

THE MOST IMPORTANT DAY OF THE WEEK

THE GIFT OF CORPORATE WORSHIP

Devon Kauflin

Lead Pastor, Grace Church (Clarksburg, MD)

Every Sunday morning offers an endless variety of opportunities. To-do lists can be attacked. We can finish what we started or never got to on Saturday. Or we can sleep in and enjoy a lazy morning with a fresh brew while we binge on Netflix.

Or if you're more adventurous, countless locations vie for our attention (and our children's attention)! Beaches, lakes, sports, pristine golf courses, and hiking trails beckon us to enjoy life to the fullest.

With so many possibilities, it might seem strange that Christians take multiple hours every Sunday morning together in a building with a diverse group of people to sing, pray, read the Bible, listen, and talk to each other. Certainly, we can arrive more aware of duty and obligation than expectation and joy. But that's only because we might have forgotten what makes the church gathering together so significant. How can we ensure that congregational worship is more than just one good option among many equally appealing options?

Who Is There

First, we want to remember *who* is there. Of course, we'll see friends and family, members of our small group, other church members, and guests. But the one whose presence defines, shapes, and fills every meeting of the church is God himself. As we walk through the doors of whatever building this Sunday morning, we aren't just walking into the presence of other believers but into the very presence of God, the Creator, Sustainer, and Lord of all things.

But isn't God everywhere? Yes. God is everywhere, but he loves to make his presence especially and graciously known wherever his people gather together to worship him. As Paul points out, it is the Spirit of God that shows up through our speaking and through our singing, all for our good (1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 5:18-19).

In the late seventeenth century, David Clarkson, the co-pastor and eventual successor to John Owen, composed an essay on why public worship is to be preferred before private. He chose as his text Psalm 87:2:

"The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob."⁶⁷ The gates of Zion, Clarkson explains, represent the place where God's people assemble to worship him. Clarkson writes, "It was the Lord's delight in affection to his worship, for which he is said to love the gates of Zion, more than all the dwellings of Jacob."⁶⁸ God is everywhere, but he loves to make his presence known when his people come together to praise his name.

Who We Are

Second, we want to remember who we are. Both Paul and Peter use the metaphor of the church as a building being built together, stone by stone (Eph. 2:22; 1 Pet. 2:5). Each individual isn't a building. Rather, the people of God together make up the building.

This means that the church is now a temple, the place where God's presence is particularly known. Paul reminds the church in 2 Corinthians 6:16, "we are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.'" To be the temple of God serves as an ongoing reminder that God is our God, that we are his people, and that he is with us. This is who we are as we assemble in corporate worship. And as those united to Christ, the assembled church gathers to be "built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:22).

Where We Are

Third, when we gather we want to remember where we are. Every Christian parent of young children is familiar with the Sunday morning conversation that includes, "Get your shoes on! We're going to church." But how does the Bible fill out what is implied in the phrase, "going to church"?

The epistle to the Hebrews describes in remarkable fashion what is happening: "You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb. 12:22). This means that when the church assembles to worship through the astonishing grace of God and work of the Spirit, we enter the heavenly places. We join with "innumerable angels" celebrating, saints rejoicing, and through the Spirit's work, we come into the very presence of "God, the judge of all" (Heb. 12:23-24).

Each week as we gather with the church this is what we get to participate in. This is what we enter into. Though we don't see it and can't touch it, this is where we go. And so we go in faith, having "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). The spiritual reality that we cannot see is the very thing that we are made for. We are made to worship God. This is what it means to long for God, to look to God, to hope in God.

⁶⁷ David Clarkson, "Public Worship to Be Preferred Before Private" *The Practical Works of David Clarkson, Vol. III.* 1865.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Satisfying Our Longing

Psalm 42 begins with the psalmist longing for God like a deer pants for flowing streams. What he remembers and longs for are the times he would go with the people of God to the house of God—the temple. He remembers voices joining together in “glad shouts and songs of praise” (Ps. 42:1-4). It isn’t private times of devotion the psalmist thinks about, but the joyful and grateful assembly of God’s people in the presence of God. His antidote to discouragement is a hope in God that takes the shape of corporate worship: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God” (Ps. 42:5).

Each week, rather than seeing the church’s gathering as one option among a host of other options, we gather to remember what we are made for and how we are to live. We are reoriented to reality that exists in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

For that reason, what we do on Sunday morning when the church gathers is far more extraordinary, far more astonishing, than anything else we participate in. For as we assemble for these few moments and participate in the seemingly ordinary activities of public worship, we remember this truth: “Our God comes; he does not keep silence” (Ps. 50:3). Out of his abundant grace, the very God of heaven comes to bless his people.

Now, how could we not eagerly look forward to that each week?