

“Ceaseless Praise”

*Dangerous Wonder, part 3, based on the book by Mike Yaconelli
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Revelation 4:1-11

Good morning, friends. It is an honor to serve you and engage God’s Word together.

Would you do me a favor? Find someone sitting next to you, look them in the eye, and tell them, “God is amazing.” I truly hope that Sunday morning is not the only time you ever utter those words. They are not just true for this moment; they are always true. And if you’re a little skeptical, and you’re not quite sure who God is, I invite to listen with an open mind. God has something to tell you today. Let’s pray.

O Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth. Look down on Your people here and now, as we gather to worship and praise You. Speak Your words of life into our souls. Help us to lift up the name of Jesus Christ, the center of our praise. For it is in His name we pray. Amen.

What is the longest time you’ve ever spent doing one thing? For me, it was and still is, working on my ordination. I’ve been in this preparation for ten years, including five years of seminary, and it has been both fascinating and frustrating. In one way or another, this journey has completely captivated my life for a time. Right now I am focused on writing and finishing my theological papers.

Becoming ordained takes a long time. Maybe you can relate. Help your pastor out this morning. What have you spent a long time doing? (*Solicit some answers. Fishing, perhaps?*)

There are things we love to do that could occupy us forever, figuratively speaking. There are other things, like writing a thesis or dieting, that are much harder to sustain. When you are trying to discipline yourself to do something difficult, time can seem to stretch into eternity, can’t it?

Counseling at Elementary Summer Camp is great fun, but at some points, it feels like an eternity, like when waiting for the kids to finally fall asleep! However, camp is a great experience. I serve at Lake Louise and Michigamme, where the camp staff use every opportunity each day to talk to the students about Jesus. We want them to form deep, healthy, spiritual habits that will last forever.

So, here’s my question for you this morning: what are you going to do for eternity? It won’t be gardening or writing papers or raising children. The Bible tells us the answer: we will worship God for eternity, or at least, we should.

If we are to worship God forever, then we should be clear on what worship is. Let me ask you another question: what does worship mean to you? (*Solicit answers.*) If we were playing Family Feud, we’d have something like the Top Ten answers on the board. They would probably read: “Music. Singing. Going to worship. Going to church.”

Let’s unpack those last two, worship and church. The word church in Greek is “ecclesia,” meaning the people, the congregation. Literally, we are the church, wherever we go. In the biblical sense, you can’t “go” to church or to worship. Rather, that is who you are and what you do. If “church” just means the building, and if “worship” just means the opening songs from the band, maybe your definitions are too narrow.

Maybe there are some better answers to “what is worship.” Things like: loving Jesus, serving others, giving, and praying. The point is, worship is a lifestyle, not just an hour on Sunday. Worship is a habit we should practice our whole lives. That kind of worship prepares us for eternity.

We will worship God forever. And while worship may actually look different to other people in various contexts, the object of worship, God, is the same. Therefore I want to look into these verses in Revelation, because they give us a pretty interesting picture of who God is and how God is worshipped in heaven.

Look again at Revelation 4. What is happening here? The Apostle John is having a vision of heavenly worship. John sees God, encircled in light, surrounded by precious jewels. It’s not necessarily the value of these stones that makes them appropriate for worship, it’s their splendor, their appearance, and their brilliance. God is surrounded by light. That’s pretty awesome.

The scripture also says God is surrounded by 24 elders, believers who have spent their earthly lives worshipping God. The number 24 is highly symbolic. There were 12 tribes of Israel and 12 disciples of Jesus. Twelve is a symbol of governance. Twenty-four would include both the Old and New Testaments. In other words, God is the center of perfect power and authority, across all time.

And in the midst of this throne room, John sees lightning, fire, and hears thunder. God’s power and authority are on display in a big way.

That’s not all. Surrounding God are incredible creatures, similar to the ones found in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, who also had a vision of God. These creatures are powerful – the lion, the ox, and the eagle. They are covered with eyes, seeing everything, and they, too, are worshipping God.

This amazing scene is, frankly, not easy to understand. Yet in the midst of all this brilliance and strangeness, we read in verse 8, “Day and night they never stop saying: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.” God is eternal. Just like when God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush, when God said, “I AM, I WAS, and I WILL ALWAYS BE.” God is past, present, and future, all at once.

This is a vision of eternity: eternal worship of the Eternal One. The elders and creatures worship God day and night, all the time. Then in chapter 5, John sees the same great crowd worshipping Jesus, the Lamb of God. They are singing, “You are worthy,” without stopping.

All of this extravagance and beauty, saints and creatures, huge crowds of people, are all focused on one thing: worshipping the awesome, holy Lord.

(PAUSE)

Two weeks ago we asked ourselves, what would it take to have a childlike faith and regain our sense of awe and wonder of who God is? We have learned that God is powerful, loving, and even scary, in a sense. We do not worship a passive, weak God. We cannot control God, or put God in a box. No way! We worship the God described in the Bible, an awesome God whose Son, Jesus Christ, is amazing! God is both the one whom we fear and the one from whom we receive divine love. What an amazing gift.

I loved playing hide and seek with my children when they were little. Hide and seek is fun, but when you add a dimension of terror to the game, it’s much better. I would hide behind a door, where I could see them coming. When they just barely set foot in the room, I would jump out and scream at the top of my lungs, and they would flee from the room, tripping over themselves in retreat. And then, after moment, they would realize that I wasn’t a monster, I was their

daddy, and they would turn around and try to tickle me. We would play this game over and over again. (Mike tells a similar story in D.W., 123-125)

To my then-small children, I was a large, powerful, even scary being, who loved them intensely, who fiercely protected them and who gently held them in my arms.

Yet I am not God. Far from it! The God we worship is awesome, powerful, and mighty. God is dangerous. Fiercely loving. Clothed in awe, wonder, majesty and light. Heaven forbid, we should ever have too small a vision of who God is.

Can you imagine what it would be like if everyone felt about God that way? How the world would be different? How our church would be different? I’m not saying we would do everything out of fear. Yet our actions would be grounded in a sense of a gratitude for this awesome God, who loves us.

What will you be doing for eternity? And more importantly, what are you doing now to prepare for eternity in the presence of this awesome God?

The truth is, what we practice now, we will do in eternity, in heaven or in hell. If we practice love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, worshipping Jesus, then we will do those things for eternity. If we practice evil, hate, violence, selfishness, bitterness, greed, slander, sulking, , back-biting...you get the idea...we will carry that emptiness into eternity as well.

This is a tough truth we all must face. So let me challenge you a moment. Let each of us look at our own lives, myself included, and ask, what are our goals? Are they eternal? Do all of us center our lives around worshipping Jesus? Do others see it in the way we live? Fortunately for us, God’s grace always gives us a second chance if we want to change.

There are only two things you can take with you to heaven: relationships and values. That’s it. No possessions. No 401k. No brass plaques. No cars, toys, houses, or anything else money can buy. Only the people we love into a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ, and the values we spent our lives practicing.

It comes down to two simple words: Worship God. That’s how you practice being the church. That’s what we want to do in eternity. Philippians 2:10 says that one day, every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is

Lord. Will this be what you practiced every day? Or will you be trying to cram for a test you missed your whole life?

You have a chance this morning to start a relationship with Jesus that will continue into eternity. Jesus loves you so much, there is nothing that can separate you from him, if you love him in return. All it takes is an honest and willing heart, one that says, "I've sinned. I've messed up. I've chosen my own way, not your way. Please forgive me. Thank you for saving me. Show me how to live for you, in the present, and in eternity."

I pray that you will see God the way John saw God. The way I see God. And you will understand how God sees you. God loves you. My prayer is that you will realize the awe, wonder and majesty of God, and know that this is the God we serve. My God is so BIG, so STRONG, and so MIGHTY, there's nothing my God cannot do. Amen.

Memory Verse

Revelation 5:12 - "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

Reflection questions

1. What is the longest you've spent doing only one thing? (e.g. running a marathon, taking an exam, doing a project or hobby.) How did you keep your concentration?
2. When you hear the words "praise" and "worship", what comes to mind?
3. How does creation give praise to God? (See Psalm 19.)
4. Why is Jesus worthy of our praise?
5. What biblical values do you practice now that you will continue in eternity?