

Worship before service

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everybody. Nice to see you all after yesterday. Hope you're recovered. I want to turn this morning to Matthew chapter 4. It's just a short reading. Matthew chapter 4, verses 8 and 9.

Again, the devil took him, Jesus, to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.

All this I will give you, he said, if you will bow down and worship me. Jesus said to him, away from me, Satan, for it is written, worship the Lord your God and serve him only.

Let's just pray. Father, we just commit this message to you this morning. May you be glorified in it and may you speak to each one individually in some way or other through what is said.

For the glory of your great name. Amen. Before I begin the message proper, let me say a few words about the temptation in the wilderness, which you might find helpful.

[1 : 16] Although this story is very familiar to us all, and there are many lessons that can be drawn from this episode in Jesus' life, I never fully understood the reason for it until one day I heard a preacher explain that the purpose of the temptation was so that Jesus could retrace Adam's steps on our behalf in order to undo the damage that was brought upon the human race through the disobedience of our first parents.

That was a revelation to me. Daniel used to tell us, didn't he? It's not what God can do for you, it's what he can undo. Well, I was never a great fan of the way that was put because it emphasizes what God undoes more than what he does.

Having said that, however, the temptation of Christ is, I would suggest, the prime example of God undoing something. And in this case, something of immense importance for us all.

In retracing Adam's steps and succeeding where he failed, Jesus has released us from the curse that came upon humanity through his and Eve's disobedience.

But notice the contrast. They were in a beautiful garden. Christ was in a wilderness. They were, with one exception, free to eat from all the trees in the garden.

[2 : 38] Jesus had fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. Adam was tempted once and failed. The Lord, despite being tempted three times, did not fail.

Another thing that Daniel often said was that Jesus lived the life that we should have lived. This is also significant. For taken together, it's clear that our salvation is dependent not only on the cross, but on the life of Jesus in its entirety.

On our behalf, he lived the perfect life that we ourselves were incapable of living. Retraced Adam's steps for us, succeeding where he failed, and died on the cross in our place so that we could be forgiven.

The result is that through Jesus, we are made right with God in every way. No wonder, Paul declares in Romans 11, 33, O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out.

What I want to share with you from a reading this morning is something I have never forgotten, even though I was shown it not long after I became a Christian at the age of 18.

[3 : 55] When a friend of the same age and I joined a small house fellowship, we were taken under the wing of an older brother by the name of Jimmy Forsyth. Jimmy had been a tramp and an alcoholic, but had been wonderfully saved.

He lived in a flat near the bottom of Leith Walk and worked as a kitchen porter in the Caledonian Hotel, but liked nothing better on his day off than going around Leith's second-hand bookshops, rummaging through their stock in search of old Christian books.

Jimmy helped instill in us a love of scripture. Often after a meeting when we were having a cup of tea, he would take us to a passage in the Bible, pose a question, and say, let me know the answer next week.

It made us search the scriptures. Sometimes he would just share with us some insight that he himself had discovered. On one occasion, he took us to the passage that we read together a moment ago and said to us, Now I realise that I may be putting my head in the lion's mouth by saying that after all the hard work that everyone put in yesterday, to make yesterday such a success.

But the truth is, I wasn't really thinking about the fun day when I was preparing this message. And of course it's very important that we serve the Lord and one another, for no church or family could possibly function without the faithfulness of those who serve.

[5 : 31] But I've never forgotten what Jimmy said because I believe that he was right. So I want to look at the subject of worship this morning. In fact, if I had to give this message a title, it would be, dare I say, the priority of worship.

It's never wise, of course, to make a case for something based on only one verse of scripture, but there are other passages in the Bible that confirm the assertion that worship has priority over service.

Perhaps the best example is found in the story of Mary and Martha. You will recall that Jesus and his disciples were at the home of the two sisters, and whilst Martha was busy in the kitchen, Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus, drinking in his every word.

Thirteen people coming for lunch is a lot to cater for. Gerald knows about that, and Daniel. And you're a lot more than thirteen.

But when the pressure got too much for Martha, she actually scolded Jesus. Can you believe that? Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me.

[6 : 43] Martha, Martha, the Lord answered. You're worried and upset about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.

It's not that Martha wasn't serving the Lord. She was running herself, ragged serving him. But it was at the expense of the one thing that was necessary, spending time with him, like Mary, sitting at his feet in adoration, the neglect of which is often the reason that pastors and others in Christian ministry today can end up burning themselves out.

Worship should have priority of service, simply because service is mostly focused on others, but worship is focused on the Lord himself, and he comes first.

In prayer, too, God must come first. Except in emergencies, it's never a good idea to come into his presence and just reel off our requests one after another.

Psalms 100 verse 4 tells us, first of all, to enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and praise his name.

[8 : 01] When Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer, he encouraged them to ask for their daily provision and to seek forgiveness for their trespasses. But to begin, Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

The Bible is full of examples of worship. Hebrews 11.21 tells us that way back in the days of the patriarchs, Jacob, by faith when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's son and worshipped as he leaned on top of his staff.

In 1 Chronicles chapter 16, we read that David appointed Levites to praise and worship the Lord on musical instruments and in song before the Ark of the Covenant.

He made it a paid-up, full-time career for them. Music and worship also played a big part in the life of the early church. For Paul, writing to the Ephesians, says in chapter 5, verse 18 and 19, Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery.

Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music in your hearts to the Lord.

[9 : 12] But for me, when it comes to worship, I think that our best teachers are the angels. Unlike us, they're sinless, and they have the advantage that, as Jesus says, they always behold the face of the Father in heaven.

Often when angels are mentioned in the Bible, it's in the context of worship. For instance, in chapter 38 of the book of Job, God questions Job, Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy. Remember John mentioning joy last Sunday night. I love that verse, I can just picture it. Interestingly, it suggests that this happened before Satan's rebellion. For it says, All the sons of God shouted for joy. Isaiah writes that in the year that King Uzziah died, he saw the Lord high and exalted and seated on a throne, surrounded by seraphim who were crying, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty.

The whole earth is full of his glory. And of course, at Christmas time, we remember how an angel appeared to the shepherds to proclaim the birth of the Messiah.

[10:26] Immediately after which Luke tells us, Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those in whom his favor rests.

But no book in the Bible shows us the angels that worship more, I think, than the revelation of John. There on three separate occasions, and for three distinct reasons, we see the angels extolling the Lord.

There are, of course, many reasons to worship the Lord, but let's take a look at these three specific ones that motivated the angels to worship, and it might help us too. The first reason angels worship God is for creation.

In chapter 4 of Revelation, John describes being taken up into heaven, where he sees the Lord upon a throne, surrounded by four living creatures and 24 elders.

When the living creatures give glory to God, the 24 elders, these heavenly beings, cast their crowns before him and say, You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.

[11:42] I don't think we praise God enough for creation, although we did quite well this morning with the children's hymn and the first hymn. So here's a tiny reminder, and hopefully this is going to work.

I want to show you a wee slideshow. A sunset. The earth from space. A tranquil scene. A thunderstorm.

Some flowers that are grown. First in black and white, then in glorious color. I love the fact that we see in color, and in three dimensions.

And I thank God for that. We can get by with black and white. And some of us can remember when everything on TV was in black and white. But I like my grass to be green.

I like my sky to be blue. And my flowers to be all the colors of the rainbow. And not just 50 shades of gray. Here is a diagram of a cochlea.

[12:48] It's in your inner ear, and it's only about 10 millimeters across. But notice the spiral shape of the cochlea. This is a nautilus shell.

It's also in the form of a spiral, and it's about 10 inches wide. Spirals are even found in galaxies, some of which can be hundreds of light years across.

That's a beautiful picture of a spiral galaxy. Galaxies are unbelievably big, but bacteria are so small that we can't see them without the aid of a microscope. Here is a picture of some bacteria.

In this next diagram, we can see a bacteria's long tail. It was only very recently, in the 1970s, that scientists discovered that bacteria have a rotary motor that drives its tail like a propeller, which is in the next slide.

There we go. It has all the same parts that a man-made electric motor has, only in micro-miniature. It's extremely tiny, but it's an electric motor.

[14:00] It's amazing. It's incredible. Then there's you and I. That's me on the left when I was younger. Just so you get the right one.

No, I'm only joking. Actually, this is what I used to look like. And so did you. And so did you. King David said in Psalm 139, verse 13, You formed my inward parts.

You knitted me together in my mother's womb. Apparently, fetal cardiac tissue begins to beat only five or six weeks from conception, and the fetal heart is fully formed by week 10.

The adult heart pumps enough blood in one year to fill an Olympic-sized swimming pool. All animals think and communicate and act. But being made in the image of God, we humans have a brain capable of such complex thought that we can comprehend the universe, create beautiful music and great works of art.

And through speech and the written word, we are able to communicate our ideas, be the actual or abstract, to others. Coupled with the fact that the human hand has been described as the most versatile tool in the known universe, human beings have been able to build amazing structures like great cathedrals, send rockets to the moon, and construct all manner of things.

[15 : 25] But there isn't time this morning to say more. Suffice to say that no wonder David, when he was penning the words for his King James Version of Psalm 139, wrote, I will praise thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Marvelous are thy works, and that my soul knoweth right well. The children's hymn that begins, all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all, goes on to say, He gave us eyes to see them, and lips that we might tell. How great is God Almighty, who doeth all things well. The second reason angels in Revelation worship the Lord is because of our salvation.

In Luke 17, Jesus tells his disciples that the angels in heaven rejoice when one sinner repents. And chapter 5 of Revelation confirms that. The angels rejoice when men and women are saved, and they worship God when that happens.

In this chapter of Revelation, Jesus is depicted as a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes. You don't know how difficult it was to find a picture, a good picture.

[16 : 41] Some of them are kind of weird. That's the best one I could find. So Jesus is depicted as a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes and looking as if it had been slain. That's kind of blood down the front there.

He takes a scroll that is sealed with seven seals from the right hand of God. And as he does so, the living creatures and the elders fall at his feet in worship, declaring, Worthy are you to take a scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

And you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.

Myriads of angels join in worship, and with a loud shout cry, Worthy is the lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise.

And every creature in heaven and on earth says, To him who sits on the throne and to the lamb, be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever.

If the angels in heaven rejoice at our salvation, how much more should we who are the recipients of that salvation? When was the last time you got down on your knees and thanked God for saving you?

[17 : 56] We are such a privileged people. Once we were far from God, but now we have been brought nearby the blood of Christ. We have been redeemed, justified, sanctified, and adopted into God's family.

Our sins are forgiven. We have received the gift of the Holy Spirit as our helper. His presence in our life is also the guarantee of our future redemption and inheritance.

And what a prospect we have, for scripture says that eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man the things that God has prepared for them that love him.

The lamb is worthy indeed of our worship, and not only our worship, but the worship of everyone around us, here in Westerhales and beyond. Charles Wesley writes, Oh, that the world would taste and see the riches of his grace.

The arms of love that compassed me would all mankind embrace. But have we lost that first love that in the first flush of our conversion caused us to tell our family and friends and even strangers on the bus of our wonderful Savior?

[19 : 09] Perhaps yesterday will help stir up that desire in us again. Thirdly, the angels worship and praise God for victory over sin and Satan.

In chapter 12 of Revelation, John is showing what is yet to come. From verse 7 we read, Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven.

The great dragon was hurled down, that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth and his angels with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say, Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah.

For the accuser of our brothers has been cast down, who accused them before our God day and night. They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony. They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Here's a depiction of that scene from an incredibly detailed woodcut made in 1498 by the famous Renaissance German artist Albrecht Dürer.

[20 : 27] It's a powerful and vigorous image. And a funny looking devil. When the Allied troops successfully landed on the beaches in Normandy on June the 6th, 1944, Germany had effectively lost the war.

But they did not concede defeat until almost a year later in May of 1945. Satan is a defeated foe, but he will not give in until Jesus returns and he is bound and cast into the bottomless pit. He may win some battles, but the war is lost. We're in a battle, and although God has equipped us with the full armor of God, we still at times fail. Satan not only accuses us before God day and night, he also takes every opportunity to accuse us to our face.

So we need to discern between the conviction that comes from the Holy Spirit that leads to repentance and the accusations of the devil who heaps guilt and condemnation upon us in order to destroy us.

Once, when Alan was speaking, he quoted some words from a hymn which, if you'll pardon the pun, really struck a chord with me. When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within, upward I look and see him there who made an end of all my sin.

[21 : 47] Because the sinless saviour died, my sinful soul is counted free for God the just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me.

I find great encouragement too in Jesus' words to Peter at the Last Supper. Although he tells him, Simon, Simon, Satan has desired to have you that he may sift you as wheat.

That's a very scary prospect indeed. What a relief. What a relief that he adds. But I have prayed for you that your faith does not fail.

It makes all the difference when the Lord says, but I have prayed for you. It's because of the prayers of Jesus who intercedes for us before the Father and the help of the Holy Spirit that our faith like Peter's does not fail.

So we can say in the words of 1 Corinthians 15 verse 57, Thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

[22 : 49] The 24 elders in heaven were right to cast down their crowns and declare, You are worthy our Lord and God to receive glory and honour and power.

And the angels were right to cry, Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise. And this brings us back to our reading and the temptation of Jesus.

Satan offered Jesus a shortcut, an easy option. He could bypass the cross and regain what was rightfully his dominion over all the kingdoms of the world if only he would fall down and worship him. But where would that leave us? The devil has never given up on his obsession to be worshipped. But unlike God and the Lamb he is not worthy of worship and Jesus rightly rejected his offer. He is not the creator. He is not the redeemer. And inasmuch he is the very epitome of sin how could he possibly deliver anyone from its power?

[23 : 59] Sadly there are many in the world today who have been willing to fall down and worship the devil for a great deal less than he offered. You just have to listen to what some pop stars have admitted to in order to get fame and fortune in this life.

The world may worship whoever and whatever they like. But I'm sure I speak for all of us this morning when I say we will worship the Lord our God and serve him only.

Joining with the angels as they declare to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever.

Amen. So we're going to worship God now in our final hymn will worship the King all glorious above. Father we thank you for this time spent together in your presence.

Continue with us over tea and coffee and part us with your blessing and may the love of God the Father the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us now and forever more.

[25 : 13] Amen.