

## **Entering his holy presence:**

How to worship daily

Dr. Jim Denison

Psalms 8, 100

Would you agree with this statement? "The problem with the typical morning worship service is that it starts at 11 o'clock sharp and ends at 12 o'clock dull."

Many people do agree. According to surveys, the number one reason people drop out of church today is that its worship is boring. A little boy went to church with his family. That night in his prayers he said, "Dear God, we had a good time at church today, but I wish you had been there."

Have you seen the book, 101 Things To Do During a Dull Sermon? Good, because I'm sure you won't ever need to buy it. But I must admit that the authors have done their work well. Here are some examples:

- Locate all of the typing mistakes in the church bulletin.
- See how many state birds you can list. Match the state birds you have listed with choir members who look like one of the birds.
- Sit in the back pew and roll a handful of marbles under the pews ahead of you. After the service, credit yourself with ten points for each marble that made it to the altar.
- Pass a note to the organist asking whether she plays requests.
- Devise ways of climbing into the balcony without using the stairs.

Dull sermons and services are a serious problem. According to the surveys, the number one problem with the church today is boring, irrelevant worship and sermons.

Wouldn't you like to come to church each week expecting an exciting, life-changing experience? Knowing that you would leave filled with the presence and power of God? Certain that Jesus would meet you where you hurt, and give your life renewed purpose and significance? I want that for you, and for myself.

Would you like to begin each day that way? How can we experience that kind of exciting worship together on Sunday and personally through the week? That's the critical question we'll ask this morning. We need to know the audience, the performers, preparations, practice, and results of worship. Nothing is more vital to our souls.

## **Explore the Psalms**

### **Who is the audience of worship?**

We begin at the beginning: who is worship **for**?

Growing up, I assumed the worship service was for the congregation. The pastor preaches to you and the choir sings to you. You act like any other audience--you come, pay money, laugh or clap if you want to, and come back if you like what you hear. When I was a member of the congregation, I certainly thought worship was for me.

So when I became a preacher, I continued in that mindset. I tried to preach sermons that would help people, entertain them, and keep them coming back. It's the most popular way to preach today--I call it "therapy preaching." The pastor is a counselor, a therapist, here to help you with your problems.

Is this how you see worship? Will you say things such as, The choir sounded good today, or I didn't like those hymns very well, or I didn't get much out of the sermon, or That really helped me? Consciously or unconsciously, do you think the congregation is the audience? That you're the ones worship is for?

It was a shock to me to learn that this is not how God sees worship at all. Look at the worship service Isaiah got to see (Isaiah 6).

He's standing in the Holy of Holies, the inner room of the Jewish Temple. The room is 30 feet long by 30 feet wide by 45 feet high. And this whole room is filled with the robe of the one seated on the throne at its center. Angels called "seraphs" are flying all around the room, crying "Holy, holy, holy." The doorposts are shaking and the temple is filled with smoke. And who is the audience of this incredible worship service? Isaiah, or God?

This is the scene in heaven right now: "Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne 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' (Rev. 4.9-11).

Here's the future: "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!' Then I heard every creature in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them singing: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!' The four living creatures said, 'Amen,' and the elders fell down and worshiped" (Rev. 5.11-14).

This is what God wants from each one of us: "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (John 4.23).

Who is the audience of worship? Who is worship **for**?

I first realized the true audience of worship when I read these words by Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher. They forever changed the way I see worship: "When we come to worship, we generally feel as though the preacher and other ministers are the performers, God is the subject of the performance, and we as the congregation are the audience. Authentic Christian worship is just the opposite. We are the performers. The preacher and other ministers are the directors of the performance. God is the audience. Everything we do is directed to him."

We worship an audience of one.

And this Audience is very attentive. He is watching everything we are doing.

Listen to this sobering verse: "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13).

God knows when our worship is sincere and when it is just habit: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Mt. 15:8-9, quoting Isaiah 29:13).

God knows whether we prepare ourselves to be in God's presence, or just walk in and sit down. He knows whether or not we really sing hymns of praise to him, for he hears our words and read our thoughts. He knows whether we return his tithe to him financially. He knows whether you're really listening to his word right now, or just sitting through the Bible study. He knows whether you will apply his word to your life this week or not.

He knows whether I am teaching this study to glorify him or to impress you.

Many years ago a choir presented Handel's Messiah so beautifully that the applause was thunderous and everyone turned in appreciation to Handel as he sat in the crowd. Handel stood slowly and pointed his finger upward, silently indicating that the glory should be given to God, not himself. And the true Audience was pleased.

Is he pleased with us today?

### **Are you prepared to worship God?**

It was the last night of the revival I was preaching in my brother's church in Houston.

The service was done and we were in the Fellowship Hall when we heard the sirens. They came closer, until they stopped at our church! We rushed outside to find the sanctuary on fire. Smoke had set off the alarms and firemen were running up, hoses in hand.

It turned out to be a small fire in the balcony of the sanctuary, more smoke than flames, and it was soon out. The interesting part was happening outside the building. People

from all over the neighborhood were running out to watch--some in their pajamas. Three times as many as had come to the church for its revival services came to watch its fire. And I thought of the statement Charles Finney made a century ago: If your church is on fire, people will come from miles around to watch it burn.

Before we can have a fire, we'd better prepare the fireplace. If we don't, nothing good will happen. We've studied the **audience** of worship. Now let's learn the simple **preparations** essential to the life-changing worship of God.

The first step in having a fire is to **decide we want one**. We must want to have a fire before we'll build it. We must want to meet God in worship before we will. We must believe that we can, and that we will. We must believe that the fire can come, that it *will* fall, before it does.

Like everything else in life, we get what we expect in worship. If we come for a Rotary or Kiwanis Club meeting with a Bible study, just another part of the week, that's what we'll find. If we expect a routine service, we'll have one. But if we seek fire, we'll feel it.

It's a proven fact: we cannot see what we don't expect to see. Joel Arthur Barker, author of Future Edge, makes the point clearly in a video I once watched. He flashed a deck of cards on the screen, asking the viewer to find the "wrong" card. I saw nothing wrong. Then he flashed the cards much more slowly and I saw the problem: a red jack of spades, a black ten of hearts, a red three of clubs. I wasn't watching for that, so I didn't see it. I couldn't see it.

What do you expect in worship? A preaching and musical performance? That's what you'll see, and nothing more. Do you come to meet your needs? For a good time with friends? For your business? I've met several in my various churches who were honest enough to tell me they joined for the business contacts. Do you come to be entertained? You'll get what you seek.

Next we **repair the fireplace**. If there are cracks in the bricks, the fire won't draft properly. If the damper is stuck shut, all we'll make is smoke. If rain is leaking onto the fire, it won't last. We must repair the fireplace before the fire can start.

In 1 Kings 18, the altar of the Lord was in ruins (v. 30). For years the people had neglected it in their idolatrous worship of Baal, the Canaanite god of fertility. Its stones had fallen and crumbled, and weeds had grown up over it.

Today my heart is God's fireplace, his altar. The Bible teaches that my body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). My life is his altar. If my life is choked with sinful weeds or cracked with spiritual neglect, I must repair it before God's fire can fall in my worship.

I must get rid of anything I have made more important than God in my life: "If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only" (1 Samuel 7:3).

I must purify myself of everything unclean: "When they had assembled their brothers and consecrated themselves, they went in to purify the temple of the Lord, as the king had ordered, following the word of the Lord. The priests went into the sanctuary of the Lord to purify it. They brought out to the courtyard of the Lord's temple everything unclean they found in the temple of the Lord" (2 Chronicles 29:15-16). It took them sixteen days to make the temple clean again.

This is indispensable to prayer and worship: "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened" (Psalm 66:18).

Do you repair your altar before you use it to worship God? Do you repair the fireplace, so God can send his fire?

First, we decide that we want a fire in our house. Second, we repair the fireplace. Third, we *prepare the wood*. We tear up newspaper, split the kindling, and get the wood. We arrange it properly. We get the matches. If we don't prepare the wood, we can't have a fire.

This we do in private, meeting daily with God. It's been said that we don't know a man well if we've met him only in crowds. Before we meet God here, in public, we first must meet him in private. We must prepare the wood before we can have a fire.

We must prepare the wood before the fire can fall.

Jack Hayford is pastor of Church on the Way in Van Nuys, California, one of the fastest-growing churches in that part of the country. He is also the author of the most popular chorus in America, Majesty. I read this week that Dr. Hayford goes to his church building every Saturday night to pray. He literally puts his hands on every chair in the sanctuary and prays for whoever will sit in it. He spends as long as it takes to prepare himself for the next day. He prepares the wood.

But preparation is not just the work of the preacher. F. B. Meyer, perhaps the greatest preacher of his day, once preached the same sermon to two different churches on succeeding nights. The first night God moved in mighty power; the second, nothing happened at all. Friends of Dr. Meyer who attended both services asked him the reason. He said, "It's simple. The first church prayed before they came--the second did not."

Eighty years ago a Welsh college student named Evan Roberts had a profound meeting with God in which he experienced his cleansing and renewal. He went home to his village to preach a sermon in response. Only seventeen came to hear his simple message: confess any known sin to God; put away any wrong habit; obey the Holy Spirit promptly;

and confess faith in Christ openly. But within three months 100,000 converts resulted from the awakening which began with this young man.

You've heard the stories about the Welsh revival--how the mining industry shut down because the miners were converted, stopped cursing, and their mules couldn't understand them. How the police and judges were out of work because there were no criminals. All because one young man prepared the wood for the fire.

It's been said, "Our problem is that we worship our work, work at our play, and play at our worship." That's been true in my life. Is it true in yours?

In a remote mountain village, a wealthy man who had grown up in the community wanted to leave a legacy to his hometown, so he built a church building. When the people gathered for its unveiling, they were amazed at its beauty. The steeple was tall and beautiful, the woodwork intricate, the pulpit and furnishings ornate. But soon they noticed a problem: "Where are the lights?" There were no lights anywhere in the sanctuary.

Their benefactor pointed to brackets on the walls. Then he gave to each family a lamp which they were to bring with them to worship. "Each time you bring your lighted lamp to worship, your area will be lighted. If you come without lighting your lamp first, your place will be dark. The light in the church is up to you."

Indeed it is.

## **Does your worship praise God?**

Why should it? First, **God deserves our praise** (see Psalms).

Second, **God empowers our praise.**

King Jehoshaphat and the nation of Israel are on the brink of annihilation. Mighty armies from Moab and Ammon have attacked and surrounded them. They have no chance of victory, or even survival. So "Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: 'Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever'" (2 Chronicles 20.21). And what happened? "As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated. The men of Ammon and Moab rose up against the men from Mount Seir to destroy and annihilate them. After they finished slaughtering the men from Seir, they helped to destroy one another. When the men of Judah came to the place that overlooks the desert and looked toward the vast army, they saw only dead bodies lying on the ground; no one had escaped" (vs. 22-24). God empowers our praise.

Jonah's life was ending in the belly of a great fish when he prayed, "I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation

comes from the Lord." The result? "And the Lord commanded the fish, and it threw Jonah onto dry land" (Jonah 2.9-10).

God empowers us as we contact him through praise.

Third, **God commands our praise.** Let me give you just a few examples:

- 1 Chronicles 16:8-10: "Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done. Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice."
- Psalm 22:23: "You who fear the Lord, praise him!"
- Psalm 29:1-2: "Ascribe to the Lord, O mighty ones, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness."
- Psalm 32:11: "Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!"
- 1 Peter 2:9: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."
- And of course, Psalm 150: "Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with the tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord."

And fourth, **God dwells in our praise.** Psalm 22:3 says, "God inhabits the praise of his people" (KJV). God literally dwells in the place where his people praise him. If you want to make contact with God, praise him.

A wealthy Ohio farmer named Taylor was once approached by a young man named Jamie, asking for a job. Taylor hired Jamie, and allowed him to sleep in the barn. He proved to be a very valuable employee.

One day Jamie came to Taylor and announced that he and the wealthy man's daughter had fallen in love. The farm worker asked Taylor for his daughter's hand in marriage. Taylor was incensed and fired him. Jamie packed his things and left, and Taylor never heard from him again.

Years later Taylor was cleaning the barn and came to the area where Jamie used to sleep. When the straw was swept away he was startled to find that Jamie had carved his full name in the wood: James A. Garfield.



Taylor's farm hand had gone on to become a general, then president of the United States. The man could have been father-in-law to the President, but he never recognized Garfield for who he was.

Do you recognize Jesus for who he is, and give him the praise that is his due? Or do you miss him each morning and each week?

Missionary Morris Plotts tells this story about the 1956 Mau Mau uprisings in East Africa.

A roving band from the Mau Mau tribe had just pillaged the village of Lauri, killing all 300 inhabitants, including women and children. Now they were descending on the Rift Valley School, a school for missionary children. You can imagine their fear. Word had reached them about the destruction in Lauri, and there was no time to flee. Their only resource was to go to God. Afraid and crying, the whole school began to pray and to worship God.

Out of the darkness of the night lighted torches drew closer to the school. Soon there was a complete ring of these terrorists around the building. The children and teachers heard their shouts and curses. They came closer and closer, shouting louder and louder. Then suddenly they stopped.

They began to retreat and ran into the jungle. Soon government soldiers arrived, pursued the Mau Maus, and captured them. Later before the judge at their trial, the leader was called to the witness stand. The judge questioned him: "On this particular night, did you kill the people in Lauri." He said they did. "Was it your intent to do the same at the missionary school in Rift Valley?" Again, yes.

"Why didn't you attack the school?" Remember that this tribal leader had never read the Bible or heard the gospel. He said, "We were on our way to attack and destroy all the people and the school, but when we came closer, all of a sudden between us and the school there were many huge men, dressed in white with flaming swords, and we became afraid and ran to hide."

## **Conclusion: Do you truly worship God?**

How can you know? First, *are you awed by God?*

On a family vacation to Washington I was awed by the statue of Lincoln, the memorial to FDR and Jefferson, and the opulence of the White House. If I'd met the president, think how I'd have felt. We're that way when we meet someone who impresses us.

A woman went into a Haagen-Dasz store in Kansas City for an ice-cream cone. She had just gotten her ice cream when she turned and found herself face to face with Paul Newman, in town filming the movie Mr. and Mrs. Bridge. He smiled and said hello. Her knees began to shake. She left the shop, heart pounding, then realized she didn't have her



ice cream. She started back into the store to get it and met Newman at the door. "Are you looking for your ice cream?" he asked. She nodded. "You put it in your purse with your change," he told her.

Isaiah was awed by the holy power of God. Peter, James and John were terrified on the Mount of Transfiguration as they beheld the glorified Christ. In the Revelation John fell at his feet as one dead. The writer of Hebrews said, "Let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12.28). If God has been our audience this morning, we'll be awed by his presence.

The writer Annie Dillard asks, "Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?" On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

And second, **has God changed your life in worship?** We do not come to worship to have our needs met, but to glorify God. He is the audience, not us. But the result of being with God is that we can never be the same. How could we be?

Isaiah's sinful lips were cleansed, and he cried, "Here am I. Send me!" God did, and he became the greatest prophet of the Old Testament. Abraham met God and became the father of his nation. Jacob met God and became Israel. Moses met God and was turned from shepherd to warrior and hero. Jonah met God and led the entire nation of Nineveh to him. Matthew met God and wrote our first gospel. John met him and gave us the Revelation. Paul met him and wrote half the New Testament.

For some of us a sanctuary is a cave, and for others it's a tunnel. When you go into a cave, you come out the same place you went in. When you go into a tunnel, you come out in a different place. Are you coming out different? Do you have something to change? Something to do? Someone to help? Something to say? Have you said to God, "Here am I. Send me!" Has God changed your life yet?

It all depends on the audience of your worship today.

John Gillespie Magee, Jr. was a young pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force, killed in action during World War II. Among his effects was found this poem:

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,  
and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbled mirth

of sunsplit clouds--and done a hundred things  
You have not dreamed of--wheeled and soared and  
swung--high in the sunlit silence.

Hov'ring there, I've chased the shouting winds along,  
and flung my eager craft through footless halls of air,  
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue, I've topped  
the windswept heights with easy grace,  
Where never lark or even eagle flew.

And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod the high  
untrespassed sanctity of space,  
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

So can we.