

# Receiving in worship

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Littlebourne - 31st August 2025 - Hebrews 10:19-25, 12:18-24, Jeremiah 31:31-34

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Hebrews 10:19-25:

*19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

Hebrews 12:18-24:

*18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly[a] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

## Jeremiah 31:31-34:

*31 "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. 33 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."*

## Why are we here?

The question I'd like us to think about today is "why are we here?" What is it that we expect to accomplish by meeting every Sunday? What is it exactly that we are doing? What's different about the time we spend here each week, compared to the rest of life?

The obvious answer is of course that we are worshipping. We're here to worship God. This is correct, as far as it goes. But we often talk about how everything we do is to be worship. Whether we're singing, or washing the dishes, we should be doing it to the glory of God. I've stood up here and told you all this on occasion - every part of life, for the Christian, should be worship.

So then what's special about Sunday? What are we doing in worship here that we can't do at home? If worship is something we can do in every aspect of life, then why is staying at home and watching tv not valid too? There has to be something about what we do in our Sunday services that is different than that kind of worship - different than the worship we offer in our day jobs or our housework, different than in other parts of life.

## Old Testament patterns

Last week, we heard about the threefold pattern that occurs in the Old Testament sacrificial system - cleansing, consecration and communion. This pattern is found in the way sacrifices were used together - typically a sin or guilt offering to atone, followed by the ascension offering, that was to consecrate and draw near and then the peace or fellowship offering that represented the communion with God and allowed the people to eat with God. The pattern is also in each sacrifice individually - the death of an animal to atone, the consecration of that animal in being processed, chopped and washed, ascending the altar, and then finally the sacrificed animal would be with God. Remember that the animal represented the worshipper - it died in the place of the worshipper.

This pattern matches the outline of most Christian liturgy through the ages. There's confession and assurance of forgiveness - in other words atonement or cleaning. Then we have the consecration through the Word - in the New Testament we have metaphors of the Word being a sword, able to divide joints and marrow (Hebrews 4:12), and the metaphor of it washing us (Ephesians 5:26). Lastly, we have communion with God, where we really do partake with God, meet with Him.

But that explains the how - it explains what we do, but not exactly why we do it. And if we understand the why, then the what and how might make more sense.

## **Some possible whys**

Different congregations might place different emphases on what we should be doing and why. The book that we read (The Lord's Service, Jeffrey Meyers), gave four common answers to the 'why', before the author gave what he considers the correct answer.

One why would be evangelism - Sunday's are about reaching the lost. Another reason would be education, that we are here to learn. Others might place the emphasis on experience, that our feelings are the key. And another approach is to say that our service is all about exultation - the purpose of the service is to give God praise, and what's worship, if not giving in expectation of no return?

In fact, each of these things - evangelism, education, experience and exultation all feature in a good service. But as well as all these things, we're really doing something deeper. Something more is going on than just what we do.

## **Receiving from God**

What we are doing each week is renewing covenant with God. During corporate worship the Lord renews His covenant with His people when He gathers them together and serves them.

Our focus, if we're honest, is usually on what we do in the service. We consider the words we say, and the way we sing, and what we give to God. It's not wrong to be mindful of all that, we should think carefully about those things. But the dangerous attitude we might fall into is thinking that God is just up there receiving, and we're just down here giving.

But corporate worship is not just about pleasing Him or placating Him. If it were, it'd be paganism. The sort of worship service that thinks we can summon God, or get benefits from God if we just do the right things, say the right words, enact the right rituals, would be no different than the 'worship' of the myriad other religions of the world. Yet Christianity is different.

This is the main point I want to get across today - in the service, God gives to us. We receive from Him. We do not call God down through worship. He calls us up. He initiates.

## Entering Heaven

Hebrews 10:19-22:

*19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*

We're told in these verses that we can enter the holy place - this is the place behind the curtain, the most holy place. We do so by the blood of Christ, and also by His body - the curtain is likened to His flesh.

We often think of the curtain as the concealment of God from people, but it was also the path of entry to meet God, the avenue to full communion. For us, this is Christ - Him and His sacrifice. "No one comes to the Father except through [Christ]" - He is that avenue to communion, of which we are assured.

Presently, Christ is reigning in heaven, at the right hand of the Father, and we go through Him to enter the heavenly most holy place, and do so confidently - God invites us in.

Hebrews 12:22-24:

*22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

Contrasted to Mount Sinai, and the Old ways of the physical temple, we come to Mount Zion, the temple mount, in the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem. Through Christ, we join with the heavenly chorus in their joyous festivities. We join with Christians from all ages and places, the church, the ekklesia or assembly of those who have been made perfect. We join with Christ, the mediator of the New Covenant, and His blood.

Remember that Abel's blood cried out from the ground - cried for justice and retribution. But Christ's blood for us speaks of forgiveness and grace, redemption and reconciliation.

In the worship service, we are joining in the assembly of heaven, along with all other Christians worshipping on a Sunday. Past, present and future, from all over the earth, (and who knows maybe beyond in future), we join with the whole church in communion with each other and with God.

We don't go to a physical temple anymore, what unites us is no longer the pilgrimage to the earthly place of worship, rather we in our worship are transported to heaven, joining in the heavenly Jerusalem, where God dwells with us.

Just as the sacrifices of old ascended into heaven as smoke, pleasing to God, we the living sacrifices ascend to God in our worship. Where once the worshippers were confined to earth, only their representative animals being sent up in smoke, now we rise to God - but not through our own death, through Christ's.

## **Covenant**

I mentioned that what we're doing is renewing covenant.

In Reformed theology, we think of the first, original covenant as being between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And from this covenant, from this relationship, flows all of God's covenants with man - God is a covenantal God, and He relates to us through covenant.

We see lots of covenants that God makes with man in scripture - with Noah's family, with Abraham, with Moses and Israel, with David, and of course the New Covenant.

These covenants follow something of a pattern. For example:

The Noahic covenant (Genesis 8-9): God calls Noah out of the ark (8:15-19). Noah offers burnt offerings, pleasing God and averting further curse, in other words, atonement (8:20-21). God blesses Noah and sets creation apart with commands, that is, consecration (9:1-7). God establishes the rainbow as a sign of fellowship (9:12-17). God commissions Noah and his family to repopulate and steward the earth (9:1,7).

The abrahamic covenant (Genesis 15-27): God calls Abram to a vision and covenant (15:1; 17:1). Animal sacrifices ratify the covenant (15:9-21). Circumcision sets Abraham and descendants apart, consecrates them (17:9-14). God dines with Abraham as a friend (18:1-8). Abraham is sent to father nations and bless the world (17:4-6; 22:17-18).

Or the covenant at Sinai (Exodus 19-24): God calls Moses and Israel to Sinai (19:3-9). People wash before God's presence (19:10-15); blood sprinkles for atonement (24:5-8). Law given for holy living to consecrate them (20-23) and they commit to obey (24:3,7). The elders eat/drink before God (24:9-11). Israel is commissioned as a kingdom of priests (19:5-6).

And we could go on with other examples.

So there's this fivefold pattern - calling, cleansing, consecration, communion and commissioning. Those three parts in the middle should sound familiar, because that's what we see in the sacrificial system. But it is bookended by God calling his covenant people and God commissioning them.

We also see this fivefold pattern when God doesn't so much create new covenants, but calls the people to renew the covenant. For example, when Ezra and Nehemiah lead the people in renewing covenant (Nehemiah 8-10): The people are called to gather for Torah reading (8:1-3). They take part in corporate confession and fasting (9:1-3). The law is explained and faith reaffirmed, consecration (8:4-12; 9:4-37). They joyfully feast together (8:9-12). Lastly they are commissioned through a signed pledge to keep covenant and

rebuilt the temple (10:28-39). This renews the covenant with God after the exile and recommits the remnant of Israel to the covenant they have with God.

Now, we have the New Covenant, in which God does the same thing - He draws us to Himself and calls us to renew covenant.

## New Covenant

Jeremiah 31:33-34:

*33 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."*

The New Covenant that God makes with His people is one where He writes the law on our hearts, where we have the indwelling Holy Spirit to transform us. This is a covenant where sin is dealt with in finality, as Christ has paid the penalty for our sin on the cross.

Thus in the new covenant there are differences in what we do compared to other examples from the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, the old covenants, people would make animal sacrifices for their sin. In the New Covenant, we no longer need to make sacrifice, as Christ has made the ultimate sacrifice for us. In our worship, we remind ourselves of this fact, and merely point to the atonement already accomplished.

We don't experience communion with God in quite the same way either - in the Old Testament, few ever got really close to God. Now, God dwells within us and we are spiritually transported to heaven when we commune with Him. For them, it was the meat sacrificed that was the key part of the feast, and we also eat of the sacrifice, but in the form of bread and wine that for us are the body and blood of Christ.

But much also is the same - it's still God that calls. Ultimately, none of us would be here if it were not for the calling of God. We need to recognise that what we are doing is responding to God.



Likewise, we are still commissioned. Noah and his family were commissioned to repopulate the earth, Moses and Israel were commissioned to be a kingdom of priests. When Nehemiah and Ezra renew covenant, the people are commissioned to rebuild the temple.

How are we commissioned? Well all of the above. We are commissioned to disciple the nations, to populate the earth with Christians. We are commissioned to be a kingdom of priests to our God. We are commissioned to take part in building the new temple of God, which is the church. 1 Peter 2:4-5:

*4 As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a temple of the Spirit to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

## Corporate

This view of covenant also reveals why it is that we can't really do these things alone. The covenant is corporate - God makes covenant not so much with individuals, but with us as a body. The bride of Christ is not you or me, it's us and us along with Christians of all times and places. The covenant people of God is a multitude.

In all these covenant events, God made covenant with not just a person, but people - in Noah, God made covenant with all the living at that time, in Abraham, God made covenant with all of Abraham's descendants. In Moses, God made covenant with all of Israel. In the New Covenant, God makes covenant with His people, the church. God calls us to come *together* to renew covenant with Him.

## Conclusion

In all the covenants that were made in the Old Testament, in the various times that covenant was renewed - whether the renewal under Joshua at Shechem (Joshua 24:1-28), or Moses and the people at Moab (Deuteronomy 29-31), or when Hezekiah leads the people in renewal of covenant as he reinstated the Passover (2 Chronicles 29-31) - the beginning is the same. God calls, and only then do His people respond.



So to sum it up, in our Sunday service, the corporate covenant renewal that the body of Christ experiences each week, we find the following parts:

- God calls us
- God cleanses us
- God consecrates us
- God communes with us
- God commissions us

In all these things, God initiates. He gives, we respond. Our God is the overflowing God, who lavishes upon us grace after grace. We should come on Sunday expecting to receive. We should come expecting to feel better at the end of it, having been reminded of forgiveness, having been shaped by the word of God, having enjoyed fellowship with Him, and been blessed and equipped for His service. In short, we receive from God. And we certainly receive more than we could possibly give back.