

Drawing Near to Worship

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, it should have been one of the happiest days of Aaron's life. The whole assembly was gathered in front of the tent of meeting because God had promised to reveal his glory. Aaron himself, as priest under his brother Moses, was in charge of the sacrifices and he was following the instructions down to the letter, making the sin offering, the burnt offering, the fellowship offering. His two sons were there, helping their dad with the rituals, handing him the blood to sprinkle, passing him the bits of the burnt offering for him to put upon the altar. And when everything was completed, Aaron and Moses went inside the tent of meeting. And when they came out again, they blessed the people and the glory of the Lord appeared. Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the meat and the fat portions upon the altar. And when those who were gathered, the whole assembly of Israel saw it.
- [1 : 0 7] They were overcome with reverence and awe and they worshipped God, shouting for joy and falling face down. But in the midst of the celebrations and the worship, Aaron's two sons had managed to escape from their dad's watchful eye. And they filled up their own senses with coals and incense. And as the fragrant smoke began to rise from them, they did what dad had done and made an offering before the Lord, swinging the fire and smoke in front of the altar. Maybe they hoped God would show his glory a second time and they'd be blessed again. Maybe they were simply copying what dad was doing. Maybe they were just having a bit of fun, as naughty boys are known to do. But we read their worship was unauthorized. And so it says in Leviticus 10, Then fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them. And they died before the Lord. The verse that follows is both stark and poignant.
- [2 : 2 6] Moses then said to Aaron, This is what the Lord spoke of when he said, Among those who approach me, I will show myself holy in the sight of all the people. I will be honored. Aaron remained silent. What had started off as a celebration of the presence of the Lord God amongst his people Israel had turned into a day of silence for Aaron because God had killed his two sons. And why? Because God is a holy God who cannot, must not be approached unless on God's terms. His holiness is so strong, his character is so pure that even these children, these adolescents, could not be permitted to draw near in the wrong way. Later on in Leviticus, we read that Aaron himself is told by God that even he can't approach him, draw near to him whenever he wants.
- [3 : 4 0] He has to wait on God's timing and do it in God's way. And as for the rest of the people, we read in Numbers 18, from now on the Israelites must not go near the tent of meeting or they will bear the consequences of their sin and they will die.

God is holy and approaching God is risky business. And as the centuries went by after the time of Moses, this truth was continually demonstrated with terrible consequences.

We read in 1 Chronicles 13 that a man called Uzzah dies when he reaches out his hand to steady the Ark of the Covenant as it trembles on the cart that was pulling it along.

And he's struck down by the Lord. When the temple was built, its architecture symbolised the fact that drawing near to God in worship could only be done by the high priest and that only once a year.

The presence of God was not available for all people. In Jesus' day, we know that even the priest who would enter the most holy place once a year would do so with a rope tied around his leg just in case he died in the presence of the Lord and they had to remove his body without incurring another death on those who were trying to rescue him.

[5 : 19] And of course, that most holy place, the place where God would symbolically dwell, we read, is cut off from the rest of the people by a massive curtain.

The curtain that Rod explained to us at Easter this year was like 20 centimetres thick and took 100 people to lift up. And it needed to be this thick because lives were at stake.

God's holiness is a dangerous thing. And yet, you might remember that last week we spoke about how God seeks worshippers.

It's his highest priority. If he were to advertise his top job on seek.com.au, it would be for worshippers. That's what he wants and what he deserves.

He wants his name to be glorified, his marvellous deeds to be declared amongst the peoples. And it's also what's best for us. We were created to bring him praise.

[6 : 29] It completes us. It satisfies us. It blesses us. But what we didn't talk about in this ad last week was really the fact that the employer is the Holy One, the pure and sinless Almighty God.

And who could ever meet the requirements to worship such a one? We're so far from holy, so sinful, so broken, so self-absorbed.

It's really as if we'd be turning up to work in his pristine white office building, covered, ourselves covered from head to toe in sewage.

That's the state in which we ourselves would be answering such an ad. And of course, if we did that, we'd be putting our lives on the line.

There's no way we'd be let in to stain the carpet, to fill the air with the stench of our sin. And if we tried to push down the door and come into the presence of the boss, even with good intentions, even with good intentions, we'd be utterly destroyed by his just and holy wrath.

[7 : 59] And so despite what we've spoken about, it seems as though we could never answer the ad for worshippers as we are, no matter how keen we are to do it.

And yet, of course, the writer to the Hebrews says that we can. We can become worshippers who not simply wait at a distance, shyly hoping to be accepted one day, but who can step right in to the oval office, if you like, with confidence, that word meaning boldness, without shame, with courage and joy, speaking freely, head up.

We can fulfil our destiny to be worshippers. We can live our lives in the presence of God. We can offer him what he deserves. But this isn't because God has gotten soft in his old age, deciding that, well, in this modern, post-modern time, we may as well slacken off a few of the rules.

He hasn't changed from that Old Testament God of wrath to the New Testament God of love, as one man was trying to explain to me at a conference last year.

No. He's still the holy God. In fact, the writer to the Hebrews clearly says in chapter 12, our God is a consuming fire.

[9 : 29] So our confidence, our boldness to be worshippers doesn't stem from a lessening of the magnitude of our sin.

No. It comes from the fact that the sacrifice of God's Son on the cross was so powerful, so huge, so worthy, so sufficient that all of our filth, all of our sins, past, present, and future has been dealt with, removed from us as far as the east is from the west.

And so Hebrews says this, therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh.

And since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

God will be together. You see, Aaron's sacrifice on that day recorded in Leviticus 10 that I spoke about at the start, it looked amazing. But it wasn't even enough to save his sons from the wrath of God in the very next instant.

[11 : 09] And of course, we read in the Old Testament and in Hebrews that it had to be repeated time after time, year after year. And the high priest himself couldn't even enter the most holy place whenever he wanted, but he had to sacrifice for his own sins.

But when the blood of Christ was spilt on the cross, God tore that thick curtain of the temple open from top to bottom, opening the way to himself, to all people, the way it was meant to be.

humans in the presence of their maker all the time, worshipping him as they work, as they study, as they care for their family, as they gather together through their heart attitude toward him.

You see, that's what it means to draw near to God, to approach God. The expression is used a number of times in the book of Hebrews, and it's not talking about a spatial thing or a physical thing.

It's not like going to a temple or going to a church building or coming up the front for an altar call. It's a heart action.

[12 : 27] It's something that can be done in your own home, at work, in a hospital bed, in a pew listening to a sermon, whilst singing praises when we pray.

it's an appropriating of the past and present work of Christ for us in every situation in life. It's directing the heart into the presence of God, that heavenly sanctuary, God who is as distant as the holy of holies in heaven, yet as near to us as the door of faith.

And so the writer to the Hebrews says in 4.16, let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in the time of need.

In 7.25, he says, consequently, Jesus is able to save for all time those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

And 11.6, without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

[13 : 48] That's the great aim of this writer to the Hebrews. Really, everything that he has been speaking about up to this point in chapter 10 is to encourage us to get near to God, to have fellowship with God, not to settle for a life where the creator of the universe is watching us at a distance, but where he is a near and present reality to us.

And so he says this is possible because the past action of sacrifice of Christ's body, that is, through his flesh on the cross, has brought about a new and living way of relating to God.

Not the old way of sacrifices, but a better way, he says. Those old sacrifices stayed dead and they were consumed. But in this new covenant, this new agreement, which has been ratified by the victorious resurrection of Christ, we have a relationship with the living Lord.

And so he is our present high priest as well as our past sacrifice. He is our mediator, the one who answers for us in the presence of God.

He is our everything. This week, it has been bowling me over just to think about how amazing this offer for us to draw near to God is through the past and present work of Christ.

[15 : 27] Christ. I imagine it like this, that as we sit in prayer or, you know, we're travelling in the car, wherever we are, we direct our thoughts and heart to God, knocking on the door of God's office, of his throne room.

And it's like Jesus looks out and says, Father, it's Megan. You know, we've enabled her to put her trust in me, Father, by our spirit.

We've, I've washed her clean from all her sins by my death on the cross, Father. She's wearing that white robe that I gave her.

In fact, that robe that I swapped with her on the cross. She's come to worship us, Father, by drawing near at this time, by asking you for what she needs, by declaring your worth, Father, my lordship, Father, our majesty, by confessing her sins, by just letting us take her burdens and our spirit loving her in our presence.

That's what I imagine drawing near to God is. And I think that's right. Some people talk about drawing near to God as being prayer or reading the scriptures or singing great worship songs.

[17 : 10] Sometimes we even sing songs which have lyrics like, draw me close to you or I want to be where you are or I want to be with you.

But drawing near is more about a heavenly reality, a heart direction that can be done anywhere, anytime. But that's not to say that those things, prayer, reading the scriptures, singing great worship songs together, that's not to say that those things aren't a part of it and that there's not an experiential aspect to drawing near.

psalm 16 says, in your presence is fullness of joy at your right hand are pleasures evermore. To be in Jesus' presence every moment or to sit there and say, Lord, I come to you because sometimes it does take that, doesn't it, a conscious decision.

To be in Jesus' presence is really for us to be the greatest privilege that we can experience, the greatest joy we can know. And I think, friends, if our hearts are never warmed when we hear the gospel, if we never smile when we declare his praises, if we've never felt overwhelmed by gratitude at the gift of love God gave in Jesus Christ, then it may be that we need to hear one or more of these next three exhortations in this passage in Hebrews chapter 10.

So let's read on. First of all, verse 22, let us approach, draw near, with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

[19 : 06] There's only ever been two conditions for Christians to approach God in worship. We don't need to have it all together. We don't need to wear a good suit or make poverty history wristband.

We don't need to sing hillsong music or emu music. We don't need to be perfect. We simply need to have a heart that hasn't got divided loyalties and that does believe that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is sufficient for all our sins.

simply we need repentance and faith. But doesn't the devil love to whisper in our ear that that might be true for everyone else but it's not true for us?

He says to us, you've blown it. You, Megan, you're a minister. You should have known better. You're a home group leader. You should have known better.

You've been a Christian for a really long time. You should have known better. You've excluded yourself. It's too humiliating to go back to God now. You've sinned one too many times. There's no repentance left for you.

[20 : 17] But that is just so wrong, isn't it? When we've sinned, it's exactly the time that Christ is asking us to draw near. In Hebrews chapter 4, that's it.

Finding grace and mercy to help us in our time of need. That's exactly when we need to draw near. I can't count the number of times that I have in my mind or in my heart stayed away from God because of feeling that I have to be perfect or sinless or that my house has to be clean before I can have a time of prayer with him.

Or that I am just, I've just blown it one too many times and I can't draw near. And perhaps that's why it was so powerful for me when I watched The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe last year and I saw that scene.

I don't know if you've seen it, but you might have read the book, where Edmund and Aslan go off and have a conversation. And I'm a bit of a crier, as many might know, but I'm sitting there blubbing away because it was just, Edmund had done so much to betray Aslan and he had been separated from him, yet Aslan's heart was to say, come let us reason together.

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as wool. And they had a conversation. And Aslan didn't gloss over his sins.

[21 : 56] No, he took them seriously. Seriously enough to know that the forgiveness that he would offer to Edmund would cost him his life. And we know, of course, that Aslan is a picture of the Lord Jesus.

We need to know that God longs for us to draw near to him, even when we are feeling unworthy, because that's exactly the time where we find grace and mercy to help us in our time of need.

And boy, that glorifies God, that worships God. The second let us, it's just a smaller sentence, let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.

Sometimes we find it difficult to draw near to God in worship, to feel like we're actually giving due worth to God, because our trust in the promises of God and our vision of the hope of glory in the future for those who trust in him is wavering.

It's swerving, if you like. That's the sense of that word, that we're kind of all over the place. And maybe it's because we haven't been in the word enough, you know, just reminding ourselves of it, even if it's not every day in the scriptures, even though, of course, that's a wonderful thing.

[23 : 19] But for some of us, we haven't been reading the Bible regularly, like for ages, or reading it at all for ages. And so we think, okay, reading the Bible regularly is about reading it every day.

And so I can't do that. So I can't really, you know, read it at all. Friends, every week is better than nothing. And can I encourage you to just open the word, even tonight, and say, God, would you help me see your promises, trust in them, maybe stop swerving around and speak to me from your word.

And by your spirit, help me to do it as regularly as I can. Build up. Be in the word. Maybe you want to speak to someone who can pray with you or answer some of your questions so that you stop swerving around your hope.

But the third let us is something we spoke about last week. But it's something that is just made so clear to us in this passage tonight. To draw near to God, we must continue to meet together.

24, verse 24. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day approaching.

[24 : 44] This week I've been reading some material from a group called Open Doors, and they're a group that supports persecuted Christians around the world. And it struck me as I was reading this material to what lengths these believers will go to to get to meet together, because they just know how essential it is.

believers in China risk imprisonment, even when they're gathering in each other's homes. And when they are imprisoned, like even for 20 years, as soon as they come out, they get right back to meeting together, because they know that that is what it's about in supporting each other and keeping the fire going as Christians.

A guy was telling me that one church's pastor was imprisoned, and her congregation was so intent on still meeting together with her that they approached the prison guards, and they said, we want to meet as a church in here, and we want to do so with our pastor who's behind bars.

And the prison guards said, oh, you know, okay, which was a blessing in itself. And so now, once a week, this group come into the prison, the pastor teaches them, and others from the prison, of course.

We know the Holy Spirit has been doing that since the Apostle Paul's time. He's bringing more and more believers into that gathering, converting people in that prison, and making the church grow there.

[26 : 22] I read in Colombia, Christians are being purposefully isolated from each other by the guerrilla forces so that they don't meet together and strengthen each other.

And yet these Christians are willing to even keep going, though there are threats against their family and their children, because they know how essential it is for believers to meet together.

Now, friends, of course, we can draw near to God individually. And it's about the work of the Lord Jesus Christ for me and for you, yes, as individuals. But it's the Lord's plan that we do it together.

It's so important. I mean, these people will risk their lives to meet together, yet we have freedom in this country to meet together that we just take for granted, don't we?

And, you know, miss a Sunday here or there. And, you know, this is not about rules and it's not about a guilt trip. It's about taking hold of the privilege we have in Australia to meet together because it's as we meet together that we can help each other to draw near.

[27 : 39] Now, obviously, this happens at church on a Sunday, but it's actually, the author obviously has in mind meetings where people are able to interact, to form relationships, to speak into each other's lives.

And for us, this is, you know, kind of possible in a service of this size, 60 people or so. But it is ideally done in home groups, Bible study groups, smaller groups.

And at Holy Trinity, our home groups are supposed to be the core of our ministry of encouragement to each other. It's the primary place where we are to do what the author says, consider how we might provoke one another to love and to good deeds.

Because the idea of considering how to do this is not just doing a one-size-fits-all sermon application or a one-size-fits-all Bible study application.

But it is actually to get to know the people around you, to discern what their needs are, you know, what their life situation is, what are their challenges, what are their gifts, what are the particular areas of weakness that they might be.

[28 : 52] Getting to know people so that then you can consider thoughtfully, prayerfully consider how you can assist that individual to love others and to serve the Lord in their church community and beyond.

So it's like saying, now, I think Lisa would love this new book on sharing your faith with post-moderns. Because I know she's got a few friends who think all religions are the same.

She was telling me that. And I know that God would love her to be more equipped to speak to them about Jesus. Or I hear that the Sunday school needs more workers and I've been praying and I think that it would be an awesome way for Julie to use her gifts with children.

And so I'll speak to her about that. Or I'll try and catch up with Andrew this week because I can see that he's feeling a bit down in his faith. And I'd like to see if I can pray about something for him so that he can draw near to God again.

Drawing near to God is God's desire for each one of us. And each of us has a special role to play in helping others do that. But each of us also has to make a commitment to be willing to do that.

[30 : 11] But not because of who we in ourselves are. But having confidence, boldness, a lifted face to come into the presence of the King of Kings through what Jesus Christ has done on the cross.

Can I encourage you, friends, that if this is not something that you've thought about much before or if you're thinking, I don't know what that's going to look like in my life or actually I think I'm going to find that really difficult or I am finding that difficult.

Can I encourage you to speak to someone in your home group or to come and speak to myself or Rod to use this next song that we're going to learn and sing together as a time of saying to God, drawing near to you is what you want from me and it's what my soul is made for.

I want to do that. Can you answer that ad? God seeks worshippers with confidence.

Because of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you that although you are a holy, you are a holy God, a consuming fire and we cannot of ourselves come to you, approach you, draw near to you.

[31 : 41] But you long to have us in your presence and you've done all that it takes for us to be there. Lord, would you grant us faith and repentance so that we might enjoy the fullness of your presence, the joy at your right hand.

And Lord, would you stir up in us those things that we need to bring to you, that we need to get our fellow sisters and brothers to help us with so that our whole lives, Lord, are worshipped to you in your presence.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.