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The What and Why of Worship

Psalm 40

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Every summer we study a psalm or two and talk about *worship*, to remind ourselves what it is and what we believe about it. Whenever we do this, there is always somebody that stops me and says, “Are we having a problem? Is there a crisis?” And the answer is no. It’s more the idea of being proactive. We don’t wait until there’s a crisis; we just keep talking about these things to try to prevent that from happening.

If you are new to LBC in the last year or two, one of the things that would be very helpful to you is to read through our philosophy of worship. You can pick up a copy of that at the Worship & Arts booth in the foyer. That will tell you what we believe about worship and what we are trying to accomplish when we gather together like this.

It’s not that every week we accomplish our philosophy. Some weeks we do better than other weeks. Some weekends we feel like we were effective, and some weekends we feel like it just didn’t work. Just like in a sermon—some weeks I walk away thinking, *Okay, I think I accomplished what I wanted to*, and other weeks I think, *That was just not very good*. You don’t hit a home run every week, and that’s just the way it is. But in understanding our philosophy of worship, at least it will help you understand what we are trying to do.

Sometimes people will say, “Are we going *this* direction now?” and “Are we going *that* direction now?” The answer is we’re not going *this* direction or *that* direction. We’re going according to the philosophy of worship, and we’ve been doing that for years. It’s the same philosophy that has been in place now for many years, and we have no intention of changing that. So that’s the direction that we’re going.

What we really desire to accomplish here at Lincoln Berean is to provide a worship experience that is meaningful to everyone in the body. And that is a challenge. One of the unique things about Lincoln Berean is we have such a wide span of ages, from over 90 years old to under 10 years old, gathered together for corporate worship. Most churches this size don’t have that; we’re very unique in that.

We also have people who come from various traditions such as Lutheran and Methodist and Catholic and Presbyterian—all these different backgrounds—and they have certain things for them that were meaningful in their spiritual journey. To put all that together and try to have a worship service that is meaningful to the body is certainly a challenge.

One of the things that you can do to help us know what is meaningful to you and what’s not is to give us feedback, both positive and negative, to help us understand how we’re doing and where we’re at. My desire as the pastor would be to create an environment where you feel like it is very safe to give constructive input. But my desire is also to create an environment where you feel it is very unsafe to grumble, because the Bible says grumbling is a sin and I refuse to create an environment that enables sin.

So it really raises the question: How do we know the difference? You may be wondering, *If we come to you with a comment, are you going to take that as grumbling, or are you going to take that as a constructive comment?* That’s a fine question.

We can sort it out a couple of ways. One is you have to assess your own attitude, the motive of your heart. I can't do that for you. There are those people who are just consumers at heart and, really, all they want is what they want. They really don't care about the rest of the body. They really don't care about a philosophy of worship. They just want what they want, and if they don't get it they complain. That's the heart of a grumbler; that's the heart of a consumer.

That's very different from the heart of someone who says, "You know, I'm behind the mission of the church; I understand the philosophy of worship, and I just want to make this input, this comment, that I think will help us as a body to be more effective in our worship." That's a very appropriate thing; that's a very important thing to do. Two different motives, and only you can assess your own heart. None of us can do that for you.

But there is also a more practical thing that we can look at to help work through this. One of the things we need to assess is: Who am I talking to with my concerns and my complaints? If you find yourself being critical to someone who does not have the authority or the ability to do anything about it, that's grumbling. That's complaining. There's nothing positive that can come from that. There is no reason to share that, other than you just want to grumble.

If you walk out into the hall and you're complaining about anything in the church with somebody who doesn't have the authority and ability to do something about it, it's just grumbling. It's just divisive. There's nothing good that can come from that. Whether it's in the hallway, whether it's in a classroom, whether it's in your LifeGroup, whether it's over dinner, that's something you need to think about.

Also, we need to understand that if you receive that—if you listen to that—you are part of the problem. You're enabling somebody else's sin, and frankly you are a part of it. If someone is complaining to you and you don't have the authority or the ability to do something about it, then stop them and say, "You know, I don't have the ability or the authority to do anything with this. Don't tell me. If you have a concern, here is who you talk to..." That's the best way that we can stop it. We don't want to enable someone else's sin.

But if you have a concern, if you have a complaint, if you have positive input, we'd love to hear it. If you find yourself talking to someone who has the authority and the ability to do something about it, we don't consider that to be grumbling. We don't consider that to be complaining. That is feedback. That is input that we need. You can talk to me. You can talk to Kenyon. You can talk to Robin Smith, Donn Stoner, any of the pastoral staff, any of the elders—we're all willing to listen and consider that. But you do have to understand that we're getting input from a number of directions, and everybody is not going to always get what they want.

For example, this morning we had video footage shown behind the words of the song, "Lord, I Lift Your Name on High." Some will say, "You know, that was really meaningful to me." Others will say, "That was really distracting to me." Well, something's got to give there...can't have it both ways. On a particular morning in the same service, somebody will say, "That was way too loud." Somebody else will say, "I couldn't hear it." And they're both sitting in the same service. Sometimes it depends on where you are sitting, and sometimes it's a frequency thing. It isn't so much a volume issue, but rather, certain people have issues with certain frequencies put out by different instruments. We try to consider that and figure out what we can do with that.

I do promise you we'll listen and we'll consider whatever feedback you give, but then we have to work it through with what's good for the body.

But part of what you have to assess is: Who am I talking to? If you come in and talk to one of us who has the authority and the responsibility to do something with it, that still doesn't give you license then to go out in the hall and talk to ten other people. Just talk to whoever you should talk to and then leave it and go on with your life.

But it does raise the question: Why does it seem like in any church you go to, worship tends to be a part of conflict? I think the answer is because the enemy hates worship. There is probably nothing we do as a church that the enemy hates more than worship for two reasons. One is because worship is so important to God. The enemy hates it when we worship God; he'll do anything he can to get us sidetracked. But the second reason is because worship is very important to *us*, and if he can get us sidetracked and not really worshipping, he can dramatically affect our lives.

This morning we want to talk about both the *what* and the *why* of worship. We are looking at Psalm 40, which was probably written by David, and in the psalm he talks about both the what: What is worship? and the why: Why is it so important?

He opens this psalm with one of my favorite opening lines of any of the psalms. He says, "I waited patiently for the Lord." Now, in the Hebrew it's a little bit different than that. It's actually written, "Waiting, I waited." Most of us have been there: waiting, I waited. We're waiting on God and it doesn't seem like God is hearing us. God is not responding to us; He is not doing anything. There is nothing harder than waiting. We keep our faith; we keep believing. So we feel like "waiting, I waited... 'til finally God heard me."

I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, and He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. (Psalm 40:1-2, *NASB)

It's very vivid language here, where David feels like he has been in the mud, in the muck, in the miry clay slogging his way along, and finally God hears him and reaches down and sets his feet upon the rock. And for the first time in a long time he feels like there is firm footing under his feet. God has rescued him. He has saved him from his distress. So how does he respond? Verse 3:

He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; many will see and fear and will trust in the LORD.

The response is that God has put a new song in his heart which comes before the congregation, that the congregation might enter in. Throughout the Psalms one gets this repeated phrase of "a new song." I think it's a reminder that it is very important for every generation to express their faith, their belief in God, their experience with God. Every generation has those who are gifted with the ability to express for their generation, *This is our experience with God*. That is what the psalmist is saying—that God delivered him and put a new song in his mouth.

But that song needs to be appropriate for the body, so that others can listen and enter into that. He says they see and they fear—not meaning afraid, but meaning reverence. They are reminded that God is awesome, and the result of that is they trust in the Lord.

It's very interesting that the writer uses the word "see" rather than the word "hear." When we think of somebody singing a new song, we think that people hear that, but that is not the word he uses. They *see* that. I think what he is saying is they look at David as he presents this new song, this proclamation, this testimony, and they not only hear it but they see it in him. They see that God has delivered him. They see the life of God in him and they are responsive to that.

It's a reminder that worship engages our senses. It is not just our ears, but also our eyes. We see the worship leaders and we believe. We see our fellow members of the body and we believe. We're engaged as we proclaim the truth of God and who He is and what He has done.

David is saying that this is his personal testimony. This is his proclamation that has been put to music. Any song, any hymn that we sing, is someone's own story that they've put into song. It's their proclamation of this experience with God and what's true about God and who He is and what He has done. It may be several hundred years old. It may be a year old. But we hear that and we see it and we're reminded that God is awesome, and we trust.

Imagine someone in David's congregation who is still in the mire and the mud and they're saying, "Waiting, I waited..." and they're discouraged. But when they hear the proclamation of David that says, "God has delivered me and God is awesome and you can trust Him," they see that in David and they say, "Yes, I will trust Him; I'll believe!" Verse 4:

How blessed is the man who has made the LORD his trust, and has not turned to the proud, nor to those who lapse into falsehood. Many, O LORD my God, are the wonders which You have done, and Your thoughts toward us; There is none to compare with You. If I would declare and speak of them, they would be too numerous to count. (vs. 4-5)

In verse 4, "how blessed" is the same word used in Psalm 1. It means to be happy. It is saying, "How happy is the worshipper; how happy is the man or woman who worships the Lord and is reminded of who God is and that we should trust Him." It keeps us from buying into the value system of this world. He is saying that keeps us from being deceived and from going into idolatry and destruction.

You show me a Christian who goes through their Christian life filled with anxiety and misery; I'll show you someone who doesn't know how to worship. You show me a Christian who has the joy of the Lord in spite of circumstances; I'll show you someone who understands worship and comes together and is reminded that God is awesome and God can be trusted. Happy is that person because they don't go down a path of destruction. They are not deceived. They're not lured away. But they remain steadfast.

In verse 5, he says that many are the wonders of the miracles of God. Many are God's thoughts toward us. He says if he were to try and name them all, they would be too numerous to count.

There are some people who wonder, *Why are worship services so long? Why can't we have two songs and the sermon and get out?* We would say, "Why are they so short?" There's so much about God that we need to declare! There's so much about God that we need to affirm. There's so much together that we need to hear and be reminded of. His goodness is just too numerous to count!

Then in verse 6, he talks about what worship is *not*:

Sacrifice and meal offering You have not desired; my ears You have opened; burnt offering and sin offering You have not required.

David is not saying that they shouldn't participate in the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant. But what he *is* saying is God doesn't want them cranking out their religious ritual.

One would guess he has King Saul in mind when he writes this. You remember it was King Saul that was ready to go into battle, but Samuel wasn't there and nobody had offered sacrifice. Saul was concerned that if nobody offered sacrifice they wouldn't have God's favor and might not win the

battle. Saul decided to do it himself, even though he wasn't a priest. And so he offered the sacrifice (kind of like a good luck charm, like a rabbit's foot) hoping that somehow the ritual would make God happy and they would win the battle.

Samuel shows up and says, "Saul, what are you doing? You can't do that! To obey is better than sacrifice. God doesn't want the ritual; God wants your heart." That is what David is talking about here. God doesn't want them cranking out the ritual; God wants their heart.

It's very important to remember that there is not some value by walking in this building and sitting in this auditorium every week. God is not in heaven taking attendance and looks down and says, "Okay, there's Bill; he's here, so he might get a blessing this week." There is nothing gained by just coming here, sitting down, and going home...unless you're engaging in the worship and hearing the words and being reminded of who God is and what He has done. There is no value in just cranking out the ritual.

That is one of the big problems we have in our culture—people live like the devil all week and then they do their religious ritual on the weekend and feel like everything is okay. They think, *As long as I get to confession, as long as I get to mass, as long as I get to that worship service, then everything is balanced out.* It doesn't work that way. God doesn't want you cranking out some ritual. He wants your heart.

Then I said, "Behold, I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart." (vs. 7-8)

What is David talking about when he talks about the scroll of the book? He is referring to Deuteronomy 17. In the Law it outlined what the king was supposed to be about—that he was supposed to lead the people in righteousness and obedience and to lead the people as they follow God. And the king was supposed to walk in obedience to God. The Law talks about that, and then it is followed by a section that says, "Put this in the scroll of the book." The king was supposed to keep that with him all the time, and on a regular basis he was to open up the scroll of the book and remind himself what the king was supposed to be about, what he was supposed to be doing, and what God expected from the king. So he said, "I opened up the scroll and I realized it was about me." He was supposed to delight in the Lord and have the Law written in his heart. So he says he reads the scroll of the book and he does—he delights in God, and the Law is written in his heart.

That is what God wants. God doesn't want religious ritual. God wants us to delight in Him. God wants us to know Him. God wants us to walk in His ways. He wants us to obey Him. That is what worship is. It's intimate. It's personal.

The writer of Hebrews takes these verses in Psalm 40 and quotes them in Hebrews 10. Then he tells us that Jesus is the fulfillment. One of the reasons why David said we aren't supposed to just crank out the ritual is because the ritual had no ability to save. It was merely a picture of the fulfillment to come. The writer of Hebrews says Jesus Christ is that fulfillment. Everything written in the scroll of the book was ultimately written about Him. Jesus is the fulfillment; therefore, we enter into relationship with Him. We delight in Him. We walk in obedience to Him. He is the focus of our worship. Our worship is to be Christ-centered as the fulfillment of God's salvation.

I have proclaimed glad tidings of righteousness in the great congregation; behold, I will not restrain my lips, O LORD, You know. I have not hidden Your righteousness within my heart; I have spoken of Your faithfulness and Your salvation; I have not concealed Your lovingkindness and Your truth from the great congregation. (vs. 9-10)

Notice he keeps talking about “among the congregation.” He is saying, “I gather together with the people of God, the great congregation, and I’m not silent. I tell them about Your righteousness and about Your faithfulness and about Your lovingkindness and about Your salvation.” He says, “I declare to the people who You are and what You’ve done, that they might hear that and be reminded that God is awesome and enter into that and trust Him, no matter what anyone is going through.”

There is a reminder in these verses that worship is ultimately about truth. It isn’t so much about engaging our emotions as it is engaging our minds. It is really not about styles of music. It’s not about what instruments are used. It is about truth and what is true about God and who He is and what He has done. We have to be very careful that we don’t just engage our emotions and have some feeling that we walk away with. We need to engage our *minds*. We think about what it is that is being declared. Worship is proclamation. It’s a proclamation of God and His character and what He has done for us and how we respond to that. But we have to *think* about that. We engage our minds; and if we engage our minds in the truth, the proper emotions will flow.

Already this morning we have proclaimed some of the great doctrines of our Christian faith through our musical worship. Can you tell me what those were? Were you engaged in the truth? Was your mind engaged? Can you tell me what it is we have affirmed to be true about God already this morning? Or do we just get caught up in the musical flow and we aren’t really thinking about it? What is it we proclaimed?

I realize that we believe Sunday is a day of rest, but it doesn’t mean that you leave your mind at home at rest. You need to come and be prepared to work very hard in worship. It is hard work to engage our minds and to think, but we have to. Worship is primarily about truth. With our minds engaged, we affirm what is true about God and His character—who He is and what He has done for us.

That is the *what* of worship. The what of worship is to proclaim the character of God and who He is and what He has done. We, together with our voices, affirm and remind ourselves that God is awesome and we should trust Him—that He is faithful, that He is loving, that He is kind, that He is merciful, that He is compassionate, that Jesus is our salvation. We believe that and we embrace it.

The proclamation of worship may be through music. It may be through a loop story. It may be through a live testimony. Those are all proclamations of God and who He is and what He has done.

With our minds engaged, we have just proclaimed some of the great truths of our Christian faith. They started with the experience of one man and his understanding of God and who He is and what He has done—how great God is. With that being put to music, then for generations it has come before the congregation, and we affirm those truths and are reminded that God is awesome and we say we will trust Him. Blessed (happy) is the person who puts their trust in God.

David has talked about the what of worship. Now he goes on to talk about the *why*. Why is worship so important?

You, O LORD, will not withhold Your compassion from me; Your lovingkindness and Your truth will continually preserve me. For evils beyond number have surrounded me; my iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to see; they are more numerous than the hairs of my head, and my heart has failed me. (vs. 11-12)

Just before we talk more about verse 12, I do have to point out something that seems very obvious that the writer is saying. He says his iniquities are more numerous than the hairs of his head. It seems like he is saying there that the number of hairs on your head are an indication of the number of

sins in your life. Now, I don't write it; I just interpret it. Those of us, year by year, that lose hair—it's because we have less and less sin in our lives, right? Some of you that are so smug with that wavy head of hair, we now know *why* you have so much hair. I thought about titling this "A Bald Man's Psalm"—but that may not be exactly his point. But it does seem to be there in the text.

In verse 12 when it says, "Evils beyond number have surrounded me; my iniquities [*sins*] have overtaken me"—that is a Hebrew word that was used to describe the waves of the sea. It's as if he is drowning in his own sin. He is overwhelmed. He says, "I can't even see anymore. My heart has failed me." It means he is about out of hope.

We really ask the question: What happened? What happened to the guy in verse 3? Who is this guy now in verse 12? The guy in verse 3 was proclaiming the goodness of God. The guy in verse 12 is saying, "I'm almost out of hope; I'm overwhelmed." What happened?

Life happened. Life is hard. Sometimes we are on a mountaintop, and sometimes we're in the valley. The first half of the psalm was past tense, where the psalmist was saying, "This has been my experience in the past." The last half of the psalm is present tense; it's not where he's at right now. He is struggling.

Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me; make haste, O LORD, to help me. Let those be ashamed and humiliated together who seek my life to destroy it; let those be turned back and dishonored who delight in my hurt. Let those be appalled because of their shame who say to me, "Aha, aha!" (vs. 13-15)

David is saying that there are those who delight in his pain, in this case specifically his iniquity, his sin, and he is living with the consequences of that. Those around him are pointing to him and they're saying, "Aha! I knew it!"

Anytime we as Christians, the people of God, fail, there are always those around us that take delight in that. They already feel a certain sense of "holier than thou" from us. And when they see us crash and burn they say, "Aha! I knew you weren't any different!" They justify their own behaviors and achieve a level of self-righteousness because of our failure. So they delight in our failures and destructions.

That is what David is feeling. He is hearing the voices of those who are condemning him and judging him and delighting in his iniquity, his pain. So what does he do? Well, he needs to come together with the people of God and worship. That's what he says in verse 16:

Let all who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; let those who love Your salvation say continually, "The LORD be magnified!"

In other words, he needs to come together with the people of God and hear them corporately magnify the Lord—to say again that God is good, God is faithful and compassionate and loving and kind, and He is our hope and our salvation. We're not a self-righteous people; we are sinners saved by grace. We come back among the people of God and the voices of worship drown out the voices of condemnation. That is what David is saying: he has got to get back with the people of God so that their voices might drown out the voices of judgment and condemnation which are causing him to lose hope. He needs to be reminded again of God and who He is and what He has done. Why? Because we're an afflicted and a needy people.

Since I am afflicted and needy, let the Lord be mindful of me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God. (v. 17)

The very first line of the psalm is: “Waiting, I waited.” The very last line of the psalm is: “I can’t wait much longer. Hurry! Hurry!”

Why do we need to worship? Because we’re a needy and afflicted people. Because of the voices of the world that condemn and judge and deceive and lead us astray. Those voices are loud and consistent, and we need to get back together with the people of God and collectively remind ourselves of who God is and what He has done—that we might walk in His ways and trust Him and experience the joy of our salvation, especially those who are struggling (as in David’s case, struggling with sin).

It is interesting that when people struggle with sin they often avoid worship, which is almost a guarantee that they will crash and burn. If there is one time in your life when you need to be together with the people of God in worship, it is when you’re struggling. And it’s when you’re sinning. You need to come back and hear the voices of God’s people that remind you God is your salvation, your grace and your mercy, and that He is forgiving and loving and kind. It is when you’re struggling that you need to be reminded of God’s righteousness, His goodness and His faithfulness, and the voices of God’s people can drown out the voices of this world and bring you back on track and again bring hope to your despairing soul.

Some of you feel like David when he was stuck in the muck and the mire and the clay. You feel right now like you’re kind of slogging your way through life. Maybe you felt like not even coming to this service; you just didn’t want to come. But you’re here. Maybe for you it isn’t your iniquities, but maybe it’s just the stuff of life. You’re going through a struggle or a trial. You’re facing the battles of life and you’re discouraged, and you feel like your hope is draining away. When you come back together with the people of God you are reminded that God is awesome, God is faithful, God is compassionate, God is forgiving. And once again you are reminded that you can trust Him.

If you’re struggling this morning, you need to engage your mind as we sing this last song. Think about the words of the song. Think about what we believe as the people of God to again restore your hope and the joy of your salvation.

Our Father, we are thankful that you are a faithful God. Lord, You desire us to be worthy worshippers—that we would worship with our hearts. Lord, we pray that we would not just crank out some weekly ritual, but that we would engage our minds and proclaim the truth..

Lord, we are an afflicted and needy people. We need to gather together with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to remind ourselves of who You are and what You have done for us. I pray especially for those who are struggling, those who feel like they are stuck in the mire, in the mud. They are waiting and they’re discouraged. They feel their hope draining away, and they’re crying out for You to deliver. Lord, together with voices lifted up, may we be reminded of Your faithfulness and Your awesomeness and what is true—that we might trust You. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation.

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