

DO NOT BE AFRAID

**A Worship Devotional of Hope and Comfort
Easter 2011**

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Come Near to God

Day 1 – April 18

“Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” James 4:8-10 NIV

The season of Holy Week has come, and we are offered an opportunity to “come near to God” again. As we observe the time of preparation when Jesus “stepped himself for the journey to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51 The Message), we can intentionally prepare ourselves for a journey of deeper worship of Christ.

This is a time in which we seek to leave behind the old life and experience the new. This season has traditionally been a time of prayer, repentance, fasting, and self-denial. However, it’s also a time of hope and comfort as we look to Jesus. Recognizing our sinfulness, we have the opportunity to come near to God, confess our sin, and deepen our worship of the risen

Lord. As we journey through these next two weeks we seek to deepen our worship and become more intimately acquainted with the Savior.

Heart questions:

- 1. What sins in my own life have caused separation from God?**
- 2. What steps can I take to “come closer” to God?**
- 3. In which ways may I experience “deeper worship”?**

Prayer: Dear Lord, I open myself to You. I admit my sin, which has caused my separation from You, and for which Jesus died. Forgive my sin, and allow me to come closer to You. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

The Worship Journey

Day 2 - April 19

“And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will accept. When you think of what he has done for you, is this too much to ask? Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is.” Romans 12:1-2 NLT

We are each on a lifelong journey of worship. Throughout our days on earth we can experience an ever-deepening relationship with God as we respond to all He has done for us.

In these two verses in Romans, the apostle Paul gives us the reason, the means, and the goal for worship. We worship because of all that He has done for us. We worship by giving our entire selves, all that we are, to Him. And as we worship, God transforms us into new people who will then “know what God wants” us to do.

Throughout these next couple weeks we will explore some basic ideas of worship. True and heartfelt worship of God must be first, Christ-centered, then authentic, passionate, excellent, submissive to His will, and sacrificial. In this time we are invited to seek God fully, with the anticipation that He will transform us and reveal His will for our lives. Step out in this journey of faith.

Heart questions:

- 1. How well do I know Jesus Christ, the object of my worship?**
- 2. How sincere and authentic is my worship?**
- 3. Am I truly passionate about knowing and serving Him?**
- 4. Am I committed to bringing Him my very best in all parts of life?**
- 5. Am I willing to submit my life to Him and to His will?**
- 6. Do I choose to sacrifice in order to more fully love Him?**

Prayer: Lord, I embark on this journey of worship in order that I may more fully know, love, and serve You. In Your holy name, Amen.

Behold the Lamb

Day 3 - April 20

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" John 1:29 NIV

John the Baptist lived a life marked by God from before birth. He would always be different than others, finding himself drawn to a lifestyle of solitude and seeking God. And at the proper time, he would utter these prophetic words, "Behold, the Lamb of God." For John knew in His heart that the promise of God, the deliverance of man from sin, would take place through the sacrifice of a perfect and spotless lamb, and that he was now seeing that Lamb before him—Jesus Himself.

As we explore Jesus as both the object and means of our worship, we must understand that it is because He did choose to sacrifice His own life for His friends that "God raised him to the heights of heaven" (Philippians 2:8b-9 NLT), and that this last choice in His life now gives us boldness to come to the Father through Him. It is through the cross of death that Jesus now promises us life.

Jesus is our Way, our Daily Bread, our Shepherd, our Friend, and our Sacrifice. He is All-in-all, and we may truly wonder at His greatness and majesty before us. And as we approach Easter may we glory not only in the cross, but also in the life in His resurrection.

Heart questions:

1. What does Jesus' sacrifice reveal to me about the depth of my sin?
2. What emotion does the cross stir in me?
3. How does my view of Jesus' death influence my desire to live for Him more intently?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, I pray that throughout Holy Week I may more deeply ponder your sacrifice on the cross, and that it will create in me a desire to obey You more fully. In Your holy name, Amen.

Sin, the Enemy of Worship

Day 4 - April 21

The LORD accepted Abel and his offering, but he did not accept Cain and his offering. This made Cain very angry and dejected. "Why are you so angry?" the LORD asked him. "Why do you look so dejected? You will be accepted if you respond in the right way. But if you refuse to respond correctly, then watch out! Sin is waiting to attack and destroy you, and you must subdue it."

Genesis 4:4a-7 NLT

In the beginning man was created to worship God and have unhindered fellowship with Him. But when sin entered the world, it broke the relationship with God, and impaired man's opportunity to worship. Sin is the enemy of worship.

When Cain approached God, God's response was not the one for which Cain had hoped. As a result, he grew angry, and withdrew himself from God. God, in His love and care for Cain, offered him the opportunity to restore fellowship and communion, warning that sin was nearby, threatening to take control of Cain.

In those times when God seems far away, or somehow unloving or disapproving of our worship, sin is waiting to attack and destroy us. It is important that we recognize the danger of broken fellowship with God, and choose to "respond in the right way" by drawing near to Him in obedience. It is our choice to worship or to withdraw.

Heart questions:

- 1. Have I felt distance from God, and withdrawn myself from Him?**
- 2. When that has happened, how did I feel? What did I do as a result?**
- 3. Do I truly believe that God will always welcome me in worship, even in those times when I feel distant from Him?**

Prayer: Dear Father, I do not always come to You in worship, but at times I allow distance to come between us and threaten our intimacy. Lord, protect me from the sin of separation and allow me to worship You more fully. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The Dark Night

Day 5 - April 22 - Good Friday

Joseph bought a long sheet of linen cloth, and taking Jesus' body down from the cross, he wrapped it in the cloth and laid it in a tomb that had been carved out of the rock. Then he rolled a stone in front of the entrance. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where Jesus' body was laid. The next evening, when the Sabbath ended, Mary Magdalene and Salome and Mary the mother of James went out and purchased burial spices to put on Jesus' body.

Mark 15:46-16:1 NLT

And so our Holy Week journey comes to its conclusion, the last dark night of the Passion of Christ. Jesus' disciples, His family, and His admirers have seen His remarkable life end in a display of horrible violence. They have seen their hopes dashed upon the rocks of Roman execution, and their fears are now fully realized in the knowledge that Jesus, having uttered His last, is gone.

It can be enlightening for us when reading Scripture to “put ourselves into the story.” Here we can try to imagine what Jesus' followers might have experienced on this darkest of nights. What were their fears? Their regrets? Did they think back on all the times of great joy and love with their Savior and Friend? Or were they painfully reminded of those times when they didn't understand, appreciate, or value the gift of His presence in their lives? Would they lose hope completely? Would sadness and grief cripple any effort to continue living their lives? And what of His promises—could they continue to believe in the abundant life He promised them?

We stand at the entrance to the tomb. We see the soldiers stand guard. We are crushed under the weight of realization that our friend is gone. We sense the finality of the events of that dreadful day. The dark of night covers us, and we are beaten, defeated, and left with nothing.

Nothing, save the hope of morning.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, we wait. We have seen Your Son die. We know He has been buried, and the tomb closed. We pray that You will not forget us, but deliver us in our time of greatest need and weakest faith. And so we wait on You. Amen.

Truly Submissive

Day 6 - April 23

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." Matthew 16:24 NASB

As our Worship journey continues along the road to the cross of Christ, we are reminded that one core element in true, biblical worship is that of submissiveness. The willingness to submit to Christ's lordship is at the root of a right relationship with Him; conversely, it is precisely a lack of this crucial element that leads us in the opposite direction: focus upon self, unwillingness to follow the commands of Christ, and lack of trust in the One who made us and who redeems us.

In the Matthew passage above, Jesus had commended Peter for his verbal confession that He was indeed "the Christ, the Son of Man." But when the teaching turns to Christ's impending sacrifice and death upon the cross, Peter is quick to challenge Him, and is rebuked, as Jesus tells him that he is not setting his mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.

One goal in worship is to align ourselves with God's intention, His plan, and His will for our lives; and then to dedicate ourselves to being used by Him to make them a reality in the world around us. By submitting ourselves to Him we are truly "setting our minds on the things of God," and He will not disappoint us.

Heart questions:

- 1. Do I ever simply tell God that I desire to know and do His will?**
- 2. When I realize that God's plan for my life doesn't seem to match my own desires, how do I respond?**
- 3. What walls do I put up that keep me from submitting my will to that of Christ?**

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You are the way, the truth, and the life, and I desire to know and obey You in all things. May I humbly serve You more completely each day. In Your great name I pray, Amen.

Do Not Be Afraid

Day 7 - April 24

He is Risen!

All Things Hold Together

Day 8 - April 25

“For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities— all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Colossians 1:16-17 ESV

As we continue our journey on this side of Easter, we are mindful that our worship must be first and foremost Christ-centered. Worship that is directed to a vague, mysterious God is not true worship, for it is through Christ alone that we are able to worship the Father. And so we must take in Christ in all His glory, and let that view inform our worship.

Take a moment to look around at the wonder of creation. Gaze upon the majesty of the night sky; consider the beauty of trees, of wildlife, of wind and rain. Take in the sun’s heat, and study the intricacy of a single snowflake. God created it all, and Christ was there. Colossians tells us that it was by Him, through Him, and for Him that all things were created, and hold together. The stars and planets keep their courses because of Him.

Consider also the complex and fragile creations we call our bodies: they must be sustained by a constant heartbeat, an exacting temperature. When injured, they strive to heal to their original shape and form. And Christ holds them together as well. He is indeed the “glue” which connects, sustains, empowers, heals, and gives life all around us. He is “All-in-all.”

Heart questions:

- 1. Do I take time to consider the amazing creation around me, and ponder how it is held together?**
- 2. Am I grateful for life, breath, heartbeat, things without which I would cease to exist?**
- 3. How does this view of Christ (as the means and object of all creation) change the way I worship Him?**

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You were there when the worlds were created, and it is only by You that they hold together. You give me life and breath, and I am grateful. In Your holy name, Amen.

Show Us the Father

Day 9 - April 26

Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied." Jesus replied, "Philip, don't you even yet know who I am, even after all the time I have been with you? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! So why are you asking to see him? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I say are not my own, but my Father who lives in me does his work through me." John 14:8-10 NLT

Jesus had just told His followers that He was the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and that no one could come to the Father except through Him. He finished by saying, "From now on you know him and have seen him." But these words, sadly, did not seem to register with Philip; and, if we're honest with ourselves, at times neither do they with us.

We've studied this already, but ask yourself these questions: How often are we confused as to what God is truly like? How often do we question His love for us, His guidance in our lives, or His faithfulness in doing what His Word tells us He will do? And yet we need look no further than Jesus, for in Christ "all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9 NIV).

To know God better, to truly worship Him and draw nearer to Him, we must look to Jesus. Read the accounts of His life, study His words, and watch His actions. See how He utilized His time on earth. Observe how He lovingly treated those who were hurting, lost, or distracted. And notice His enduring patience with all of His children, including you and me.

Heart questions:

1. What can I learn about God from the actions of Jesus?
2. What do the words that Jesus said tell me about His Father?
3. Have I truly taken time to "intimately acquaint myself" with the Savior?

Prayer: Dear Father, Your Word tells me that all the fullness of the Godhead is in Your Son Jesus, and that I need look no further than Him to know You more fully. May I devote myself to knowing Jesus in all of life. In His holy Name, Amen.

The Good Shepherd

Day 10 - April 27

"I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. The Father loves me because I lay down my life that I may have it back again."

John 10:14-15, 17 NLT

Because most of us are far-removed from the agrarian culture of the Bible, it is easy to miss the references Jesus made to farming in general, and to herding sheep in particular. And yet the Bible is full of references to a lifestyle that, in His day, was known by nearly everyone.

Sheep are commonly understood to be fearful and untrusting. They sleep standing up to avoid the sudden attack of an enemy. They can be stubborn, and often must be prodded to do even what is best for them. So it is a wonder that a shepherd is able to gain the trust of his sheep, and over time allow his voice to represent to them comfort, safety, and health.

Among God's promises to us in Psalm 23 are freedom from want, peace, restoration, guidance, lack of fear, comfort, goodness, mercy, and the promise of dwelling with Him. These are what Jesus the Good Shepherd promises to us. If we hear His voice, we can follow Him, and trust Him for everything; He will not fail us.

Heart questions:

1. Am I able to trust Jesus fully for everything I need—safety, comfort, protection, and peace?
2. Do I go to Him first in prayer when I am fearful, anxious, apprehensive, or frightened?
3. Can I seek Him and learn to trust Him more fully for each day of my future?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, I admit that I don't always trust You to protect me and keep me safe. I admit that I am fearful at times. Lord, I want to trust in You more, and seek peace and safety only in You. In Your holy name I pray, Amen.

Friend of Sinners

Day 11 - April 28

“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”

John 15:13-15 NIV

God created man for intimate fellowship with Himself. But over time this relationship had degenerated into fearful rule-following. The religious leaders in Jesus’ day sought to separate themselves from sin and from sinners. Since they could not admit their own sin, theirs was a religion of isolation and exclusion.

Into this culture comes Jesus, not only proclaiming Himself equal to the God they worshiped, but actually eating with and befriending sinners! Recoiling at this subversive view of a holy God reaching out to fallen man, the leaders rejected Jesus’ offer of love, mercy, and salvation.

Jesus befriended sinners. It was sinners whom He came to save, and it is only self-admitted sinners who may approach Him. We must be honest about our sin and disobedience, but in this honesty we may boldly approach the throne of grace, and embrace our Savior without fear, as in the words of the old hymn:

*Can we find a friend so faithful
who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness
take it to the Lord in prayer.*

Heart questions:

- 1. How often do I consider Jesus as friend?**
- 2. How did Jesus relate to His friends in the Bible?**
- 3. What promises did He make to them? And to me?**

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You have promised to be my friend, and to reach out in love to me. I accept Your gift of love, and I choose to obey You more fully in everything. In Your name I pray, Amen.

We Are Fully Known

Day 12 - April 29

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. Psalm 139:1-4 NIV

We were created for worship, to be in an intimate relationship with God and to know Him even as we are known by Him. Because of our sin, our awareness of Him has become clouded, while He is fully aware of all that is in us. He knows everything we think, say, and do. To God, each of us is an “open book.”

And yet, even knowing this, we still make futile attempts to hide ourselves from God. In those times when we do not believe in His love for us, or trust in His goodness and faithfulness, we allow distance to creep in to our relationship. But the distance is all on our side—God always knows us fully.

God’s desire is that we willingly allow Him into our deepest thoughts, come to him in all honesty and sincerity, and allow ourselves to be known by Him. And He is faithful; He will never leave us or forsake us due to anything we could do, but rather is completely gracious and long-suffering. He desires intimacy with us.

Heart questions:

1. How often do I realize that God knows my every thought, even before I have it?
2. How does knowing that make me feel? What light does it shed on my daily life, my choices, and my plans?
3. What steps can I take to more fully be aware of His presence, and to open my heart to Him?

Prayer: Dear God, as the psalmist says, You know me intimately. There is nothing I can hide from You. Lord, please draw me to Yourself and lead me to willingly open my heart to You more each day. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Worship in All Seasons

Day 13 - April 30

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.

Psalm 95:1-3,6 NIV

The Psalms are a virtual storehouse of worship expression. The emotions expressed range from exceeding joy to heartfelt sorrow, from passionate devotion to mournful cries for deliverance. The Psalms provide a pattern for a life of worship that is grounded in God and who He is, regardless of the situations in which we find ourselves.

Psalm 95 describes just a few of the ways in which we can honor God. We are instructed to sing to the Lord, and to shout joyfully. (When was the last time You shouted out to God in a worship service?) We are to come with thanksgiving, and to sing Psalms of praise to Him. We are also instructed to worship and bow down, and to kneel before the LORD our Maker in reverent submission.

As we finish this season, remember worship is rooted and grounded as we pause and think on all that God has done for us. We can look back on our lives and see His hand over us (even in those times we did not feel it). We can see His plan having unfolded over the months and years. We are encouraged when we come to God in the joyful times as well as the sorrowful, for He is our God, and He desires our presence regardless of our state of mind or heart.

Heart questions:

1. Do I feel free to approach God, no matter what state I'm in?
2. Am I more likely to approach Him when I feel things are going well, or when I feel more need for His help and care?
3. What can I learn from the Psalms regarding my freedom to approach God with every emotion?

Prayer: Dear God, teach me to come to You with everything that is in me, knowing that You are my God and that You desire my worship at all times, no matter how or what I feel. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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