

# Why am I here?

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     What comes to mind when you hear the word worship? What is it you think of? Whatever it is, it probably has some association with religion, because there's an assumption that worship is what religious people do.

And so those who wouldn't call themselves religious would never dream of being a worshipper. Yet the fact is, everybody worships. Listen to what Nick Cave, the Australian singer-songwriter, said this week in answer to the question, What do you think of cancel culture?

He said, As far as I can see, cancel culture is mercy's antithesis. Political correctness has grown to become the unhappiest religion in the world. Its once honourable attempt to reimagine our society in a more equitable way now embodies all the worst aspects that religion has to offer.

And none of the beauty. So worship, you see, isn't just something done solely by Christians or people of other religions, because there are so many ideologies that have taken the status of new religions in our contemporary culture today.

And they have their worshippers, people who will make great sacrifices for a cause they strongly believe in. And they will look to that cause to give meaning to their lives and to help them make best sense of the world.

[ 1 : 2 1 ]     So everyone is a worshipper. The only difference is who or what we worship. G.K. Chesterton expressed it well when he said, For when we cease to worship God, we do not worship nothing, we worship anything.

So God made us to worship. And if we don't worship him, we will find other substitutes to worship instead. And so as we continue our journey through the Bible book of Ecclesiastes, we've reached a section where the teacher discusses the worship of God.

He's been searching for meaning in life. And so in chapters one to four, he's forced us, forced us to look at life in this world, to show how it's all meaningless without God.

And now in chapter five, he turns our attention to what it means to worship God. And so he is forcing us to ask, why am I here? What do I exist for?

And so he takes us out of the world and he invites us into the house of God, into the temple, the place where God is worshipped, to look at what goes on there. And so we could call this talk, Worship for Dummies, or maybe the Complete Idiot's Guide to Church, because the teacher doesn't mince his words here.

[ 2 : 3 8 ]     He talks about fools three times in chapter five, verse one to seven. And so he's not approaching the subject of worship, like most religious programs on TV or radio would, that is in a mild, bland, inoffensive, wishy-washy way.

No, what the teacher does is he highlights all the pomp and ceremony to call it out for what it really is, a meaningless waste of time. And so while his target audience is those who show up at the place of worship, he's instructing all of us about what it means to be a true worshipper of God.

And so whether you'd call yourself a Christian or aren't sure what you'd call yourself, the teacher wants to help us to know how we should relate to the God who made us.

And so he tells us we must listen closely and speak carefully. And those will be our two points this morning. Listen closely, verse one to three. And secondly, speak carefully, verse four to six.

So first, listen closely. This is what he says. Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools who do not know that they do wrong.

[ 3 : 53 ] So he's talking about approaching God in worship. And so the picture is of a worshipper going to the place of worship. And so the house of God is probably a reference to Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, but it applies to any place or space where God is worshipped.

And so you've got to guard your steps on the way he's saying, which means really you're already a worshipper, even before you enter a place of worship. You don't magically become a worshipper when you climb the church steps.

And that's why the teacher is telling us that we need to guard our steps on the way, because it matters how we live our lives all through the week. Worship isn't just an hour on a Sunday.

Our worship is the response of our whole life to God. And so it's worth asking, how have you worshipped this week? Not did you make it to church or how did you find the worship service?

But how have you lived a life of worship to God 24-7? Because turning up to church or tuning in to church should be the natural outflow of a life of worship.

[ 5 : 06 ] I mean, as if God cares about taking our details at the door to confirm that we've been there. A bit like when church reopens and we've got to take a record of everybody who attends because of the coronavirus.

Well, you see, even if we're able to put on a good mask for everyone else, God sees beyond to what's inside in our hearts. And so what the teacher wants to say is that you can show up to a worship service, but fail to worship God.

And so while we may be there in body, what God wants is for us to offer all that we are to him. And that's the clear message that we get all the way through the Bible.

And so after God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt early in the Old Testament, God gave them instructions for how they should live in the promised land. So listen to this in Deuteronomy chapter 6.

And then the Apostle Paul says, similar in Romans chapter 12.

[ 6 : 31 ] He says, Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your true and proper worship. So our true and proper worship is to offer our bodies all that we are as a sacrifice to God.

And so anyone who thinks that pitching up at church on a Sunday or when you feel like it ticks the box for worship, doesn't have a clue about how we should relate to the living God.

And so the teacher says, Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools who do not know that they do wrong. To listen has a double force in the original Hebrew, which means to pay attention to in order to obey.

And so we listen closely to God with a view to obeying what he says. We approach him with our ears wide open, where we want to hear God speak and then go and live out what he says.

[ 7 : 39 ] That's the right kind of worship, true worship. And it's in contrast to the wrong kind of worship, false worship. And that's why the teacher says we should listen rather than offer the sacrifice of fools.

Now, he probably had Solomon's temple in mind with all the worshippers streaming in to offer their sacrifices to God. And it must have been quite a sight to behold, just like crowds excitedly streaming into a music concert or a sports event.

So the people were doing the right things. They were going through the motions. And yet God wasn't fooled by it. It's the people who were fools because their worship was just a sham.

And the teacher is exposing people who look like worshippers, but whose hearts are far from God. And it's hypocrisy. And if we are honest with ourselves, we know we're all guilty of it.

But there should be no distinction between our worship in the house of God, whether the temple back then or the church today, and how we conduct ourselves the rest of the week.

[ 8 : 44 ] Because we can't be out of step with the spirit, showing little fruit of the spirit, all week, and then suddenly be transformed into a spirit-filled worshipper when we step into church on Sunday.

A religious habit of ritual keeping means nothing if there's no desire to draw near to God and to listen to him and to live his way each and every day.

So the teacher is saying, don't delude yourself by being such a fool. Because if we profess to worship God, then we listen and obey what he says.

Because he is God over my entire life, my time, my speech, my temper, my sexuality, my money, everything.

And that's why we must guard our steps when we approach God. We can't play games with God or underestimate him. And the teacher explains why. He says, do not be quick with your mouth.

[ 9 : 43 ] Do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth. So let your words be few.

He's saying that the priority in worship is to listen to God more than it is to speak to him. Because worship is all about God. It is never about me or what I think.

Because what God has to say is far more important than what we have to say. And so when he says, God is in heaven and you are on earth, we are reminded that we are mere mortal beings, creatures on the earth, as nothing compared to the immortal God in heaven who rules over all.

And that's why we can't get caught up with ourselves and what we've got to say when it comes to worship. We need to know God as he has revealed himself to us so that we worship him as he is.

Not as we imagine him to be. We need to learn his character, to understand his plan, to be directed in his ways so as to bring our lives into conformity with his will.

[ 10 : 56 ] And so the teacher warns us about underestimating the importance of God speaking to us and overestimating the importance of our speaking to him.

And this happens when we think of worship far too narrowly. For example, we might call singing in church worship. Of course, singing is part of worship.

It's sung worship. But worship is far more than merely music or singing. The priority is listening to God. God speaks to us through his word, the Bible.

And so we should never think that worship is about me, about what I say, or how much I say, about what I enjoy, or even about how I feel.

Because it becomes less about the God of heaven and what glorifies him and more about me on earth and what I like. And the danger is that we fail to see beyond ourselves to worship God in heaven.

[ 11 : 58 ] I think C.S. Lewis expresses it so well in his letters to Malcolm, chiefly on prayer. He says, every service is a structure of acts and words through which we receive a sacrament or repent or supplicate or adore.

And it enables us to do these things best, if you like. It works best when, through long familiarity, we don't have to think about it. As long as you notice and have to count the steps, you're not yet dancing, but only learning to dance.

A good shoe is a shoe you don't notice. Good reading becomes possible when you need not consciously think about eyes or light or print or spelling. The perfect church service would be one where we were almost unaware of.

Our attention would have been on God. But every novelty prevents this. It fixes our attention on the service itself. And thinking about the worship is a different thing from worshipping.

I think C.S. Lewis nails it. And so what the teacher is saying is that if we come to worship and it's just a mechanical process where we open our mouth and trot out our words, then we're not worshipping.

[ 13 : 16 ] Instead, we must listen to God's words. And the teacher illustrates this. He says, A dream comes when there are many cares and many words mark the speech of a fool.

So just as dreams come because of too many cares or too much work, so a fool's problem is too many words. Or as Lisa Simpson from The Simpsons says, It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.

So too many words are seen as a negative thing when it comes to God because God knows the state of our hearts no matter how impressive sounding our words are.

And so we must have reverence for God in worship by listening closely to him. That's our first point. Listen closely. Our second point is speak carefully.

Verse 4 to 6. And so now the teacher warns about the danger of our speech when it comes to God. So he says, When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfil it.

[ 14 : 29 ] He has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfil it. So he's talking about making vows to God and promising God about what we will do.

And what he says echoes part of Deuteronomy chapter 23 earlier in the Old Testament. Because making vows to God was a common feature of public worship.

And it's mentioned in the Psalms, the worship songs of God's people. And so people would promise to make a sacrifice to God or to offer money to God in return for an answered prayer.

But if the request was granted, they might avoid fulfilling the vow they had promised. Casually dismissing it as just some words. It's no big deal.

And God shouldn't worry too much about the failure to keep them. And that's the sense of what he's saying in verse 6. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin.

[ 15 : 30 ] And do not protest to the temple messenger, my vow was a mistake. Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? The teacher's talking about the kind of vows that aren't commanded by God, but are freely made by the people.

And so making a vow when you don't need to and failing to fulfil it was serious. Because failure to keep a vow to God is a sin against God.

And that's why the teacher says, do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And so we might wonder what making vows in the temple and failing to keep them has got to do with us today.

Well, the application is closer to home than perhaps we realise. We might not make a vow to sacrifice an animal to God, but there are plenty other promises that we make in public worship.

Just think about all the words that we sing to God and all the words that we speak to God in prayer. We can sing songs that make great promises of what we're going to do.

[ 16 : 37 ] For example, this song, it goes, Jesus, all for Jesus, all I am and have and ever hope to be. All of my ambitions, hopes and plans, I surrender these into your hands.

I'm not being critical of the song, but it's a big promise to say that we're going to surrender everything, but then have no intention of doing it. And we can make great promises to God in prayer if only he will give us the help we need.

And so someone might pray, Lord, I'm in a really difficult situation right now, but if you can sort it all out for me, then I promise that I will start going to church.

And of course, time passes, the difficult situation is resolved, but the person forgets about God and the promise they made. Because you see, when it comes to God, we can make all kinds of promises, but then we can also make up all kinds of excuses for why we can't follow through.

And so it's not that making vows is necessarily bad. That's not the point. The point is that we should speak carefully. We must not make unnecessary vows to God and then fail to fulfil them.

[ 17 : 54 ] The teacher is warning us that God has no pleasure in fools who do this. Far better that we don't make a vow before God than make a vow that we don't keep.

And Jesus says the same in the New Testament, in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew chapter five. He says again, You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, Do not break your oath, but fulfil to the Lord the oaths you have made.

But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is God's throne, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king.

And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply yes or no.

Anything beyond this comes from the evil one. So the teacher's advice is that if we do vow, we must keep our vow. And Jesus follows this by saying, we should let our yes be yes and our no, no.

[ 19 : 04 ] Why? Because we sin if we are not careful in what we say. God is not impressed with the words from our lips if they don't flow from a heart that worships and loves and obeys him.

Because if God is in heaven and we are on earth, it isn't that God is so far away that he's not aware of what we promise. It's that with his vast power and his great vantage point, he sees and hears everything.

And he knows what is going on in our hearts. And so we can't be casual or careless with God. We should never think that it doesn't matter what we say or what we do before him.

Because our lives exist to worship God. And that's why we must listen closely and speak carefully. So is that it?

Is that why I'm here? Well, in case we doubt, the teacher concludes this section by saying, much dreaming and many words are meaningless.

[ 20 : 14 ] Therefore, fear God. That's his answer to life. Fear God. But it's not just his conclusion here in this section.

It is the ultimate conclusion he reaches at the end of the book after his long search for meaning in life. Listen to what he says at the end. Now all has been heard.

Here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments. For this is the duty of all mankind. And so he's saying we can't mess about with God.

And that's why failure to worship, love and obey God is to live in opposition to him. It's a choice that will exclude us from God in heaven forever.

So God is to be feared. But we know that it's impossible for us to worship God as we should. We just can't do it. Our hearts are divided.

[ 21 : 14 ] And so our sin separates us from him. And so what can we do? Well, we can't do anything ourselves. But the good news is that God has come to us.

He entered into this world as a man, Jesus of Nazareth, to live the life we could never live, a perfect life, fully devoted to God. And Jesus died the death that we deserve to die, a death for our failure to worship, love and obey God.

And so through Jesus's perfect life and obedience, we have the perfect sacrifice to take the punishment we deserve for our sin and rebellion against God.

And that's why we must respond to the good news of what God has done for us through Jesus' death and resurrection, if we are to be saved.

We can't be saved by our good works. We can't be saved by our religious performance. We can only be saved by turning from our sin and placing our faith in Jesus.

[ 22 : 21 ] And when we do, God forgives us. God accepts us. God adopts us into his family. He gives us the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of eternal life with him in a new heaven and new earth.

And that is what we were made for. The writer to the Hebrews says in chapter 12, therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful.

And so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. And so our inability to truly worship God stems from our rejection of Jesus as our savior.

And it's only as we put our faith in Jesus and what he has done on the cross do we truly worship God. And so our response will be to guard our steps, to listen closely, to speak carefully and to stand in awe of God.

Let's pray. God in heaven, help us to truly worship you as we should through your son, our savior, Jesus Christ.

[ 23 : 35 ] Give us a right fear of you. So we guard our steps, listen closely, speak carefully and stand in awe of you, our great God. For we pray in Jesus name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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