

The Qualifications for Worship

SERIES: THE NOW OF WORSHIP

By Doug Goins

We began this series on worship in Revelation 4 and 5 ([Discovery Paper #4621](#)) with a vision of community worship and our focus together on God. We saw God seated on a throne of majesty, of authority, of sovereignty. Throughout this series, we have been confronted with the fact that the God we worship is not a tame, manageable deity. In the passages we have considered, God reveals himself in a number of different ways: as a living, powerful ruler; as one who speaks truth into our lives; as the one who creates. Not only is he a God of redemption and forgiveness, but he is also a God of righteous anger, as we saw clearly in Psalm 95 ([Discovery Paper #4623](#)). He speaks judgment when it is necessary, and brings order out of chaos. Above all, he brings incredible spiritual enrichment to our lives as we see him in worship when we gather together as the family of God.

Psalms 93 through 100 were connected in the Psalter to give us demonstrations of worship and teaching on how to worship. Psalm 97 confronts us with the holiness of God, in his moral beauty, and perfection. There is about him a mysterious inaccessibility. The psalm says he is surrounded by "clouds and thick darkness are round about him" (verse 2). The point the psalmist makes is that God is not our pal, he is not our buddy, or "the man upstairs." What we see of him, when he allows us to see him, is his glory. His whole being is established on righteousness and justice. As his saints, we are people of light and joy (verse 11). That is only reality if we embrace his holiness, righteousness, and justice; and resist sinful influence in our lives. The psalm says that when we choose to live that way, God is delighted in us.

What happens when we do not feel that way, when we know that we have allowed sinful compromise in our lives? How do we come to church when we know that there is not much light or joy, when we do not feel very saintly, when we know we are not doing justice, and not living out the righteousness that has been given to us in Jesus Christ? In Psalm 24, David, the psalmist, addresses the problem of qualification--of who has the right to stand in God's presence. David asks the questions in verse 3, "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?" The answer is in verses 4 and 5: "He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false, and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of his salvation."

That sounds severe. So what do we do when we feel disqualified from worship? I remember times through the years when I did not feel like coming to church, even though I had the responsibility as a pastor to teach or lead worship. I may have felt disqualified because of how I responded to a marriage conflict, or a financial issue, or a family crisis. Knowing I have failed, I have felt hypocritical being in a position of leadership on Sunday mornings.

The passage we are considering, Hebrews 10:19-25, offers good news. God himself has qualified us to worship him through the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Jesus is the only one who is perfectly qualified to enter into worship. He has absolutely clean hands, and he has a consistently pure heart. There is no place in his heart for idolatry. The great news is that we share in his blessing, we share in his vindication, and that is why we are free to enter into worship. Hebrews 10:19-25 says:

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us 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. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and

let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

This passage is beautifully structured in its simplicity. There are two phrases that speak of God's provision to us and why we can be confident that we are not disqualified in worship. The phrase in verse 19, "since we have confidence," is something God has given us. The same phrase is in verse 21, "since we have a great priest." The phrase "since we have" controls the opening verses. It is what God has given us, and why we belong in worship. Out of that flows three statements of privilege that we have been given. Verse 22 says, "let us draw near with a true heart;" verse 23 says, "Let us hold fast hope;" and verse 24 says, "let us consider how to stir up." Three times we are called to do something in response to the provision that God has made for us in Jesus. The fact that we are focusing on Jesus means that we are starting out where we ended in our study of John 4 (Discovery Paper #4624). Like the Samaritan woman, we end up focusing on the central person in worship and his accomplished work for us--Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, the one who knows everything about our life. He knows every sinful thing we have done and will do, but he welcomes us into worship. He has saved us from the penalty of sin, and the good news of the gospel is that he will continue to save us from the power of sin in our lives.

Look carefully at the tremendous provision God has made for us in verses 19 and 20: "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,..." Notice how the writer addresses the Hebrew Christians and us as well. He calls us his brothers and sisters, a tender, familial title. We are family together. It parallels our study of Psalm 95, that we are all sheep together under the tender care of a shepherd God. In Hebrews 10, he begins by saying that we are a spiritual family under the care of a loving father God.

Intimacy without inhibition

Verse 19 says that we can enter into intimacy with God without any inhibition whatsoever. It is the idea behind confidence or boldness, literally meaning that we have freedom of speech. We are free to come into God's presence and say anything we want, without it being presumptuous on our part. There is nothing to fear, and there is no restraint. It affirms our unquestioned right as believers in Jesus Christ to approach God directly in worship. The word sanctuary is Old Testament language referring to the inner room in the temple, the central place of worship for the Jews. It was called the Holy of Holies or the Most Holy Place. In Psalm 24:3, David asks, "And who shall stand in his holy place?" The only one in the nation Israel who could enter into God's presence was the high priest, and he could only do it once a year on the Day of Atonement. He could only enter into God's presence in the sanctuary after he had been ritually washed with water, symbolizing cleansing, and his robes had been sprinkled with the blood of slain lambs or goats.

The good news for us is that we can enter into God's presence anywhere, any time, and we no longer need a physical sanctuary. Any place that God is--and he is everywhere--we can have sanctuary, we can be in his presence. The church's auditorium is not the sanctuary, but only a place that we gather to meet God. We enter into worship because we have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus. Jesus became both the priest who offers the sacrifice for us and also the sin offering. Our confidence in worship is based on Jesus' saving death. Hebrews 9:11, 12 says, "But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent [tabernacle] (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) [it is not a physical room], he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption." We can enjoy intimacy with God in worship because of our eternal redemption without any kind of fearful inhibition.

Access without barriers

Verse 20 says that we can enjoy access to God with no barriers between us any more. Jesus is the living way, the eternally alive way into God's presence. He will always provide access into God's presence. Again, it is Old Testament imagery. The curtain, or the veil, was a heavy woven tapestry that hung in front of the sanctuary in the tabernacle. It shut off, or veiled, the glory of God in the Holy of Holies. It was an important symbol of a holy,

righteous, just God, who is shut off from sinful humanity. When Jesus came to earth, his own perfection as divinity was veiled in flesh and shut off from mankind. John says in the prologue to his gospel, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). It is the basis of Charles Wesley's great Christmas hymn in which we have the line, "Veiled in flesh the God-head see." (1) At Jesus' death on the cross, he became sin for us, and so both veils were torn: The veil of his body was torn by nails and spear, and his blood was shed; and the curtain in the temple was torn from top to bottom, symbolizing the fact that there is no longer a barrier, but free access into the presence of God because of the death of Jesus Christ.

The ministry of our high priest

The first provision, then, is confidence to enter into intimacy, to enjoy access to God without barriers. The second provision is in verse 21: "and since we have a great priest over the house of God," Jesus is not only the sacrifice but he is also the high priest who continues to represent us to God in worship. The language of greatness implies royalty. He is a priestly king. Earlier in Hebrews 3, the writer says that we collectively are the household of God. Again, the house of God is not a physical building, but the body of Christ, a living, breathing community as the house of God. The way the Bible uses the phrase, it is not even one local congregation, but it is every believer around the world from every tribe and tongue and nation. We belong to a huge, glorious household of God.

And leading us is a great priest, the Lord Jesus Christ. How can we view him? Priesthood can seem mysterious, distant and ritualistic. Hebrews 4:14-16 describes the kind of high priest with whom we enter into worship: "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Ponder those verses. Who is this Jesus who welcomes us into worship? He is not an austere, aloof, priestly figure. He is a sympathetic, merciful and gracious priest who has lived life like we have, understands the things with which we struggle, and understands the issues that make us feel like we do not belong in worship. He is the kind of priest that wants to help us in worship.

There are three specific, practical ways that Hebrews tells us that the Lord Jesus serves us in worship. I am indebted to Dr. James Torrance who pointed these out in a class I took at Regent College. He made clear that the context for these things is public, corporate worship. There are specific ways that the Lord Jesus, our great high priest, serves us as a community gathered.

Jesus always prays for us

The first one, Hebrews 7:24, 25, tells us that Jesus always prays for us in worship: "but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." There are several wonderful points in this text. The salvation that Jesus offers us is complete deliverance from sinful struggle, at any point in our life. His ministry of intercessory prayer continues for us at the right hand of the Father. As we come to worship, Jesus knows our needs and the areas of our struggles, and he prays for each of us, even when we cannot pray for ourselves. So when our sense of disqualification for worship makes us mute because of our embarrassment, and we are so agonized we do not know what to say, the good news is that the Lord Jesus is praying for us collectively and individually.

Jesus always leads us in worship

The second way that Jesus ministers to us is as the true worship leader. Hebrews 8:1, 2 says that Jesus is the one who leads us in worship: "Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent which is set up not by man but by the Lord." The Amplified Bible says that he is the officiating priest. The word minister is from the Greek word *leitourgia*, from which we get the word liturgy. Liturgy means the shape or structure of

worship. Literally, it is saying that Jesus is the liturgist, the worship leader in every service of worship. So when we come into any worship setting, regardless of who is leading music or praying or preaching, in reality we are led by the Lord Jesus, the eternal worshiper.

That awareness can be tremendously freeing. When we are distracted by different personalities or styles, we can focus on the fact that it is actually the Lord Jesus who gives leadership to worship service. When I have a leadership responsibility in worship, this spiritual reality lifts a great burden from me. I am not the one who has to make worship happen, but I am teaming up with what Jesus is already doing. He does it much more effectively than any human leader can.

Jesus always mediates our relationship with God

The third ministry is in Hebrews 8:6, where it says that Jesus mediates our relationship to God: "But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises." The writer refers to Old Testament predictive promises like Jeremiah 31:31-34. Jeremiah speaks of the days when a new priest would come and bring better things into our worship life. That passage promises three things that Jesus mediates whenever we come into worship. First, he helps us hear truth. He helps us focus on spiritual reality so that we can hear the important truth that God wants us to understand. If you are confused or lost at times, Jesus helps mediate the truth of God to you in the worship setting. Secondly, he actually strengthens our intimacy with God. We will know that he is our God and we are his people, because Jesus mediates that certainty in worship. Third, he offers full and absolute forgiveness for all sins. He will convince us that we are forgiven, and do not have to live under condemnation with guilt. It is tremendous encouragement whenever we struggle with disqualification from worship to know that Jesus mediates truth, intimacy, and forgiveness.

Jesus' priestly ministry--praying for us, leading us in worship, mediating our relationship with God--ought to motivate us to want to gather together more. In a summary of the provisions God gives us in worship, Eugene Peterson paraphrases Hebrews 4:14-16:

Now that we know what we have Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God let's not let it slip through our fingers. We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all--all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help. (2)

In light of the tremendous generosity on the part of our loving heavenly Father, we are called to three privileges in worship. The invitations in Hebrews 10 are "let us draw near" (verse 22); "let us hold fast" (verse 23); "let us stir up one another" (verse 24). They are not commands, but requests. They are strong invitations addressed to all of us inclusively. Nobody is exempt from the invitation. All three exhortations are written in a verb tense which means continual action. We are to continually exercise these privileges and enjoy this responsibility, because in reality our common life as the body of Christ depends on it.

Jesus is the object of saving faith

First of all, in verse 22 it says, "let us 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." It is about our heart as a true worshiper. It is the inner life of the believer, and it is to be marked by purity of motive, a sincerity without pretense. It is based on an absolute assurance of our standing in Jesus Christ, and it is foundational for a confident drawing near to God in worship. Jesus is the object of our faith, and it is only by trusting in the fact that Christ really has finished his work on the cross on our behalf that we really can have full access to God.

This assurance is reinforced by the symbols of water and blood. Remember that the high priest could not enter into the presence of God on the Day of Atonement without being ritually washed and sprinkled with blood. In the Lord's Supper and in baptism itself, we have wonderful symbols of these spiritual realities. The sprinkling of our hearts signifies the effect of the blood of Christ on our inner life, our hearts. As Christians, we are cleansed from

sin by his shed blood. We no longer have to live with guilty consciences. And every time we celebrate communion around the Lord's table, we remember his sacrifice and our forgiveness for sin. In the same way, at baptism, having our bodies washed with pure water is a symbolic action pointing to spiritual reality. The reality of cleansing from sin is something already accomplished inside of us by the Spirit of God. Baptism is also a sign of death to the old, sinful lifestyle, the fact that we have been made alive. As we come up out of the water and we see the light, it corresponds to the fact that we have been made alive to the resurrection life of Jesus Christ. At baptism, we give a confession of faith in Jesus Christ and a commitment to follow him. Because of saving faith in Jesus, we can draw near to God with complete assurance of our standing before him.

The apostle Paul rejoiced in the assurance of our standing. In Romans 5:1-2a, he writes about the focus of faith: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand..." Paul says that Jesus is the object of saving faith.

God is the object of our unwavering hope

The second invitation, in verse 23, is focused on the God of hope, our trustworthy God: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful;..." Some translations use profession instead of confession, but they both mean verbalized expression of telling the truth. Just because we gave our confession of faith once at baptism does not mean we stop there. The challenge is to keep on speaking, singing, testifying, and confessing why and how we put our hope in God. Just as Jesus is the object of our saving faith, God is the object of all of our hope. We speak and sing in worship out of complete trust in God's goodness and faithfulness. In worship we affirm that God is trustworthy. As the text says, "he who promised is faithful." That is what keeps us hopeful and unwavering, rock-steady.

Think about this carefully. We do not put our hope in present circumstances or the people around us or in the expectation that somehow life will get better. If we put our hope in any of those things, we will be disappointed. But hoping in God will not disappoint. Paul's confession of hope which continues in Romans 5:2b-5, is a confession of hope in God: "...and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us."

Our church family is the object of loving encouragement

Paul's excitement about God's love, his supernatural *agape* filling us up, brings us to the last of the three invitations to worship. The first two focused vertically, on Jesus our great high priest, the object of our faith; and our trustworthy God, who is the object of our hope. The third invitation is focused horizontally, inviting us to lovingly interact with our brothers and sisters in worship. Again, verses 24 and 25 say: "and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." *The Message* paraphrases these two verses more succinctly: "Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshipping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching." (3)

There are three important principles that come out of these verses. First, in verse 24, true worship is other-centered. The challenge is to consider one another in worship. Each of us has a responsibility to the good of the whole in our worship life. The word "consider" means to approach it thoughtfully. We are to make a concerted effort to motivate others to loving encouragement and good works. We are not to come on Sunday morning and say, "Here I am; give me good worship." We are called to come with a servant's heart, to come praying, "Lord, how can I help somebody else in their worship struggles? Maybe they're struggling with disqualification in worship. Lord, how can I contribute to the flow of *agape* love in this place, among us as a people gathered this morning?" For me, the place to begin in stirring up one another is to examine my own heart. Am I setting an example in my own loving, worshipful attitudes and actions? *Agape* is the one New Testament term for love that is not self-seeking or self-serving. It is the love whose paradigm is the cross, and Jesus expressed that love when

he prayed to the Father, "...not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42b).

True worship is other-centered

Let me make this practical and personal. This *agape* love can be expressed by those of us who prefer the hymnbook, with the centuries of traditional hymnody, over newly-written expressions of praise and worship. We can love those in our body who enjoy new expressions of worship by singing the new songs and delighting in the joy it brings them. For those who are more traditional, it is also helpful to remember that every old hymn was a new cultural form at one point in time. The church, for instance, rejected the new hymn forms created by Isaac Watts in the 1700s, but now he is revered as the father of English hymnody.

Agape flows the other way as well. For those of us who prefer new expressions in song we ought to sing the hymns that mean so much to those who are more traditional, and sing joyfully because we love those folks in Christ. And also, if I am impatient with traditional hymnody, it is good to remember that we stand in a continuum, part of the communion of saints through 2,000 years of church history. Hymns that have endured have withstood sifting and sorting, the testing of time. Yes, there is great music being written today, and I believe much of it will endure. Our worship should include the new songs along with the strong hymns of history.

Paul's challenge to the Ephesians and Colossians to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs covers the broad balance and blend of musical expression. The church inherited the Psalter, the traditional songs of faith. But we can see from early church writings that there was conflict over how to blend and integrate psalms with the hymns that were written in the Greek language in the new poetic forms of expression. Paul says the Psalter and hymns of praise ought to be a part of our worship, but spiritual songs--those that are subjective, experiential, emotional musical expression--have a place as well. The old and the new ought to be embraced in terms of balancing the life of the church and representing the diversity of our body. But also by committing ourselves to a broad balance in worship, it gives us a greater opportunity to love one another.

If we struggle with certain styles of music or cultural expression, we need to build a relationship with the person who loves that style of musical expression. It is difficult to be judgmental toward somebody with whom we have a love relationship. I do not particularly understand or appreciate some of the musical languages that my children like, but I love my children. I trust the fact that Jesus Christ is in them and working in them. So one of the ways I respect who they are and how they are growing in faith is by enjoying their music.

Our community worship life is crucial

True worship is other-centered, and the community worship life of the body is tremendously crucial. Again, verse 25 says, "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another," The danger is that we would avoid worshiping together. The key word is habit, consistently finding reasons not to engage with the church family in worship. The original language is strong in affirming that corporate worship is not an option. Someone wrote that none of us can exist as a "pious particle," but there is more to community than just regular church attendance. We are to come as encouragers, focusing on other people and their needs, and desiring to be a spiritual contributor. In the Old Testament book of Job, Eliphaz acknowledges Job as an encourager, perhaps without realizing what he was saying: "Your words have upheld him who was stumbling" (Job 4:4a). When it comes to our worship life as the body of Christ, do our words keep men and women on their feet? Or do they undermine morale?

When we do not like what is going on in worship, it is easy to do one of two things. Either we can abandon the place and find somewhere we like better, or if we choose not to leave we can criticize. Both responses are dangerous, and are discouraging to the body of Christ. Whether it is abandonment or criticism, both responses can be driven by conceit--spiritual, aesthetic, or intellectual snobbery. Most importantly, abandonment and criticism are not loving. It is not *agape* at work.

All of our worship leaders--technical teams, musicians, drama people, multi-media teams--need our support and encouragement. If we see a problem in worship, then we need to ask the Lord to show us how we can be a part of

the solution for the good of the whole, rather than being somebody who compounds the problem. A ministry of active encouragement brings joy to us and it is good for the body of Christ.

Urgency in worship

Look again at how the author of Hebrews closes in the last phrase of verse 25: "...encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." There should be an urgency as we come into a service of worship. The call is for more love, more good works, more encouragement, more commitment to the place and people with whom we worship. It should never be status quo. We should have a watchful awareness. We worship in anticipation of the day of Christ's return, the *parousia*, and every week we come to worship we are one week closer to it. The sense of anticipation ought to be building in our lives, not flat-lining.

Let me close with a passage that summarizes and reinforces what the writer of Hebrews 10 says. In the context of the Day of the Lord drawing near, the apostle Peter points out what is most important (1 Peter 4:7-11): "The end of all things is at hand [the day is getting closer]; therefore be sane and sober for your prayers" (verse 7). Do we pray for our own church, for the worship leadership, and the decisions that have to be made? "Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins" (verse 8). *Agape* love covers all the ways we sin against each other. "Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies;..." (verses 9-11a). Until this point it has been horizontal, indicated by the term "one another," the concern for the good of the whole. But in the closing doxology, it is vertical, focused back on the Lord Jesus and on our Father God: "...in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen" (verse 11b).

We have tremendous provision in our worship through Jesus Christ. We have incredible privilege to serve the Lord and to serve one another in our worship.

Notes

1. Charles Wesley, *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing*.
2. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994, p. 462.
3. Peterson, p. 470.

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Fifth message
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