

PSALM 98 THE HEART OF WORSHIP

Not long ago, Taylor wanted to check his progress in one of his classes at Richmond High School. When I wanted to do that in high school, I would have waited until the end of class, approached my teacher, and waited while he or she searched through marks written in red pen in a mysterious little book.

But times have changed, so we dug out some passwords and codes we had received from the high school, then we logged on to the district website, and within a few seconds, everything was in front of us: Taylor's grades for each of his classes, and his record of being there, and being on time.

Perfect attendance, so far. No tardys, so far. I wonder if that is how we sometimes think about worship. I was there, and I was on time!

It's sort of a "checklist mentality." As I evaluate this area of my life, I measure success or failure by my presence or absence. Maybe I am always in church, and I am glad about that. Or maybe I am not in church so often, and I feel badly about that.

As we read through the Old Testament this year, we are occasionally pausing and pondering Psalms. Today, we read Psalm 98, which presents a portrait of worship that is very different than a "checklist mentality."

Psalm 98 reveals worship to be much more than a part of our lives that we check off. It is to be the heart of our lives as individuals, and as a church.

Let's be honest. We live in a busy culture. We can occupy ourselves with so much. Sunday can be a day of more activity, or a day of little activity, as we rest from all the activity of the week.

Let's keep being honest. In our culture, people are attending church less and less. Even in so-called "Bible-believing" churches like ours, people find all kinds of other options for Sundays. Especially among the younger generations, many professing Christians don't see the point in "going to church."

Why should worship be a priority in our lives? Why should you resist a "checklist mentality", and have a deep passion for worship?

Lord willing, we will spend two weeks on Psalm 98. Today, we will learn about the heart of worship. Next week, we will explore the act of worship.

What is the point of this event we call worship? Why gather for this, when we have so many other options?

We get to the heart of worship, when we think about the subject of worship, and the substance of worship.

What is THE SUBJECT of worship? In school, students have subjects. Math class is about math. History class is about history. If you walk into math class, you expect to hear about math. If you don't, you are confused and even frustrated, because you know you need to pass math, and you want to hear what will help you pass math! If not, why be there?

In the same way, if you enter worship, and if it is a lot of information with no clear purpose, you will wonder why you are there.

What is the subject of worship? Quite simply, the gospel.

THE MARVELOUS GOSPEL. Psalm 98 begins, "Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things..."

This word translated "marvelous" means more than just great. We say, "That is marvelous," and we mean something is really, really, really, great.

But the word here refers to something that is not just great, but unique. The word describes God's miraculous intervention in our lives, and in our world. When we proclaim that God has done "marvelous" things, we are saying he has done something only he can do.

It is like with a great athlete, or a great musician, or a great actor. We see them perform, and we praise them. Why? They are doing something that we cannot do.

I cannot hit a baseball 400 feet. I cannot make an instrument produce glorious music. I cannot believably portray a person in a drama.

We worship God, because he has done something marvelous. He has done something that none of us can do.

He has saved. The marvelous gospel is THE SAVING GOSPEL.

Verse 1 again: "Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him."

The gospel is about salvation. The gospel is the good news that God saves people. But what are we being saved from? James Boice explained it well.

First, we are saved from sin. Paul writes in Romans 8, "...there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death."

We have rebelled against God, and God's response is holy anger against us. But Jesus, through his

suffering and death on the cross, has paid the penalty for the sins of all who believe in him. Through faith in Jesus, there is now no condemnation. No fear of God's anger. No worry about God's punishment.

Next, we are saved from death. Paul writes in Romans 6, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Because of sin, there is death. But in Jesus, while we still face physical death, we also possess the hope of eternal life. He has risen from the dead, and our hope is that he will one day raise us from the dead.

And, we are saved from Satan. Paul writes in Colossians 1, "For (Jesus) has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

As sinners, we have been under the power of Satan, who leads us to rebel against God, as he has done. But in Jesus, who forgives our sins, we have the ability to live a new life. We still sin, but we can see real victory over sin.

The saving gospel. Believers in the Old Testament hoped for this, but we have seen this. God has done the "marvelous" thing that only he can do. God has sent Jesus to save.

The subject of worship is the gospel: God's marvelous act of saving his people from sin, from death, and from Satan, and to new and eternal life.

Without the gospel, we have no reason to worship. We are still lost in our sins. We are still facing everlasting death. We are still without hope of true change in our lives.

But with the gospel, with the marvelous, saving gospel of Jesus, we have so much reason to worship! We want to sing to the Lord, for he has done so marvelous a thing, as to save sinners like us!

It's not a matter of checking off a list so we can say, "I went to church." It's a passion to proclaim the glory and goodness of our marvelous, saving Lord!

And that is what we do, as we gather. The gospel is the subject of our worship, and the gospel is THE SUBSTANCE of our worship.

What do I mean by that? Quite simply, when we gather to worship, we are gathering to re-present the gospel to ourselves, and to anyone else who joins us, before our marvelous and saving God.

At our denomination's General Assembly in June, Mark Harris and Jon Ford heard a presentation on worship that several of us had heard before.

Bryan Chapell, who leads our denomination's seminary, Covenant Seminary, walked through a short history of worship. He showed how the church, in all generations, has ordered her worship around five basic elements.

First, the recognition of God's character.

In worship, we proclaim who God is. We always do this in song. We often do this in prayer. We sometimes do this as we read aloud Scriptures, creeds, or other words that declare who God is.

For example, we may sing, pray or say the words of Psalm 103: "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love." We sing, pray or say those words in recognition of God's character.

Second, the confession of our character.

When we recognize who God is, we recognize who we are. We are sinful. We are corrupt. We are rebellious. We are messed up. Sometimes we will sing that. Sometimes we will say that - aloud, or silently.

For example, we may sing, pray or say the words of Psalm 51: "Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." We sing, pray or say those words in confession of our character.

Third, the affirmation of God's grace.

God is good, and we are not. So we need God's grace. We need God to be good to us, despite our evil. He is, and we sing, pray and say this.

For example, we may sing, pray or say words that express the truth of Titus 3: "...when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."

We are affirming God's grace. We are proclaiming that although our sin has separated us from a holy God, God has provided for our return to him!

The fourth element of worship: instruction for personal transformation.

God loves us as we are, but he does not leave us as we are. We come to worship, hoping to leave this place, different than when we came to this place.

So how does God instruct us in worship?

It starts with the words we sing, pray and say. We are tempted to be thoughtless about our worship. But when we pay attention, God's Holy Spirit can and will use these truths, to touch our hearts and shape our lives.

Yet we also receive much instruction, in the sermon. As I offer God's truth to you, and as you actively listen, God's Spirit can and will move your heart and change your life.

Then the fifth element of worship: responding in covenant faithfulness.

What is this? The Lord's Supper. In that sacrament, we:

- * Renew our memory of what God has done.
- * Renew our love for him and each other.
- * Renew our hope of eternity.

The Lord's Supper is an event of covenant renewal, where God promises again to be our God, and we promise again to be his people.

Now you may be thinking: "Where does the offering fit into this?"

Through much of church history, the offering has been closely related to the Lord's Supper. But as history developed, and the Reformers thought the Roman Catholic Church was going astray with its teaching on the Lord's Supper, they decided to move the offering away from the Lord's Supper, to keep from making people think they could somehow "pay off" God with an offering.

But the offering is certainly a way we respond in covenant faithfulness, no matter when we do it. God gives grace, and we give as a grateful response.

The recognition of God's character, the confession of our character, and an affirmation of God's grace.

Instruction for personal transformation, and responding in covenant faithfulness.

Worship re-presents the gospel we believe. "Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him." The gospel is the heart of worship.

Think of the human heart. Blood flows into the heart, and blood flows from the heart.

What is the heart of the five elements I have presented to you? If the gospel is the heart of worship, what is the heart of the gospel?

It is the affirmation of God's grace: God has given grace to us, through the death of Jesus on the cross.

So, just as blood flows to and from the heart, each worship service flows to and from the heart of our hope - the cross of Jesus Christ.

We flow to the cross, by recognizing God's character and confessing our character. Those elements show us our need of the cross!

We flow from the cross, by gaining instruction for personal transformation, and by responding in covenant faithfulness. Those elements show how our lives are changed, because of the cross!

The mixture of elements will be different each week. For example, let's briefly look at two recent services:

* On August 19, we began by declaring God's faithfulness and greatness, by singing "Ever Faithful, Ever Sure" and "O Great God." We arrived quickly at the gospel:

I was blinded by my sin, had no ears to hear Your voice
 Did not know Your love within, had no taste for heaven's joys
 Then Your Spirit gave me life, opened up your word to me
 Through the gospel of Your Son, gave me endless hope and peace.

Then, in the sermon, we learned how the Proverbs guide us in the use of our tongues. Finally, in the Lord's Supper, we renewed our covenant with the Lord, in the hope that he will help us use our words well.

We flowed to the gospel before the sermon, then the sermon showed us how the gospel should flow from our lives, in how we speak to each other.

* The next week, everything was different. We quickly entered into the struggles of the book of Ecclesiastes. We did not get to the gospel until the end of the sermon! Then we rejoiced in that marvelous and saving gospel, as we received the Lord's Supper, then sang these words:

So long have I wandered in darkness, in the shadows of grief and despair
 But the Lord in His mercy reminds me of the hope
 that He's bringing to bear
 Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.
 Surely goodness and mercy, will follow me all of the days,
 all the days of my life.

Two very different services, but with one heartbeat: the gospel.

The gospel is the subject and the substance of our worship. It is the heart of our worship: for God's glory, and for our good.

This may have seemed more like a Sunday School lecture than you are used to hearing from me! But I offer this to you, because I long for us to move beyond a "checklist mentality" to worship.

My son can go to school, arrive on time, occupy a chair, and say that he has been to school. But he has only truly "been to school," when he is willing and able to grasp what he is supposed to be learning and living in that place.

In the same way, you can say you arrived here on time, and stayed for the whole service. But what is the point, if Jesus Christ does not enrapture you and capture your heart and life, through the glorious truths of his gospel?

I don't care if you can write out a flow chart that shows how every service flows to or from the gospel! This is not about analysis.

This is about knowing in your mind, and feeling in your soul, the marvelous, saving gospel of Jesus. This is about going from this place, knowing Jesus well enough that you long to grow in him yourself, and long to show him to others.

Next week, we will see how the heart of worship changes the act of worship, and changes every day of our lives.

But for now, may God's Spirit overwhelm us with the marvelous and saving gospel. And as this gospel of Jesus fills us and flows from us, may we have a passion to gather anew next week to proclaim,

“Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things;
his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.”