

“You Were Planned for God’s Pleasure”

“Give yourselves completely to God since you have been given new life” (Romans 6:13b, NLT).
Romans 12:1-2; Revelation 5:11-14 ¹

A number of years ago, when holograms were still quite new, *National Geographic* featured the first published hologram on its cover. As you know, holograms—those little three-dimensional images that are now on virtually every credit card—look quite different from different angles, and one evening two friends and I picked up this *National Geographic* to examine the image. We put the magazine on the floor under a light, and the three of us moved around in front of it, marveling at all the variations in its appearance.

Suddenly it occurred to us that we were doing all this bobbing and weaving in front of a window, and we collapsed in laughter at what passers-by might think if they were to see us. Surely we looked as if we were worshiping some ancient idol or deity on the floor!

In some places, of course, such worship is not unusual. Primitive peoples worship the sun, the moon, nature, their ancestors, sex, snakes—there’s no end to the list. You and I, far more sophisticated in our obeisance, worship houses, properties, diamonds, businesses, boats, automobiles, exotic vacations, athletic teams, retirement accounts, and the like.

Since the topic before us today in our 40-Day Journey is “worship,” how would you define “worship?” My guess is that most of us would begin our response somewhere near 10 o’clock on Sunday morning, saying that what we’re doing right here, right now, is “worship.” There’s truth in that, and that’s not a bad place to begin, but such an idea is far too constricted to get at the true reality of worship.

One of my favorite pictures of worship in the Bible is found in the fifth chapter of John’s vision recorded in the book of Revelation: *Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying:*

**“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”**

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:

**“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”**

The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped (Revelation 5:11-14).

Although the Bible suggests many other dimensions to life in the Heavenly City than simply this, I suspect that something similar to this is going on in heaven at this very moment, and I find that idea pretty exciting and awesome!

As wonder-full as this is, though, I need something a bit more concrete to help me with worship in the here-and-now. Rick Warren helps me with that when he notes in our book that “Worship is bringing pleasure to God. **Anything you do that brings pleasure to God is an act of worship.**”² I can begin to “get my teeth” into that!

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on February 14, 2016.

² Rick Warren, *What On Earth Am I Here For? The Purpose Driven Life*, expanded edition (Zondervan, 2012), p. 66.

Paul meant something similar to Rick's statement when he wrote these words to the church in Rome: "*Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship*" (Romans 12:1). And in Ephesians, Paul wrote that "*We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*" (Ephesians 2:10).

Taking all of this together, I suggest to you that **to worship God is to give your life joyfully to those "good works which God prepared in advance for you to do."** Worship is really a way of life, not a one-hour meeting each week.

Worship is much larger than what happens in this sanctuary. Your whole life is your worship, and what you do in this one hour is either confirmed or invalidated by what you do with the other 167 hours of each week. As Rick puts it, "Worship is not a *part* of your life; it *is* your life."³

Now if worship has to do with organizing our lives around God's purposes, what might those purposes be? It seems to me that God has two primary purposes for our lives. **God's first purpose** for your life is to so shape your character that you are willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with him. And **God's second purpose** for your life is that you invest your life in expanding a community of relationships that only God can build. We call that community "the Church."

In Romans 12:2—the very next verse after "*true and proper worship*," Paul wrote, "*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*" Part of what Paul meant by this is that God's purposes in any particular moment are not always apparent to us, and it is only by offering our lives to God day by day, every day, that we begin to understand our lives as God does.

God is doing things in our lives, in our world, and in the universe that are far beyond our present ability to understand them. In fact, one of the many ways in which God shapes our character is to sometimes ask us to do things that don't make sense to us. As one of many examples that could be cited, the Bible tells us that "*Noah did everything exactly as God had commanded him*" (Genesis 6:22). Building a boat the size of a small aircraft carrier hundreds of miles from the ocean didn't make any sense to Noah, but he did it anyway.

The soldier on the ground seldom understands the grand strategies that will win the war, but it is only by the faithful obedience of that soldier that the grand strategy accomplishes its purpose. Rick put it well when he wrote that "God doesn't owe you an explanation or reason for everything he asks you to do. Understanding can wait, but obedience can't. Instant obedience will teach you more about God than a lifetime of Bible discussions. In fact, you will never understand some commands until you obey them first. Obedience unlocks understanding."⁴

The way I often put that idea is that "**obedience precedes understanding.**" You might want to write that down.

I like the way A. W. Tozer put it: "Those who know Christ at all well come to give Him a blind trust. They do not know what He will feel it right to do, nor what they themselves ought to ask from Him; but they are entirely sure of His interest in them, and His compassion toward them, and His power to carry through what no one else could do for them. And they leave it at

³ Warren, p. 68.

⁴ Warren, p. 74.

that, with the inner peace that only He can give.”⁵ The Bible says that “*We need have no fear of someone who loves us perfectly; his perfect love for us eliminates all dread of what he might do to us. If we are afraid, it is for fear of what he might do to us and shows that we are not fully convinced that he really loves us*” (1 John 4:18).

When this sort of trust settles deep into our souls, the world becomes a much more wonder-full place, because there is no longer any real danger in it beyond what we bring ourselves. As awful, as wicked, as despicable as the actions of global terrorists are, or as frightening as it is to receive a diagnosis of potentially-deadly disease, **physical death is not our greatest danger. Disobedience is our greatest danger.**

After all, the process of diagnosis, treatment, and healing can be—and frequently is—character-shaping, if we allow it to be so in Christ. But even if our present disease is healed, we’re still going to die. We’re all terminal . . . but death is not our greatest danger (have I said that already?). Paul reminds us that “*our present troubles are [actually] quite small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us an immeasurably great glory that will last forever!*” (2 Corinthians 4:17). And Paul had suffered enough to have the right to make that statement.

My friends, can you begin to sense the wonder-full freedom that comes from living a life that is truly worship, that is focused on bringing pleasure to God? God has given each of us different things to do in this life. We have differing abilities, differing gifts, and differing passions, but we all have the same vocation: to follow Jesus and to become like Him.

Because our personalities are all different, we need different experiences if we are to be shaped into the character of Christ. Because the false gods that tempt us are different, God must work in different ways to release us from them. Sometimes God’s redemptive activity in our lives works in ways that Sheldon Van Auken called “a *severe* mercy” . . . but it is mercy nonetheless.⁶

Paul Tournier, the great Swiss physician, used to tell his patients, “I will do all I can to restore you to health. But my prayer is *that you will not get well until you have learned what this illness has to teach you.*”⁷ To say this is not to say that God sends every illness. But God will use every illness, every delightful thing, and every dreadful thing that comes into your life to shape your character into the likeness of Christ. The Bible tells us that God works in all things “*for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*” (Romans 8:28).

Such surrender to God’s purposes in our lives—which is the essence of worship—is not for wimps. Abraham followed God’s leading without knowing *where* it would take him. Hannah waited for God’s perfect timing without knowing *when* God’s answer would come. Mary released herself into the experience of the Incarnation without knowing *how* it would occur. Joseph the Carpenter trusted God’s purposes without knowing *why* things happened as they did.⁸

The blessing of living a life of surrender, of obedience, of worship, is that such a life experiences God’s **peace**. Such a life experiences God’s **freedom**. And such a life experiences

⁵ A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*.

⁶ Sheldon Van Auken, *A Severe Mercy*.

⁷ “Genuine surrender says, ‘Father, if this problem, pain, sickness, or circumstance is needed to fulfill your purpose and glory in my life or in another’s, please *don’t* take it away.’ This level of maturity does not come easy. In Jesus’ case, he agonized so much over God’s plan that he sweat drops of blood. Surrender is hard work. In our case, it is intense warfare against our self-centered nature” (Warren, p. 83).

⁸ Warren, p. 80.

God's **power**. Ninety percent is not enough. Ninety-five percent is not enough. Ninety-nine percent is not enough. So long as you or I hold anything back, we will not be truly free, and we will not know the fullness of God's power.

The problem with "living sacrifices," of course, is that they keep jumping off the altar. The journey of daily-life-as-worship involves a clear initial commitment, but it's also essential that there be a daily renewal of that commitment. This renewal is often a moment-by-moment kind of thing, and **every one of those re-commitments is an act of worship**.

Jeremiah once went down to the potter's shop and watched the potter at work. "*The jar [the potter] was making did not turn out as he had hoped, so the potter squashed the jar into a lump of clay and started again*" (Jeremiah 18:4). The problem you and I have is that we're under no constraint to allow God to shape us. God has given us the freedom to jump off of the potter's wheel. We don't have to worship *God*. But we do have to worship *something*.

But the Good News, my friend, is that, just as the potter squashed the clay and began again, so *God is able to reshape your life, no matter what you've done with it so far*. Are you still arguing with God about who's in charge of your life? Are you still trying to make a kindergarten ashtray out of your life, or are you offering yourself to the Great Potter, who has eternal purposes for your life?

The day will come, my friend, when every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea will sing: "*Blessing and honor and glory and power belong to the one sitting on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever*" (Revelation 5:13). Do you want to be in that crowd? Then begin preparing for the incredible worship that is to come by offering your life to the Potter today. And wear your helmet.