

The Glory of God and Why We Sing

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the relationship between the glory of God and singing in congregational worship. It delves into the importance of experiencing God's greatness, beauty, and worth, and expressing strong affections for Him through singing. The speaker highlights the significance of gathering for worship to edify and glorify God, refuting the notion that worship is not a biblical concept. The sermon concludes with a call to engage in authentic, heartfelt singing that reflects God's truth and worth.

Scripture: Ephesians 5:18, Colossians 3:16, 1 Peter 2:4, Hebrews 13:15, Psalm 100:2

Topics: "Worship", "Expressing God's Glory through Singing"

Description

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Transcript

Let's pray together. Father, we just sang our prayer, and so all I want to do now is use my own voice to say amen, amen. We meant every word of it.

All the purposes for your glory in Belfast, in Northern Ireland, and wherever this will reach. All the purposes for your glory. So we invite you, Holy Spirit, to come and to grant us ears to hear and me a faithful voice to speak your word.

And so do those purposes we ask in Jesus' name, amen. So we're going to talk about the relationship between the glory of God and singing or congregational worship. So we have lots of words to explain.

Who is God will be the place we start. What does it mean to glorify Him, or before that, what is the glory of God? What is Christian singing? What is corporate worship? Should we even think of our gatherings on the Lord's Day as corporate worship? Have you ever heard anybody say, as I have, that's not what the New Testament teaches? It's not a biblical idea. You don't gather to worship, you gather for edification.

Is that right? We'll see. So, we have our work cut out for us, and it's a glorious work, because we're not dealing in opinions, right? Wonder of wonders, God gave us a book, and our job is to open the book and find answers to those questions, not dream them up. You should not care at all what my opinions are.

Is that clear? So this visiting American does not come with my opinions. I come either as a faithful witness to what you can see, or you should just pity this poor old man that he can't make anything plain. Is that clear? I'm not coming as an authority, but with an authority.

And if I can't show you what's here, there's no reason you should pay any attention to me. So we have a glorious work to do. All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete or equipped for every good work, and a great work is to get answers to those questions.

That's a great work. So I invite you into that Scripture-supported great work that it has been given to equip you to do. That's where we're going.

In the next minutes, what matters is God's answer to those questions, and we'll start with who is God. Where would you go to answer that question? What text would you use? I would love to know, but here's where I'm going. I think the most fundamental sentence in the Bible to answer the question, who are you if you are, is Exodus 3.14. Now, you remember the situation.

God has come to Moses and said, I'm calling you to deliver the people out of bondage in Egypt. And Moses responds, verse 11 of Exodus 3, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt? And God patiently answers, verse 12, I will be with you. Moses argues again, verse 13, if I come to the people of Israel and say to them, the God of your fathers has sent me, they will ask me, what is his name? What shall I say to them? And God answers, I am who I am.

Say this to the people of Israel. I am, has sent me to you. What does that mean? Why did God identify himself as I am who I am? I absolutely am.

Now, if we can take off our clouded spectacles of mere religious jargon like G-O-D, this should come, will come as a bolt of lightning. God is. That's staggering.

What sentence could be more important in any language than God is? So what did he mean when he said, I absolutely am? I am who I am. What did he mean? I'm going to linger here longer than you think I should, perhaps, because until God becomes dominant in our thinking and in our feeling, until God becomes the blazing sun at the center of the solar system of our daily lives, until God becomes the Mount Everest in the foothill of all of our concerns with this world, until God rests on the souls of the saints in Belfast and on the churches of Northern Ireland, until he rests on the churches and the people here with ten thousand times more weight than all your political concerns and all your church growth concerns, then all of our talk about the glory of God and singing and gathering for worship will be just more tinkering and engineering of religion to try to get people to do what we hope they will do in some kind of appropriate way. The world doesn't need any more tinkering with religion.

It needs God. It needs to see God. It needs to be stunned that there is a God.

So it's no accident that when Moses says, who's sending me? God says, I am who I am, period. And we need to linger over that. And I've got ten things I think it means.

They're very short. It's not the whole message. It's introduction.

Number one, God is who he is means he never had a beginning. And that just staggers the mind. Every child asks his parents, where did God come from? Who made God? And every wise parent says, nobody

made God.

He just was always there. Always. No beginning.

Number two, God is who he is means God will never end. If he didn't come into being, he can't go out of being because he is being. Absolute being.

There's no place to go outside being. There's only he. Before he creates, he's all there is.

Absolutely. Number three, God is who he is means God is absolute reality. There's no reality before him.

There's no reality outside of him unless he wills it and creates it. He's not one of many realities before he creates. He is simply absolute reality.

He's all that was. Eternally. No space.

Space didn't exist. The universe didn't exist. Emptiness did not exist.

Only God existed forever. Absolutely and absolutely all. Number four, God is who he is means that God is utterly independent.

He depends on nothing to bring him into being. He depends on nothing to support him. He depends on nothing to counsel him.

He depends on nothing to make him what he is. He is absolutely independent. Number five, God is who he is means everything that is not God depends totally on God.

All that is not God is secondary. Dependent. The entire universe is secondary reality.

Let that sink in because nobody in this city believes that. And if the church doesn't, you're just like them. All the universe is secondary.

Humanity is secondary. God is primary, absolute, first, last, glorious. Everything else, secondary.

Galaxies. Compared to God, nothing. That's number six.

Let me just go back and restate it. God is who he is means all the universe is by comparison to God as nothing. All the universe by comparison to God is as nothing.

Contingent, dependent reality is to absolute independent reality as a shadow to substance. As echo to thunderclap. As bubble to ocean.

All that we see, all that you are amazed by in your land or around the world, all the world, all the galaxies is compared to God as nothing. If you put God on one side of the scales and the universe on the other side of the scales, the universe goes up like air or dust on the scale. Isaiah 40, 17.

All the nations are as nothing before him. They are accounted by him as less than nothing and empty. Number seven.

God is who he is means God is constant. He's the same yesterday, today, forever. He cannot be improved.

He cannot be diminished. He's not becoming anything. He is who he is.

There's no development in God. There's no progress in God. Absolute perfection cannot be improved.

Number eight. God is who he is means he is the absolute standard of truth and goodness and beauty. There's no law book which he consults in deciding what is right.

There's no almanac to establish facts for God. There's no guild, no musical guild, for example, to determine what is excellent and beautiful. He's the standard.

He himself is the standard of the right, the true, the beautiful. Number nine. God is who he is means God does whatever he pleases and it is always right, always beautiful, always in accord with truth.

There are no constraints on God from outside that he doesn't will to exist and thus govern. All reality that is outside of him is subordinate to him. So he's utterly free.

He's the only free being in the universe, in fact. He is utterly free from any constraints that don't originate from his own will. Finally, number ten.

God is who he is means he's the greatest, the most beautiful, the most valuable, and the most important person in existence. He's more worthy of interest and attention and admiration and enjoyment than all persons and all realities put together, including the entire universe. Now, the Bible reveals and assumes that God everywhere.

If you're a pastor, you should be drawing him out everywhere, every Sunday. Next question. So, what is the glory of God? Talk, talk, talk, talk, talk.

You reform people, especially, talk about that all the time. What are you talking about? Do you ever pause to define your cherished phrases? Like now. What is the glory of God? I venture this, and then I'll try to show you why.

The glory of God is his greatness, his beauty, and his worth of value on display. I mean, we all know words are words. It's all God.

And this book is full of them, and don't you ever belittle them, right? Don't say, ah, it's just words, words, words. That's words, words, words. The question is whether these words are true to this word.

Now, why did I just say what I said? Do you remember the glorious text that every worship leader should love from Isaiah 6? Verses 2 and 3, especially. In the year the king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord high and lifted up. His smoke filled the temple and his train ran down filled Belfast.

Each, and he was surrounded by these cherubim that flew. Each had six wings. With two, they covered their face.

With two, they covered their feet. And with two, they flew. And one called to the other saying, holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.

The whole earth is full of his. Why didn't it say holiness? It didn't, right? You all know that. You're just Irish or Northern Irish.

I don't know how you say these things. It didn't say what you would expect it to say. Holy, holy, holy.

The whole earth is full of your holiness. It didn't say that. And I've always, I mean this is my starting point for trying to figure out what is the glory of God.

It says holy, holy, holy. The whole earth is full of his glory. Why the shift? Here's my attempt at an answer.

I think in biblical terms, generally, I can't make this work in every text. I would just say generally, the holiness of God, I'm not talking about the holiness of temple utensils or people. The holiness of God is generally his intrinsic beauty and greatness and worth.

And when that goes on display, the Bible calls it his glory. They're not radically different realities. God is who he is, right? He's great.

He's beautiful. He's infinitely valuable in himself without any creation in existence. But when the heavens were created, they were telling the glory of the Lord.

When the Son of God came, we saw his glory. Glory is the only son from the Father. The glory of God is the intrinsic worth, the intrinsic beauty, the intrinsic greatness gone public for you to admire and worship and enjoy.

Hebrews 1, 3 speaks of a radiance of the glory of God. Psalm 19 speaks of the heavens telling the glory of God as you see what God has put out there to communicate what cannot be seen. You're supposed to see the planets and the stars and the blue sky and the cloud formations and the entire natural world and know this is a great God.

This is a glorious God. This is a beautiful God. This is a true, valuable, infinitely glorious, beautiful being.

Why do I choose these three words? Greatness and beauty and value. I'm not just throwing those words out there. Thought.

Are those the three words that I should use? By greatness, I am referring to his scope, his extent, his grandeur. I mean, there's no geography, no dimensions in God, but we use language, the Bible uses language of greatness. That's what that is.

Scope, extent, grandeur. Beauty, the perfections of all his attributes and the infinite harmony of their interrelationships. If you were to list all the attributes of God that are revealed in the Bible, they would all be beautiful, but the totality of the beauty of the glory would be not only each one's individual beauty, but the harmony of them all as they get shown in history and in salvation and judgment.

And third, his worth, because the Bible reveals him as a treasure. More precious, more valuable, more to be desired than anything or anyone in the universe. And that may be the one that you need to hear most.

I certainly need to hear it most. Because your heart is going after treasures every day. Every day your heart is latching onto something satisfying, something precious, something you want.

And the Bible's message is he's the most wantable reality in the world. If you don't feel it, you're wrong. You're broken.

So those three things, greatness, beauty, and worth. This is the glory of God on display. Now my experience is, I'm 73 years old.

I've been talking about my love for the glory of God for about 50 years. My experience is that the greatness and beauty and worth of God, the glory of God, they don't become dominant in a heart, in a mind. They don't become a dominant reality.

They didn't in my life. Until I saw how dominant the glory of God was. I grew up in a home.

My dad probably mentioned the term glory of God in almost every prayer he prayed in my presence. And that was every night that he was home from his evangelistic work. He pronounced it glory.

Glory. He divided the syllables after O. Glory, not glory. I love it, because it's just stuck there.

Do everything for the glory of God. And my mother would sign off on letters to me in college and graduate school. Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything to the glory of God.

But they never, to my... I'm sure this is not true, but you know, the memories of kids are distorted. I don't remember them ever saying, God lives for the glory of God. God exists for the glory of God.

God does everything he does for his glory. And when that began to come home to me, and I had to wrestle with whether I liked God like that, my life shifted. I was newly married.

We were just in seminary. And I remember saying, Noel, you know, one of the biggest evidences that your world is being turned upside down by the centrality of God in the mind of God is your prayers. I mean, why is the first petition of the Lord's Prayer, Hallowed be your name.

Like, take yourself seriously. That's not for him. That's for us.

We got to get in sync with that. Because Jesus said, that's one. That's number one.

Kingdom next. Will next. Or do I get backwards? Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done. First three petitions, God, God, God, do it for yourself.

Your prayers are changing. You sound different when you pray as a 23-year-old who's being blown apart by the centrality of God in the life of God. So let me show you what, just six quick glimpses of what did that.

I mean, there are dozens, dozens in the Bible. So I'm asking this question, and you need to come to terms with it. From predestination to consummation, why does God do what he does? Ultimately.

There are a lot of subordinate reasons. I wrote a book called 50 Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die. So I'm not a reductionist.

But I know number one. And I want you to see number one. Predestination.

I've got one verse for each six stages of redemptive history. Predestination. Ephesians 1.5. He predestined us to adoption through Jesus Christ to himself, according to the kind intention of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace.

That's why you were predestined. To the praise of the glory of his grace. Number two, creation.

Why did he create the world after that? This is Isaiah 43.6. Bring my sons from afar, my daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory. You wonder why you exist? It is so thrilling at 23 years old to discover I know why I'm here. Ultimately, I know why I am here.

I know why I'm in Belfast. I know why I'm standing here. I'm not at a loss.

That verse is clear. I was created for his glory. Number three, incarnation.

Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And you will find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly hosts saying, Glory to God.

Glory to Mary. Glory to mangers. Glory to Jesus even.

What should you shepherds be seeing when you come away from seeing this baby? God is glorious. God is glorious. That's what you should be saying.

Number four, substitution. Christ's work on the cross. This is in Romans 3.25. God put Christ forward as a propitiation.

That means one who satisfies the wrath of God. Puts Christ forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith. Here it comes.

This was to show God's righteousness. Because in his divine forbearance he has passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time.

So that he might be just. And the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Christ died for God.

So that he could die for you. He vindicated God so that he could justify you. Number five, sanctification.

Is anybody making any baby steps in sanctification? Yes, you are. You are. If you're a Christian, you are.

Why? Why is the Holy Spirit doing this for you? Second Thessalonians 1.9. These. Oops, I skipped it. Philippians 1.9. Almost got to consummation first.

Sanctification. Philippians 1.9. This I pray. That your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment.

So that you may be filled with the fruit of righteousness. Which comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God. Are you becoming a more loving person? Are you becoming a more patient, kind, meek, gentle person? Are the fruits of the Spirit being worked out in your life? If so, I'll tell you why.

To the glory and praise of God. Number six. Last one.

Second coming. Why is he coming back? Consummation. Why is Jesus coming back? Oh, hasten the day.

Second Thessalonians 1.9. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord. And from the glory of his power when he comes on that day. Here it is.

To be glorified in his saints. And to be marveled at among all who have believed. I love clear sentences.

He's coming to be marveled at. Like, you're marvelous. That's why I just came.

Just simple. Utterly life changing. Utterly life changing.

If you believe everything from predestination to consummation is for that. That God does everything he does for the glory of God. So you exist.

Your family exists. Your churches exist. Northern Ireland exists.

The world exists. The universe exists for the glory of God. What does that mean? I mean, we use words like glorify.

Glorify. Or magnify. What does it mean? What's happening if you do that? I mean, my dad said, my mom said, whether you eat or drink, whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Glorify God. What does that mean? To glorify God does not mean make him glorious. We're all agreed there, right? He's glorious whether you exist or not.

So you can't make him glorious. So glorify is not like beautify a room. Like this room is boring.

We're going to make this room beautiful. So beautify this room. You never do that.

It's heresy if you try to beautify God. Or glorify God like that. It's helpful to take the word magnify and distinguish between magnifying with a telescope and magnifying with a microscope.

We all know that you can do both, right? To magnify, you can magnify with a microscope. So you can take a human cell, which is invisible to the human eye, a very, very tiny thing, and you can make a tiny thing bigger than it is. So trying to magnify God like that is blasphemy.

Right? He's so tiny, he needs all of our help to look bigger than he is. That's blasphemy. So you don't magnify God like a microscope.

What does a telescope do? A telescope also has lenses that magnify, and telescopes magnify stars. Why do we need to magnify stars? Because you look up at night, they look like pinpricks. Are they pinpricks? They're bigger than the solar system, which is the way God looks to this world.

Pinpricks, little teeny erasers in the night sky. He's absolutely pointless, beautiful, not. Your job is to put a telescope to that.

That's what it means. Make God look like he is, right? Make God look like he is, namely, bigger than anyone can imagine, and more glorious than anyone can imagine. So how do we do that? To magnify God like that is to, I'm going to argue, experience him and show him to be what he really is.

There's two words. Experience him and then show him to be what he really is. Here's another name for that.

Worship. And yes, the implication is all of life is worship, which is what Romans 12, 1 and 2 says. All of life is the experiencing of God as supreme and the showing of God as supreme.

You can do it in church with songs. You can do it on the street with love. You can do it with a roommate in words of witness.

There's lots of ways to show and deep ways to experience. Now, why do I use those two expressions, experience and show? Because a lot of Reformed types get nervous with the word experience, which I think is demonic, not to overstate things. We must experience him for who he is and we must show him for who he is.

Because experiencing God is an invisible act of the mind, knowing, and the heart, feeling. And God doesn't intend to be glorified invisibly. He wouldn't have created the universe.

And showing God is a visible act of the body doing. And both parts of experiencing invisibly and showing visibly are necessary without either they're incomplete. If we try to show God when there's no experience of God, there's a name for that.

Hypocrisy. Woe to you hypocrites. You clean the outside of the cup.

Make God look really, really nice in worship. Nice music. Nice preaching.

Nice everything. And inside you're full of greed. We've seen that over and over again in the States as pastors go crashing to the ground in greed.

If we think we are experiencing God where there's no impulse to show God, we've got another name for that. Dead. Faith, if it does not have works, is dead.

A good tree bears good fruit. So, the inward experience that glorifies God is knowing God truly and feeling God duly. Knowledge that is true to God, feelings that are due to God.

We cannot glorify God as we ought without knowledge that accords with God's truth and feelings, yes, feelings, that accord with God's value, greatness, beauty. If you think you can glorify God by feeling nothing as you look at His beauty, look at His value, look at His greatness, you just don't get the meaning of creation. The heart was not created to be blank as it stares at infinitely satisfying beauty.

They have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge, Paul said in Romans 10. So, without a mind that's in tune with true views of God from the book, worship is empty. And, we have a description of experience or knowing that has no experience.

Even the demons believe and tremble. Knowledge minus feeling about God is demonic. It's what the devil has.

The devil can't love Him, but he can know Him. In fact, the devil, I would argue, is probably more orthodox than anybody in this room. Meaning, he knows more about God and he trembles, but he hates it all.

We have the enormous privilege by the Holy Spirit to have been awakened to the beauty and the value and the greatness that the devil hates and is therefore blind to and blinds others to. Let's bring all this to bear now as we move to the end on corporate worship. I've seen in the Getty website and materials these verses and I still feel really, really happy to read them to you.

Just two verses on corporate worship in the New Testament. The first is Ephesians 5.18 What do we do when we come together? Be filled with the Holy Spirit. Yes.

Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Singing. Singing.

And making melody to the Lord with your heart. Giving thanks always. And for everything to God the Father in the name of Jesus Christ.

That is a rich sentence. Or here's Colossians 3.16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Teaching, admonishing one another in all wisdom.

Singing. Psalms, hymns, spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. That's really clear.

That's glorious. That's full. It's not truncated.

I'll sum it up in six sentences. Six statements. Six observations.

Number one. Starts with the word, right? Starts with the word. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

Any worship that's not starting here can go haywire. Not going to work. Number two.

Fullness of the Holy Spirit. Be filled with the Holy Spirit. What does he do? He illumines this so that these brains can see what's really here.

So seeing Christ for who He is in the word. That's number two. Number three.

I should have said just number two. Illumination by the Spirit. Number three.

See because of the illumination. I broke them out. So the word comes.

The Spirit illumines. We see. Number four.

We're moved by what we see with affections like thankfulness. Making melody with your heart giving thanks. The mind is alive to truth and the heart is alive with affections for God.

Number five. This focus of our mind on God, these affections of our hearts for God overflows with singing. So singing is number five and number six is simply you do it to people and you do it to God.

Singing to one another. Singing to God. Both of them are explicitly in these two verses.

Let's make sure we get this. It's not as though when you sing, some of your singing is to God. Great is thy faithfulness.

Oh God my Father. It's not as if some of your songs are to Christians. Come Christians join to sing.

No. All of your singing is to God and all of your singing is to others. The fact that there are others listening is why we call it corporate and the fact that you're singing to God is why we call it worship.

Corporate worship. I mean nobody puts on noise cancelling headphones while singing great is thy faithfulness because we're singing to God and nobody in their right mind says that when we sing, come Christians join to sing that we don't want, long for, and believe God Almighty is stooping low to listen and enjoy our hearts. So all singing is Godward.

All singing is manward in corporate worship. So I come to an end by asking the question that I piqued you with at the beginning. What shall we say to those folks and I can tell you where most of them live who say

you got it all wrong Getty Piper.

You should not be telling people that we gather for worship. We gather for edification. We gather to teach.

We don't gather for worship. It's not a New Testament concept. You cannot find services called worship anywhere in the New Testament.

That's true. Whoa. Is that a problem? Here's what I would say to any of you who may be here who think that way.

To say that we should gather as Christians to teach and edify on the Lord's day and not to awaken and express Godward affections is like calling for marriage without sex, eating without taste, discovery without delight, miracles without wonder, gifts without gratefulness, warnings without fear, repentance without regret, resolves without zeal, seeing without savoring. And my answer to that is no! Absolutely no! When your church gathers, of course you're gathering for edification. The Bible says so.

Let all things be done for building up. To which I ask, up to what? Building up to what? Edifying to what? I'll read you Peter's answer. Here's Peter's answer from 1 Peter 2-4.

You are being built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. And one of those beautiful sacrifices of praise to God is the fruit of lips, Hebrews 13-15. And one of the sweetest, most precious gifts of God, fruit of lips, is singing.

Why is that? This is my last question. Why is that? I mean, why didn't God create a world without singing? Why didn't He just shut down 10,000 radio stations and all they do is play singing? What's with that? Just shut them down! Why doesn't He just silence every concert hall? Why doesn't He silence the song that rises up in every culture on the planet? Why? Partly, I think, because when people sing, a new God-designed, God-reflecting beauty comes into being. But mainly, I think, it's because singing, music with words, singing has a peculiar power to awaken and carry, awaken and express strong affections which God made for Himself.

Singing is my definition. Christian singing, it's restricted to that. Christian singing is the musical use of the voice to express truth that accords with God's Word and feelings that accord with God's worth.

Say it again. Christian singing is the musical use of your voice to express truth that accords with God's Word and feelings that accord with God's worth. It's a gift beyond measuring.

And therefore, make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness and come into His presence with singing. Father, would you please create an authentic song in our hearts? You are very, very great.

We can't be satisfied with preaching. I love preaching. I gave my life to preaching.

We can't be satisfied with poetry. We can't be satisfied with painting. We can't be satisfied even with the glories of the heavens that are declaring your glory.

We have to sing how great you are. So, don't let that be artificial. Don't let that be fake.

Grant that we would experience you according to your worth and know you according to your truth as we sing. In Jesus' name, amen.

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