

Worship Engages our Whole Lives

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Date: 10 June 2018

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[0 : 00] I can remember that when I was a lad, I was uncertain about whether I really wanted to go to heaven. The reason for it was that I had heard reference made to heaven being a place of eternal worship.

And when I heard the word worship, I thought that that meant an everlasting church service. And when I was growing up, a church service meant being sat in a very hard, uncomfortable pew, except for when you stood up to sing a hymn, the words of which I didn't understand, to a sound that I really didn't enjoy.

And then sitting down for a very, very long time, listening to prayers that again I didn't understand, and a very, very, very, very long sermon that I still didn't understand.

And I thought, if that's what worship means, and heaven means that, going on forever, I'm not totally convinced about it. One of the reasons why we're thinking over these next few weeks on this series, which is actually based on something produced by the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity, the series on worship, whole life worship, is to perhaps revisit what might be some false understandings of what worship is.

See, worship is not about singing, it's not about music, although it can include that, of course it does.

[1 : 48] Worship is not about what happens on a Sunday, although it is about that, it's not exclusively about that. Worship is not about an activity that takes place at any time, although it does involve acts of worship.

Worship is actually something that is far broader than an isolated activity. It's a whole of life thing, hence the title of this series, whole life worship.

Worship is about an approach to the whole of our lives, and it's about a way of living. In a deeply, deeply practical sense.

And so, let's go back to the words of scripture that we've just heard, because they help us to understand how this is so. Romans 12, verse 2 says, Do not conform to the pattern of the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

You see, to be conformed to something means that you fix yourself to something that is already there and that is already fixed. To be transformed means that something is changed into something that is so much bigger and so much greater.

[3 : 22] Now, I didn't speak with Julian before the service, so I didn't know he was going to do this, but actually I went to the message as well to see how Eugene Peterson had paraphrased it.

The message is a paraphrase of scripture, and sometimes it can be a really good place to help unpack some of what scripture is saying in contemporary language. And let me just read it to you again, because I think it's really, really helpful.

The message translates those words, paraphrases those words in the following way. Don't become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking.

Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you and quickly respond to it.

Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity. God brings out the best in you and develops well-formed maturity in you.

[4 : 30] I don't really know anything at all about fish. That sounds a random comment. I'm coming to the point. But I'm told that a fish will grow to the environment in which it's in.

Now, I wanted to check this, and it actually turns out there is a little bit of a myth. But it is one factor that can influence the size of a fish. In other words, fish can be really small and they can be really big.

And one of the things that can determine their size is how big the tank is or how big the pond is. One of the factors.

I share that with you because I think it's quite an important image if we can understand what Paul is saying to us here about whether we conform to the constraints of the environment that surround us. Or whether we are transformed by something that is so much bigger and so much greater. Now, we find that unpacked in Paul's letter to the Romans. And let's just go back to it because he starts that passage, Romans 12, by saying, Therefore, I urge you.

[5 : 45] Therefore. Now, we come across that quite a lot, particularly in Paul's letters and the way in which they're arranged. That sometimes we can begin reading a chapter in one of Paul's letters and he starts by saying, Therefore.

But, of course, he doesn't start with that. It's pointing back to what's preceded it. The word, therefore, is a piece of verbal glue that joins one piece of writing to that which has preceded it. You wouldn't start a sentence with therefore generally. Well, so you wouldn't start a conversation. So let's say the service is just finished and everyone's having coffee and I come up to you and you say, Oh, hello.

And I don't say hello, but I just say, Therefore. Or you're in Liddles tomorrow morning and you see somebody that you know and you just go up to them and you just say, Therefore.

That would be slightly odd. Because it's not something that we usually open with. The word, therefore, is a glue that sticks what we're about to say to that which we've just said.

[6 : 51] And that's true in Paul. So let's think, what is the therefore that points us back to what Paul has just said? Well, what Paul has just said in the preceding chapter, at the end of chapter 11 in Romans, is a piece of doxology.

That means worship through poetry, through song. Where he ends up, Romans chapter 11, by saying, Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God.

How unsearchable his judgments and paths beyond tracing out. Who has known the mind of the Lord? Who has been his counsellor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? Far from him and through him, for through him, for from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.

Amen. Amen. That's what Paul writes. You see, as Paul is writing his letter to the Romans, we have some pretty heavyweight systematic theology as he unpacks his thinking in a very systematic way.

[7 : 55] But then he gets to the point at the end of that chapter where he just breaks into worship. And he writes, well, this is this poem, this doxology. So he's just done that.

Paul has just broken out into worship, into prayer, in his letter. And then he says, therefore. So you can imagine Paul writing this. He's there.

He's doing his theological stuff. And then he suddenly breaks into prayer. He's worshipping God. And then he's back in the room again. And says, therefore. Therefore.

You see, when Paul says, when he says, do not conform to the pattern of the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

He's in that place where he's just experienced that sense, not of conforming to what's going on around him, but being transformed by worshipping God himself. And that's something very, very powerful.

[8 : 53] You see, the vision of knowing God in worship, the sense of knowing that he's our creator and our sustainer. When we know his sense of eternity in worship, the eternity that God is, the eternity that he promises to us.

When we're immersed in that in worship, it changes everything. It transforms our thinking. It means we think not smaller, but bigger.

And that's what faith does. That's what worship does. It makes our vision bigger. Sadly, tragically, a lot of people think that if you're a Christian, it shrinks your world down.

It makes things smaller. No. It's just the opposite. Paul knew this. When you experience God in worship, it suddenly flings wide open everything. Everything takes on a deeper dimension.

It's bigger. It's greater. It's richer. It's fuller. It's bigger. It's better. It's what happens. But we are surrounded by a culture that thinks in very limiting and limited materialistic terms.

[10 : 01] Remember, a few Christmases ago, Argos had a very unfortunate advertising slogan. Now, I knew what they were trying to say, but they said, Argos, helping you live for less.

They were talking about saving money, but that actually is perhaps a slogan of the world and its culture in which we live.

To live for less. To have a limiting and a limited vision. When we worship God, it expands everything.

It makes everything bigger. Our world can too easily close down, be shrunk down into something very small, very privatized, and very limiting.

But faith enlarges things. I'll give you some examples. You ever have that experience where you can't sleep? And I'm not just talking about good old-fashioned insomnia.

[11:08] I'm talking about when you're worrying about something. And you're there in the early hours, and you cannot get to sleep because that thing is weighing on your mind.

It's staring you in the face. And that thing, strangely, in the morning, may not seem quite so big. But there in the early hours, boy, it's massive.

It's huge. And you're wide awake, and you can't get your mind off it. You're just thinking of this thing, this situation where it's something going on at work, or in your family, or whatever it is. But something is keeping you awake at night.

You cannot sleep. It seems huge. It's your whole, not world, universe. It will not let you rest. You close your eyes. You try to sleep. You can't think of anything else.

It's massive. It's got hold of you, and it will not let you go. You see, it seems so huge, even though it isn't. And even it may be in the morning.

[12:04] Actually, you think about it. You think, why was I? It just seems to have gone back to a sensible perspective in the morning, even though we might still have it on our mind. But the reason, perhaps, in the middle of the night, why it can seem so massive and keeps us awake is because our world has been shrunk down by it.

Worrying works in that way. Let me give you another picture that I have heard shared before by psychologists in terms of how to deal with worry and anxiety.

In that sometimes, whether it's in the middle of the night or during the day, you can be so fixed on something that is worrying you, that's bothering you, it can feel like everything's just suddenly slowed down to a halt.

A helpful image to think in those situations is imagine life as being stuck in a traffic jam. So when you're really worried, and you can't think beyond that thing that is worrying you, it's like being stuck in really, really agonizingly slow-moving traffic.

It feels like nothing's going to change. Nothing's moving. You're just sat there behind the wheel, and everything's shut down in all directions. But imagine that you could somehow take a camera and pan out from that street in which you are jammed.

[13:26] Probably a few more streets, you'd be able to see a little bit of movement going on. But as you pan out, you then take a view of the whole city. And as you see that, you see a picture, actually, of traffic that is moving around.

It's just the spot where you are at right now isn't. It's frozen solid. But when you see that bigger picture of things moving around, somehow it seems okay.

It's all right. It's just a temporary blip, and you're caught. But when you're right there, and you can only see the street that you're stuck in, it feels like it's going to be forever. And so sometimes picturing our lives in that way, seeing something that life right now for us can feel like it's on lockdown, but actually when you see the bigger picture, it's not.

It can be really helpful. Now, I share that with you because, again, it's another picture that reminds us that our lives can seem so small when we're locked down and focused in.

But worship enlarges that perspective. It sees it in perspective, the perspective of faith through God's eternal lens.

[14:39] Right now, for us in our lives, we might be in a place where it feels like there's a traffic jam going on. But from God's perspective, things are different. Things are moving. Worship enlarges that vision that we need to see.

You know, it's true in relationships. Worship can radically transform our view, our perspective in relationships.

Because when we're focused in just on ourselves and our own perspective, it's not helpful. When we see the perspective of the other, of the other party, when our vision is enlarged, as difficult though it might be for us to do that, things change.

And worship enables us to see that bigger perspective. And it's true not only in relationships. It's true in terms of a whole vision and the way we look at our world.

You see, the danger is we can be so shrunk down to our own concerns, our own lives going on in the place where we live. Worship blows that open and enables us to see things in global perspective.

[15:48] When we see things through the lens of faith in the eternal God, we see our own lives in a global context. And we recognize that, yes, we might have our own challenges going on, but globally we can see that as one life in a whole world that belongs to God.

A world in which a few hours by plane will take you to somewhere where people's lives are so fraught with abject poverty, we just don't know it. We can live in such a small, locked-down world. But worship throws the doors wide open. It changes, it transforms. Because when we worship, we are reminded not to conform to that which surrounds us, but to be transformed by God's eternal vision.

When we are reminded that God is there to be worshipped and experienced and encountered, that transforms things. When I was a teenager, I had a job.

This was on the Isle of Wight where I grew up, in a cafe on a beach. It wasn't exactly an Agon Rone place. It was... Everything was fried. And I would go there for...

[17:10] Do my shifts and fry everything inside. And after working there for a while, I realised I would come out from that place absolutely stinking of chip fat.

You know, I walk past any greasy spoon environment now, and I'm transported back to my teenage years in that cafe. But I realised that... But I realised that... Quickly realised that I actually had to wear...

Have a completely separate set of clothes that I wore to that place. Because otherwise, no matter how much they were washed, they could not lose this smell of chip fat.

So I had a separate set of clothes to wear to work, and only to work, and they would go nowhere else, because the smell of that environment just clung.

Worship does that. When you're immersed in that vision of God, and I mean this in a positive sense now, the image I've just given you is not a particularly positive image of an aroma.

[18:16] Think of a nice smell. Think of a good one. Think of a good one. Worship clings. That's why worshipping together in this sort of way is important on a weekly basis.

But it's also why those activities of worship in our daily life are so important. Why? Not because worship is just about isolated activity.

Of course it's not. But when we do that in our lives, it clings to us, so that in every situation that we find ourselves in, that sense of God's presence, we know is there.

That connection is made. We know that God is with us. We are not conformed, but transformed by that eternal vision in which we are immersed.

I want to leave you with this thought to lead us into prayer. It's a huge privilege for me in my job as a Methodist superintendent to be involved with the training of local preachers.

[19:26] And at the moment, we've got several people training for preaching, ministry, using this amazing new course that's come out for training preachers.

And part of that course involves, it's all online-based stuff, involves watching video clips of other preachers. As part of that experience, I saw a clip a few weeks ago, and I thought it was mind-blowingly brilliant, of this preacher who was talking about, it was particularly about how preaching can connect with suffering.

And this preacher referred to another preacher that he had heard at a funeral where he said this. He said that life, sorry, death is not a full stop. It's a comma. And he went on to say that the same can be said, not only of death, but of life itself.

Now, I'll come back to that in a moment. The point is, punctuation matters. If you get punctuation muddled up or wrong, it doesn't communicate clearly. Years ago, when I used to live in Devon, I can remember driving along one day, and there was a road sign, and it was meant to say, slow.

[20:53] Men at work. But there was nothing to separate the word slow from the rest of the sentence. So it simply said, slow men at work. Punctuation makes all the difference between meaning one thing and meaning another.

Back to this preacher. He was talking about the importance of not confusing full stops with commas. You see, too often in our lives, we put a full stop where a comma belongs.

Let me explain. A full stop means I've finished. That's it. I've come to the end of my sentence. There's nothing more to be said. End of. Whereas a comma represents a pause. It means there's more to come. I haven't finished yet. Now, when it comes to our lives, too often, commas need to be put back in where we've allowed ourselves to be conformed to the thinking of our surrounding culture and allow a full stop to be put in instead.

For example, we might be tempted to think, you know, I really messed that up. Full stop. End of. When we worship God, when we are immersed in his eternal perspective, that full stop is taken out and replaced with a comma.

[22 : 16] I really messed that up. Comma. Wait. But somehow, it's going to be all right. God's going to get me through that and in a better place.

Full stop. Or we can think, you know, I just, I guess I'm just a bit of a disaster. Full stop. Or someone else might make you feel that way and say that to you.

You are just a complete disaster. Full stop. Now, let's be honest with ourselves. There may be truth in that comment. But let's take the full stop out and replace it with a comma.

I guess I've been a bit of a disaster. Comma. Up till now. Comma. But with God's help, that can change.

And it's going to change. Full stop. See, a comma says, keep going. There's more. I'm not done yet. I feel I've failed as a parent.

[23 : 24] Full stop. I have failed at times as a parent. Comma. Not proud about that.

Comma. But I can do this. Comma. Because like anything else in life, I can go at it with God's strength and he can change those situations for the better.

Full stop. I'm immersed in debt and I can't see beyond it. Full stop. God will change that.

I'm immersed in debt and I can't see beyond it right now. Comma. But God can. Full stop. What started as a habit now controls me and I'm addicted.

Full stop. God's perspective says, I'm addicted. Comma. But with God's help, I'm getting control back.

[24 : 35] Full stop. I'm locked into a situation that I can't get out of. Full stop. God says, locked in to a situation that you can't get out of.

Comma. But things are going to change and they are going to get better. Trust in God. Full stop. There's no hope to my health ever improving.

I've been told that. Full stop. God says, there feels like there's no hope of improving.

Comma. God is greater than any pain. And God is eternal. Full stop. The point is this.

Don't let anybody put a full stop where a comma belongs. We live in a full stop world. But worship enlarges things.

[25 : 35] It takes out those full stops and replaces them with commas. It says, keep going. You're not done yet.

Do not conform to the full stop pattern of this world. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. That's not even ■■■ suppress.

You know, I've been living in a ■ with a half around a while the entire one MuhammedFF means to people to the children as as as as the Folge of