

When you were a young girl or boy, who did you dream about becoming? When I was young, most of my occupational dreams revolved around saving the world—perhaps I would be the next Spiderman or Superman? Every night I would slip in between my Star Wars bed sheets, and drift off to sleep dreaming about light sabres and far off galaxies.

As I got a little bit older, my occupational dreams shifted from Superhero to every day hero—police officer, fireman, or professional athlete. But at the age of 19, the question, “*what do you want to be when you grow up?*,” became a lot more real. Some of you are about to graduate from high school, or maybe you’re in university and you still don’t have an answer—every time the question is asked, your frustration grows.

Maybe you’re in your 30’s or 40’s and you’re working on your 2nd or 3rd career—you still don’t know what you’re supposed to be when you grow up. Maybe you’re nearing retirement, or have recently retired, and the question has suddenly reappeared. *What do you want to be when you grow up?*

Our Western culture is activity oriented—people move at such a fast pace that we tend to be less reflective and more shallow. We can send people into space but we cannot answer the deep questions of life. And when answers to these deep questions evade us, we don’t search harder for answers, we simply change the questions.

The question, “*what do you want to be when you grow up?*” is but a poor substitute for the questions God has written into the human

heart. *Who am I? What have I been made for? Why do I exist?*

Years ago, I made a mistake of confusing my occupation with my identity, and despite our culture’s obsession with occupation, identity is something much deeper, something much more important.

While this confusion didn’t fully clear until my early 30’s, at the age of 19, I had an encounter with God that laid the foundation for this discovery. One afternoon, while seated at my kitchen table, I cried out to God, offering all of me, all for Him. I did not know then, but I often look back to that afternoon as one of the defining moments in my life—it was the moment I discovered my life purpose; it was the moment that I became a worshipper.

We tend to associate worship with singing, but the Bible’s vision of worship is more expansive—I want to explore this vision with you this morning. And I want to begin with a scripture that sets the tone—it can be found in 1 Peter 2:9. The apostle Peter writes, “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*”

Rick Warren writes, “The moment you were born into the world, God was there as an unseen witness, smiling at your birth. He wanted you alive, and your arrival gave Him great pleasure. God did not need to create you, but He chose to create you for His own enjoyment. You exist for His benefit, His glory, His purpose, and His delight. Bringing enjoyment to God, living for His pleasure, is the first

purpose of your life”.¹ Worship—you were created to know God, to enjoy Him, and to reflect His glory.

This morning I want to invite you to turn with me to Hebrews 11—this chapter could be described as a kind of Faith Hall of Fame. This chapter contains the names of many different people, and what each of them has in common was a fervent trust and dependence on God. These people took God at His word, being *sure of what they hoped for and certain of what they did not see*—these people, their faith, pleased God.

In Hebrews 11:4, the list begins with Abel, and with the priority that God places on worship, it shouldn't surprise us that the Faith Hall of Fame's first inductee was recognized as a worshipper. Let's read what Hebrews 11:4 has to say, *“By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.”*

In order to understand this statement, we need to read Cain and Abel's back story—let me invite you to turn with me to Genesis 4:1.

“Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, “With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man.” 2 Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. 3 In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. 4 And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his

offering, 5 but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

6 Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? 7 If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.” 8 Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let's go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. 9 Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don't know,” he replied. “Am I my brother's keeper?”

What I'd like to do is walk through this text and make a few observations—here's the first:

1. **God is worthy of worship.** This story is so unexpected and startling that this truth is easy to overlook. Verse 3 says, *“in the course of time, offerings were brought to God.”*

Why do we worship? First, because God is worthy— all the provision we experience, the beauty we see, and the love we encounter, is the work/gift of His hands. But second, we were created to worship—created to know and enjoy Him—and when we live for His pleasure, we experience pleasure. As we live for His pleasure, we find purpose and meaning in life. Here's the second observation,

2. **God longs to show His favour.** This too is easy to overlook in the story. Verse 4 says that *“The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering;”* Psalm 149:4 says, *“the Lord takes delight in His people”*.

¹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 63.

This story reveals a God who looks with favour over Abel’s worship; God loves to be in relationship with us. But third,

3. Not all “worship” honours God. Allow me to read vs. 4-5, *“The Lord looked with favour on Abel and His offering, but on Cain and his offering, He did not look with favour.”*

Vs 5 says that when God rejected Cain’s offering, Cain became angry and his face downcast; this is our first clue that there was a problem—not with God, but with Cain. Notice that God’s response to Cain didn’t evoke surprise; Cain didn’t ask “why,” or say “sorry,” instead, he burned with anger. Cain thought his offering “good enough” and he was upset that God thought differently.

Look at verse 6, *“the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?’”* The implied answer to God’s question is “yes”—if Cain had done what was right, he would have been accepted. God is not arbitrary—the faith and obedience required of us are always based on prior revelation. God had told Cain and Abel what was right; if Abel knew to how to find God’s favour, surely, so did Cain.

You might be asking, “what was wrong with Cain’s gift?,” and there are really only three options. Either: (a) Cain brought the wrong gift but had a right heart; (b) Cain brought the right gift, but had a wrong heart; or (c) Cain brought the wrong gift, and had a wrong heart. Which was it?

Some people have made a big deal of the fact that Cain brought fruit and vegetables while Abel brought an animal sacrifice. And yet throughout the Old Testament, God requests that fruit and grain be brought to Him—it too was an offering pleasing in His sight.² So what made Abel’s offering acceptable and Cain’s unacceptable? I want to suggest that the heart of worship is ultimately a matter of the heart.

We’re told that Cain brought *“some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.”* We have a hint here—but only a hint—that Abel brought his very best to God, while Cain did not.

Hebrews 11: 4 says, *“By faith Abel offered a better sacrifice”*. Abel came to God bearing a gift, and what pleased God was Abel’s heart—he came with his best. Cain came to God bearing a gift, but God saw through Cain’s gift to the heart behind it—he didn’t bring his best, he brought his “good enough”.

One of God’s standing frustrations with Israel’s worship practice was their focus on the externals to the exclusion of the internal. In Isaiah 1:11-14, God expressed His displeasure saying, *“I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats...Stop bringing meaningless offerings...They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.”* The thing is, God’s people were doing the right things—they were bringing the sacrifices that God had asked for. Isaiah 29:13 gives us more insight, *“The Lord says: These people*

² Leviticus 23:40; 27:30.

come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

So often, worship comes down to the heart—when our heart isn’t in it, every prayer that we pray, every song that we sing doesn’t amount to worship. Worship without the heart is like someone giving you a dead fish handshake—it’s not convincing or life-giving. The Lord Jesus, when asked about life’s #1 priority, responded saying, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*”³

I wonder, does God ever look at us and say, “*Enough! I despise your “worship”! Stop singing when you don’t mean it, stop giving with Grinch-like hearts, close up your Bible unless you’re really coming to meet with Me—don’t talk about your love for Me...live it out.*” When God looks at my heart, does He see a worshipper? What does He see when He looks at yours?

In the second half of my sermon, I want to talk about what worship *isn’t* and what worship *is*. Let’s begin with *isn’t* #1.

1. Worship *isn’t* about style. The strife between Cain and Abel was centred around the issue of worship—little has changed. There is no other issue in the North American church that has caused more strife, more factions, more church splits than the issue of musical style. And what makes this so ironic is the fact that the Bible is silent when it comes to the issue of musical style.

At times David used his harp to worship God—it had a certain “unplugged” feel. On another occasion, in the context of worship, David danced before the Lord with all his might. Other Psalmists talk about praising God using tambourines, cymbals, lyres, trumpets, flutes. Was it a symphony? A big band feel? We aren’t told.

Ephesians 5:18-20 says, “*Be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart (there’s the heart again) to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” There are many ways and many styles that fit under the umbrella of “worship.”

I’ve heard some argue about worship music, as though certain music in and of itself has a “spiritual” quality—as though certain instruments are “spiritual” while others are not. Let me read a quote for you, “Worship has nothing to do with the style or volume or speed of a song. God loves all kinds of music because He invented it all—fast and slow, loud and soft, old and new...There is no biblical style! There are no musical notes in the Bible; we don’t even have the instruments they used in Bible times. Frankly, the musical style you like best says more about you—your background and personality—than it does about God.”

What makes a song “worship” is the words that we sing and the heart that we bring. *Are the words that we sing communicating something true about God, humanity, and the world?* If “yes,” what we’re singing might be worship. *Do the words that we offer to come,*

³ Matthew 22:37.

come from a heart that is humble, authentic, and engaged? If “yes,” what we’re singing might be worship. Here’s the second *isn’t*...

2. Worship *isn’t* about you! When we gather for “worship” through song, it isn’t for us—it is for God. Chuck Fromm, the editor of *Worship Leader Magazine* once said, “Worship is too often perceived as a performance that must satisfy the human audience.”

The end result of consumer worship is a kind of spiritual narcissism. We end up asking the wrong questions, “*What’s in this for me? Is this meeting my needs?*” If these are the questions we are asking, we can be sure that we’ve left the realm of worship. Let’s get to the third *isn’t*...it isn’t far behind...

3. Worship *isn’t* even about singing. Sadly, worship has all-too often been defined as the singing portion of the Sunday morning service. Maybe you’ve heard the following post-service conversation, “*Wasn’t that a great time in worship? I really loved that new song.*” For some people, once the Sunday service is over, worship is done until next week.

Now that I’ve talked about the *isn’t*s, let me offer two *is*’...

4. Worship *is* about choice. When God created humanity, He hard-wired worship in our DNA—we cannot not worship. But we do have a choice—**God has given us freedom to choose who or what we will worship.** All of us end up worshipping what we love most.

What do you love most? What can you not live without? What is it that you want more than anything? What are you pursuing? I don’t know how you would answer these question, but what I do know is

that your answers will reveal who or what you worship.

And let me offer a pastoral warning—you **will be shaped by, and become like, what you worship.** When we worship at the altar of money, our mind will be consumed with protecting what we have and getting more, but there will never be enough—our heart will shrivel until greed is all that is left.

When we worship at the altar of sex, our mind will be consumed, people will become objects and relationships will become secondary — our heart will shrivel until lust is all that is left.

When we worship at the altar of self (the biggest altar in all of North America), our mind will be consumed with our own needs, wants, and desires. No amount of recognition, pleasure, or indulgence will be enough—the people around us will become means to our ends—and in the end, our heart will shrivel until all that is left is an isolated, selfish, dry husk of a life.

But as we choose to worship the Lord Jesus Christ, we’ll find that our mind will be renewed—we’ll begin to see people, situations, and the world from His perspective; our life will get larger, not smaller. Whereas money, sex, and self cannot satisfy our deepest needs, **God can, and does, satisfy the deepest desires of our heart.** We won’t be able to get enough of God, but as we keep turning to Him, He will water our minds and hearts so that we flourish like a well-watered garden.

At times, choosing to worship Christ is all joy and delight, and at other times, worship requires an act of the will—remember, worship is about choice. Our culture tells us that doing something we don’t

feel like doing is inauthentic and damaging to the human heart—William Shakespeare penned, “*to thine own self be true*”.⁴ It’s this kind of rubbish that has Western society floundering. Worship is a choice to prioritize God above oneself—Jesus promised that when we make this choice, we will find a life worth living. And now for the final *is*,

5. Worship *is* about our whole life. Worship is too large and all-encompassing to be confined to an event at church on Sunday morning; worship is an entire life lived to the glory of God. Singing, praying, reading your Bible—worship includes these things but is so much more.

Each week is made up of 168 hours—no more and no less. How do you spend your waking hours? I’ve created a pie chart that outlines how an “average” Christian might allot their time. One might sleep about 56 hours a week, work about 50 hours a week—give or take, and that leaves 28 hours with family or friends, 14 hours watching tv/online or reading, 8 hours for sports, 6 hours for miscellaneous, and 4 hours on a Sunday morning to engage in this thing we call *worship*.

But here’s the problem—if worship is what we were created for a weekly 2-4 hour investment seems a tad low, don’t you think?

The enthusiasts among us might say, “Let’s divide up the pie differently. I can sleep a little less, play a little less, work a little less so that the worship slice can grow a bit.” This kind of approach has some merit; it is a healthy exercise to take stock of how we spend our

time and then reapportion based on our values and priorities. But I want to suggest a different course of action.

Our work, our play, our relationships, our music, and our money are all a part of God’s wide world of worship. Now obviously, I’m not talking about a 1-dimensional, slimmed down, non-fat, decaf version of worship; I’m talking about a full-bodied 3-dimensional kind.

I don’t think I can say this too strongly: we do violence to the biblical definition of *worship* when we reduce *worship* to a style of music, or to a time slot on Sunday morning. When we read the Bible we find instructions about being children and parents, about work and rest, about sex, money, and how to treat our neighbours.

The more we read the Scriptures the more we begin to realize that God’s definition of worship is all encompassing. Worship isn’t confined to Sundays, certain religious holidays, or specific locations like a church—all of life is to be set apart to and for God.

To paraphrase Deuteronomy 6:7-8, “*When you’re with your kids, when you’re at home, when you’re out for a walk, while you’re working, and even when it’s time to go to sleep, understand that your life is set apart for Me—let your life be an act of worship to Me.*”

1 Corinthians 10:31 says, “*whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*” Colossians 3:17 says, “*And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*”

⁴ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, spoken by Polonius in Act 1, Scene 3.

All of life is wrapped up in the word “*worship*”. All of life can be lived in the name of *Jesus*, empowered by the *Holy Spirit*, to the glory of God our *Father*.

Getting back to our pie-chart—the goal is not necessarily to increase the worship slice of the pie (though that may be in order); instead, God invites us to see every slice of our life as the place where worship can take place.

Conclusion: Hebrews 11:4 says, “*By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.*”

The most important thing we bring to God in worship is our whole self—our heart, our desires, our mind and our bodies, our dreams and plans, our time, and our relationships. *A life of worship is a life in which I set apart all of me, all for Him, in all of life.*

At some point in our lives, each of us needs to answer the question: “*Who am I, and what is the purpose of my life?*” Abel made a conscious choice to be a worshipper, and my prayer for my own life, and yours, is that by faith we will spend our lives living for the pleasure of God.

Prayer

Worship