

## We Behold God

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### Micah 6:1-8 NIV

Listen to what the LORD says: "Stand up, plead your case before the mountains; let the hills hear what you have to say. Hear, O mountains, the LORD's accusation; listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth. For the LORD has a case against his people; he is lodging a charge against Israel.

"My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me. I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam. My people, remember what Balak king of Moab counseled and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD."

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.



### Luke 24:13-35 NIV

Now that same day [of the resurrection] two of [Jesus' disciples] were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.

He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

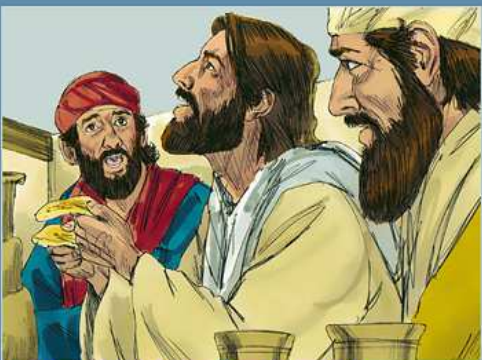
"What things?" he asked. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the [Messiah] have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.

They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.



*Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him.*

“What does the LORD require of you?” That was the question the prophet Micah asked the people of Israel and Judah in the eighth century BC. His question has reverberated through the centuries, and believers are still asking it today. “What does the Lord really want me to do? What does he want his church to do? What are we supposed to be doing together?”

Micah supplied his own answer to the question, of course, an answer based on his understanding of the word of the Lord. For that’s what a prophet is, in the Bible: a person who hears a word from the Lord, and then declares that word to the people. So Micah answers, “This is what the Lord requires of his people: *ki ’im-’asot mishpat ve’achavat chesed vehatznea’ lechet ’im-’elohecha*, ‘To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.’”

But what do these things mean? To “act justly” means to “do *mishpat*,” to act according to God’s order of things, especially as set forth in his Word. That part we can understand. We can also understand what it means to “love mercy,” as our English translation has it, since Jesus teaches that we need to forgive others so the Lord can forgive us. That doesn’t really get at what Micah is saying, because to love *chesed* really means to love God’s faithfulness to his covenant with his people, and to reflect that faithfulness back to him by our loyalty. I think we can understand that, too. But what about the third item in Micah’s list: “to walk humbly with your God”?

To get at that, we need to look at where Micah is coming from. At the beginning of the passage we read, the Lord is calling on his creation — the mountains and hills, the foundations of the earth — as witness against his people. “For the LORD has a case against his people,” he states; “he is lodging a charge against Israel.” And the indictment is that Israel hasn’t been faithful to God in spite of everything he’s done for them, leading them out of slavery in Egypt and bringing them into the land of promise. Instead — and this is the critical point — the people have substituted *false worship* for doing what the Lord really requires of them. Micah describes what the people have chosen to do instead:

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? (Micah 6:6-7)

The people have carried on their animal sacrifices, and brought their offerings of oil and grain and all the rest, just as the Law of Moses commanded. But those things are no substitute for really walking humbly with God. And what’s worse, it looks like the people have done the unthinkable. They’ve adopted rituals of their pagan neighbors, offering their own children as a sacrifice — a horrible practice condemned in Scripture, but which they’ve substituted for doing justice and being faithful to their merciful Lord.

So when Micah speaks of “walking humbly with God,” he means not only doing justice and mercy but also entering into the true worship of God. It’s one thing to engage in the worship of false gods; that’s the temptation of people who don’t know the true God of creation, and we see plenty of that in our world today. But Christians who believe in the one God, who made heaven and earth, face another temptation — not to worship a false god but to practice the *false worship of the true God*. Walking humbly with God involves worshiping him the way he wants to be worshiped. And that’s what we’re going to talk about today: worship, specifically what we do when we come together as a church family on the Lord’s day.

I realize our Christian life is larger than what we do on one hour on Sunday morning, but let’s face it: the church is the only organization that worships the one, true God in his fulness. Other organizations do good things, but they don’t worship. Other groups worship, but they don’t worship the Lord. Worship is at the heart of the church’s life, and we’d better get it right.



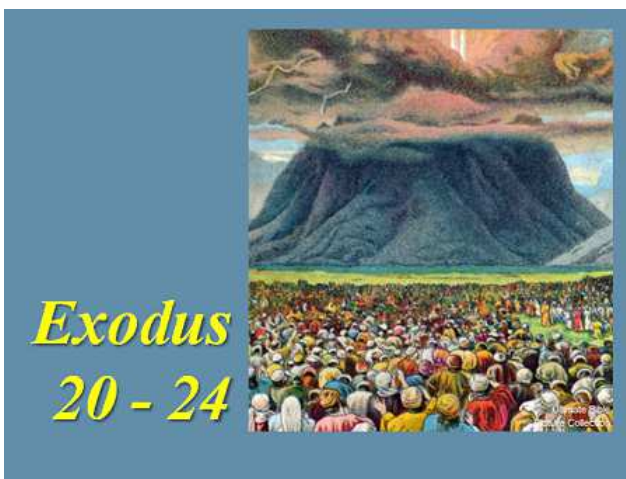
In the 1990s I was asked to participate in a seven-volume publishing project called *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*. I was the Scripture editor for the project, and most of my work went into Volume I, *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*. After that I was asked to become Dean of the Institute for Worship Studies, which offers a doctoral program in Christian worship through correspondence, with two weeks each

year on campus in Florida. I served in that capacity from 1998 till 2001. During all that time I became impressed with the fact that, through the centuries, Christian worship has followed a particular order and structure. On the basis of my previous doctoral work in the 1960s and 70s, I realized that this historic order of Christian worship is based on biblical models.

So what is this order, and what are its biblical foundations? Briefly, the historic order of Christian worship has four "movements": Entrance, Word, Table, Dismissal. That is, first we enter into the Lord's presence — or his presence enters into our gathering. Then, once we've met with the Lord, we hear his Word in the teaching of Holy Scripture. Third, in responding to his Word we gather at the Table of the Lord as his family. Finally, having enjoyed

God's presence and been built up by Christian teaching and fellowship, we're sent forth to be the servants of the Lord during the rest of the week. That's the sequence: Entrance, Word, Table, Dismissal.

Where does this sequence, this "order of worship," come from? While doing the work I described earlier, I realized that this pattern of worship actually comes out of a structure that's basic to the Bible: the covenant between the Lord and his people. When you get right down to it, that's really what the Bible is all about: the relationship between the Lord and those he has called to serve him, which in Scripture is called the covenant. In granting this covenant, the Lord adopted a model that was current in the ancient world, a treaty between a "great king" or emperor, and the client kings or "vassals" who ruled under him. In such a treaty, each party has his obligations; the "great king" promises to protect and defend his servant kings, while they in turn promise to be loyal to him and not ally themselves with any other ruler. And the treaty has a certain structure: the "great king" identifies himself, then he states the obligations he expects from his servants, then there's a ceremony to seal the agreement. A major source for this pattern appeared in 1931, in a book by Viktor Korošec entitled *Hethitische Staatsverträge. Ein Beitrag zu ihrer juristischen Wertung*. Biblical scholars soon realized that this treaty structure was the same pattern the Lord used in making his covenant with Israel, and since I did my doctoral work in this area I came to realize that it follows that same order we find in historic Christian worship.



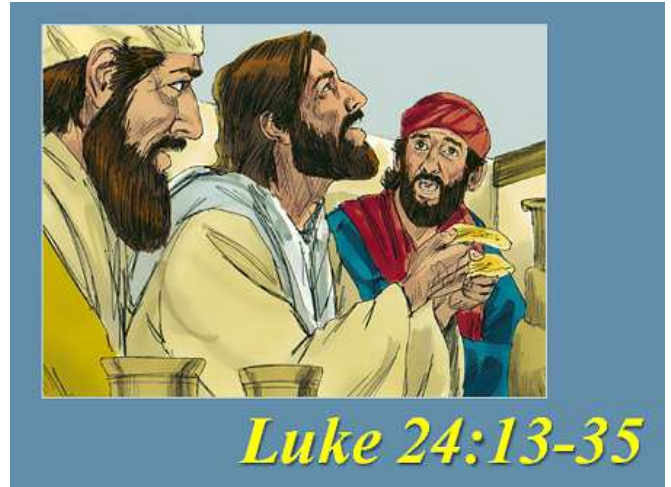
### *Four "Movements" of Worship*

- **Entrance:** *God Is Present*
- **Word:** *Teaching the Scriptures*
- **Table:** *Holy Communion*
- **Dismissal:** *Sending Forth*

Let's look at one major biblical example of this structure, the covenant on Mount Sinai recorded in Exodus 20-24. First the Lord announces who he is, and what he has done for his people: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." That's the Entrance, in our fourfold sequence. Then the Lord lays out the requirements his servants need to keep to maintain their side of the treaty: "You shall have no other gods before me," and all the other stipulations of what we

now call the Ten Commandments. That's the Word, in our worship sequence. The working out of the Word continues through chapter 23, and then in chapter 24 we come to the sealing of the treaty. Moses reads the "book of the covenant" to the people and makes a blood covenant with them to obey it. Then the elders of Israel go up on the mountain, where they share a meal in the Lord's presence; as Exodus says, "they beheld God, and ate and drank" (Exodus 24:11). That's the Table, the third movement in our fourfold structure. Moses then dismisses the elders, in order to go further up the mountain.

We find the same pattern in the Gospel lesson we read from Luke 24. First, the risen Jesus appears to his two disciples, though in their grief they don't recognize him. As he walks with them he teaches them from the Scriptures, explaining that the Messiah had to suffer for God's plan to be fulfilled. Coming to an inn the disciples share a meal with their companion, and as he breaks the bread their eyes are opened and they know he is Jesus. At that point he vanishes, and the disciples go forth with the joyful news that they have seen the risen Lord. Entrance, Word, Table, Dismissal — the fourfold pattern of Christian worship is here. We find that same pattern in the earliest record of a Christian worship service, in a second-century document known as the *Didache*.



What are we doing when we gather for worship? If these biblical and historical examples are our guide, we must realize that when we gather for worship we're celebrating our covenant with the Lord. We don't come just to sit and listen to a performance, or be entertained. We come to *meet with God*: to listen to his instructive Word of faithfulness to us, and to respond with our own pledge of renewed faithfulness to him. We enter his presence, we listen to his instruction from his "book of the covenant," we gather at his table to seal our agreement, and we go forth as his witnesses. I am so glad that this congregation is one that observes Holy Communion at each gathering. Jesus said, "This is my blood of the new covenant." Without the Table of the Lord, something would be lacking in the fourfold sequence of our worship, and our celebration of the treaty God has made with us would be incomplete.

- **Worship isn't a performance; it's a *meeting with the Lord*.**
- **Worship is a *covenant (treaty)* between our Great King and us, His servants.**
- **A King doesn't make a treaty with peons but with *other "kings"* – important people *made in His image*.**

By the way, understanding that our worship is a covenant, like the treaty of a "great king," says something about *who we are!* A king doesn't make a treaty with peons, with powerless peasants. A king makes a treaty *with other kings*. When we gather to

worship we need to remember that we don't come as worthless worms; we come as people whom the Creator of all things deems worthy to enter into mutual agreement with him — people made in his own image, capable of carrying out his mission. As Peter writes, God has granted us great promises and commissioned us with a serious responsibility, and in so doing has made us "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). If you came here today feeling put down, insignificant, a "nobody" in this world, then take this to heart: a king only makes a treaty with other kings, and if God, through his Son Jesus, has entered into an agreement with you that's because you have something important to contribute to his plan and purpose in this world.

We've discussed the biblical foundations of worship, in the fourfold sequence: Entrance, Word, Table, Dismissal. Now I want to turn specifically to the place of music in worship. And let me say, first of all, that I believe music in the church should be different from the kind of music we hear elsewhere. The message of the gospel is different from the message we get from our cultural environment, and the way we sing about the gospel should be different too. Psalm 150:4 says, "Praise him with timbrel and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!" so I guess drums and guitars are okay along with the pipe organ; but we hear drums and guitars

everywhere else, while we only hear the organ in church. So I tend to favor the pipe organ to accompany our singing. But I digress.

The role of music in the worship of the Lord was established when King David had the ark of the Lord brought up to Jerusalem, and appointed Asaph and his fellow Levites to minister continually in the sanctuary with both singing and instruments. We read about this in 1 Chronicles 16, and it was the beginning of what we know today as the Book of Psalms — music that was to accompany the worship of God’s people. The Psalms have continued as the foundation of Christian music down to the present day.

But over the centuries other music has been created, and most of the songs we sing today in Protestant worship are less than 200 years old. I’m speaking of both the words and the music, although some of the finest hymns we sing are actually musical settings of the Psalms in verse. For example, “Joy to the World” is Psalm 98, “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” is Psalm 90, “Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven” is Psalm 103, and “All People that on Earth Do Dwell” is Psalm 100. We regularly read a responsive Psalm as we begin our worship, but it’s also good to sing the Psalms from time to time. There are several ways to do this, but that’s a big subject I don’t have time to explore today because I want, instead, to discuss how the songs we sing fit into the fourfold sequence of worship I have described.

Music for Christian worship needs to be selected carefully, because not all songs are the same. Some are appropriate for one place in the sequence of worship; others are appropriate for another place. So we shouldn’t just sing whatever we want to just because it’s familiar, or it’s one of our favorites. We have to ask, “Where does this song belong in the flow of worship? — starting with our Entrance into God’s presence, our hearing of his Word, our gathering at his Table, our invitation to serve him as we’re Dismissed to go forth.

To begin with, not all the songs in our hymnal are hymns. A hymn, properly speaking, is a song that addresses the Lord in praise, or speaks of the majesty and power of God, or invites the praise of God. But many of our favorites are not like this; instead, they speak of our personal devotion to the Lord, or *how we feel* about what Jesus has done for us; or they address other people with a call to Christian living and commitment. Songs like this are what hymnologists call “devotional lyrics,” but they’re not really hymns. The question is, what are the words to the song talking about? Are they talking about *the Lord*, or directly to him in praise, or are they talking about *me* and how much faith I have? I will give examples of both types.

**Hymns:**

- *Speak directly to the Lord in praise*
- *Tell of His majesty and power*
- *Invite people into God’s presence to worship Him*

**Where does a song belong in the flow of worship?**

- *Entrance?*
- *Word?*
- *Table?*
- *Dismissal?*

Then there are hymns that invite the praise of the Lord, like “Come, Christians, Join to Sing,” “We Gather Together,” “Come, We that Love the Lord.” These are examples of songs that fit the first movement of worship, the Entrance, as we assemble in the Lord’s presence.

Our hymnal, however, is not very rich in hymns like this. But it’s filled with devotional lyrics: songs that talk about us, and our Christian experience, or exalt some aspect of God’s activity that affects us, or urge other people to get serious with God. For example, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me,” “Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord,” “I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the

roses," "Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus," "Sweet hour of prayer that calls me from world of care," "Just as I am, without one plea," "I was sinking deep in sin, but love lifted me." What about one of the favorites, "How Great Thou Art"? From the title we would expect it to be a hymn of praise. But I counted the pronouns in the four stanzas and chorus of that song. The words "Thy," "Thee," "Thou" occur nine times. The words "I," "me," "my" occur eighteen times. So who is the song really talking about?

Do you see the difference between a devotional lyric and a hymn? Those songs aren't really right for the opening of worship, because they focus on *our experience* of the faith instead of the glorious presence of the Lord. So we have to pay attention to the words when we select music for different parts of the service, and sometimes it's hard to find suitable songs. For instance, there's not much in the hymnal we use that relates to our gathering at the Lord's Table, because I don't think the editors of this hymnal were thinking about churches like ours that have Holy Communion each time we worship.

Perhaps I have offended someone with this analysis — but, as they say, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread," and no one ever called me Solomon. I don't mean to downplay your favorite songs, because each may have its proper place. The point I'm making is that if we're going to honor the Lord in our weekly gathering, we have to take worship seriously and do what's consistent with the sequence of worship in Holy Scripture.

Worship isn't an entertainment program or a spectator sport. Worship is a gathering to renew our covenant with the Lord, and it has a certain flow that comes to a climax as we once again affirm that covenant as Jesus shares the symbols of his life at the Lord's Table. We're not here to impress the Lord, or our fellow worshipers, with what great Christians *we* are. We're here to walk humbly with our God, giving the Great King the tribute of our praise and receiving his Word, and his life, into ours. So may it be said of us as Scripture says of the elders of Israel on Mount Sinai: "They beheld God, and they ate and drank."

## Devotional Lyrics:

- *Talk about us* and our faith experience
- Express *how we feel* about Jesus
- *Call others* to Christian living and commitment



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