

Dynamics of Worship Farther Up, Further In

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[0 : 00] 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 teaching community, a serving community, a healing community, a reconciling community, an evangelizing community, a discipling community, a praying community, a justice-advocating community.

But first and foremost, we are a worshipping community. Makes sense, does it not, given the fact that we were created for worship? First question of the Shorter Catechism, what is the chief end of humanity?

First answer, the chief end of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Or, as I think that ought to be stated, the chief end of humanity is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever.

However, we most honor the living God when we find our greatest joy in Him. More to the point, we most honor the living God when we enter into the joy God has in being God.

When we enter into the joy the Father has in the Son, and the joy the Son has in the Father. Our chief end in life is to glorify God by enjoying the joy He has in being God to us.

[1 : 22] As the Church of Jesus Christ, we are, therefore, a worshipping community. We are and do, and the world flows out of and into corporate worship.

Now, there is in our congregation no small amount of tension about worship. Did I say that correctly?

This is the case all over the country. It's the case all over the country. Every growing church I know of, and especially churches that have some tradition, is experiencing some kind of tension about worship.

Over the past 18 months or so, I, the worship planning committee, and the members and elders of the worship commission, have listened to your concerns and to your input.

And I can say without reservation that we have heard every perspective represented in this congregation. Every one of them. And we have wrestled with every one of them.

[2 : 30] Hymns, no hymns. Choruses, no choruses. Repeat the choruses, don't repeat the choruses. Raise hands, no raise hands. Robes, no robes.

Pulpit, no pulpit. Doxology, no doxology. Drums, no drums. Prayer led by those from up front, prayer led in small groups in the pews.

We have heard it all. We have received many letters. And many of the letters that we have received are worthy of publication in the journals that are wrestling with worship in our time.

As a result of our wrestling, and especially as a result of the time we have spent in prayer, we have come to what we believe is the Lord's leading for the next season of our life together at GPC.

We cannot satisfy everyone. But we believe that we have been led in a new direction that will, for the next season of the church's history, help maximize this glorify God by enjoying Him.

[3 : 40] We believe that we are being led to develop two different but parallel worship services. Please mark the words carefully.

Two different but parallel worship services. The picture I keep getting as I pray is that of two sets of train tracks traveling side by side.

It's just that each of the trains on these sets of tracks is a little different. They have many features in common. It's just that one of those trains leans this way and the other train leans that way.

Both, however, heading in the same direction. I want to underscore that. The same direction. And that is what I want to lay before us today.

The same direction, we believe, the two different but parallel worship services are to head. And the passage of Scripture that I think helps us lead in that same direction is Psalm 95.

[4 : 48] Psalm 95 lays out for us the basic dynamics of the kind of worship experience the living God desires. Notice how I put that. The kind of worship experience the living God desires.

After all, in the final analysis, the only one that we really have to satisfy is the living God. Psalm 95, for centuries and in very different cultural settings, has been used as a call to worship on the Lord's day.

And rightly so. For it calls us to the kind of worship that pleases the living God. Now, there are a lot of other texts that we could look at as we grapple with this matter of worship.

But I think it's Psalm 95 that keeps bringing us back to the basic foundational dynamics of the worship that pleases God. If you are able, will you please stand for the reading of God's word? Is this working, Ron, so I can get rid of this? Psalm 95.

[6 : 17] Come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. For He is our God, and 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 Massa in the wilderness.

When your fathers tested me, they tried me, though they had seen my work. For 40 years I loathed that generation and said they are a people who err in their heart and who 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 centuries ago now, you inspired the psalmist to write down these words.

In your mercy and in your grace, will you take these words off the page and cause them to come alive in us as never before? For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

You may be seated. Now, Psalm 95 paints a particular picture. It paints the picture of people gathering at the temple for worship.

[7 : 25] And as they do, they begin to climb the steps to go into the temple. And as they climb the steps, they turn to one another and exhort each other to rise to the occasion. I preached two sermons on this psalm when I began my ministry with you in the fall of 1993.

Since then, the Spirit of God has shown me more things. This is an incredibly rich psalm. Now, before developing the dynamics of worship that I think are revealed in this psalm, let me make three observations about the psalm itself.

First, notice what I will call, simply call, a fluidity to this psalm. There is a fluidity to this psalm.

Without breaking stride, it moves from speech about God to a speech by God.

Without breaking stride, from a speech to God to a speech by God. It begins with the psalmist encouraging people to address God, but it ends with God addressing people.

Without missing a beat, the flow is from people speaking to God to God speaking to people. Verse 7, today, if you would hear his voice. And then verse 9, the voice speaks.

[8 : 40] When your fathers tested me, etc. That's the way it is with biblically shaped worship. As we authentically come before the Lord, as we begin to open up ourselves to the Lord in song and in prayer, before we know it, the Lord begins speaking to us.

Not just in the sermon, but all along the way. This is a fact to which those of us who lead worship need to become more sensitive.

There is a fluidity. The worship event flows back and forth between our addressing God and God addressing us. For instance, we might be singing a great hymn like, O worship the King, or a chorus like, He is Lord, when God wants to break in with his own song, Be still and know that I am God.

In biblically guided worship, there is this back and forth, in and out, now us, now God, a constant dialogue. Second observation.

Notice that word come in the text. It's there three times in verses 1, 2, and 6. Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord. Come before his presence.

[9 : 54] Come, let us worship and bow down. Three times. Why three times? The first come is a general call to worship. The second come is a call to move into more intentional awareness of the presence.

You need to know that literally that word presence in Hebrew means face. The second come is to more intentional awareness of the face. The third come is a call to move into an ever deeper response to the presence, to the face.

Come ever closer. Come ever more aware of the presence. Come into ever deeper intimacy with the Holy One. Many scholars suggest that this first come in the text is a call to enter the sanctuary.

The second come is a call to enter the inner courts of the sanctuary. And the third call is to enter into the Holy of Holies, where the only appropriate response is to lie prostrate on the ground in the

presence of such purity and grace.

Three comes. The three comes suggest to me the phrase, further up and farther in. Come, come, come.

[11:12] Further up and farther in. Third observation. Many call Psalm 95 a prophetic psalm.

Why? Because the voice speaks in the psalm. Most of the other psalms are us addressing God. Hear the voice of God speaks. Do not harden your hearts.

Today, if you would hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as the ancestors did in the wilderness. This is such a critical passage for the life of faith that the author of the book of Hebrews spends two whole chapters on it.

Chapters three and four. Now, what is this prophetic word doing in a psalm about worship? It is there to warn us of the propensity toward hardened hearts, which the author of the book of Hebrews says is rooted in unbelief.

Verses 8 through 11 refer to a specific period in the history of God's people. That specific period took place immediately after they were led out of Egypt towards the promised land.

[12:22] Within the first year of that journey across the wilderness, they hit a crisis. They found out they had no water. The place where that happened was originally called Rephidim, but his name was later changed to Meribah and Massah.

Why? Meribah means a place of strife. Massah means testing or temptation. The place name was changed because it was there that the people began to grumble and complain.

So what's wrong with that? Because, says Moses, it is a sign that even though they knew that God had provided faithfully for his people, they were not trusting him.

Moses says that all the grumbling and all the complaining meant that the people did not believe God was present as he promised. The grumbling and the complaining meant that people did not believe that God would take care of them as he promised.

And the grumbling and the complaining meant that they were tempting God to prove himself. Now, after the incident at Rephidim, the people continue their journey during that first year and they hit nine other crises.

[13:35] And what do they do in each of those nine other crises? They trust the Lord, don't they? No, they don't. In each of those nine other crises, they respond by grumbling and complaining.

Finally, they reach the promised land. They reach the borders of the promised land, sorry. And at the borders, Moses sends in spies. The spies come back with a good report that the land is full of milk and honey.

But they also come back with a report that there are some big people in that land. Ten of the twelve tribes call them giants. The ten spies then counsel the people not to go on.

Two of them argue that yes, there are giants in the land, but yes, Yahweh, the great and almighty God, is in the land, and he is greater than the giants, and therefore they ought to go on.

The position of the ten won the day, and the people chose not to go further up and farther in. Thus says the text, the Lord swore that they would never enter the rest that he had for God's people.

[14:43] The constant grumbling and complaining simply revealed a hardened heart of unbelief. So for 40 years, that generation wanders in the wilderness, going around Mount Sinai again and again and again and again for 40 years.

How many congregations in our time are just like that? Stuck at the border of the promised land. They will not go on because their hearts are hardened by unbelief. They will not trust God in the unknown. They prefer the predictability of the present to the unknown of the future in the promised land.

Come, come, come, says the text. Further up and further in. Yes, those words are spoken by the leaders and by the people as they make their way into the sanctuary.

But are not the words of the leaders and the people an echo of the words of the triune God whose passion it is that we enter into the joy and love the Trinity experiences?

[15:52] Three comes. Three. Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Come, come, come. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as the ancestors did at Meribah and Massah, says the text.

The psalmist recalls Israel experience in order to encourage us not to miss out. Come. Further up. Farther in. Now, the rest of the psalm then helps us make our way further up and farther in.

And let me hold before us just three of the dynamics of worship that pleases God that I think are revealed in this psalm. Dynamic number one. Worship is encounter.

Encounter with the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How could it be otherwise? What else ought worship to be?

Yet, this simple dynamic of worship is easily lost in the shuffle. Worship that pleases the living God is encounter with God.

[17 : 07] The whole point is to encounter the creator and redeemer of life. Notice how the psalmist puts it. Sing to the Lord. Shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation.

Kneel before the Lord, our maker. Listen to the voice of the good shepherd. Psalm 61 adds the word first. First for the Lord. The whole point of the event is encounter.

I hear people say, I come to hear the word preached. Amen. I like hearing that. But the word is to be preached and to be heard in the context of encounter.

It's all about encounter. The test, if you will, of the success of a worship service is did the encounter with the Holy One take place? Which is why, as I studied Scripture and look at the worship scenes that take place in Scripture, there is this timelessness about it.

If you were having a meeting with the Queen of England right now, you would never look at your watch. You wouldn't look at your watch meeting with the Queen of England.

[18 : 27] If you had a meeting with a sports hero or a rock star, you wouldn't look at your watch. That's because authentic encounter breeds this timelessness.

Where time becomes irrelevant. Which says to me that we need to be real careful about how we schedule the Lord's day. We need to be real careful that we do not schedule anything to happen right after worship.

I hope you haven't done that this morning. You see, if on the Lord's day I schedule something to take place immediately after the worship service, I am implicitly saying that nothing significant is going to happen to me at worship.

It says, I don't expect an encounter that's going to change my life. I expect to just go on with my normal routine. Now, I realize that some folks are locked into schedule by their jobs.

But for most of us that's not the case. And I think we need to be sure that we do not lock God into a finite, fixed amount of time. I said that wrong, didn't I?

[19 : 38] The problem is not locking God in. The problem is locking God out. The whole point of the event is encounter.

And that's because of the passion of the living God. God's passion to be known. God's passion to reveal himself to us.

God's passion to draw us closer to himself. God's passion to give himself to us. Encounter. Worship is encounter.

Dynamic two. Worship is a verb. You've heard me say that before. Worship is a verb involving the whole self.

What was Jesus, according to Jesus, what is the greatest commandment? You shall love the Lord with your mind. Period. No. You shall love the Lord with all your mind and all your heart and all your soul and all your strength.

[20 : 45] worship involves the whole self. Let us go to worship. Phrase we use.

Let us go to worship means let us go and do something. Worship, says Robert Weber, is not something done to us or for us, but by us.

Let us go to worship means let us go and actually do something with our whole self and do that something in front of, for, to, in, on behalf of the living God.

I had thought about expressing this second dimension of worship as worship is work. And that is a fact. And the fact is embedded in one of the words we use for worship, the word liturgy.

The Greek word liturgia, simply means both worship and work. And that's because worship is our greatest work and because worship involves work.

[21 : 52] Somehow, we have gotten this idea in the Western culture that we come to this event and it happens to us. It doesn't because it's work.

Now, paradoxically, it's work that refreshes. It's work that leads us into the rest of God. It's work that empowers our other work. But still, I prefer to put this second dynamic of worship as worship is a verb.

Or more accurately, verbs. Plural. Worship is verbs involving the whole self. Look again at the verbs in Psalm 95.

Come. Come. Sing. Shout joyfully. Give thanks. Worship. Bow down. Kneel. Do not harden your heart. Verbs that call for the whole self to be involved in this encounter.

Sing. You realize how much of the self is involved when we sing? In order to sing, you need your mouth, you need your throat, your lungs, your diaphragm, your chest muscles.

[23 : 00] Sometimes you need your arm and leg muscles. You need your mind. You need your emotion. Sing. It's the distinctive mark of Christian worship. As the Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 5, 18 to 19, when the Holy Spirit comes upon us, when He begins to move in us and fill us, there is this natural outpouring of song.

Even if you can't carry a tune, you want to sing. You know, we are the most privileged generation in church history because of the amount of music and song we have at our disposal for our worship. It's incredible. Songs from the past, songs from those great spiritual awakenings involving people like Isaac Watts and Charles Wesleyan, and songs from the present, songs that come from the hearts and minds of people like Twyla Parris and Melody Green and John Michael Talbot and Graham Kendrick.

I especially appreciate those songs that have a way of taking the text of Scripture and putting it to music. You know, we experienced that last Wednesday, the Revelation class as we met.

We were making our way through the Revelation in Revelation chapter 12, verse 11, and then we sang, A Mighty Fortress is Our God. Those of you who were there, wasn't that powerful? Because A Mighty Fortress is Our God took that text and put it to music.

[24 : 26] And because it was in music, it got down in our souls more deeply. Sing. It involves so much of the self. Here I'm going to give a word of exhortation as your brother in Christ.

Those of you who do not like the hymns, please sing them. And those of you who do not like the chorus, please sing them. Please.

It's because those words of Scripture can get down in your soul where they transform. Sing it. Sing it. Sing it. Please. Please.

Please. If you really hate one of the songs, sing it. Even as we go with these two different but parallel services, sing.

Or you'll go away empty. Much of the criticism about worship services lies right there. If you don't sing, you don't get blessed.

[25 : 42] It doesn't get down in your soul. It involves the whole song. And that's why we do it.

So does this verb shout joyfully to the Lord. Twice in the text. Now, I don't know what that's all about. I've been in the mainline church all my life, so I don't know what that's all about.

But it clearly requires more than singing. It's a way of giving hearty voice to the truth. It's a way of giving hearty voice to our praise.

I will never forget that day at the Promise Keepers Convention in the Los Angeles Coliseum. How many of you guys were there? Remember that day? Remember that day that 78,000 guys at the top of our lungs shouted our praise to Jesus Christ?

I couldn't talk for four weeks afterwards if we shouted so loud. Now, someone watching that from the outside could have judged that as mere emotionalism. I'll tell you, it was not mere emotionalism.

[26 : 42] We were so moved by the depth of the love of Jesus Christ for us, we could not keep it to ourselves. Shout joyfully to the Lord.

All the earth, says the psalmist. Whoa, that took a lot of me. That's a sign that I'm getting healed because my leg's getting better.

When my leg was really ripped up, I couldn't do that. It takes your whole body to sing and shout to the Lord. Amen. We went over the deep edge, Martha.

Look at three other verbs. They're in verse six. This keeps worship them from being just a shouting edge. I'm disconnected.

I'm unwired. Three verbs in verse six. Forgive me. Worship, bow down, and kneel.

[27 : 45] Notice those? Kneel. We all know what that involves. Bow down. This verb means to bow down in such a way that your head touches the ground.

It's what the wise men do when they come to the cradle on Christmas. Worship. I've told you before that every one of the words in the Psalms that's translated as worship has a bodily movement to it. This word in verse six means to lay prostrate on the ground. Why? Kneel. Kneel is clearly a sign of humility.

It's a sign of reverence. It's a sign of affection. Whenever we sing that hymn, Fairest Lord Jesus, I've got to meet it.

Bow down so your head touches the ground. It's an act of even greater humility. It's an act expressing even greater desire to see. It's an act of submission.

[28 : 51] One of our songs has that chorus in it. Hosanna, Hosanna. Hosanna, Hosanna, in the highest.

Every time we sing that, I've got to get my head down on the ground and lay prostrate on the ground. It's a sign of even greater humility.

It's a sign of even greater seeking and longing after God. Whenever we sing that song, Holy is the Lord, my whole body wants to go down.

Holy is the Lord. Holy is the Lord. Holy is the Lord.

Holy is the Lord. righteousness and mercy, judgment and grace, faithfulness and sovereignty.

[30 : 03] Holy is the Lord. Worship is a verb.

It means work. It involves the whole sin. Other psalms speak of the use of the hands. Man, after that, the hands are nothing.

Lifting hands as a way of expressing our longing, our longing for Him and our dependency and our trust. Other psalms call for us to dance.

Psalms 149, let Israel be glad in His maker. Let the children of Zion rejoice in their king. let them praise His name with dancing. Boy, talk about the whole self. Let me ask you a question.

Are there not times when you are so taken by the love of Jesus Christ for you that like a child, you want to throw your hands and arms up and you want to get your feet and legs going?

[31 : 12] Aren't there times like that? Anybody? How many of you? I knew it. I knew it. And Scripture calls us to that.

One day, very soon, I know that I'm going to be free to be able to dance like King David did and dance in the Spirit. Oh, Jesus, you're so good.

You're so good. Good. You're good. You're good. You're good. You're good. The whole self, you see.

Let me show you something else about these verbs. In the text here, I'm out of breath. A particular verb of worship is the function of a particular attribute of God that is being manifested at that time. You see that little word for that I've underlined in the text for you? It's in verse 3 and verse 7. The word for explains why the particular verb came which precedes it.

[32 : 28] The psalmist calls for a certain set of verbs when focusing on the greatness of God. He calls for another set of verbs when focusing on intimacy with God.

God is great so we sing joyfully, we shout joyfully, we clap our hands. The great God is our God so we kneel and bow down and lay prostrate.

Yahweh is the great king above all kings and so we sing how great thou art or mighty, mighty savior. Yahweh is our maker, we are the sheep of his hand and so we sing love with everlasting love for Lord you're beautiful.

You notice that little word hand in the text? Verse 4, in whose hands are the depths of the sea.

Verse 5, his hand formed the dry land. Verse 7, we are the sheep of his hand.

You see that word? Use your imagination for just a moment here. Just for a moment, picture the mountains that are north of us and picture the ocean west of us.

[33 : 42] Picture the tectonic plates beneath us. Picture the earth whirling as a globe. Picture the galaxy with all of its stars.

Now picture this hand holding it all. The psalmist says that God calls every star in the galaxy by name, holding it all in his hand and calling them all by name.

How do you want to express your worship right now? But now picture a pasture and picture these green gentle rolling hills.

Picture sheep roaming and eating their hearts full. Picture you. And then picture that hand picking up you and calling you by name.

How now do you want to express your worship it changes doesn't it? The verbs of worship vary according to the attribute of God that is being held before us.

[34 : 52] Yahweh is a great God. One set of verbs. Yahweh is our God who has entered into covenant with us another set of verbs. And so it goes as we go further up and further in.

And then the third dynamic. Oh my, running out of time. No time. Third dynamic.

And this is really important. Worship that pleases God follows a flow. These verbs come in order for a reason.

The encounter doesn't just happen any old way. There is a protocol to the encounter. We do not just walk into the holy of holies and start chattering.

Outer court, inner court, holy of holies. There is a flow to this encounter. Which is why we must be on time for worship.

[35 : 57] worship. My second exhortation today. We must be on time for worship. Worship has a flow to it.

Many folks come in too late after the flow has begun and are playing catch up. Now I know sometimes the baby throws up or the car won't start. And in those times the Holy Spirit graciously enables us to kind of get in the flow in our car on the way down.

Most of the time there is no excuse for being late. It's a matter of discipline. More importantly it's a matter of desire.

If you had if I gave you tickets for the theater or for a film you'd be there on time. If you had a date with the Queen of England you'd be on time and you'd be prepared.

If you had a date with a rock star or a music hero you'd be on time. We're talking about a date with the King of Kings. We need to do everything we can to be on time when the flow begins so that we're not behind because encounter takes place in stages.

[37 : 11] In Psalm 95 and other Psalms I detect the following pattern and I'll just run it through you very quickly. I want to put it out in front of us because those of us who've been working on the whole worship thing have come to believe we're not being faithful to this pattern.

Here's the pattern. We begin on the note of affirmation and remembrance. We come and we reaffirm who God is in Jesus Christ and we remember the work that God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Sing to the rock says the psalmist. Sing to the creator. Sing to the one who holds the mountains and the sea. Sing to our maker. Sing to the good shepherd. Sing to the lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Sing to the crucified risen and coming king.

Sing to the one who loves us with a love that will not let us go. We start on that note of affirmation and remembrance. And then we move into the note of celebration and thanksgiving.

It is here that we begin to directly speak to God. It is here that the hymns and choruses that we pick should no longer have the third person reference he but the second person reference you because now the songs need to be sung to the Lord.

[38 : 26] We are getting more personal in this encounter. And then there comes somewhere along in there a spirit of contrition. What I would call holy sorrow. As we become aware of those things that displease God or those things that keep us from him.

Here the Holy Spirit begins to bring a conviction of sin. Isaiah says he sees the Lord high and lifted up and what's his next response? Woe is me. He realizes something is wrong and he opens his life up to the cleansing fire of God.

This is the place where we sing songs like purify my heart or just as I am. Then comes the note of assurance as we hear the gospel again that Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Here we stand at the cross in humility and in gratitude. We sing songs like Oh How He Loves You and Me or Amazing Grace or And Can It Be. Then comes the note of adoration.

When we focus on the Lord simply because He is who He is. Here is where our hearts begin to melt. Here is where we want to kneel. Here is where we begin to open up those deep places in our lives for His healing.

[39 : 36] Here is where we simply want to enjoy His presence and His embrace. Here is where whatever we sing has to be simple and melodious and reverent.

And then is when we can hear the Word. That's when we're prepared to hear the Word and receive the Word. Which is then followed by a time of response to the Word. That response will take different form depending upon the Word that God speaks to us.

That response may be more celebration or more confession or laying on of hands or praying together in small groups. A different kind of response depending upon the Word spoken. Ideally, this response time should take place around the Lord's table.

Around the sacraments through which the living God gives Himself to us as the bread of life and the living water. And then we are sent out empowered with new life to join Jesus in His ministry in the world.

Again, Isaiah. After His worship time, who will we send? Here am I. Send me. So God has revealed a flow to this encounter. Affirmation and remembrance, celebration and thanksgiving, contrition and assurance, adoration, listening, responding, and sending.

[40 : 52] Which means that announcements, as important as they are in the life of the church, need to come either before we begin or just before we are sent.

I'm going to move now in the direction that announcements will no longer break up the flow of the encounter. Come.

Come. Come. Moving up farther in. That is where we believe the Lord is leading us for this next season of our life together.

And doing so on two different but parallel tracks. service. One service leaning in a more traditional bent with the choir leading the music.

The other service leading in a more contemporary bent with a praise band leading the service. but both of them further up farther in to glorify God by enjoying them now and forever.

[41 : 56] Thank you.