



WORSHIP *together*

Five-Week Devotional



WEEK ONE

WORSHIP *together*

IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH

WEEKLY MEMORY VERSE

“But the hour is coming, and now is here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

JOHN 4:23-24 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION

The word culture comes from the Latin “cultus” which means care or value. Collins dictionary defines it as, “a particular society or civilization, especially considered in relation to its beliefs, way of life, or art.” To say that a group has a culture is to say that there is some kind of shared common ground, usually relating to values, beliefs, and way of life. There are innumerable cultures at play in our world – some are tied to institutions while others are tied to geographical region, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and more. In fact, many of us belong, at least in part, to multiple cultural groups.

For this study, we want to consider a critical question: What is the culture of the church? Or, to ask it another way: What common ground should the church find together? The Word of God leads us to answer that question with one word: worship.

Christians around the world and throughout the ages have spoken in different languages, met in different spaces, and even on different days of the week. But the common element that unites all Christians is the consistent practice of gathering to worship God.

The Westminster Divines describe worship as the purpose of our existence, both personally and corporately, we are to, “glorify God and enjoy him forever.” To glorify God and enjoy him forever is what it means to worship him. We are to ascribe to him the glory he is due, and in doing, we are to enjoy living all of life in his presence and under his Lordship; worshipping him as the one true God who exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Practically speaking, how are we to worship him with our lives? Jesus provides us with answers...

BIBLE STUDY

JOHN 2:13-21 – Jesus startles and confuses the Jews as he cleanses the temple.

What was happening in the temple (the place of worship) that upset Jesus? Why was Jesus angry?

How does Jesus reorient the worship practices of the temple and focus them on him? Why did the Jews misunderstand what he was saying?

If Jesus was upset about worship becoming more about a place than a person, what would he say to our modern churches? What would he think of the way you evaluate churches or your personal practice of worship?

JOHN 4:16-26 – In this well-known passage, Jesus violated cultural norms by engaging a Samaritan woman in conversation. As they spoke to one another, he taught her (and us) about true worship.

What do you think Jesus meant when he said, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth”?

How does Jesus reorient the notion of a place of worship for the Samaritan woman?

JOHN 14:6; 16-17; 26 – JOHN 15:26 – JOHN 16:7-15

How does Jesus describe himself in John 14:6? How is the Spirit described in John 16:13?

According to John 14:17, where does the Spirit dwell?

According to John 15:26 and John 16:14, who is the Holy Spirit continually pointing to, bearing witness to, and glorifying in his ministry?

As you study these verses, what do you begin to learn about what it means to worship in spirit and truth?

TO SUMMARIZE

Given what we have studied and considered in these passages, perhaps a working definition of what it means to worship in spirit and truth is as follows:

TO WORSHIP IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH IS TO BE LED, EMPOWERED, AND STRENGTHENED BY THE INDWELLING SPIRIT OF TRUTH WHO NEVER CEASES TO GLORIFY AND BEAR WITNESS TO JESUS, WHO IS TRUTH.

All of the Christian life is to be one of worship, filled and fueled by the Holy Spirit, centered on the glory of Jesus.

In his cleansing of the temple and conversation with the Samaritan woman Jesus was taking the historic worship of Israel and centering it upon himself. Their worship practices, through the centuries, pointed to Jesus.

As Jesus drove the people out of the temple with a whip of cords, he was cleansing it of self-absorption, consumerism, idolatry, and commerce. In so doing, he reestablished what the purpose and focus of the temple ought to have been all along. He was to be the end of all their endless sacrifices, becoming the once and for all final Lamb that was slain for the sins of the people. He and his cross were the ultimate temple: the place where mercy and justice, wrath and forgiveness all converge to demonstrate to Israel and the world the immeasurable grace and love of the Father. This is why Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." He wasn't talking about the physical temple building.

He was talking about himself, the real and risen Savior. As Bruce Milne states it, "Here he states clearly that the destroying and raising of his body will in fact lead to the replacing of the temple worship by a new spirit and truth worship, based on his sacrifice and living presence."¹

As Jesus conversed with the Samaritan woman, he further emphasized the shift away from a geographical location of worship to the object and heart of worship. Some quick history...

The Samaritans considered the only scripture to be the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Therefore, they did not give loyalty to David's decision to build a temple for the lord in Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 17:1-15). Further, there was a history of animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans dating back to the conquest of Israel in 722 BC. Thus, the Samaritans had built a temple for worship on the southern slope

¹ B. Milne, *The Message of John, The Bible Speaks Today*, (InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 88.

of Mount Gerizim in Samaria rather than worshipping with the Jews at the temple in Jerusalem. That temple was destroyed in 128 BC, but the Samaritans continued to offer their worship (a mixture of Jewish/pagan observances) on the summit of Mount Gerizim.

With that context in mind, the Samaritan woman's statement to Jesus makes more sense: "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain (likely gesturing toward Mount Gerizim), but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." As Jesus was discerning her heart and drawing her unto himself, she was wrestling with the nature of worship. How and where is she supposed to worship? Jesus alleviates her distress by moving her attention away from the location of worship to the heart of worship as it is focused on the Triune God. His answer, as paraphrased by William Hendriksen, is essentially:

The hour is coming when neither exclusively in this mountain nor exclusively in Jerusalem will you

worship the one and only Father through Jesus Christ...worshipping in spirit and truth can only mean a. rendering such homage to God that the entire heart enters into the act, and b. doing this in full harmony with the truth of God as revealed in his Word.²

In doing this, Jesus is not minimizing the importance of corporate worship. He is shifting the focus of worship away from the physical rituals of Israel's worship to the spiritual nature of true worship.

We begin to understand a little more about the nature of true worship through these passages. Namely, that as God is a spirit, our worship is spiritual in nature, made possible only through the finished work of the Son, as we are united with him by the spirit of truth.

As Jesus taught his disciples in John 14, 15, and 16, the true worship of God the Father is unwaveringly Christ-centered and Spirit-fueled.

² W. Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: John*, (Baker Book House, 1953), p. 166-167.



WEEK TWO

WORSHIP *together*

IN SELF DENIAL

WEEKLY MEMORY VERSE

“And he said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?’”

(LUKE 9:23-25)

INTRODUCTION

We all admire a pristine lawn. You know the kind: vibrantly green, well-manicured, lush, weed-free. Many of us like the idea of that kind of lawn, but few of us have ever obtained that type of lawn. This type of flourishing looks like how a lawn was meant to be, yet counterintuitively, it requires a ton of really hard work.

A visitor from “across the pond” once asked a groundskeeper at England’s famed Eton College how its manicured lawns were kept so perfect. “It’s simple,” the good man replied. “Brush off the dew every morning, mow every other day, and roll them once a week.”

“That’s all?” the tourist asked.

“Absolutely,” the expert said. “Do that for 500 years, and you’ll have a nice lawn, too.”

Have you ever met a Christian who was so at peace, filled with wisdom, humble, and mature that you wonder how they became that way? Sometimes it is easier to attribute it to natural temperament than believe all the years of hard work that went into becoming that person. Perhaps to finalize the metaphor we might think that the grass is always greener on the other side.

We know from scripture that none of us are wise or righteous by birth. So how do we become the type of Christian that is mature, thoughtful, wise, gracious, humble, and in right relationship with God and neighbor? A crucial step in that path is recognizing the centrality of self-denial and sacrifice in the life of a disciple of Christ. We’ll see how a life of self-denial and sacrifice leads to wisdom, righteousness, others-oriented lifestyle, and ultimately flourishing.

BIBLE STUDY

MARK 7:14–23 – In this passage, Jesus is explaining what makes people clean and unclean.

In light of Jesus' teaching here, where is the battlefield for our righteousness?

Is it possible to believe that some people have an easier job with sanctification than others?

2 CORINTHIANS 5:16–21 – Notice that Paul, in verse 17, says that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Notice that it is not a promise for the future, but a present reality.

What do you think this means for the Christian life, the Church, and worship?

What is the significance and what challenges are presented by Paul's use of the past-tense when he says that the old self has passed away? Again, he is not saying that it will pass away but declaring that it has already passed away.

LUKE 9:23-25 – There is Jesus' invitation to gain followers.

What is the cost of following Jesus? What is the cost of not following Jesus?

What do you think it means for Jesus to "save" your life? What implications does it carry for your present life, not just some future state?

"Take up your cross" though a familiar phrase to us, may be offensive to our modern-day sensibilities. Imagine how the disciples must have experienced such a graphic description of the cost of following Christ. Bearing this in mind, how would you expect the disciples to respond to Jesus' words?

Bearing this in mind, how would you expect the disciples to respond to Jesus' words?

If you continue reading to verses 46-48, how would you describe the disciples' interpretation of Jesus' words in 23-25? Are there similarities to how the modern church misunderstands these words?

MATTHEW 13:44-45

What do you think Jesus is trying to communicate with these two parables?

TO SUMMARIZE

In 1973 the psychologist Walter Mischel led a study at Stanford University known as the “Stanford marshmallow experiment.” This study was designed to study delayed gratification. Each child in the experiment was offered the choice of one marshmallow immediately or two marshmallows if they waited for a few minutes. The follow-up studies showed that the children who were capable of this self-denial had better life outcomes measured by SAT scores, educational achievement, body mass index, and other criteria. All this to say, Jesus’ teaching of self-denial is not necessarily unique. Other religions and even secular psychologists see the merit in this self-denial, but the question is what reward awaits you at the other end of self-denial and sacrifice?

The first point of emphasis in these passages is that Jesus assures us that the call he offers is life and life to the fullest. Life in the kingdom is likened to a hidden treasure or a pearl of great value: something so wonderful that anyone who sees it for what it is will gladly trade everything they have for it. Without this backdrop the other passages can be extremely difficult to understand.

God is good and is the author of life. In our natural state of rebellion towards God we do not live life as it is meant to be lived. What Jesus offers is forgiveness for this rebellion and reconciliation to God. In other words, not just life eternal but life

restored. In order to obtain the life we ought to have, we have to give up the things that are contrary to this.

The idea of sacrifice and self-denial is sometimes buried in our churches, our worship songs, and especially in our evangelism methods. But this was not the case for Jesus. Each of the synoptic gospels records Jesus’ call to take up your cross and follow him. As we see in Luke 9:46-48 at first the disciples seemed to misunderstand or severely underestimate the meaning of these words. However, in time the disciples came face to face with the significance of those words spoken by Jesus and all but one of them died a martyr’s death. These words ring true today, so much so, that we also must give careful consideration to what Jesus said.

In a sense we are still fighting the same fight as the disciples: a confusion over the meaning of the Kingdom of God. No other person in history has used the term kingdom to become synonymous with service and sacrifice. Every human culture interprets kingdoms and kings as places of privilege and power, but Jesus turns this upside down. He says that the greatest in the kingdom is the servant and Jesus, who made himself servant of all, is the truest king.

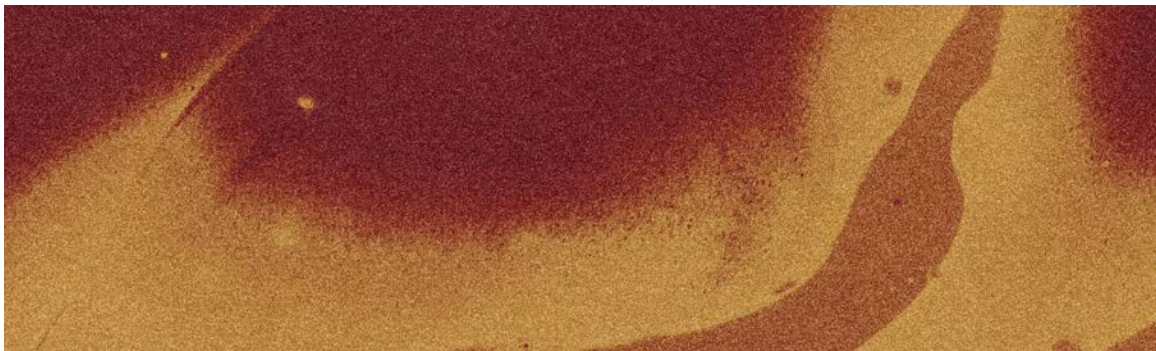
The world of the disciples is the same world that surrounds us. We are tacitly told that we find meaning through power, wealth, titles, or even something seemingly as noble

as family. As Western Christians, our world has shifted drastically in the last 100 years. The sociologist Robert Bellah coined the term, “expressive individualism” to describe the values of our culture. Perhaps you recognize some of the popular mantras such as: you be you, be true to yourself, follow your heart, speak your truth, find yourself, and countless others. Individual freedom and the expression of authentic self are seen as the highest values in our culture. As difficult as it was for Jesus’ disciples to accept self-denial and sacrifice, how much more will we struggle with this when we’re told that all of our meaning and worth come from self-assertion?

Many religions teach that we are to persevere or tolerate suffering, whereas Christians have come to

expect and in some case’s embrace suffering when it is for Christ’s sake. In Philippians 1:29 Paul says that it has been granted to you to suffer for the sake of Christ. He continues in chapter 3:10 that we share in Christ’s sufferings. It is perhaps worth noting the emphasis on suffering for Christ’s sake. There is a rising sentiment in American Christianity that is informally referred to as, “persecution complex.” Oxford Languages defines this as, “an irrational and obsessive feeling or fear that one is the object of collective hostility or ill-treatment on the part of others.” Suffering is not inherently a virtue. Many of us suffer the consequences of our own folly and sinfulness. This can be true on a personal level and on a corporate level. Suffering gains its merit when it is done for the sake of Jesus and his kingdom.

In summary, we seek to be rooted in self-denial and sacrifice because they lead to a more beautiful vision for life. A life that prizes Jesus himself more than anything else. A life where we are in a right relationship with God. A life where we discover our truest selves, experience contentment, satisfaction, and fulfillment in him alone. Suffering is part of the inevitable price of this journey, but Jesus does not ask anything of us that he did not already do. And while we don’t avoid suffering, we also don’t seek it out. We seek the life God has called us to in Christ even if suffering is encountered on the journey.



You may begin to think that Christianity is a tough sell not just for you, but certainly for your family, friends, and neighbors that do not yet know Christ. The good news of the gospel is that we are in pursuit of a joy-giving king who is the greatest treasure this life has to offer. We ought not deceive people about the nature of the path to life to the fullest, nor can we undersell the greatness of the destination. We are to proclaim that Jesus is the great treasure of this life. What we have to proclaim and offer this world is life at its fullest in Jesus, life so wonderful that anything we have or will encounter is worth the cost.

As we consider corporate worship, what place might self-denial and sacrifice play in that? Each week we confess our sins and shortcomings of God's standard while also receive assurance of our forgiveness in Christ. But practically speaking, many churches divide over tribalism and petty factionalism. If not outright division, some might feel the need to go church shopping. This can be a result of the type of worship music, length of the service, style of preaching, denominational or theological particulars, and countless other criteria.

It is interesting that this tendency to shop around may be one of the most frustrating and stressful things we can engage in as Christians. Barry Schwartz¹ has observed that having many options to choose from, rather than making people happy and ensuring they get what they want, can cause them stress and problematize

decision-making. He goes on to say the negative consequences of having too many options can actually lead to anxiety, indecision, paralysis and dissatisfaction. Is it conceivable that Jesus saw what we often fail to see, self-denial is beneficial for our physical, mental and spiritual health.

The question is, how is it possible that followers of Jesus, who calls all of his followers to self-sacrifice, can divide themselves over so many personal preferences? Each time we divide the church or even fail to attend the church, we are tacitly communicating that what we want or need is more important than what everyone else wants or needs. Of course, there are valid reasons to not attend certain churches, but research from various groups indicates the vast majority of reasons are not on the level biblical conviction.

Instead of focusing only on our own preferences, what if the church were a place where we go to deny ourselves and serve others? This can happen in the smallest of ways. When a worship song starts that you don't enjoy, pause for a moment and look around at those who are worshipping and celebrate that they find the song meaningful and that God is still being glorified despite your own preferences. Instead of focusing on a church that will feed me in the exact way I want to be fed each week, how can I serve to ensure that others are fed? It is a subtle but profound shift in mentality. This type of self-denial does not happen naturally. You must be committed to Jesus' call on your life and cultivate a genuine love of others.

¹ Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, 2004

WEEK THREE

WORSHIP *together*

FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

WEEKLY MEMORY VERSE

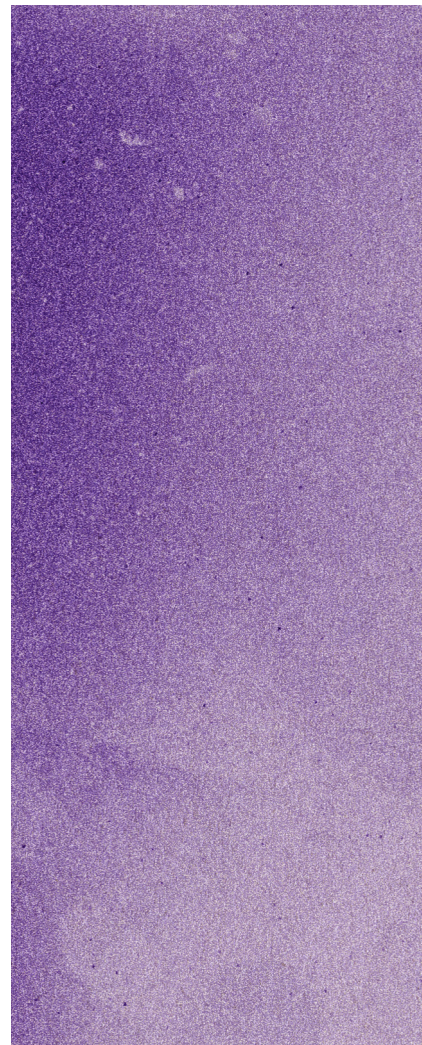
“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

COLOSSIANS 3:17-17

INTRODUCTION

In the past couple of weeks, we’ve considered what it looks like to worship God in spirit and in truth. This week we’ll be considering the idea of formation and how worship shapes all of who we are.

The reality is, we’re all being formed and shaped constantly by various things. The office we work in, the relationships we have, the shows we binge, the music we listen to, the news we watch, the apps we endlessly scroll, all of these shape our disposition, character, and response to the world around us. Some in a very good way, some in more harmful ways. As you study the Scriptures this week, you’ll see how you are spiritually formed through weekly gathered worship and how that impacts our character and response to the world around us.



BIBLE STUDY

2 CORINTHIANS 3:18; GALATIANS 4:19; AND ROMANS 12:1-2 – Each of these verses use a variation of the word “formation” (i.e.: formed, transformed).

In your own words, what would you say is the goal of Christian formation?

These verses also speak about how we are formed. What are some of the ways that these verses say we are formed as Christians?

HEBREWS 10:23-25 – In light of the work of Jesus as our great high priest to give us direct access to God, Paul gives a few commands for the people of God.

What do these verses say we should do in light of the work of Jesus?

COLOSSIANS 3:12-17 – Paul is describing the character and practice of the Christian community that has forsaken their former ways of sin. Paul does not assume that these traits happen passively. We are charged to “put on” these traits in the same way we put on our clothes. These characteristics are the outfit that suits a follower of Jesus.

Looking at verses 12-15, describe Christian community in your own words.

If you were to think about verses 16 and 17 in the context of weekly, corporate worship, what are some of the core elements of how Christians worship together?

Compare verses 16 and 17 with Ephesians 5:19-21. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

PSALM 73 – All of the Psalms were written to be sung corporately by the people of Israel in their worship.

As you read the Psalm think about singing a song like this to God on a Sunday morning. Consider some of these questions to help you meditate on the Psalm. You will not have the time or space to answer them all, so use the ones that are most helpful to guide your thinking and use the space below to record your thoughts and observations.

What about singing a song like this would be encouraging to you? What makes you uncomfortable? How does it form your character? How does it convict you of sin? How does it demonstrate the grace of God? How does it form your posture towards the world around you? How does it form your view of God?

TO SUMMARIZE

The ultimate goal of spiritual formation for the Christian is Christ-likeness. Every human has been created in the image of God, but because of sin, our capacity to bear his image has been broken and distorted. For the Christian, however, God is undertaking an image restoration project within us. As we grow as Christians, we are being continually transformed into the image of Christ. That means that his character, his posture toward the world, and his glory are all being formed in us. But how does this happen? It's impossible to say it better than 2 Corinthians 3:18 "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." Beholding the glory of the Lord is what changes us into his image. In 1 John 3:2-3, we learn about the completion of this image restoration project when Christ returns again, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." Again, we're reminded that when we see Christ, we begin to look like him. But how do we practically apply this? What does it look like to "behold the glory of the Lord" in my weekly schedule?

We are always being formed by something. Paul in Romans 12:1 calls us not to be conformed to the world because he knows that we are never neutral observers of the world around us, but are constantly being pulled, molded, and shaped by it. Our culture, our families, our circumstances, our entertainment, are all shaping us and the list could go endlessly on.

So, two important questions you could ask yourself are this: What is most forming your life? And what are you being forming into? Maybe it's a career that matches with your passions and gifting, but the culture of your office is one of pushing harder and harder for results to the detriment of relationships and family. Maybe it's a group of friends that bring great companionship, but also a constant

pressure to keep up your appearances that leads to deep insecurity. Maybe it's a news cycle or social media that keeps you informed on the events and direction of the world. Perhaps it reinforces your existing opinions and prevents you from being challenged. Maybe it cultivates an underlying sense of anxiety or panic and a growing disdain for those with different views of current events. Your work, relationships, and news sources may not necessarily be bad things (in fact, most of those things can be quite good!) but we may be unaware of how significantly they are shaping who we are. For most of us it is easier to observe these types of influences on others, but the key to spiritual formation will depend on our ability to assess these influences on ourselves.

That might sound like spiritual formation is an individualistic activity that involves isolation and self-reflection. In reality, it is God's intention for his people that the primary avenue for your formation as an image-bearer would come through the church. We saw this in our study of Hebrews 10:23-25, where God through Paul says that the primary way for us to "hold fast to the confession of our hope" (the good news of the gospel) is to meet together and encourage one another constantly. In Romans 12:1-3 we saw that offering our whole lives to God is an act of worship that transforms our minds and allows us to look at the world and discern God's will. In worship, particularly gathered worship (as the New Testament and Old Testaments repeatedly demonstrate), we behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and are transformed into his image.

Corporate worship shapes us in a variety of ways. Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5 named several elements of worship for the people of God. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." The Bible is the primary means by which we see Jesus, because in the Word of God Jesus is made known to us. It's no accident that Paul's first call for Christian worship is centered on the Word of God because that is what governs the rest of the worship of God's people. From there he names teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom. The teaching of the Word of God helps the people of God to know and love him more deeply. Admonishing one another in all wisdom speaks to the

life-on-life aspect of the church. People who know each other and are invested in one another's lives have a special opportunity to help one another apply the Word of God in daily life, whether that comes in the form of encouragement or correction when we're being shaped by the world instead of the Word.

Lastly Paul mentions singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (all categories of singing that are governed by God's Word). It is interesting to note the audience of the songs that God's people sing. In Colossians, it says that we're singing "with thankfulness in your hearts to God" while in Ephesians it says, "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord in your heart." There are (at least) two audiences to your singing in worship. Have you ever thought about that reality on a Sunday morning, that you're singing both to God and to the people around you? This is an important piece of the formation of God's people in corporate worship. It is one of the ways we help one another hold to the confession of our hope without wavering and stir one another up towards love and good deeds.

I think of the Sunday after my mom's funeral when we sang the song "Great is Thy Faithfulness." In all honesty, that was one of the hardest songs for me to sing. As I sat in the throes of grief, the onset of depression, and wrestling with doubt about God's goodness, I was surrounded with hundreds of people declaring that

God is faithful. As I wept, unable to muster the ability to sing the words of that song with confidence, the community of God's people declared the great faithfulness of God to me in a way that to this day has profoundly comforted me and shaped the way I see God's work in the world. In so many ways, with corporate singing we fulfill God's command to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15).

There is a third audience to our singing: ourselves. We are often singing to our own hearts as we sing to the Lord and those around us. I think of Psalm 42:6 where psalmist sings, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God." He's singing to his own soul an encouragement to trust the God who is his salvation. We all know this experience as we sing songs, longing to more fully believe and live out the words coming from our mouths.

Gathered worship is not only the shaping of the mind to know who God is cognitively, it is also a shaping of the heart to experience his love and grow our love for him. A beautiful expression of this shines through the raw honesty of the psalmist in Psalm 73. If I could paraphrase the theme of the first half of the psalm, it would be "God, how come all of the godless people have success and the people who trust you end up miserable?" The psalm expresses honest emotion and complaint to God. That is a part of our worship! This psalm is meant to be sung by people gathered to worship. We corporately confess our jealousy of people who have more success in life than we do. But the psalm doesn't end there. He beholds the glory of God in corporate worship (v. 16-17) and it reshapes his entire perspective on the world around him and what God's faithfulness looks like in the scope of eternity. His mind and heart are shaped by who God is, and it changes the way he lives in the world.



A principle derived from Ephesians 5:21 is another important element of the corporate worship experience: "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." We demonstrate our love of Christ in our love others. Most of us grasp this in the abstract, but this principle of mutual submission is often quickly abandoned in discussions of personal preference in worship. Maybe you walk into church in a fantastic mood on a Sunday, but all the songs seem to be slow and dealing with doubt and grief. Do you disengage? Plan to go to a different church next week? Or do you enter in and weep with those who weep? Maybe the words or pace of a song don't resonate with you, but the middle school student in front of you feels like there's finally a song that expresses her heart to God. To submit one another in worship out of reverence for Christ, often means overlooking personal preferences and trusting that the Lord has you in this church at this time, singing this song, for a reason.

When we're being transformed into the image of God, it changes the way we see and interact with the world around us. Rather than being passively shaped by it, we look at the world with discernment and can affirm the good things and challenge the bad with the compassion and grace of Christ who's being formed in us. And maybe, some of the broken places that have previously shaped us will begin to be shaped by us as we reflect his image into the places that we live, work, and play.



WEEK FOUR

WORSHIP *together*

IN SUFFERING

WEEKLY MEMORY VERSE

“I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth.”

PSALM 34:1 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION

One of the first songs I remember singing in my brand-new role of Worship Leader at Perimeter Church was “How Great is Our God.” I had learned this popular praise song in college and, in those days, almost every church in America was singing it. Yet over the coming months, singing this song became a struggle for me. On one level, I believed wholeheartedly that God was great. As a kid, that’s the very first thing they taught me in Sunday school! But I was entering a season in my life of growing uncertainty. My husband was having substantial health issues, I was doubting our decision to move away from family, and my faith was floundering more than I wished to admit. And these were the thoughts that swirled around my mind each Sunday as I attempted to sing that chorus. How do I sing of God’s greatness when my life seems to be falling apart?

I knew in my mind that God is good, but what about those seasons that don’t feel good? What do I do with my pain and grief? And does God still want me to sing the truth of his goodness, even if my heart is struggling to believe it? It was somewhat of a crisis of faith but in a good way. My struggle to reconcile suffering and worship was what birthed within me a desire to understand worship in a truer sense. And what I discovered was that worship is more than just singing happy songs in happy seasons. Worship is much more than my individual expression of praise.

This week, as we turn to God’s Word, we will discover that worship is our opportunity to have an intimate connection with God during our suffering. We will also discover the benefit of connecting with others along the journey.

BIBLE STUDY

PSALM 34:1-3

Does David's instruction to bless the Lord at all times challenge your view or past view of worship?

What phrases or "anthems" tend to be continually in our mouths when we walk through trials? Is my heart prone to faith or doubt ?

How might "exalting his name together" be helpful for the believer in the midst of a trial?

PSALM 95:6, 7

Why might the psalmist invite us to bow down and kneel before God as part of our worship?

How does the acknowledgment of God's supremacy over all things bring us comfort in our suffering? How does this psalm remind us of God's care for his people?

PSALM 13:1-6

Describe David's feelings toward God in verses 1-4. Does any of this language feel awkward to you in the context of worship? Can you relate to any of David's questions to God?

Why does David say he is choosing to sing, despite the pain and anguish he feels in his heart?

ACTS 16:22-26

Why might Paul and Silas have chosen to sing hymns during one of the most terrifying moments of their lives?

After God released them from prison, the jailor places his faith in Christ. What role might Paul and Silas's singing have played in the jailor's conversion?

REVELATION 5:8-10

When we consider the response of the twenty-four elders in John's vision, how does the song they sing bring hope to us?

We are told that worship and singing will be an integral part of the new heavens and new earth. How might taking part in those practices this side of heaven sustain us and prepare us for what is to come?

TO SUMMARIZE

When you first begin to spend time in the Bible, you will notice that worship is a prominent theme throughout scripture. We observe the Israelites responding in song as they reach the other side of the Red Sea, giving God honor and praise for their salvation. We hear Mary's magnificent bursting forth in praise toward God for choosing a simple, virgin Hebrew girl to bear his son. There are many more instances of God's people honoring him through song, acknowledging his goodness and worth; but worship is more than just an expression of gratitude to God. Worship can also be an act of faith.

In Psalm 13, we saw a glimpse of what it looks like to worship in suffering. David's life was full of hardship. Some situations he fell victim to, and others he brought on himself. What is particularly interesting about Psalm 13 is the contrast between how the first four lines of his song sound and what we regularly hear in a Sunday morning worship

service! Is it okay to be so honest with God? Is voicing frustration with him appropriate in worship?

As someone who shares the same doubts and fears as David, I am grateful that Psalm 13 was included in the canon of scripture. Not only does God allow us to cry out to him honestly, he already knows the doubts we wrestle with, even the ache in our hearts that words cannot express! And rather than cleaning ourselves up before coming to God in worship, God invites us to come as we are.

Though God values our authenticity in worship, our own feelings towards him cannot become the object of our worship. Though David begins his song with raw, fluctuating emotions, he ends by focusing on the character of God. In the last 2 verses, he tells us of three choices he is making in his suffering: David chooses to trust, he chooses to rejoice and he chooses to sing! Why? "Because the Lord has dealt bountifully with me." (v. 6)

Take a moment to consider this in your own life. How has the Lord dealt bountifully with you? Can you trace the record of his faithfulness? Where are you placing your trust as you walk through suffering, are you simply looking for resolutions to your problem? Are you trusting in your own ability to sort through the mess or bear the painful burden? How might choosing worship in suffering keep your mind fixed on God's character and his greater plan for you?

In closing, consider the following statement: We can't always control what we walk through, but we can always control how we walk through what we walk through. Simply put, in our suffering, we can choose worship.

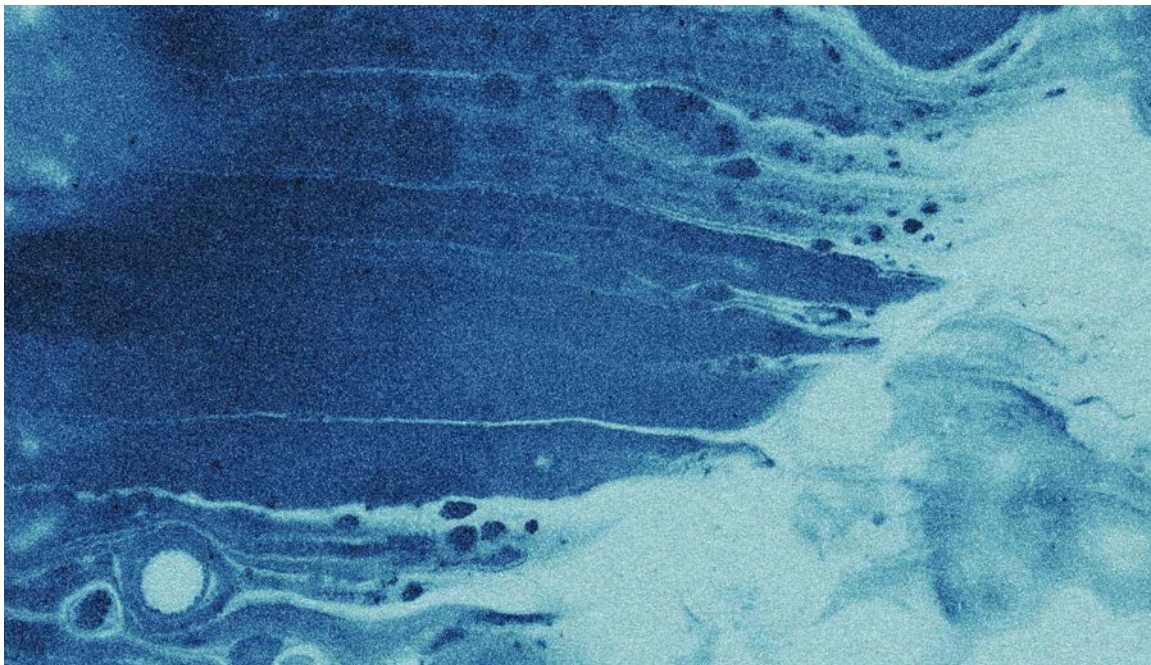
As we live life in this sin-marred world, we will face trials. Scripture promises it and life confirms it. Brain tumors are discovered. Families fracture. The best-made plans don't always come to fruition. And often, we have little say in the matter.

One thing we do have control of is how we respond to life's trials. And as we see in so many of the psalms, suffering can either dampen our worship or deepen it. If our picture of worship is solely our emotive, energetic response when things are going well in our lives, it will probably not withstand trials. But if our worship is based on the immense worth of God and the proclamation of his never-changing truth, it will not only continue through suffering but become the anthem that carries us through the storm.

Through worship, we can know on the deepest level how Job felt, having

lost everything, yet still exclaiming, "Though he slay me, I will hope in him!" We can know the sentiment of Abraham who was asked to do the unthinkable. And as God called him to lay down his only son Isaac on the altar, he told his companions, "I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." (Gen 22:5). During this time of great confusion and anguish, Abraham worshipped in faith and obedience. Worship isn't the song we sing on the other end of the trial; it's the song of desperation and lament we sing in the thick of the trial. But it is also a song of hope and truth when our emotions tempt us to complain.

Are you suffering? Are there trials in your life? How might worship be a soundtrack of hope in your life? May worshipping God in trials both free your heart to be vulnerable before, and fix your eyes on his steadfast character.





WEEK FIVE

WORSHIP *together*

AS PART OF A BIGGER STORY

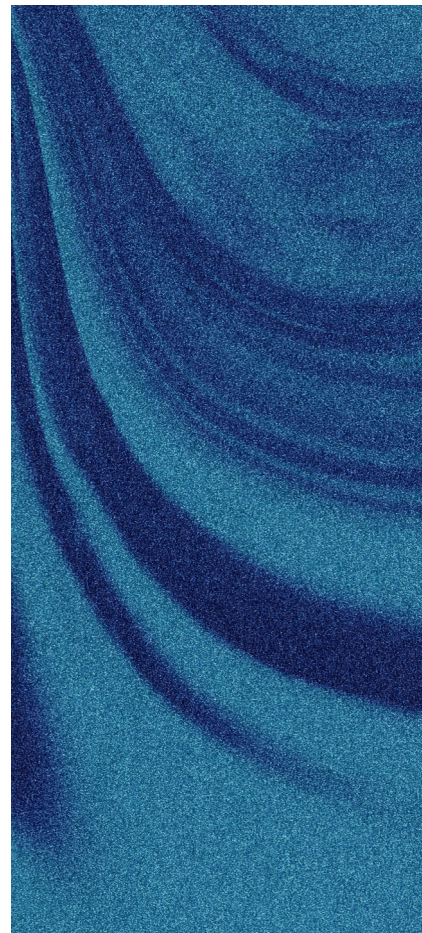
WEEKLY MEMORY VERSE

“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

REVELATION 7:9-10 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION

Over the last four weeks, we’ve considered what worship is and what it looks like in practice. For our final week, we are going to take a step back and consider how our worship connects us to God’s church throughout history. We will see that the church is far bigger than a single local congregation in a particular place at a particular time. We’ll also see that corporate worship draws us back into the true story of the world in the face of many competing stories. We will also discover the benefit of connecting with others along the journey.



BIBLE STUDY

REVELATION 7:9-12 - In John's vision, he sees several glimpses of God's people worshipping in heaven. This is one of those scenes.

What kinds of people are around the throne of God worshipping him in heaven?

PSALM 105 - This psalm is recounting God's faithfulness to rescue his people out of their slavery in Egypt by giving an overview of the history of the events of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) and the Exodus.

Verses 1-6 serve as an introduction to the psalm. What are some of the ways the psalmist calls us to praise God in these verses?

The central theme of this psalm is verse 8. Why do you think this is significant for the people of God as they sing this psalm?

PSALM 90:1-4, 12-17 - A psalm of Moses for the people of Israel as they have come out of slavery from Egypt and wander in the wilderness before reaching the land that God has promised to them.

How does God view time (v.1-4)?

How long is a person's lifetime in comparison with God's view of time?

Even in the midst of turmoil and suffering in life, what lessons does Moses ask that the Lord would teach his people (vv.12-17)?

ROMANS 8:28 - Paul is unfolding the future glory of the Christian life.

How does this verse help you to understand the ways that God works in history?

In light of Psalm 90, how does Romans 8:28 encourage you?

TO SUMMARIZE

We live in a world of competing and conflicting stories. Every narrative begs you to be a part of it. The story of consumerism says that you are what you buy. Your status, your worth, and your value are made up of the things you have and the experiences you can be a part of. Other people and even your relationship with God can become “transactional,” a means by which we get what we want.

The story of expressive individualism says that “the primary purpose of [life and] religious observance is to facilitate ‘finding oneself’ and ‘chasing one’s dreams.’ Within this frame of mind, sinfulness is no longer falling short of the glory of God but the falling short of one’s own potential.”¹ The experience of worship can then be reduced to means of self-fulfillment and self-gratification.

The story of power paints a picture that your worth is in how much you can control. Your purpose in life is to get what you want and you can use money, people, and position to control the course of your life to arrive at your own predetermined destiny. Your relationships are a means to achieving your goals and the church can become a social club to gain moral recognition and network relationships.

All of these stories (and there are many more) are vying for your heart’s devotion. They mask an ultimately self-destructive narrative of life in the

guise of pleasure, satisfaction, and peace. Thankfully, there’s a much greater story that we’re a part of in Christ. And as we align ourselves to it, it brings real and lasting satisfaction and peace. The primary way that we remember this story and live in it takes place in corporate worship.

Have you ever looked around in a worship service? Looked at all the hundreds of faces around you, singing to God? Every person with a different story, different struggles, and different joys. It reminds us that we are part of something far bigger than ourselves. Something that God has been doing through the ages.

God’s redemptive unfolding of history through the centuries is the true story of the world. As God’s people, we have a role to play in this “drama of redemption.” The Bible does not provide a script for exactly what a Christian should do and say in every situation that they face, but it does set the stage and help us understand our role in God’s unfolding story. In a way, you could say that the Christian life is like improv.

You may remember the television show *Whose Line is it Anyway?* In the show, four actors are given a scene and a role to play, but no script to work from. They have to make it up as they go while staying true to their character and the scene. In many ways, God’s Word does the same thing for the believer; by it

¹ Trevin Wax, *Eschatological Discipleship*, p.144

we understand how the world was created, how it has been broken and ruined by sin, who God is, and who we are in light of the work of Jesus on our behalf. The stage is set, and the better we understand our role as redeemed image-bearers, the better we can live it out in the world. James K. A. Smith says that we do this “by being regularly immersed in the drama of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself, which is precisely the point of Christian worship - to invite us into that story over and over again ‘characterizing’ us as we rehearse gospel drama over and over.”² Taking this a little further, Mike Cosper describes worship in this light, saying “Our gatherings are meant to connect us to one another and to the story God is telling in history and to spur us on toward our hope-filled future”³

This is what Psalm 105 is doing for the people of God as they sing it. In the Old Testament, the model of redemption for God’s people was the Exodus. After 400 years of slavery in Egypt, God redeemed them from their bondage and gave them the land that he had promised to Abraham hundreds of years earlier. As God’s people sing Psalm 105, they’re singing through close to 600 years of history in which they are reminded that “he remembers his covenant forever” (v.8). The redemptive works of God in history cause his people to praise him. His faithfulness in history reminds his people that he never forgets his covenant promises and always has the power to fulfill them.

² James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, p.90

³ Mike Cosper, *Rhythms of Grace*, p. 96

God is not simply the God of this one moment in time, he’s the God of all history, the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:7). So when we worship him, we remember that we are a part of a much bigger story than what our own lifetime encompasses. God’s faithfulness to “a thousand generations” reminds us that no amount of time will void his promises. When we remember this in worship, it gives us a different perspective of the moment of time in which we live. When we worship the Lord, we are joining with God’s people since the creation of the world who have worshiped him as redeemer.

Not only does our worship tie us to the church throughout the ages, but it also ties us to the church throughout the world. Revelation 7:9-12 shows us a glimpse of a time of worship in heaven. It is an incredible scene to try to picture in your head, “a great multitude that no one could number...” Think about that! Everywhere you look, all you can see is people; more people than anyone can count. And who are they? They are people “...from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,” God’s redemptive drama has extended to the very ends of the earth! There is no nation or language that is unrepresented. And what unites them all?

They are all “...standing before the throne and before the lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our

God who sits on the throne, and to the lamb!” Jesus is their savior and their king. As we gather in worship each week, we gather with our brothers and sisters throughout the world who confess Jesus as lord and savior. As we do, we are reminded that we serve the God of all the nations, and the God of all history and that all who have worshipped him in the past, those who are worshipping him around the world now, and all those yet unborn who will worship him are one family in Christ.

Revelation 7 also shows us what we are looking forward to. It gives us a glimpse of “unfiltered” worship. We, with all of God’s family throughout the world and throughout history, standing literally, physically before Jesus himself. When we worship together, we remember that this story is going somewhere. It reminds us that Jesus will come again and bring us to himself. It reminds us of our restoration, freedom from sin, and joy in worshipping Jesus face to face.

So how does the bigger story impact our worship this week? First, it helps us to take a step back and see our life from a broader perspective. Our lives in these moments of history certainly matter, but in light of God’s redemptive plan for the world, we’re just a small moment in time (see Psalm 90). When we see that, it can lessen our anxious worries about the world because we serve a God who’s not surprised or overpowered by a moment in history. We serve the God who has always been

faithful and always been king. In that way, worship helps us to look at our lives from the perspective of history and eternity. God’s faithfulness to a thousand generations doesn’t skip my generation, and my generation can’t derail God’s redemptive work in the world.

How does the bigger story impact the way we look at our work during the week? Whether that’s in our home, raising children, in the office, at the studio, in the courtroom, or with a patient there are alternate stories competing for our attention. Each week we remind ourselves of our role in God’s bigger story, and this allows us to walk into our vocation and interact with people not simply to get something from them, but to serve and love them with patience and compassion as God in Christ has done for us. We can do our work with excellence, not to achieve a name for ourselves, but to honor the Lord and serve our neighbor. We can take on a new challenge without the fear that we will be ultimately ruined if we fail, because our career is not the ultimate definition of who we are as people.

When we worship, we’re reminded who we are, who he is and our role in his world. In the face of so many competing stories, we have the true story of the world in which God is working all things together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).