

Carefully Preparing for the Privilege of Worship

*God Himself is with us: Let us now adore Him,
And with awe appear before Him.
God is in His temple, All within keep silence,
Prostrate lie with deepest reverence.*

With these words, Hymn 324 in our *Psalter Hymnal* calls us to regard with awe the privilege we have to worship God in His very presence.

After all, that's what we do each Lord's Day when we gather: we enter the presence of our holy God in answer to His call. Then begins the dialogue, as He speaks and we answer throughout our time of worship.

Have you considered what an amazing privilege that is?

Because of its regularity, there is a temptation to greet the Lord's Day with a ho-hum attitude. There are certain things we don't do on this day; certain other things that we do only on this day. From that fact alone, it's clear that this day is *different*.

But as we make this day *different*, does our attitude say that "different" is *all* that it is? Or do our hearts and hands and faces say: This day is *special*?

Do we awaken on this day with *joy*, and truly take care to approach the Lord with humility and awe? Or do we greet the day like a disappointed child who had his heart set on playing with friends: "It's *Sunday*? Aww ...!"

We need to pause, now and then, to consider: What is this thing that we do when we gather to worship the Lord – and how should we prepare for that?

Because when we gather on the Lord's Day, we gather to encounter God!

The Bible is filled with the accounts of people who encounter God – and in no case do those people take the event lightly.

I've always been struck by Isaiah's response when, in a vision, he found himself in the throne room of the Lord. Seeing the great throne and hearing the angels proclaim God's holiness, Isaiah came unglued. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty!" (Isa. 6:5).

In the presence of such holiness, the prophet knew: He could not stand on his own merits. He should have been consumed by the wrath of God – and he understood that! But then the Lord graciously cleansed him. And the prophet responded with eager willingness to serve in any way that God desired.

Daniel experienced a similar shock when he saw a vision of Christ. As he relates in Daniel 10, the men with him were overwhelmed with terror even *without* seeing the Lord. But Daniel, actually *seeing* the Son of Man, said, "I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale, and I was helpless" (Dan. 10:8).

The Lord soon raised him up, and the prophet listened with trembling. Yet still he was speechless, until the Lord Himself opened his lips. Then he confessed: "How can I, your servant, talk with you, my lord? My strength is gone and I can hardly breathe" (Dan. 10:17). Daniel was *overwhelmed*.

The Apostle John could relate, having been given a vision of Christ on the Lord's Day while confined to the island of Patmos. John writes, "When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead" (Rev. 1:17a).

Inspired by terror when Jesus appeared in all of His glory with Elijah and Moses, Peter began to babble about pitching tents (Mark 9:2-7).

Job was humbled by his encounter with the Lord – so humbled that he immediately repented of his pride, donning sackcloth and ashes (Job. 42:1-6).

There is a lesson in these accounts of men who encountered the Lord.

In each case, they remind us that our God is awesome and great. He is the One who reigns on high, causing nations to tremble (Psalm 99). We must not approach this God lightly. We must come before Him with joy and adoration – but also with fear, honor and deep reverence.

Korah, Dathan and Abiram drew near to the Lord with proud hearts, intent on implementing their desires rather than submitting to His. In answer, God opened up the earth to swallow both the men and their families. Meanwhile, He sent fire to consume the 250 who had followed Korah (Numbers 16).

Aaron's own sons, Nadab and Abihu, learned the danger of drawing near to God lightly – in a lesson that turned them to dust and ash. Their sin? They offered unauthorized fire before the Lord (Lev. 10:1-2). While the smoke of their destruction still hung in the air, Moses admonished Aaron: "This is what the Lord spoke of when He said: 'Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored'" (Lev. 10:3).

The examples of God's holiness – which He jealously guards – could be multiplied countless times. Meditate on the significance of the punishment God meted out for the man who gathered sticks on the Sabbath

(Num. 15:32-36). Consider the demise of Uzzah, when he thoughtlessly extended his hand to the Ark that represented God's holy presence (2 Sam. 6:5-7).

Our God is holy – we must not approach Him lightly!

In worshipping God, we come not to be entertained, nor to socialize, nor to enjoy ancient traditions. Even our desires to be instructed by God's Word and conformed more to His image are secondary when we draw near at His call.

We come to glorify the holy God – *this above all!*

But *how should* we approach Him?

Imagine, for a moment, that you were summoned to meet the President in the Oval Office. How carefully you would prepare for that visit! You would want to know the appropriate behavior and expected manner of dress. Before speaking, you would ponder how best to express yourself.

After all, it's a great privilege to meet with the President!

In real life, we have *not* been invited to the Oval Office. Instead, we've received an infinitely greater privilege. Rather than the President of the United States, we've been called to meet with the Creator of Heaven and Earth, who sustains and governs every living thing. Beside *Him*, the President is a peasant!

So ask yourself: How should we prepare for such a privilege?

First, we should prepare for the *activity* of worship.

Unlike television, worship is not passive. In worship, God calls us to hear Him and respond; to speak His name in prayer and confession; to ponder the Word and store it in our hearts; to express thanksgiving in song and offering.

So as we prepare for worship, we should *preview*. On what passage will the sermon focus? (Usually it's printed in the previous week's bulletin.) Take time to read it and meditate on what it means. Such a practice will prepare you to receive the message – just as a field is prepared for seed by working the soil.

Consider the needs of the congregation – those who have been sick, struggling or absent. Pray that God will bring them, along with those to whom the congregation has been witnessing, and that He will open their hearts to understand what is proclaimed. Pray that His Word will be proclaimed faithfully.

Having prepared to worship, take time to prepare for a day of rest that is focused on God.

A minister once saw his son getting gas on the way home from Church, so he asked about it when the son arrived at home. Cleverly, the son pointed to Luke 14:5, in which Jesus approved of rescuing one's ox or donkey if it falls into a hole on the Sabbath. The car, he explained, is the modern-day ox – and running out of gas is the equivalent of falling into a hole. Hence, the gas stop.

Unimpressed, the father asked, "Why didn't you fill the hole on Saturday?"

We need to "fill the holes" on Saturday so we can truly rest on Sunday. That might mean preparing some of Sunday's feast on Saturday, concluding catechism preparation and homework, or finishing our chores.

By diligent preparation on Saturday, we free ourselves to truly focus on doing what God desires of us on the Sabbath day. And He has promised: as we do so, He will make the Sabbath our delight (Isa. 58:13-14).

Preparing for worship also involves *outward* matters of behavior and dress.

Clearly, our behavior in worship can either honor or dishonor God. Passing notes or whispering during the sermon dishonors God, who is addressing us. On the other hand, taking notes and carefully comparing what is said with what is written reveals a desire to know and understand.

What about appearance? Does it really matter how we dress?

Would you visit the Oval Office wearing flip flops, shorts and an untucked polo shirt? Of course not! Such casual clothes would tell the president that he was not worthy of your best clothes – an insult to the man and his office.

But we aren't meeting the president. We're coming before God Himself! How much more, then, should our clothing convey respect and honor!

Finally – and most importantly – we need to prepare for worship by preparing our hearts.

We can dress our best and do all the right things, but unless our hearts are filled with love for God, it's all meaningless.

So we need to pray that God will use us to honor Him and will fill our hearts with love for Him. We should ask that His works will make us glad (Ps. 95:1-7), and His thoughts will leave us in awe (Ps. 92:4-8). We should pray that His love and faithfulness will make us eager to confess Him as our God (Psalm 100).

Let me close with a confession: I know that some will think that this sort of worship preparation is the kind of thing that works on paper, but not in real life. And I agree: what I've outlined here is a *goal*, of which I myself often fall short. While we remain in a fallen world, we will fail to live flawlessly before God.

But we're still called to strive for something better – to *aim* for *perfection*.

There was a band concert when I was in 6th grade. As we headed for the car, Dad asked why I didn't have a tie. I said I didn't need one. Dad disagreed, saying I should dress in a way that shows respect for the people who attend.

I put on a tie – until I arrived at the band room. The only tie I could find was around the neck of our instructor. My tie was quickly relocated to a pocket.

I don't really remember the concert. What I remember is being confronted by Dad when we arrived at home. "Where's your tie?"

I explained: No one else was wearing one, so I put mine in my pocket.

Know what he told me? "You're not everyone else. You have *my name*. What *you* do reflects on *me*. And what you did tonight *dishonored* me."

That's true of us all. We aren't "everyone else." We bear the name of *our Savior*. What *we* do reflects on *Him* – including how we honor or dishonor the Sabbath; how much attention we give to honoring God; how carefully or casually we dress; how attentively or thoughtlessly we worship.

When we enter God's presence, let us bring honor to Him whose name we bear by striving *wholeheartedly* to glorify our triune God.