



why we

*Experiencing
Heaven on
Earth at Church*

worship

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1

GETTING UP THE MOUNTAIN

I ONCE LED AN ENTIRE CHURCH SERVICE while standing on the roof of a lifted Jeep. Fortunately the car wasn't in motion. The punishing blacktop yawned to greet me without mercy had I slipped. Commercial planes soared interruptingly overhead, requiring frequent liturgical pauses. The "sanctuary" was a large parking lot at Liberty Station on the San Diego Bay. It was May of 2020, and after five weeks of giving online addresses due to the Covid-19 lockdowns, we were gathering again. An FM transmitter channeled my voice into the cars along with the piano melody when we'd sing. We sent the liturgy out ahead of time so people could prepare for worship and asked those attending to bring their own cups for Communion. After the prayer of consecration, our deacons went around the parking lot with bread and pitchers of wine to fill the glasses of the faithful with Christ's blood. We even celebrated a baptism!

The weeks we worshiped at Liberty Station reminded me of two things. First, the circumstances of worship don't ultimately determine if we're meeting with God or not. Whether you're seated in a pew or a parking lot isn't the main thing. Sure, some circumstances are less ideal, but genuine worship can happen



in a cathedral or a living room. This means we need to distinguish between the essence of a worship service—its key components—and the circumstances that attend worship. The circumstances of worship are subject to change, determined by common sense and the resources at our disposal. Questions like, When do we meet? How long should the service be? and What language should the service be in? are all *circumstantial*. The essential elements of worship are those things laid out in Scripture: the reading of Holy Scripture, singing, prayer, preaching, sacraments, etc., are the “main ingredients” of God-honoring worship, and the recipe hasn’t changed since the days of the apostles. Acts 2:42 says, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

Second, our earthly location is never the destination of Christian worship. Even though the address of our gathering changed during those Sundays we worshiped at Liberty Station, we were ultimately headed to the same place we’d always gone. We were journeying up Mount Zion to gather around the throne of God in heaven. I admit this is hard to grasp, especially when planes are flying overhead or cell phones are going off unexpectedly. Worship throughout Scripture is always depicted as an ascent into heaven to meet with God, which highlights how tragic it is that many of our Sunday services remain stranded on earth. This-worldly worship results in disciples so earthly minded that they’re of no heavenly good. When we lose the transcendent character of Christian worship, it becomes domesticated and unnecessary. The benefit of the liturgy is that it takes us places we could never reach on our own and delivers gifts to us which ordinarily can’t be found elsewhere.

I was first confronted with the reality of heavenly worship in my early twenties. It wasn't in a Catholic cathedral or a Byzantine basilica, but in a small Baptist church plant. Church plants don't typically feel like heaven on earth. Like any startup, the early stages of planting can be rough. You don't have the smells, bells, programs, and pews you might find in a more established congregation. By then I had attended smaller churches as well as much larger megachurches, but this was my introduction to church planting.

At the time I would have described myself as a mature Christian, ambitious for someone who had only been walking with Jesus for a handful of years! In fact, I considered myself to be so advanced that I didn't really need to go to church every Sunday. I was a religion major in college, and we had chapel three times a week. I would engage in long discussions about God and the Bible with classmates. I wasn't lacking Christian community, and in my mind that's what Sunday was for. Church was for people who are looking for community but having a difficult time finding it. I frequented several different churches (especially if they had college-aged women) but never committed to one of them. This resulted in my Christian community looking mostly like friends at similar stages in life. We got along great but lacked diversity. We shared many strengths but were blind to our shared idols.

Joining this church plant changed everything. Not only would my new community include homeless neighbors that would become like family, but it also provided a kind of pastoral accountability I wasn't used to. I became an intern and was required to meet with the pastor, Tim, to discuss my progress. Pastor Tim must have sensed that taking part in worship wasn't a huge priority for me, because early on he confronted my sporadic church

attendance. He leaned in across the Starbucks table where we'd often rendezvous, and with his trademark grin and thick Chicago accent whispered, "Even if I had tickets to see the Bears play in the Super Bowl on a Sunday morning, I wouldn't go." I knew where this was headed. I laughed nervously and responded with something like, "When are the Bears ever going to make it to the Super Bowl?" Tim's Chicago accent wasn't the only thing that betrayed his affinity for the Windy City. He often wore a tattered Bears jersey to Bible study and talked football with other church members. Here was a man I suspected could never miss a Bears Super Bowl.

Tim didn't laugh, though, and it wasn't because I'd wounded him with my jab about the Bears never making it to the championship. His grin receded as he looked me dead in the eye and replied, "*Where on earth would I rather be than around the throne of God with his people?*" The awkward silence that followed made me start to wonder if I was crazy. I had never heard anyone describe worship that way before. Sure, the service was riddled with distractions and imperfections, but Pastor Tim believed what the Bible told him about worship, and at the time I didn't. Do *you* believe what the Bible says about worship?

Worship is a journey out of the wilderness of this present age, burdened by death and decay, and up to the heavenly city to meet with God. It's a movement someplace beyond our wildest imagination. The trouble is that a preoccupation with earthly things has blinded us to the heavenly reality. Stranded in the wilderness, we've come to embrace a safe view of worship. Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann put it beautifully: "In Church today, we so often find we meet only the same old world, not Christ and His Kingdom. We do not realize that we never get anywhere because we never leave any place behind us."¹ The first

thing we need to grasp about worship if we're going to take it seriously is its heavenly character. Worship is a vehicle that transports us into the space that angels occupy. Sadly, too many churches aren't lifting off.

A Heavenly Replica: Worship in the Old Testament

We've been to Disneyland in Anaheim, California, a few times with our kids (usually because Grandma pitches in for tickets). The last time we went, our two oldest were just tall enough to ride Space Mountain, a space-themed indoor roller coaster. The line to board was long, but the wait helped build anticipation in my daughter, who was four at the time. As we walked through the "space station," I could see her taking in all the lights and futuristic decorations. When we were finally seated, she grabbed my hand and squeezed as the roller coaster began to click-clack upward toward what looked like a spiral galaxy. Once we made it to the top, we dropped into a large room that was illuminated by thousands of tiny lights that mimicked stars. As we began to zip around the corners, my daughter looked at me wide-eyed and asked, "Are we in space now?" The scenery made her second guess whether she was still on planet Earth! The tapestry of the tabernacle in the Old Testament had a similar effect on the children of God.

Worship in the Old Testament was a journey into holy space. God commanded his servant Moses to build a worship facility that mimicked God's cosmic heavenly temple. The precious stones that decorated the priests' attire and place of worship (often referred to as the tent of meeting) recalled the splendor of the heavens. Biblical scholar G. K. Beale writes, "It is likely that part of the reason for so many precious stones and metals in one place is that

they were intended to remind one of the luminous splendor of the starry sky.”² The precise blueprints for construction were given to Moses on Mount Sinai: “And see that you make them after the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain” (Ex 25:40). The *them* there refers to all the temple accoutrements, which symbolically transported the worshiper from earth to heaven. When they approached God in worship, they were click-clacking up to God’s throne through the form of worship God had instituted. God was bringing his people up to holy space.³

Imagine that you are a priest of God living in the days of the Old Testament and that it’s your duty to go to the tabernacle to perform the divine rites. You enter a large tent, which inside is dimly lit by a golden candelabra, or lampstand. Weighing nearly eighty pounds, it is stylized like a tree, recalling the Edenic tree of life (Ex 25:33-34). The dark walls of the room are made of “fine twined linen and blue and purple and scarlet yarns” (Ex 26:1), and they have angels known as cherubim embroidered on them. These aren’t the sixteenth-century winged babies popularized by Raphael and other artists; they’re mighty heavenly beings that surround God’s throne (Ex 37:7). You can see them through the flicker of the candles and the clouds of sweet-smelling smoke from the incense burning within the tent, which symbolized the prayers of God’s people ascending to him. Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman III writes, “As one stood in the tabernacle and looked around, he would see a deep blue background with images of cherubim looking as though suspended in midair. . . . As one walked into the tabernacle, he would be symbolically transferred from an earthly location to a (symbolically at least) heavenly one.”⁴

This is why, later in the New Testament, Hebrews 8:5 says that the priests who served under Moses worshiped under a “copy

and shadow of the heavenly things.” The tabernacle and temple in Jerusalem were microcosms of the whole creation, meant to serve as replicas of God’s heavenly throne room. Like a tiny model train city, they portrayed in miniature God’s cosmic and heavenly sanctuary. The decorations God had instituted communicated to the worshiper that they were entering another world when they went up to worship the living God. As Schmemmann would have put it, they had in fact left some place behind them.

By the way, this also helps to shed some light on the relationship between mountains and encounters with God in Scripture. The ancients often chose hills or mountains for worship because the elevation gave one a sense of nearness to God. For the Hebrews, mountains often served as places of divine encounter and worship (Gen 22:5; Ex 3:12; Is 2:2). Even Eden, as the original dwelling place of God, was said to rest on a mountain, its streams flowing down to water the earth (Ezek 28:13-14; Gen 2:10-14).⁵ The temple *mount*, which was full of Edenic imagery, was established by God as the high place of worship, and the call to worship was always an ascent into the divine presence.⁶

The pilgrim psalms of ascent (Psalms 120–134) reiterate this truth. As Old Testament worshipers journeyed to the temple on feast days, they probably sang these hymns of rising. *Up* to the temple they went, climbing toward the heavenly assembly through the smoke of their burned (or ascension) offerings to meet with the God who sat invisibly upon the mercy seat. In fact, this is the main symbolism of the burnt offering spoken about in Leviticus 1. Through it, the worshiper was identified with the sacrificial animal and with it rose up to God in a cloud of smoke. Michael Morales writes, “The transformational burning was for the sake of *transferring* the animal, and the worshiper vicariously

through it, from the ordinary earthly plane to the divine heavenly realm, to the ownership of God.⁷⁷ The temple decorations, together with the sacred rites of worship instituted under the old covenant, guided the faithful into God's celestial presence.

The Heavenly Jerusalem: Worship in the New Testament

The ancient rituals of Old Testament worship are no longer practiced by Christians today. Those ceremonies were for a time, temporarily pointing worshipers forward to something greater. We can think of them like movie trailers anticipating the motion picture's release. The fullness was found in Jesus, identified in the New Testament as God's temple and the ultimate sacrifice for sins (Jn. 1:29; 2:19; 1 Pet. 1:19; Heb. 10:1-14). Having fulfilled the ceremonies that prefigured him, Jesus rendered them unnecessary for his people. In fact, to revert to the symbols of Old Testament worship would be in effect to deny that Jesus accomplished redemption once and for all. This is one of the major themes of the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament.

With the setting aside of the Old Testament ceremonies, it's fair to ask if worship for Christians has been brought back down to earth. Did the dawn of the New Testament era domesticate worship? In many churches, it sure seems to feel that way. A sincere desire to make Christian worship welcoming has led many pastors to minimize its "alien" elements. Worship in the Old Testament might have been weirdly heavenly, but now it's laid back. Our model for worship isn't God's sanctuary but our living room, complete with coffee, a comfy seat, and even a TV projector! We want guests to feel right at home, and while this isn't wrong per se, one wonders if we've lost something of worship's transcendence along the way. Could it be that the reason some have abandoned

living-room church is that they have their own, more comfortable living rooms at home? We are longing for a religion that offers us more than the perishable comforts of this age. This-worldly worship has a hard time dispensing heavenly hope that anchors us during life's storms.

It should strike us that the same book that highlights how Jesus perfectly fulfilled the heavenly rituals exhibited in the Old Testament also paints a picture of heavenly worship for New Testament believers. Despite all the changes in worship between the Old and New Testaments, one constant is the heavenly nature of what is taking place when we assemble. Like the ancients, we are being brought up to another world.

Here's how the author to the Hebrews put it:

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb 12:18-24)

It's worth pointing out a few things in this passage that reveal that the author is painting a picture of what takes place when we gather for worship. First, the verb *come* used throughout these verses

(and throughout the book of Hebrews) has a technical sense of approaching God in worship. While it's a common New Testament word, the author to the Hebrews picks up on its usage throughout the Greek translation of the Old Testament familiar to Jesus and his disciples. There, the word was often used in the context of priestly service. It means to "draw near in worship."⁸

Second, the author ends his encouragement by saying, "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe" (Heb 12:28). The call for right worship at the conclusion of this heavenly description of the gathered church indicates that Hebrews 12 is a picture of what happens when Christians congregate for worship.

Third, in the broader context of Hebrews, it seems that the author is concerned with Christians abandoning the gathered assembly of worship. Just two chapters earlier he wrote, "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb 10:24-25). A similar exhortation is found in Hebrews 3:12-13. Being committed to Christian community, and to gathering for worship, is the backdrop for the letter. The writer longs to see believers take seriously the call to reverent worship, and he highlights its celestial characteristics to remind them of the heavenly nature of their gatherings.

We'll revisit Hebrews 12 later, but for now the important thing to note is *where* the author says we're going when we meet for worship: *up to God's house, to gather around his throne*. The psalmist said, "Sing praises to the LORD, who sits enthroned in Zion!" (Ps 9:11), and "His abode has been established in Salem, his

dwelling place in Zion” (Ps 76:2). Worship does look like going to someone’s house—it just isn’t ours. We are guests of the Great King, summoned up to heavenly Jerusalem.

If you’re still not convinced about the heavenly nature of Christian worship, the book of Revelation seals the deal (no pun intended). New Testament scholars have long noted the book’s liturgical structure.⁹ John received the Revelation while worshipping on Sunday. In Revelation 1:10-11 he says, “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, ‘Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches.’” This call to worship is immediately followed by a call to confession in chapters 2–3, where Jesus himself gave exhortations to the various churches of Asia Minor, inviting them to repentance. Then in chapters 4–6 John “ascends” to heaven, where he sees God’s word unsealed and the creation worshipping around God’s throne. The middle section of the book is characterized by God’s unfolding revelation, giving snapshots of human history, and the book climaxes with a holy Communion meal called the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19). Like many worship services, the book concludes with a benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen” (Rev 22:21).

Despite the fact that the book of Revelation is laid out like a worship bulletin, Petros Vassiliadis laments how the “most ‘liturgical’ book of the New Testament has been virtually excluded from the ‘Liturgy of the Church.’”¹⁰ Not only do pastors shy away from preaching sermons on the book of Revelation, but the book’s structure is also often overlooked as a source of guidance for our worship services today. Beale writes,

One of the purposes of the church meeting on earth in its weekly gatherings is to be reminded of its heavenly existence

and identity by modeling its worship and liturgy on the angels' and the heavenly church's worship of the exalted lamb, as vividly portrayed in [Revelation] chaps. 4–5. This is why scenes of heavenly liturgy are woven throughout the Apocalypse.¹¹

Because this general structure is a guide for some of the subsequent chapters, it might be helpful to see it charted out:

Table 1.1. The book of Revelation as a worship bulletin

<i>Call to worship on Sunday</i>	Revelation 1:10. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet.
<i>Call to repentance/ confession</i>	Revelation 2–3. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22)
<i>Ascent to hear (and see) the unfolding of God's word/preaching</i>	Revelation 4–5. "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." (Rev 5:5)
<i>Holy Communion meal</i>	Revelation 19. "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." (Rev 19:6–9)
<i>Benediction</i>	Revelation 22:21. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.

Of course, interspersed throughout the heavenly service are hymns and prayers (Rev 4:8, 11; 5:8, 9-10, 12-13; 6:10; 8:3-4; 11:17-18; 15:3-4; 16:5-6; 19:1-3, 5-8; 22:17, 20). This means the New Testament doesn't just describe worship as an ascent toward heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:18-24); it also gives us a rough outline of what the heavenly liturgy, which new covenant Christians participate in, looks like in the book of Revelation! Like John, we are "called up" week-by-week to hear the unfolding of God's Word and to have a foretaste of the marriage supper to come.

The Wardrobe of Worship

The Russian Primary Chronicle, attributed to a monk from the crypt monastery of Kiev named Nestor, tells the story of Vladimir the Great's conversion to Christianity. Prince Vladimir was thoroughly pagan, but in the eleventh century he sent out envoys to examine the worship of the surrounding peoples. His emissaries brought him word of the Bulgars, Germans, and Greeks. When they reported back to Vladimir, it was clear they weren't impressed with the Bulgars or Germans. "The Bulgar bows, sits down, looks hither and thither like one possessed, and there is no happiness among them, but instead only sorrow and a dreadful stench." Despite the many ceremonies they saw among the Germans, they beheld "no glory there." Something was different about their experience in Greece, though:

The Greeks led us to the edifices where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations. For we cannot forget that beauty. Every man, after tasting something sweet, is afterward unwilling to accept that which is bitter, and therefore we cannot dwell longer here.¹²

Oh, to behold the beauty of heavenly worship, and to find the fullness of joy in God's presence (Ps 16:11)! It's not that these treasures aren't being offered today, but that we've slowly become oblivious to the heavenly gifts. Their splendor has dimmed through worship's domestication. Recovering heavenly worship doesn't require us to worship at the Hagia Sophia with cherubic

choirs. Worship can happen in a pew or a parking lot, in a cathedral or a middle school auditorium. The *elements* of worship, ordinary though they be, are vehicles that carry us up to God's presence. This is important, because you might be thinking, "Heavenly worship sounds great, but church has never *felt* like heaven to me!" Should we expect to experience fireworks each Sunday in worship? The short answer is no, but our feelings aren't always the best indicator of whether God is present and at work among us. Worship that feels ordinary can bring us into proximity to the God who is anything but!

C.S. Lewis's popular children's fantasy, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, tells the story of four young children—Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy—who get lost in the magical world of Narnia. Forced to flee London due to the war, they end up heading to the country to stay with an old professor. The children explored his home on the first morning, nosing their way into various rooms. One of the rooms held unexpected wonders. At first it looked empty but for a lonely wardrobe and a dead fly by the window.

"Nothing there!" said Peter, and they all trooped out again – all except Lucy. She stayed behind because she thought it would be worth while trying the door of the wardrobe, even though she felt almost sure it would be locked. To her surprise it opened quite easily.¹³

Curious Lucy began to swim through the wardrobe, pushing herself past several fur coats, expecting to reach the end of the clothes cupboard. What she discovered instead was another world, one with snow crunching beneath her little feet. She had stumbled on to Narnia.

From the outside, the elements of worship can look and feel like the old wardrobe. We're tempted to join Peter Pevensie in

saying, “Nothing there!” But what we really need is the childlike faith of Lucy, the kind of curiosity that drives us deeper into the ordinary wardrobe of preaching and prayer, songs and sacraments. As we enter in, we discover a world as magical as Narnia, and as real as the risen Christ.

Before we cross over, it’s worth asking why so few Christians today grasp the transcendent nature of the Sunday service. If you ask most churchgoers what’s taking place during worship, few would respond by saying, “We’re being spiritually transported into the presence of the Holy Trinity to join the church triumphant and angelic hosts.” But that’s precisely what Hebrews 12 tells us *is* happening! How did Sunday worship shift from being an ascent to heaven to something so consumer driven, entertainment heavy, and lacking in reverence and awe? In the next chapter, we’ll look at some of the worship developments of the last century that have obscured our understanding of why we worship by redefining what worship is.

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