

Worship: We Glorify God

Pillars Sermon 1

Psalm 96

September 3, 2023

A sermon given by The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

I want to kick off this fall by considering four pillars of a biblical Church. These are not exhaustive, but I don't think a church can be sturdy without these four pillars: *worship, community, discipleship, and mission*. Put another way:

**As a church, we must glorify Christ, gather as Christ's people,
grow more like Christ, and go into the world for Christ.**

This *glorifying, gathering, growing, and going* also overlap, intertwine—they work together, like ingredients in a recipe—making for a vibrant and God-honoring local church.

Today, we consider worship. Why does God require this of us? Do we understand how important it is for us? Next Sunday, we tackle community and discipleship together. Then two weeks from today, we turn to mission, and with that sermon launch into a six-week series on the mission of God.

The ordering of all this is intentional: you cannot understand the mission of God unless you understand the deeper call to worship God. And you cannot engage in the mission of God unless you see how the local church—the people who gather and grow together—is central to His plan. Mission flows out of and into local churches that are glorifying God.

So first, today, Worship. Please turn in your Bible to Psalm 96.

British author, C. S. Lewis, in a lesser-known essay, titled, "Equality," admits that he finds democracy preferable to monarchy. But not because it's necessarily better. But because in a fallen world, democracy is safer: "The real reason for democracy is [that] mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows." Democracy aims to distribute power equally, not because we're all well-suited to govern, but precisely because we are not. "I don't deserve a share in governing a hen-roost, much less a nation," Lewis writes.

What's so interesting about this essay, is that Lewis points out that even as democracy is welcomed in Britain, his countrymen can't shake their love—even, need—for the monarchy.

We Britons should rejoice that we have contrived to reach much legal democracy ... without losing our ceremonial Monarchy. For there, right in the midst of our lives, is that which satisfies the craving.... Where men are forbidden to honor a king they honor millionaires, athletes, or film-stars instead -- even famous ... gangsters. For spiritual nature, like bodily nature, will be served -- deny it food and it will gobble poison.¹

Lewis identifies this spiritual need we have for something, or someone, to revere, lay down our lives for, even worship. Take away our king, and we'll enthrone our rock stars and athletes. Take away the king's summons to serve him, and we'll instead serve ambition, career, sex, fame.

And you see this in America. We love our democracy, and work hard for equality—that everyone has a fair shot at everything. But we don't go to see Taylor Swift hoping each concertgoer gets their turn to sing—we go to see our star. We don't go to the National Gallery to see an equal showing of just anyone's art—we're there to see Monet or Van Gogh.

We can be thankful we live in a democracy and are forced to bow our knee to no one. But let us not be mistaken: *bow our knee, we will*. It's part of our soul's nature. We will find some object, some person, to value above all others—to love, desire, serve.

This is why we must take Psalms like Psalm 96—with its summons to worship God—seriously. It doesn't force non-worshippers into worship. It rescues us from false worship for true worship. It shows us that worship is not only fitting to our nature but deeply satisfying. Turning to Psalm 96, we'll see that (1) Worship Is Fitting—It's Natural; (2) Worship Is Satisfying—Even Healing, and that (3) Worship Is More Than Individual—It's Corporate.

I. Worship Is Fitting—It's Natural

Some may find it odd, or even offensive, that Psalm 96 is not an invitation to worship, nor a suggestion. It's a command. Fourteen times the Psalm demands that we worship. Here's a sampling:

Sing to the Lord; Bless his Name; Tell out his salvation; Declare his glory; greatly praise him; fear him; ascribe to him the glory due his name; bring an offering to him; worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him.

Doesn't commanding worship taint it? You can't command someone to love you. And like love, worship ought to come from our hearts, a free overflow of true affections. God is not needy. Nor is He a tyrant interested in forcing His subjects to praise Him. Something else is going on here.

A better way to understand the command to praise is to recognize that there are certain things that, in a way, do demand, or command, praise. We call these things, "praiseworthy." They are, by their very nature, worthy of our praise—in a sense, they command it.

We say, for example, when someone considers the Grand Canyon unimpressive, or a brilliant performance of Handel's *Messiah* boring, that something is wrong with them. Why? Because we know that certain things are *praiseworthy*; they demand, by their nature, to be praised.

The Psalmist says this of the Lord: "Ascribe to the Lord the glory **due** his name" (v8). Glory, or praise, is due God—owed to Him, merited by Him, appropriate for Him. "It is **fitting** for the upright to praise God" (Psalm 33:1).

To see God, to know God, is to owe God praise. His very nature demands, even commands, it. The Psalmist is aware that the reason so many don't praise God is because they don't know Him, cannot see Him. A catastrophe of the fall is a spiritual blindness—we are cast out of God's presence, and we lack the spiritual eyes to see Him.

God has, and does, reveal glimpses of Himself to us, in degrees.² This Psalm is part of that revelation. And we can see the Psalmist grasping for superlatives that can somehow open our eyes to behold God.

- God is **great**: "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised" (v4).

- God is **unmatched**—in comparison to Him, other so-called gods are worthless: “he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens” (vv 4-5).
- God is our **maker**—we owe our entire existence to Him: “The Lord made heaven and earth” (v5).
- **Splendor, majesty, strength, and beauty**, stand before God and wait on Him: “Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary” (v6).
- My favorite term to describe God in this Psalm is **glory**, appearing in vv. 3, 7, 8: “Declare his glory among the nations” (v3). “Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength” (v7); “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name” (v.8). The word carries the meaning of brightness and weight.

Think of how the sun combines brightness, heat, and weight in its greatness. Like the sun, God dwells in unapproachable light; like the sun, God is an all-consuming fire; like the sun, God’s gravity, His *gravitas*, holds everything together.

Have you ever been in the presence of a person of great spiritual substance? When you are, don’t you sense a *weight*, a *luminosity*, a glory to them? And don’t you sense a need to honor and respect them?

Here is the foundation of praise: God is great. There is none like Him. He made everything—we owe our existence to him.³ He is majestically glorious. And He is totally powerful. We do not bring our vote or our preferences into His presence—He does not answer to us.

It is fitting we praise Him, for He is utterly praiseworthy. As we say in our Communion Liturgy:

*Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is **right** to give him thanks and praise.*

Worship is more than fitting, however. It is also satisfying.

II. Worship is Satisfying—Even Healing

There is a joy in worship. And this Psalm has an ever-expanding joyous tone: it pictures not only a lone Israelite singing, but, verse 1, “all the earth.” By its close, all creation joins in:

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy (96:11-13a).

But how, exactly, is worship satisfying? And by this I mean, why isn't it enough simply to read and mentally grasp the facts about God? Isn't it enough to know that God is great, that He is your maker? Why do you need to *sing* about it? And how does this *singing* and *praising* increase satisfaction?

Think of a young boy who loves the beach, but he's afraid to get into the ocean. He plays in the sand, he runs along the water line, he even dips his toes in. But he dares not get into the water. Then one year, he gains the courage, and (with his older brother at his side), he gets in. And he swims. He feels the waves carry him up and down—he rides them. He feels the cool of the water against his skin. From here on, he races across the sand and dives into the water. He loves the beach all the more.

What happened to him? He always loved the beach and the ocean. But now, he's jumped in.

This is what worship is—jumping in. You can read about God. Learn about God. And have an enjoyment in that. But worship is when you jump in. You stop thinking, *God is my maker*, and you start thanking Him, from the bottom of your heart—Now you're in the waves! Worship is where things get more personal to your heart.

We can see aspects of how this happens as the Psalm moves from praising God not only for His greatness but for His grace—here things get personal.

We begin to sense God's personal action towards the Psalmist with the call for “a new song” (v1). This “new song” (v1), would have been a song written after the Lord had delivered Israel from danger or won a great victory for them. The context, then, is salvation—being saved.

Worship is a response not only to the glory of God's greatness but to the glory of God's grace—His saving power: Verse 2, “tell of his salvation from day to day” (v.2).

There is a reverberation of Psalm 96 in Revelation 5, where the elders in heaven also “sing a new song” (Revelation 5:9). They see Jesus on his throne. But at one moment, he is “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” (Revelation 5:5), and at the next moment appears as “a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain” (Revelation 5:6).

A Lion. A Lamb. Polar opposites in the animal kingdom. Here is a God who is at once powerful but also gentle, authoritative but also merciful, terrifying and approachable, mighty but also meek. The saints in heaven can only worship:

The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God (Revelation 5:8-10).

Worship of God is satisfying because it not only sets us before our Great King. It also sets us before our Loving Father. And we need both, together.

Kingship without compassion is crushing—it can do no more than rule us but won’t comfort us. But compassion, without power, is impotent—it can do no more than sympathize with us, it cannot help us. We need the Lion who is also the Lamb.

Have you not noticed, that in our children’s books and fairytales, we want not only to be called into serving a great king; but we want to discover we are the king’s sons and daughters. Our hearts long to honor and serve the truly great king. But our hearts also long to be enfolded in his arms. In worship, our hearts bow before our King. And in worship, our hearts are embraced by our Father.

We should mention, along these lines of worship being satisfying, that there is a way that worship may be deeply healing for us, at this cultural moment.

You see, worship draws us out of ourselves. And our culture has made us sick by telling us that health comes by looking at ourselves. We've been tutored for several decades now by the "self-esteem" movement. And this is just part of the more pervasive religion of "expressive individualism." We've been told to look inside ourselves, to think much of ourselves, and then to foist an authentic expression of ourselves onto the world. But all this has made us sick. Some recognize a tidal wave of mental health problems descending upon this self-esteem generation. Perhaps we should return to a biblical antidote, worship, that delightful practice where the self forgets itself because it's so enamored with God.

In Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, young Count Nikolai Rostov leaves the university to join his countrymen in fighting Napoleon's invading army. Early in his tenure, Rostov stands in formation with the thousands of his fellow soldiers, as the Russian Emperor approaches.

"Eyes front," a voice shouts. Deathlike silence ensues, only the sound of horses' hooves is heard as the Emperor's entourage approaches. The cavalry begin to play their trumpets, but it's as though the entire army "burst into music." Of the final approach, we read:

Rostov, standing in the foremost ranks..., which the Tsar approached first, was possessed by the same feeling as every other man there present—a feeling of self-forgetfulness, a proud consciousness of might, and passionate devotion to the man round whom this solemn ceremony centered.⁴

To lose yourself in the presence of someone far greater than you—someone to whom you can honor, lay down your life for, revere—is not a picture of illness, but health.

Perhaps what our culture needs most is not to think more about our health—whether we are flourishing or authentic or being true to our inner voice—but to be more in the presence of our God. His greatness, His saving-power, His eternity—"the weight of his glory," as Paul says (Romans 8:18)—are the only real antidote to the burden of our frailty, our mortality.

III. Worship Is Collective

Let me close by drawing a specific summons from two words in the Psalm. The words are "sanctuary" in verse 6 and "courts" in verse 8. With these words, the Psalmist reminds us that worship

is not only individual but collective. The sanctuary and court speak of the Temple in Jerusalem, where all Israel gathered three times a year to worship the Lord. The third and final point, then, is that worship is *collective*.

Of course, it must also be individual. Worship must come from *my* heart. But there is a pattern in the Scripture where God calls not only individuals to worship Him, but He appoints a time, a place, where His people gather. In the Old Testament, on the Sabbath, in the Temple. Now, it is on Sunday—the Lord’s Day—and with your local church. We see this communal emphasis in the New Testament letters:

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... (Hebrews 10:24-25).

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:15-16).

There have been so many times in my own Christian life when I’ve come into worship on Sunday distracted or with a downcast heart. And it has been the image of a friend, a fellow Christian, in the act of worship, that has lifted my heart back to God.

And friend, joy is increased when we share it. This is why, when you see a beautiful sunset, you call for your mom, or spouse, or friend to come look—because sharing joy increases it. To glorify in God together is the height of praise and the vision we have of heaven.

A summons to Sunday morning worship

So here is the final summons from Psalm 96 to us: see Sunday morning as the great summit of life. It is not the only place, but it is the God-appointed place, where we come together to worship.

And don’t you see how Sunday morning, by God’s grace, is a great invitation for you to come and worship—a ready-made, pre-set, map for you to follow into worship? There it is on your calendar—

every week—Sunday morning. Do you block that time out? Do you guard it? Determine to come to worship.

There is the start time of the service: do you arrive prepared to worship, or distracted?

Prepare your heart for worship.

And what of the prayer of confession in our service? Do you pray it with honesty, ready to set before God in your heart specific sins? **Humble yourself in worship.**

And then is the reading of God’s Word. How do you hear it? Do you listen as though God Almighty is speaking—addressing you? **Listen attentively in worship.**

What of the offering? Will you give to the Lord from what He’s given you? **Offer yourself to God in worship.**

In Communion, do you receive with faith, trusting that God’s Son died for *you*? **Trust that God is with you, for you, in worship.**

And finally, here, with the other believers gathered, do you sing? Do you sing a new song to the Lord? Do you lift up your voice? **Sing to the Lord in worship.**

Don’t let our democracy fool you: our hearts long for a king. May we be a people, here at The Falls Church Anglican, who gather together in one voice, and “worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness” (Psalm 96:9).

See following page for small group discussion questions.

Questions for small groups:

Members of your small group are encouraged to listen to the sermon if they were not there on Sunday. We also encourage you to begin your small group meeting with prayer and then by reading Psalm 96. The below questions are suggestions for how to have a meaningful discussion about the Psalm and about biblical worship—but you may have better questions that come up in your group.

1. What stands out to you about Psalm 96? Phrases? Images? Words? Is there anything you find confusing?
2. Try to give your definition of worship in a sentence.
3. Verse 9 tells us to “Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness.” Is worship something you enjoy? Does it come easy to you? What are ways that you worship the Lord?
4. Verses 4-5 say that the Lord is above “all gods” and “idols.” Are there things you value, desire, worship, over God? How might this impact your life?
5. How might you respond to Psalm 96’s summons to praise by how you approach Sunday morning worship? Does corporate worship help you worship the Lord? If so, how?

Endnotes

1. C. S. Lewis, “Equality.”
2. The incarnation is the fullest revelation. Jesus is the image of God. But a time still awaits when we will behold the Triune God in all his glory.
3. As G. K. Chesterton says, “The whole world has, or is, only one good thing; and it is a bad debt.”
Chesterton, *Francis of Assisi*, 72.
4. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, (Penguin Books, New York, NY: 1982), 283.