

Who's The Audience

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Preacher: Darrell Johnson

[0 : 00] I submit to you that as the Church of Jesus Christ, we are first and foremost a worshipping community. That's not all we are. As the redeemed people of God, we are also a caring community, a serving community, an evangelizing community, a discipling community, an equipping community, a justice-advocating community, a reconciling, healing, praying community. But first and foremost, we are a worshipping community. Thus the Apostle Peter, when he celebrates our new identity in Jesus Christ, refers to us as a royal priesthood called to, quote, offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. He's telling us that we are to think of ourselves first as a community of priests who proclaim the excellencies of the one who has taken us out of darkness into His marvelous light. As the Church of Jesus Christ, we are fundamentally, foundationally, a worshipping community. Everything else we are and do flows out of who we are and what we do in worship. Someone has rightly said that corporate worship is both the thermometer and thermostat of a congregational spiritual health. What we do in this thing we call public worship, both registers and regulates the health of our life and ministry together in Jesus Christ.

I invite you, therefore, to take another in-depth look at this thing we call the service of worship. And I invite you to do so through Psalm 95. Throughout history, Psalm 95 has been used as a call to worship on the Lord's Day, and it is a stirring summons to sing God's praise and to listen to God's Word.

This psalm actually suggests a particular picture. It's the picture of people making their way up the steps into the temple, and as they come into the building, they begin to exhort each other to rise to the occasion so that they don't enter the building preoccupied or apathetic. What a difference it would make if we came to worship with Psalm 95 on our tongues, exhorting each other in these words. Hear now the Word of God.

O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord. Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving. Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms. For the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods, in whose hand are the depths of the earth, the peaks of the mountains are His also. The sea is His, for it was He who made it, and His hands formed the dry land. Come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker, for He is our God. We are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand. Today, if you would hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers tested me, when they tried me, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said that they are a people who err in their heart, and they do not know my ways. Therefore, I swore in my anger, truly they shall not enter my rest.

Spirit of the living God, we believe that long ago you inspired the psalmist to write down these words. And now I would pray that in your mercy and grace you will take these very words off the page and plant them into our hearts and minds, make them come alive in us as never before. For I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Through Psalm 95, I think we discover four dynamics of authentic worship.

[3 : 56] They are worship is God-oriented, worship is reflex, worship is a verb, and worship is a decision.

Today, let me walk you through dynamics one and two, and then next Sunday we'll do three and four. Number four. Dynamic one. Worship is God-oriented, or more specifically, worship is God-in-Christ oriented. Now, that's obvious enough, isn't it? But like most things obvious, it easily gets lost in the shuffle. More often than not, a corporate worship event is not God-oriented, but human-oriented.

What do I mean? Well, there is a tendency, or as I should say, there is an inertia toward making corporate worship slowly but surely moving into human-centeredness. Human-centeredness in the

sense of need-centered, issue-centered, and experience-centered. We come to worship not focusing on the one who is to be worshiped, but on our needs that cry out to be met. You know what I mean. How many of us think of the Sunday morning worship service as a gas station, where we come to get filled and pumped up so that we can go on doing our own thing the rest of the week? Now, I need to be careful here, for the wonderful fact is God does meet our needs in worship. Indeed, it is in the context of worship that God meets our deepest needs in the most profound and effective ways. The living Christ says, come unto me, all who are weary and who have overburdened themselves, and I will give you rest. I will refresh you. The Savior delights in meeting our needs, and lifting our needs to Him is one of the greatest acts of honor we can imagine. But meeting needs is not the primary purpose of corporate worship. Worship loses its vitality and its integrity if it becomes need-centered. Many come to worship to wrestle with the great issues of our time. Many come to wrestle with justice or peacemaking or the collapse of the family or hunger or racism. And the service is built around and oriented toward this issue. Now, again, I need to be careful, for in worship God does speak to these great issues, and in worship God equips us to be about the work of the kingdom. But wrestling with justice, wrestling with peacemaking, wrestling with the family is not the primary purpose of worship. The purpose is to meet and praise the God of justice, the God of peacemaking, the God of the family. Worship loses its integrity and vitality if it becomes issue-centered. Many come to worship seeking a new experience, seeking some kind of spiritual high to lift us and take us through the next few days.

Again, I need to be careful here because authentic worship does give a lift. I regularly pray that all who come to worship will be filled and lifted as never before. But coming in order to have an experience, coming in order to have a spiritual high is not the primary purpose of this event. Worship loses its vitality and integrity if it becomes experience-oriented. How many of us regularly judge a worship service on the basis of one of these human-oriented criteria and thereby leave unfulfilled? You see, the test of a worship service is not, did it meet my needs, but, did it make me more conscious of God in Christ? The test of a worship service is not, did it give me goosebumps and cause chills to run up and down my back? But, was God enthroned upon the praises of His people? How does the psalmist put it in Psalm 95? Sing to the Lord, shout to the rock of our salvation, rock of our salvation, kneel before the Lord our Maker, listen to the voice of the shepherd. This event is oriented toward and centered in God and Christ. And if we miss that dynamic, it isn't worship. Do you know the name Soren Kierkegaard? The great Danish philosopher-theologian of the 19th century?

[8 : 44] He was the first one who compared the dynamics of Christian worship with the dynamics of theater. In his book, *The Purity of the Heart*, Kierkegaard identifies three components common to both events.

In worship and in theater, there is an audience, there are performers, and there are producers and prompters. Audience, performers, producers, and prompters. When we go to the theater, we go as part of the audience. The performers up on the stage are the ones who are making the event happen, and behind the stage, there are prompters, whispering lines, and directors making sure everything goes well.

Well, Kierkegaard put his finger on the reason why worship in Denmark was so lifeless and why it made no redemptive effect on the contemporary society. When Danish Christians said, let us go to worship, they thought in terms of, let us go to the theater. They came to the event thinking of themselves as the audience. They thought of the clergy and the organist and the choir as the performers, and if they thought of God at all, God was behind the scenes whispering things into the ears of the clergy and the choir and the organist to do for this great performance. Not, said Kierkegaard. Well, actually, Kierkegaard wouldn't have said not. What he said was, what Kierkegaard said was, is that the Danish Christians were blaspheming. They had it all wrong. In Christian worship, the audience is the living God.

Everything is done in front of and for and in relationship with the living God. In Christian worship, the performers are the members of the congregation. The pew is the stage. Let me say that again. The pew is the stage. That is where the prime action of the event is taking place. And in Christian worship, the prompters and directors are the pastors and liturgists, the organists and the choir.

[10 : 57] What they do in the event is suggest things that the performers can do, raise possibilities of expression, constantly pointing the performers toward the audience, getting the worshipers to be engaged with the great audience. Now, as you probably can tell, I take Kierkegaard seriously. I

recognize that, yes, I and Marsha and Greg and Tim and the choir and the praise team and Bob and Kemp all are on stage, but I recognize that you are on stage too. I must do my part, but so must you do your part.

As worship leaders, we really should call ourselves assistants to the priests. Our job is to help you, the royal priesthood, express yourself to God and listen as God speaks. I said to the staff earlier this week that really we shouldn't lead worship from up here at all. We should lead worship from down on the floor from right alongside you, or better yet, I would like to lead worship from behind you and whisper things in your ears. Tell Jesus he's really good. Tell the Father you could use another embrace of his arms. Tell the Holy Spirit you need cleansing. Open your life up to that grace, et cetera, et cetera. Ben Patterson, who used to be the pastor of the Irvine Presbyterian Church, made a stinging observation in an article in Christianity Today. Patterson writes, it's bad enough to have the prompters doing what the performers ought to be doing, but it is blasphemous for the performers to presume to play the part of the audience, for that is to stand in the place that God alone can occupy. Most Christian congregations are functional blasphemers in that they come to worship Sunday morning as an audience.

When we come to this Sunday service in the theater mode, we think of this event as something done for us and to us. But when we come to this event in the worship mode, we think of this event as something done by us. We are not the audience. None of us in this room is the audience. It isn't for any of us. It's all for the triune God. Therefore, the question to ask after leaving worship this morning, the question to ask is not, not, not, what did I get out of it, but was the royal audience pleased with my performance? We come then to the second dynamic of worship. Dynamic two, worship is reflex. Worship is reflex. Worship is but the natural reflex to the presence and self-revealing of the living God. When you watch a beautiful sunset, no one needs to exhort you, say, oh, how beautiful.

That is just a natural response of praise to a sunset. When you see a beautiful flower, no one needs to tell you, say, how lovely. You just say it. It's the natural response to a beautiful flower. When you go to a football game and you see a quarterback throw a great pass right to the end, no one needs to say, say, Daryl, wow. You just say, wow. That's the thing you do when you have something like that.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of shaking the hand of Corazon Aquino, who was then president of the Philippines. No one needed to tell me to make sure my hair was combed. No one needed to tell me to make sure my shirt was buttoned. No one needed to tell me to smile. In fact, they probably needed to tell me to stop smiling. I was smiling too much, although her smile kept making me smile more. No one needed to tell me. Feel butterflies in your stomach. All of those feelings and actions were but the natural response of being in the presence of a praiseworthy woman. Worship, sing, shout, kneel, bow down, is what human beings naturally do when they become aware that they're in the presence of the living God. Worship is reflex to God's self-revealing. Are you with me? I think it raises a very practical question then. How do we become aware of that presence? How do we become aware of God's self-revealing? Well, through a lot of means. Buildings are built to give us that. The music is supposed to do that. The choir, the praise team, singing the hymns, singing the choruses. But it's primarily through the book that we become aware of the presence. When we open the book, when we open

[15 : 43] Scripture, the author of Scripture comes alive and makes himself known to us. And the more who God is and what God is like is held before us, the more this reflex that is worship simply happens.

This says to me that the key to the renewal of worship is opening the book. Or to put it differently, vibrant worship flows out of really good theology.

So I'd like to take just a few moments, if you wouldn't mind. Now, when preachers say just a few moments, you know that's not really true. We'll be out before lunch anyway. Just to take a few moments and reflect with me on what the psalmist knew about the living God. What does this psalmist know about God that makes him want to worship, so much so that he enthusiastically calls everybody else to worship?

Well, in Psalm 95, the psalmist begins where we need to begin. He begins with a person. The God the psalmist celebrates is a person, not just the ground of all being, not just the grand integrator of all of reality, not some cosmic force, not a higher power. The psalmist, the God the psalmist knows and loves is a person. So personal that this God has a first name and loves to be called by this first

name. Did you know that? A first name? It's in the text three times in Psalm 95. Did you see it there three times? Sadly, you didn't see it there. You didn't see it there because it is regretfully hidden behind the word Lord. You'll find out in the weeks and years to come that I feel very badly about translations that render that way because the word Lord is a substitute term. It's a circumlocution, as the scholars say, a word that is used to avoid saying the real word that's there. And the real word that is there is the sacred name which most scholars say is now to be pronounced Yahweh. The living God has a first name and tells us, you can call me Yahweh. The psalmist knows a person. Sing to Yahweh. Shout to Yahweh. Bow before Yahweh. Listen to Yahweh. The audience in this event is a person who thinks and feels, who rejoices, who grieves, who wants a person-to-person, face-to-face, name-to-name kind of relationship. Do you know yourself right now to be sitting in the presence of a person? In Psalm 95, the psalmist then goes on to celebrate various aspects, various truths about this person. The psalmist celebrates Yahweh as rock. Sing praise to Yahweh, the rock of our salvation. Boy, that's an image that we need to hang on to in our time, isn't it? Rock, rock. Yahweh is the foundation, the solid foundation that does not change in the midst of all the changes of history. Rock. Yahweh is the source of all that we need. He's the source of the living waters that flow in the desert. The audience in this worship event is the unshakable foundation of life. Nothing is going to disturb Him. Do you know yourself now to be in the presence of the solid rock? Yahweh then sings, I mean, the psalmist then sings, Yahweh is a great God, verse 3. A mega God is the way we probably ought to translate that in our time. Yahweh is a mega God.

[19:29] And as I said last Sunday, it seems to me that one of the greatest needs of the church today is to recover a sense of the greatness of God. J.I. Packer, I think a lot of you know that name.

J.I. Packer once observed that our faith is so feeble, our worship so flabby, because we have lost that sense of the sheer majesty of God. The psalmist knows the mega God. Yahweh is a great God, a great king above all gods. The way we would probably put that in our time is a great final authority over all authorities. The one who cannot be relegated to the fringes of society, who cannot be marginalized, the one who stands in the center and demands attention there. The God before whom we now stand and sit is the mega sovereign over all sovereigns, the CEO over all CEOs. No one can unseat this king, and no one can afford his purposes. Please notice how the psalmist develops this in verses 4 to 5.

He immediately speaks of the depths of the earth, the heights of the mountains, and the sea. The depths of the earth, the heights of the mountains, and the sea. Why does he do that? Because in his day, people thought of those places, the height, the depth, and the sea, as the realm of other gods and other authorities and other lords. Supposedly, the depths were the realm of the god Molech, the height, the realm of the god Baal. The sea was the realm of the god Tiamat. Come, says the psalmist, let us worship, let us shout to Yahweh, in whose hands are the depths of the earth, in whose hands are the peaks of the mountains, in whose hands are the sea. You see what the psalmist is doing there? He's reminding the worshipers that there's nothing to fear, ultimately. Yahweh holds the depths. Yahweh holds the heights. Yahweh even holds the sea. The sea. In the mid-eastern mindset, the sea represents all the forces of chaos that threaten to undo the world. And the psalmist comes to worship realizing that even chaos is in the hand of God, that when things seem out of control, they're not out of control for Yahweh.

No wonder the psalmist says, shout joyfully. You've got to shout. Chaos does not have the last word. Evil does not have the last word. Drugs do not have the last word. Crime does not have the last word.

Racism does not have the last word. Yahweh has the last word. Oh, how we need to recover this sense of the sheer greatness of God. Can I just try a little science exercise on you? Some of you may know I earned a degree in physics, so I kind of think in these ways. And I get the lead to do this from Brennan Manning and Rod Cooper.

[22:17] Just for a moment, think about the earth. Big globe. Do you know how much the earth weighs? I'm sure these are facts you just sort of keep around the house. Do you know how much the earth weighs?

Six sextillion tons. That's six followed by 21 zeros. And yet this earth just hangs there in space, perfectly balanced, rotating around its axis at 1,000 miles an hour.

Six sextillion tons of earth rotating at 1,000 miles an hour. And rotating around the sun, whirling through space at 19 minutes a second, or 1,140 miles an hour.

Think about the sun just for a minute. Do you realize that every square yard of the surface of the sun continually gives off 130,000 horsepower?

That's the energy equivalent to 450 V8 engines. Every square yard of the sun constantly emitting that energy. And the sun is not the brightest or most energized star in the universe.

[23 : 34] The sun and its system of planets is only one of 100 billion systems that make up the Milky Way. I'm told that if on a starlit night you take out a dime, hold that dime in an outstretched arm, that dime covers 15 million stars.

How does Isaiah put it? Lift up your eyes and see. Who has created these stars? He calls them all by name. Because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power, not one of them is missing.

And now just for a moment, try to do something really big. Think about our galaxy. Just our little galaxy. And ask yourself, how long would it take you to cross our galaxy?

Let's say that you could travel at the speed of light. The speed of light is 186,000 miles per second, which is 669 million miles an hour. At that speed, you can go around the earth seven times in a second.

Now let's say that you can travel at that speed. 669 million miles an hour. How long will it take you to get across our galaxy? It'll take you 100,000 years.

[24 : 46] And Yahweh is bigger than all of that. He made it all. And He holds it all together.

Sometimes it feels as though the world's coming apart, doesn't it? And in many ways, it is coming apart. But should it fall apart, it will all fall into the hands of Yahweh.

Yahweh, it isn't going anywhere else. Which makes what the psalmist goes on to say even more wonderful. He says in verse 6, Yahweh is our maker.

Our maker. Our maker. The living God not only made the depths and the heights and the sea and the vastness of interstellar space. Yahweh made me and He made you. The hands that formed and hold the universe formed and hold me and you.

The psalmist goes on to say in verse 7, Yahweh is our God. Our God. The phrase celebrates the essence of all of God's promises. Every covenant Yahweh ever made with humanity has the phrase, I will be your God and you will be my people.

[25 : 55] This great and awesome God has chosen to be my God. To place all that He is at my disposal. Yahweh, the great God, is my God. I can almost hear Whoopi Goldberg doing it now, can't you?

Nothing you can say can take me away from my God. My God. Nothing you can do because I'm stuck like glue to my God. I don't remember the rest of the words, but you know the idea.

Great God. Verse 7, the psalmist goes on, We are the people of Yahweh's pasture. We are the sheep of Yahweh's hand. The great God chooses to be shepherd to us.

You know, there's nothing to compare with the relationship between a Palestinian shepherd and his sheep. The shepherd knows each sheep intimately. So much so, he calls them all by name and each one responds by name.

I'm Yahweh's sheep. So are you. The hands that formed all of that greatness have come down and found you and called you by name.

[27 : 05] And leads us into the paths of righteousness. It's the shepherd image that then makes the psalmist think in terms of God's voice.

Verse 7, Oh, that today you would hear God's voice. The God we worship is the God who communicates. He's not this silent one sitting on the mountaintop lost in rapture.

This is the God who comes to us and speaks rationally and personally and specifically. The living God once became us, incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, and was called the Logos, the Word.

And he speaks and expects us to listen and promises those who do listen the privilege of rest. Well, you may have noticed something in Psalm 95, which I will try to elaborate on next Sunday.

Namely, that the specific reaction, the specific reflex action that we call worship is related to the specific aspect of God that is being held before us.

[28 : 12] So, for example, the exhortation to sing and shout is appropriate when we're thinking of God as the rock and as the great mega-God, as the creator. The exhortation to bow down and worship becomes appropriate when we think of God as our maker, as our God, as the one who knows us in intimacy.

And the exhortation to listen and not harden our hearts is appropriate when we think of the shepherd who is speaking to his sheep, which tells me that the tone and the mood of worship is going to vary from Sunday to Sunday, and from parts of worship to parts of worship. It's going to vary depending upon that aspect of God being held before us at that time. There is a time for joyful, hand-clapping singing, and then there's a time for very quiet, meditative singing. There's a time for standing up and singing and even dancing, and then there's a time for kneeling and being still. Since God's self-revelation is so multifaceted, worship as reflex is going to be just as multifaceted.

And we need to give ourselves room to experience all of that as God unfolds more of his character before us. My friend John Piper summarizes it so well when he writes, It follows that forms of worship should provide two things.

[29 : 32] Forms of worship should provide two things. Channels for the mind to apprehend the truth of God and channels for the heart to respond in adoration.

The psalmist puts a spotlight on the audience, and he knows the audience to be the personal God who is the rock of our salvation, the great sovereign over all powers, who made us and chooses us for his own, and who is the shepherd who speaks us into life.

The psalmist was dazzled by God, and he simply had to sing and shout and kneel and bow down and listen and obey. It was the only logical response.

And to think that the psalmist only knows half of what we know, because we live on this side of Yahweh's full self-disclosure in Jesus. You know that the word Jesus is the translation of the word Yeshua, and Yeshua simply means Yahweh has come to the rescue.

In Jesus, we see the love of God which makes human beings whole again. In Jesus, we see the mercy of God which will go all the way to the cross to set us free. In Jesus, we see the power of God overcoming the grave and seating Jesus high above all rule and authority.

[30 : 52] In Jesus, we see the incomparable beauty of the living God. C.S. Lewis once observed that Jesus Christ produced three main effects on the people who met him.

Three main effects. They are terror, hostility, and adoration. And then Lewis writes, There is no trace in the record of anyone ever expressing mild approval.

Mild approval. Tipping the hat to Jesus simply isn't appropriate. It has to be adoration and praise.

As the church of Jesus Christ, then, we are first and foremost a worshiping community.

That's not all we are. But everything else we are flows out of that, which tells me that if we are going to have a redemptive effect on this city, our worship needs to go deeper.

How are we doing? How do we do today? Was the audience pleased today?

[32 : 08] Come. Let us sing to the Lord. Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. Let us worship and bow down before the great God who is our maker. Let us kneel before the one who says to us, You are mine.

Come. We are our right to the gospel.

Let us look. We are one. Let us worship and bow down.