

# WHY IS WORSHIP CENTRAL?

## Welcome

Thanks for downloading the Speaker Notes for the Worship Central Course.

In this first session, we've outlined the structure and key points for the talk, and left room for you to add your own examples. Feel free to personalize the examples and make it your own, but we'd please ask that you keep the core material the same, as we want people to be able to get the same Course wherever they are.

We pray this course will be a great blessing to you and your worship team, and we stand with you as you seek to encounter God, equip the worshipper and empower your local church.

Tim Hughes & Al Gordon

## Introduction

Start with a personal story of how God has impacted your life through worship.

For instance, Al tells a story about becoming a Christian. Having asked God to make himself known, it wasn't until Al encountered worship - alone, on his bed, with his headphones on and 'I Will Offer Up My Life' on repeat - that he felt the life-changing truth of salvation penetrate his soul.

Tim tells another story, this time about leading worship with the song 'Amazing Grace' in a maximum security prison. The results were dramatic: men who had been locked up for their actions brought low by the loving power of God's grace, all revealed through worship.

Let's begin by looking together at Psalm 100:

"Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.  
Worship the Lord with gladness;  
Come before him with joyful songs.  
Know that the Lord is God.  
It is he who made us, and we are his;  
We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.  
Enter his gates with thanksgiving  
And his courts with praise;  
Give thanks to him and praise his name.  
For the Lord is good and his love endures forever;  
His faithfulness continues through all generations."

Psalm 100 (NIV)

Worship is going on all around us in every possible form and style you could imagine, on earth just as it is in heaven, today, right now just as it has been for thousands of years. Throughout the world and throughout history, wherever there is worship, there has always been a conversation going on about worship; from the Church Fathers wrestling with what worship should look like in the decades after Jesus, to the reformers asking what God requires of us in the light of Scripture. Today, this discussion is still as relevant as ever.

Some of us today might be disillusioned with worship, tired of performance instead of praise, or burnt out by empty religion. Or we may be afraid of the change that seems to be sweeping away all around us and uncertain of what we can bring? Or perhaps we are excited about growing in our worship but unsure how to build a firm foundation for a lifetime of authentic worship?

Whoever we are, whatever has led us to this moment, we all start here with this simple yet all-important question: why is worship central? Today, we're going to look at three reasons why we believe that worship is central. Firstly, worship is our purpose.

## 1 Worship Is Our Purpose

We are not an accident of science or a cosmic mistake. Our lives are not meaningless and our choices matter. We were created with a purpose. The Bible tells us that God made the universe and breathed life into the human race, and calls us to 'know that the Lord is God', and that 'we are his'. (Psalm 100:3-4) God created you - just as he created all of us - to be caught up in a dynamic relationship with him at every level of your life: heart, soul and mind. That is our purpose: the dynamic relationship between us and our heavenly Father that impacts every level of our lives. That's what worship is.

Worship is central to our existence because the God who created us as an act of pure joy intends us to know his love and to love him in response. The Bible tells us that before the creation of the world God chose us to be in relationship with him, and that our very existence is to be for 'the praise of his glory' (Ephesians 1:6). Just as sin is described as not giving glory to God (Rom 1:18-25), our great rescue by Jesus will ultimately lead to the arrival of heaven, which is portrayed in terms of worship (Rev 4:11). We live, breathe, move and love as expressions of God's joy. We were made to know him, to connect with him, to follow him, to serve him and to enjoy the mind-blowing, heart-stirring fullness of this world he has created. In other words, we were created to worship. It's deep in our spiritual DNA, in every encounter with God, is this sense of coming home - worship.

Everybody worships something. Whatever captivates our heart's affection, our mind's attention and our soul's ambition, it effectively has our worship. The English word 'worship' comes from the Anglo-Saxon '*weorthscipe*' which literally means to ascribe worth to something, and today we worship anything from rock stars to endorphin-exploding experiences. Those things that we value, admire, love and enjoy most, are by definition objects of our affection. C.S. Lewis explains this really well, writing, "I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed."

So worship is central because it's what we were created to do, but when we worship anything other than God we are somehow missing out on the fullness of the experience. Ultimately, if we don't find fulfillment in worshipping God, we end up worshipping nothing other than ourselves. For many, the pursuit of personal satisfaction, fame, money and power becomes the focus of their life's ambition. But however rich, powerful and famous we become, these things can never satisfy the deepest longings of our souls.

You only have to take a quick look at the Bible to see just how profound the call to worship is. When Abraham encountered God, he was called to obedient sacrifice, an act of worship. When Moses led the people out of Israel, it was so that they could worship the Lord, and Miriam leads them in worship. When Job loses everything, he falls to his knees in worship. When Elijah calls down fire from heaven, it is in the context of an act of worship. When David dances before the Lord, it is worship. When Hannah hands over her baby son to the Lord, she sings a song of worship. When Mary knows that she is carrying the Christ, she worships. When the wise men greet the Christ child, they worship. When Simeon sees the infant Christ, he worships. When the disciples realize that Christ is the Lord, they worship him. As Matt Redman writes, “When we face up to the glory of God, we find ourselves face down in worship.”

So, worship is central because God made us - not as a project to be discarded once construction was complete, but as a child with whom he would share a powerful, ongoing relationship. Worship is another word for how we hold up our side of the bargain.

Until we discover our purpose in this life, we will never be satisfied. St Augustine once prayed “you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” In Jesus, we find the answer to the meaning of life. We have been made by the Maker, and saved by the Saviour with the one extraordinary purpose of enjoying relationship with God.

We could spend hours looking at definitions of worship, and it would be fascinating for a while. But there’s a danger in overanalyzing: we might be tempted to reduce worship to just another ‘activity’ that the gathered community of God do when we meet together. Or we might fall into the trap of seeing worship as having nothing to do with singing or liturgy, but

rather how we live the whole of our lives. However, worship must not become a victim of oversimplification. It involves everything, both the corporate activity and the personal lifestyle.

Here's what one writer and theologian - Simon Ponsonby - writes:

“Worship is not limited to singing songs, but is a life poured out in holiness, obedience, service, almsgiving, mission, sharing the Gospel with the lost, sharing our bread with the poor, sharing our lives with one another. I believe God receives glory by the very birth of an infant, by bees making honey, by husband and wife making love, when the painter paints, the singer sings, the architect designs, the teacher teaches, the athlete competes. Worship in song, in verbal praise is one part, a significant part of worship, of glorifying God, but not the only one.”

Worship involves all of our lives, not just one part. Through the rest of this Course we are going to be focusing mainly on one specific aspect of worship - expressing our worship through singing, playing music and raising our voices together - but we must start here by stating that while this is a crucially important part of worship, it is not the only way we worship.

Worship is the total alignment of our heart, soul, mind and strength with the will of God. It is our wholehearted response to God's extravagant love and mercy. William Temple, the great Archbishop, wrote that, “Worship is the submission of all of our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by his holiness, nourishment of mind by his truth, purifying of imagination by his beauty, opening of the heart to his love, and submission of will to his purpose. And all this gathered up in adoration is the greatest of human expressions of which we are capable.”

As Psalm 100 reminds us, the wonderful news of the Christian faith is that there is a God, he is good and we can know him. Today, we are invited into the beautiful exchange that is worship, where we find our true identity and purpose as worshippers of the living God.

## 2 Worship is our Priority

If worship is our purpose, and it finds expression through the whole of our lives, then it stands to reason that we must make it the main priority in our lives. We need to learn what it means to make the worship of Jesus Christ central. Put simply, worship is our response to what we value most. Genuine worship involves giving everything of who we are to God. He needs to become our number one priority above every other ambition, affection and activity.

### [Insert Story]

Insert your own humorous story that makes the point that your relationships require you to give your all. For instance, Tim tells a story about telling his future wife Rachel that he was '99%' sure he wanted to marry her. It didn't go down too well. Tell your own story of how you discovered that the best relationships require you to give it your all.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus is invited to the home of two sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha absorbs herself in the busy preparation of organizing a meal, while Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, refusing to give in to the formidable family, cultural and religious expectations of the day. It was a shocking gesture, but she was utterly devoted, utterly determined to make the most of every minute, to hold on to the Lord's every word. In a first century home, she could not have been unaware of her sister Martha, working hard in the kitchen as was then culturally expected of the women of the family. Practicing hospitality and welcoming strangers



was a high religious duty, laid down in Scripture, and highest of all was to welcome a traveling rabbi or teacher. And yet Mary does something radical and countercultural. Luke's Gospel describes her as 'sitting at Jesus feet', in the posture of a disciple, effectively asking to become a disciple herself.

Frustrated, outraged, Martha bursts in and even interrupts the teacher, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" And yet Jesus defends Mary's choice "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)

Worship will only be our priority if we choose to make it so. God does not force us to worship him. We are left with a decision to make: will we choose to be like Martha, caught up in the busyness of life, even distracted by doing things for Jesus; or will we choose to be like Mary, whose priority was to sit at Jesus' feet, completely focused on him, not letting anything, not our ambition or self-interest, not the expectations of others, nor any kind of distraction, get in the way. That choice has implications for our time, our lifestyle, our money, our energy and our ambitions in this life. In worshipping God we make him the priority. As Richard Foster writes, "If the Lord is to be Lord, worship must have priority in our lives. The divine priority is worship first, service second."

Psalm 100 encourages us to 'enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.' There's something very deliberate and practical about this verse: a choice is made, a decision is reached to worship God with thanksgiving and praise.

Sometimes we have to choose to wake up to worship, but at other times we have to choose to slow down. We can become so distracted by the busyness of life, doing, for the most part, good and noble things, while failing to make the 'better' decision; that of prioritizing worship

above all else. We must guard ourselves against worshipping the work of the Lord, rather than the Lord of the work.

The former Vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, Bishop Sandy Millar, tells the story of attending an early Vineyard Conference in California. Having been dramatically inspired by all that was going on, he went for a walk along the beach to pour his heart out to God. He was so thankful for all that was going on in the life of HTB. As he prayed, he was suggesting things that he could offer up for God to use. When he asked the question, God what do you want from me? He felt God clearly say, “Sandy, all I want is you.” Before we get caught up making grand statements and trying to offer God our money, achievements and ambitions, we need to first and foremost offer up ourselves—all that we are, all that we have been and all that we will ever be.

In worship we find perspective, we find hope, we find meaning and joy. We engage in intimacy – closeness. The fact that we don’t simply worship God from afar is earth shattering. We don’t just sing about him, a distant deity, we sing to him; we draw near.

The Greek word most used in the New Testament for worship is *proskuneo*; its literal meaning is to come towards, to kiss, to bow down and pay homage. It suggests that our worship should be about both awe and reverence towards a holy God, but also closeness and intimacy. When we worship we come humbly to approach the ruler of the heavens and earth. We bow down in adoration. But we also enjoy friendship.

That word ‘intimacy’ is so easily misunderstood or reduced to merely romantic notions about God. True intimacy is raw, honest, passionate and powerful. We engage in intimacy when we stop pretending, we allow God full access to all that we are. We let down the barriers and trust completely.

A group of the UK's elite special forces, the SAS, were fighting behind enemy lines. They were interviewed by a journalist, who asked them to summarize their relationship with one another using just one word. After much thought they came back with the word 'intimacy.' Perhaps not the first word you would associate with some of the toughest of soldiers, but these men who daily entrusted their lives to one another, who shared their deepest fears, who saw one another in the most pressured of conditions, knew what it was to experience intimacy.

Worship through singing is not about entertainment or warming up a congregation for the preacher. It is about encountering God and experiencing the liberating reality of intimacy. Worship is not about impressing other people with our liturgies, creativity or music. It is not a commodity for a congregation to enjoy and consume. No, worship is about encountering the reality of God and reordering our priorities in response to who he is. It involves drawing people's focus back to Christ, reminding them who they should be prioritizing.

We should never approach a church service with the question 'what can I get out of this service?' Instead we should be asking 'what can I give?' If we approach each song thinking, 'I like this one, I'll engage in worship' or 'I hate this song, I can't worship to this,' we'll completely miss the point. As worshippers we come to give. Practically that may involve choosing to enter in worship by using our whole bodies and deciding not to switch off and only observe. Remember those words from Psalm 100? We're called to 'shout' and to come before God with 'joyful songs'.

Throughout the Psalms we're urged to worship physically – to bow down, to lift up our hands, to sing a new song, to jump, to dance. One of the Hebrew words for praise, *halal*, means 'to make a show or rave about, to glory in or boast upon, to be clamorously foolish about your adoration of God.' The one thing genuine worship should never be is dull, rather our worship should be passionate and wholehearted.

Our very first calling is to love God. In that sense, the ‘Great Commandment’ must come before the ‘Great Commission.’ That means that first we must learn to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and then out of this flows everything that we do, including sharing that love with others. It might sound controversial, but the church’s most urgent activity here on earth is not mission, evangelism or caring for the poor, even though these things are essential. Our primary calling and concern is to see God glorified.

John Stott wrote: “The highest of missionary motives is neither obedience to the Great Commission, nor love for sinners who are alienated and perishing, but rather zeal – burning and passionate zeal – for the glory of Jesus Christ”. If we want to see the re-evangelization of the nations and the transformation of society, we must learn to make worship our priority.

### 3 Worship Is Our Privilege

Worship is our purpose and our priority, and it is also the greatest privilege we could ever know. The one who made the universe, who flung the stars into space, invites us to enter his gates thankfully, to run into his courts with praise, and to come close.

[Insert Story]

Add in your own humorous story here about a time when you discovered that you weren’t quite as important as you would have liked to think you were, or you found yourself humorously humbled. The point here is simple: give some sense of contrast between the way we create our own hierarchies here on earth and the incredible ease with which we can access God and worship him.

The amazing truth is that when we worship God, we are not disappointed. Psalm 100 encourages us not just to draw near with thanksgiving and praise, but also to enjoy the reality that the “Lord is good and his love endures forever...” God has made it possible for every one of us to enter in and experience the privilege of his presence. In Christ, we are free to enjoy access all areas by the Holy Spirit, a pleasure we can enjoy forever. In Jesus, we have passed through the security cordon into the Holy of Holies. However, this freedom has come at a great cost.

Once there was a time when the people of Israel were symbolically separated from God by a thick curtain in the temple. Something extraordinary happened on the day that Jesus offers his life on the cross for us. At the moment Jesus breathed his last breath, the Bible records that the curtain in the temple was torn in two, from the top to the bottom. Jesus has broken down the barrier, opened wide the way and invites us to experience his presence and enjoy him forever. As we draw near to God, we find ourselves running into the arms of a good and faithful Father, whose love endures forever.

In the presence of this all-loving, creator Father, extraordinary things begin to happen. We begin to change. Have you noticed the way that we start to look like the ones we love the most? Dog owners start to look like their pets and married couples start to share mannerisms. Whether it's friends or family, heroes of celebrities, whatever we cherish, changes us.

As we worship in Christ we experience a glorious chain reaction of blessing. We discover more of God's love, his goodness, his faithfulness through every generation, and our hearts cannot help but respond in worship. At the same time, God reveals more of the wonders of his love, and we experience forgiveness, healing and restoration. Like the woman who interrupts Jesus at supper to wet his feet with her tears, we love much because we have been forgiven much. This chain reaction of the heart explodes on and on into eternity, as we

enjoy God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism explains that the 'chief end' of mankind is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. C.S. Lewis, reflected on this famous saying, writing, "Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify him, God is inviting us to enjoy him."

We started this session exploring the fact that worship is simply this: God created us to be caught up in a dynamic relationship with him at every level of our life: heart, soul and mind. When we nurture that dynamic relationship, guess what - we want more. Worship sparks worship. Whatever type we're talking about - the singing or the living, the face-down silence at the foot of the cross or the determination to sacrifice that which we value in pursuit of a deeper connection with God - when we live like this we cannot help but be changed, be made whole and be inspired to want more.

So we end where we began: worship is central to everything we do, to everything we are and to every aspect of how we live in the Kingdom of God. Worship is central to everything the church does, regardless of style, denomination or tradition. All that we believe, think, say and do must flow from our beating heart of worship. Jesus is our purpose, our priority and our privilege, and today he calls us back to discover the urgency of worship. As William Temple writes, "This world can be saved from political chaos and collapse by one thing, and that is worship."

As we end this session and start this Course, I'd want to encourage us to do one simple thing: to make worship even more central to our lives. That's the invitation: to embark on a glorious adventure that never ends, but that continually captivates and satisfies. Let's ask the Holy Spirit to reveal Jesus to us in a fresh way today. The Bible tells us that God pours "his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:5). Why don't we ask God to fill us with new purpose, to reorder our priorities and to pour the Father's love into our hearts, so that we might take another step on this, life-changing, dynamic relationship with him.

## Prayer

Father, we thank you for the amazing gift of Jesus. Thank you that in him we find our true purpose as worshippers. We pray you would help us make worship our priority, and that we would enjoy the great privilege of drawing close to you in worship. Come Holy Spirit as we wait...

## Next

We'd encourage you to have a really good time of waiting on God, allowing him to reorder people's priorities. As you feel comfortable, we'd encourage people to pray for each other and to make space for the Holy Spirit to meet with people.

Once the time of prayer ministry has ended, encourage people into their groups and to serve tea and coffee. The questions for discussion are available at the bottom of the 'Notes' which can be downloaded from [WorshipCentral.org](http://WorshipCentral.org).

Also, we'd love your feedback on the session you've just given, as we're continually in the process of honing and updating this material. You can upload your examples and illustrations on the website