

ESSENTIAL CHURCH, PART 5: SURPRISED BY WORSHIP

Revelation 1:9-18 (NASB)

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The author of *The Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien, went out of his way to infuse his fantasy story with aspects of Christian reality. This can be a dangerous game. How do you show some aspect of the divine without distorting it and thereby blaspheming? In one case he does so by inventing a race of beings called elves. Elves are flesh and blood creatures who nevertheless live forever unless slain in battle. They live in immense harmony with nature. They live in the forest and actually shape trees to make dwellings for themselves.

Tolkien arranges an encounter with the elves for a traveling group of characters whose task it is to journey to Mount Doom and cast an evil ring of power into its fires because it is the only way to destroy it. The company of travelers is comprised of four hobbits, a dwarf, an elf, two men, and sometimes a wizard. They travel to Lothlórien, the magical forest which is the fairest and last dwelling place of elves in Middle Earth.

The company is confronted at the border of the forest by elf guards and then conveyed out of the light of common day into the magical dwelling place of these immortal beings. The travelers feel a sense of great dread. They are aware as well of great privilege because no one other than elves had been permitted into Lothlórien for ages. At the center of the forest is a magnificent grove where dwell the immensely powerful Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel. The travelers are led up a spiral staircase wrapped around a magnificent tree to the royal chamber where they hold their breath as they await their audience.

The encounter begins not with the approach of footsteps but a brilliant light. The travelers are taken aback to discover that the Lord and Lady of this semi-divine race radiate a glory. It becomes clear, without a word being spoken, that Lady Galadriel is preeminent. As she gazes upon them the hobbit Sam is overcome with wonder. The hobbit Frodo is shocked to discover that Galadriel knows all about his secret mission to destroy the ring, and that she knows his suffering as well. The king-in-waiting, Aragorn, knew what to expect and yet is overcome as well by the presence of Galadriel. Although he is royalty among the race of men, he bows his head to her in honor. The elf Legolas gazes upon his queen with undisguised reverence and love. The man Boromir discovers that Galadriel knows the evil which is in his heart, and he weeps in his grief before her purity. Finally, the dwarf, Gimli, who was prepared to see the powerful evil creature of dwarf legend instead finds that his heart is galvanized to adore her.

No one among the travelers is unmoved. They are all caught by surprise by the glory of this elvish king and queen. And they are all changed by the encounter.

WHY THE SURPRISE?

You may have had this experience yourself in the real world—in the universe where the Glorious One is not merely an elevated elf but the genuine Source of all things, the Holy One, and Ruler of All.

The Scripture says that for a finite human being even to gaze upon his face would bring instant death. Yet he grants us encounters where a gleam of his glory shines upon us, reflects off our faces, and penetrates our hearts. Sometimes it happens when we are in the middle of a very familiar pattern of outward worship. Sometimes it happens when we least expect it.

But wherever and whenever it may happen it is always a surprise. The transcendence of God is the fact that he is lifted up higher than we can ever reach. Because of this he can never become mundane! That is why heaven will never be boring. Nothing in our humanity can comprehend the reality of God's glory. And so whether it is the first encounter of worship or the one hundred thousandth we find ourselves surprised to be moved and known and humbled and convicted and blessed.

But the surprise of worship can be foiled so that it does not happen. Our sin nature makes us all disconnected from the One True God. It is possible by instinctively suppressing the truth to be born, to live, and to die in utter poverty of soul without ever tasting the sweetness of God's glory. Even as believers in Christ we can limit the impact of God on us by thinking small and unworthy thoughts of him. And yet worship is the essential experience of mankind before the God who made us. We cannot be true children of God without it. So the question before us is how we can embrace true worship and enshrine it in an essential church where we find ourselves surprised by God's radiance again and again.

THE PATH TO ENCOUNTER WITH GLORY

The Apostle John becomes our tutor as we examine an encounter he had with the glory of God toward the end of his life. There can be no formula for this, but there are things we can do to embrace the reality as God chooses to give it. In the first chapter of the book of Revelation John discovers that he has a divine appointment to meet Christ for the purpose of setting up the writing of this part of the Bible. John tells us where he was when it began: **"I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus"** (Revelation 1:9). John had been sent to this tiny island in the Mediterranean by the Roman authorities to shut down his ministry in the region we know as modern-day Turkey.

The reason he was there gives us our first tip on encountering God, namely that we live a pattern of worship in our lives. John's entire being was consumed with serving his Lord as an act of worship. He was so effective and persistent that he became a target for the authorities. Living a pattern of worship is a wise plan if we want to be in the position to encounter God.

Secondly, we need to learn how to be in the Spirit. John tells us prior to his encounter: **"I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day..."** (Revelation 1:10a). Let us begin by doing some clear thinking about what being in the Spirit is not. I have read a fair number of commentators who like to use the word "trance" to describe this experience. This word comes with a truckload of false assumptions. It makes it sound like John was simply having the same kind of bizarre collapse common in pagan religions, the occult, and substance abuse. On the contrary, these kind of trances are a counterfeit of being in the Spirit. They are marked by the loss of self-possession which is the opposite of the work of the Holy Spirit who produces the fruit of self-control. John was not passed out on the beach like a frat boy or possessed by a spirit like a tribal shaman.

Being in the Spirit cannot mean anything other than a heightened experience of the presence of God which has come upon us. For many years in the development of the Alliance people would talk of "the glory coming down," and how old Hattie would get up and walk the aisles during worship waving her hand in the air and praising God. The glory is the key concept, because it is the shining forth of God's characteristics. So when we are in the Spirit we experience a heightened sense of the reality of God and a sharpened awareness of all that he is. There is a sweetness in his Spirit which surpasses every other human satisfaction.

So how do we get it? I suggest the foolish notion that we begin by wanting it. How intensely do we really want to sense the holiness, grace, truth, love, mercy, and justice of God? Make sure that you are not diluting your desire for the reality of God with desires for earthly things. Make sure you explicitly receive the Holy Spirit into your life. Then, while wanting Him above all things and actively inviting him into you, read the Bible, go to church, go on a prayer walk, drink in creation, or whatever promises to lead you toward him. He will meet you. You will not be disappointed.

Thirdly, John opened himself to an encounter with God by listening for his voice, as he wrote: **"I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, 'Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea'"** (Revelation 1:10b-11). I realize that John was having an experience related to his apostleship and the inspiration of the Bible. While we can never repeat that, it is fair to say that John heard God because he was always listening for God. We will prepare ourselves to hear his voice by learning to live with our ears and hearts open.

Fourthly, we must look for the glory of God. I think John was always looking, and here's what he saw on this occasion: **"And I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His breast with a golden girdle. And His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been caused to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. And in His right hand He held seven stars; and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength"** (Revelation 1:12-16). I do not say that we will see what John saw. We will see whatever God wants us to see—if and only if we are looking.

This is a harder question than it sounds because there is nothing natural to us about the character of God in his glory. We will not see God in worship until we embrace the pointed reality that his glory is not about us, our success, our satisfaction—not even our healing, our consolation, or our relief. Looking for his glory means looking for what is all about him. Years ago the practice of worship at the General Council of the Alliance was solely piano, organ, and songs from the hymnbook. This was true even for decades after the world changed around us and God had begun glorifying himself with other instruments and songs. Dr. David Rambo, then president of the Alliance, was the one who led the shift to a genuinely blended pattern of worship at Council to better reflect who we were and where we were headed in our churches. Dave Rambo is now famously quoted in his answer to a pastor who was fussing about the change: "You don't seem to understand, brother. This is not about you."

What John the Apostle did in response to his overwhelming vision of Christ tells us what we

must learn to do in response to God's self-revelation, namely, leave our selfish selves behind: "**And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man...**" (Revelation 1:17a). There comes a time to abandon the irrational preference for oneself, as C. S. Lewis called it, and grant all of the preferment to God alone. John displayed this by falling before Christ as was the custom in the Ancient Near East. When you are on your face before someone else, you have signaled your abandonment of yourself to the other.

Why did John fall? Do you know that until the end God does not knock anyone down against his or her will? So why do people fall at revival services? The honest ones fall because they came to worship. Nobody falls who does not choose to do so. John fell because he had spent almost his entire adult life falling before Jesus Christ in worship. He did not care if he looked foolish as he did so because the entire focus was on the glory of God—not John! It is impossible to taste the glory of God if we are not willing to leave our selfish selves behind.

When we fulfill these prerequisites we will find ourselves surprised by the wonder and glory of God everywhere we go. We need to live a pattern of worship, learn how to be in the Spirit, listen for the voice of God, look for the glory of God, and leave our selfish selves behind.

WHERE WORSHIP IS FOUND

All of this helps us understand where and how essential worship is found. We are forced to consider hard questions. Are you on the hunt for God? Or are you on the hunt for you? Are you looking for the unexpected, unparalleled surprise of worship in all the familiar places? Why do you think the illimitable God would limit himself to that? It makes no sense. All of the paradigms are broken. They were always powerless. The hunt for the uncontainable God through patterns and styles of worship is wrong, sinful, and hopeless.

True worship is an adventure where we go on a hunt for the glory of God wherever and however he chooses to reveal himself. We should expect to be surprised by good worship. In music we may taste his glory in a choral piece sung in Latin, a melodic rock guitar piece, a child's song, an old hymn, or a forgotten chorus. But music is not the only way to seek God in worship. We should expect to be surprised by God in a reading, a skit, a video clip, a testimony, a work of art, a tree, prayers of all kinds, and of course the preaching of the word of God.

How do we hunt God down as a group? God has given his church pastors and elders to lead this effort to encounter the glory of God. Our own local church leaders have adopted a set of leadership initiatives to guide the hunt for this treasure:

1. We will seek to elevate the Godness of God and the preeminence of Christ. Nothing else really matters without this. I attended a great cathedral for a year with the finest music and worship appointments one might desire, but it was absent of the Godness of God and the preeminence of Christ. My soul almost starved to death. This is the *sine qua non* of essential worship.
2. We will seek to present all things skillfully. The Lord required this in the construction and worship of his tabernacle and temple. The quest is for excellence in worship, which is connected to skill but is not the same as mere technical excellence.

3. We will seek to involve God's people as appropriate. New Testament worship has a powerful element of group participation because anyone, from child to older person, from new believer to pastor, can be in the Spirit. The leaders will guide the process of involvement to encourage participation on the basis of readiness for a particular application in worship.

4. We will seek to maximize the gifts of people God has already given us. The Lord has supplied us with many spiritual gifts wrapped in people. We want to be grateful for what he has given us by unwrapping these gifts and using them. We also want to express our gratitude by helping people develop their gifts.

5. We will seek to connect with our existing heritage of worship. This includes things which have been powerful means of worship in the Alliance in the past. The leaders of our church are actively identifying what those things are. But it goes far beyond that to a very necessary recovery process to regain means of worship which stretch back through the ages of the church.

6. We will stretch forward in appropriate ways to embrace developing worship trends which fit our congregation and help us connect with those outside our congregation. God is still giving believers songs in the night. He is still inspiring works of Christian drama and dance, painting and literature. We will use the tests of the Godfulness of God and the preeminence of Christ to evaluate things which bubble up from the spring of the Holy Spirit. And we will make that evaluation based not only on how well such things work for us, but how they will help those outside of Christ connect with him for the first time.

Do we want to taste the richness of the glory of God? Do we want to be surprised by worship the way God intended? If we do we need to make ourselves ready the way that John the Apostle did and then we need to follow our leaders.

My wife and I went on a trip to Mexico for our thirtieth wedding anniversary. We were on a hike one day with another couple and a guide. At one point our guide ran off into a field on the hunt for a fruit called *guanabana*. We had no idea what he was looking for, but we could see him examining large green fruits hanging from a tree. He finally picked two and handed one to each couple. It looked like a small football covered in soft points. When we cut it open there was a very juicy white flesh studded with a few deep brown seeds. It had a core like a pineapple. We parceled out wedges of fruit to everyone, and when I bit into the flesh my head practically exploded with an intense wonderful flavor. I immediately thought: Who has deprived me of *guanabana* all these years? How can I get more of these?

This is a little taste of what the surprise of worship is like. *Guanabana* is fabulous, but the glory of God is better. Fill in the blank with your sweetest surprise and it will still be true: BLANK is fabulous, but the glory of God is better. Will you go on the hunt with me for the glory of God in our worship? Let us never tell God where we won't find him. The worship of our transcendent God is always a surprise, whether we find him in something familiar or unfamiliar, something new or something old. This is the consuming passion of an essential church. Once you taste the glory, you won't be satisfied with anything else.

[clip from *The Lord of the Rings, The Fellowship of the Ring*, DVD extended edition, disc 2, 0:47:18 to 0:49:00 (in ch. 37)]