

From Worship to Revival

BY DAN HOUGHTON As I leave my driveway, my car is filled with the beautiful bluegrass harmony of the Isaacs, their music drawing me in as the words and music flow . . .

*When I pause in the hush of His holy presence,
When I'm so still I can hear each whispered word,
When I pause to pray I enter His cathedral,
These are the times when God seems so near.*

And in moments, I am in a deep worship experience with my God while driving to my office. There is a rush of joy, amazement, adoration, and praise as I realize that He has created me to worship Him anytime, anyplace, by focusing my mind on Him. In moments like this, the thoughts, the words, and music combine to lift me out of my sin-stained world and directly into His presence, where I relish the time we spend together.

What an awesome thing to realize that He longs to have a closer relationship with me—one of His wayward, sin-separated sons. And the communion—the fellowship with my God—is sweet. The Wonderful Varieties of Grace I've discovered that God works in many ways to bring me into a worship and praise experience.

One of the most powerful worship experiences of my life happened when I was a young adult. I was a young husband and father, and one Sabbath afternoon my wife, Karen, was called to serve a 3-11 shift as a nurse. I was home with our 1-year-old son, Danny, who was taking a nap. A friend had attended a convocation weekend on the campus of Union College not long before, and brought me a cassette tape of a sermon by a preacher named C. D. Brooks. Greg loaned me the tape and suggested I would enjoy it. This quiet Sabbath afternoon seemed right, and I began to listen.

I had never heard of this preacher, but over the next hour, in the quiet of my living room, I entered into the presence of a mighty God. As Elder Brooks powerfully spoke for God, I had the overwhelming sense that if I had been the only human being on the planet who would have accepted Jesus, He would have still come and died just for me. A lump formed in my throat and tears began to stream down my face. I knelt beside the couch and poured out my gratitude to God. My life and future changed at that moment. I keep a copy of that cassette, *A Faith to Celebrate*, in my desk drawer to this day.

I'm also blessed when I recall the many times I've sat at my table with small groups of friends to study God's Word together. I've watched the transforming power of the Holy Spirit take control of the discussion, and as He speaks through the Scriptures being read, I see that the impact on my guests has been profound.

Not long ago, during one such study session, we "stumbled" onto a scripture that had not been a part of our planned Bible study. One man at the table realized that God was speaking to him personally in that moment. Conviction took hold of his mind, and with an expression of faith and belief, he made a decision to commit his life fully to God for now and eternity. I could hardly get to sleep that night realizing that I had witnessed again the hand of God moving on the heart of a man—for eternity!

Read in Red, Hearing What's Said

Worship also blossoms when I am alone with God's Word. I love to read the special Bibles that two of my dear friends, Mark Finley and Shawn Boonstra, have given me: I've marked them in a unique way. Both Bibles took me almost a year to complete. I read with a red pen and ruler, marking each verse where I sense God speaking directly to me. These have become some of my favorite worship experiences. I can't count the times I've sat in a chair, or propped myself up in bed, either early in the morning or at night, and heard God speaking to me again as I turn the pages and read again what I've underlined in red. Many times seem new, as though I had never seen them before. Yet they are marked in red—as read. God's grace through His Word is truly new every morning, and His faithfulness is humbling.

Some of my most memorable worship and praise experiences have occurred when I'm gathered with God's people to hear God's voice through one of His

servants. Good preaching stirs my heart to fuller surrender to my Savior. My pastor in Fallbrook, California, fills my cup. At our ASI Convention, the messages through sermon and testimony reveal the hand of God, and I'm moved. On a campout with my church family, singing around a campfire, my heart responds to the stories told and read of God's faithfulness. And there are always podcasts if I've missed something—I hate to miss anything good!

His We Are as Hymn We Sing

I know that many believers have grown weary from the vigorous debates over appropriate worship music. I'm not one of those, for my experience with worship music has been life-transforming. When Karen and I were first married, we sang and played instruments in our public and private worship. We involved our sons as they grew, and musical worship became a way of life. By default, almost all the music we listened to or played was spiritual in nature. Through the years, we've filled our minds with many songs about God's goodness and grace. There's something majestic about driving through the Shenandoah Mountains or the Rocky Mountains with praise songs playing on the car stereo as loud as Karen will allow!

I've been deeply moved as I've heard the message of Jesus through Handel's Messiah—and through the solo of a 10-year-old girl singing her praise to the glory of God. My worship experience in music has been deeply expanded by digital technology as well. Thanks to iTunes, I transferred my entire music collection to my computer, and included a vast array of downloaded sermons. I can now listen to the entire Bible being read by multiple voices, and I've put together playlists that combine music, Bible reading, and sermons. If I'm traveling on a plane, I put on headphones, and though everyone around me may be watching movies, playing games, doing crossword puzzles, or reading novels, I'm in a glorious worship experience! In my home, in my car, or anywhere I can carry an iPod, I find these moments precious.

A Vision of Hope

I'm also compelled to underline the power of art in worship and praise. At the recent General Conference session, my family and I had the honor of hosting an art gallery showcasing the art of Nathan Greene. The highlight was the unveiling of his new painting of the Second Coming titled *The Blessed Hope*. Thousands filed by the painting to view it with the eyes and their hearts. But the deeper

worship experience emerged from an unexpected direction: the security staff for the General Conference session competed to draw the assignment to be near the artwork! Multiple staff members told me how the room seemed holy to them—a place of sanctuary.

One security staff member told me with tears streaming down her face that she felt as if she was in Jesus' very presence. As we were packing up the gallery to go home, she stopped by again and, pointing to the new painting of the Second Coming, she said, "I have made a decision. It is not a matter of if; I will be there for that event!" I told her I looked forward to meeting her there.

The blessings of meeting my God in worship continue to flow! Worship and praise have become an attitude—a part of my praying without ceasing, bringing transformational power and grace into my life.

Dealing With Distractions

I'd be less than honest if I didn't also mention those things that inhibit and distract from my worship and praise experience.

Sometimes there seem to be so many things that block communion with God: the tyranny of the urgent; another task to do; another project to complete; simple preoccupation with the dailiness of existence. The many advances in technology designed to improve our lives and help us work more efficiently have frequently only opened up additional time in which we are tempted to take on more busyness. Sometimes, like the prodigal, I "come to myself" and realize that I'm not as connected to my God as I want and need to be. It doesn't feel healthy or good. It's as if there's static in the conversation with heaven, with only every third word being heard and understood.

It can be brought on by missing a morning worship in the rush to get to an appointment on time. Weary from working late the night before, I felt I needed every minute of extra sleep, and I didn't have time to listen or pray. . . . And there's no denying that the world around us is an alluring place. Even the seemingly "normal" things of everyday life—work, relationships, getting the groceries—can lengthen the distance between my heart and my Savior. Sometimes when the Lord looks down at my many distractions, He must muse to Himself, "His heart's not really in it." That's one kind of worship experience I

pray to never know again.

Where Worship Leads

Why have I shared my journey in praise and worship with you in these pages? Here's the simple reason: our new General Conference president, Ted Wilson, issued a clarion call six weeks ago that the world church pray for the Holy Spirit to bring revival and reformation among us. That call resonated deeply in my heart. Karen and I have been praying for this call to a new kind of "R & R" for 22 years. Now we hear it on many lips, echoing from around the world. Faintly in some places, stronger in others, but the beginnings of the sound of an abundance of rain!

Revival and reformation don't begin with groups, but with individuals. Scripture reveals again and again that a leader begins by making a personal commitment, issuing a call, inviting individuals to follow. Then as more take up the refrain, it swells into a movement.

We have a wonderful opportunity in front of us. We can choose to open a moment in our individual lives in which the Holy Spirit can bring revival and reformation to each of us. The most effective way I know to make that opening is to dramatically improve our personal experiences of worship and praise. Decisively choose to seek the Lord in one or more of the ways I've described—or in others that God reveals to you. As your relationship with God strengthens and deepens, you'll find new spiritual energy: your heart like John Wesley's will be "strangely warmed," and you'll be converted again—and again. You'll stand in awe as you see Jesus change your relationships, your circumstances, and your witness. And you will know the great and lasting satisfaction of being part of His final work to save this planet.

As His people seek His face, Jesus is leaning toward us, longing that we will know the deeper and more abundant life He always intended us to experience. "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart," He says. "I will be found by you" (Jer. 29:13, 14).

If revival and reformation are to happen in this movement—and they must—they will begin one worshipper at a time, one thoughtful hour at a time. I'm choosing a deeper worship experience for my life. And I'd love to have some

company.

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