

Encounter

THE GREATEST INVITATION WE WILL EVER GET

BIBLE STUDY | WORSHIP



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Encounter

THE GREATEST INVITATION WE WILL EVER GET

It is the greatest invitation any of us will ever get. Come and meet with the living God in worship.

It arrives every Sunday. We take it up, and yet the wonder of encountering God in worship can pass us by through distraction, just going through the motions or boredom.

Yet, God promises that as we draw near to him, he will draw near to us (James 4:8). How can that become more of a reality in our worship Sunday by Sunday? One answer to that question is cultivating a greater appreciation of what happens in worship.

SESSION 1

Meeting with God in worship

*"I've never really understood why our
worship service is the way it is.*

*Maybe it's just because we've
always done it that way."*

*"As long as we
are worshipping
sincerely, does it
really make any
difference about
what order we do
things in?"*

*"I love singing in church.
It's my favourite bit.*

*But I find myself tuning out
when it comes time to pray to God."*

Worship

– conversation and journey of encounter with God

It is amazing to think that many of us have spent countless Sundays worshipping God, but have maybe never really thought deeply about what we are doing and how to enter fully into the different parts of the service that fit together to help us encounter God.

In worship, God invites us into conversation in which our relationship with him can be deepened as he speaks to us and we respond to him. Throughout the service, that conversation takes us on a journey in which we, together, as the people of God:

- **gather** at God's invitation;
- **confess** the ways in which we have failed to live God's way and are **assured** of his forgiveness;
- know our lives **illuminated** by hearing God speak to us by his Spirit through his Word;
- **respond** to what God has said;
- are **blessed and sent** by God into his world to be his witnesses.

In each of the *Encounter* sessions we will become more familiar with how the different parts of a worship service set a pattern that help us encounter God. Doing so will help us to approach worship with greater understanding, but more importantly, enable us to experience more meaningfully the amazing privilege of meeting with the living God.

Approaching worship as a conversation makes it a much more personal encounter with God. Stepping into worship as a journey means we have a sense it is meant to be moving and taking us somewhere in our lives before God.

Discussion starter

In your group, write down the different parts of the worship service in your church in the order they happen most Sundays.

Bible passage:

Entering into the conversation



Isaiah chapter 6 is the story of the prophet Isaiah's encounter with God in worship.

Read Isaiah chapter 6. Try to see it as a conversation between God and Isaiah.

Gathering



In verses 1-4, Isaiah has taken time out from all that is going on around him in his life and world to take up God's invitation to worship him. God makes himself known to Isaiah. Isaiah becomes aware of his presence, power and glory.

In worship, we always begin gathering at God's invitation to meet with him. God invites us into that conversation and journey of encounter. This reminds us of the amazing truth that God loves us and wants to spend time with us.

Q.1 Describe a time in worship when you were particularly aware of God's presence, power and glory.

Confession



and assurance of forgiveness

In verses 5-7, the conversation moves on as Isaiah responds to God by openly admitting that in God's holy presence he is aware of his sinfulness. But, in turn, God assures Isaiah of his forgiveness.

A central part of worship always involves the twin reminder that our relationship with God is broken, but also that, despite our sin, God wants to forgive us and restore our relationship.

Here, in the Old Testament, an angel is the messenger of God's forgiveness, but of course in the New Testament, it is Jesus who we remember has brought God's forgiveness to our lives. A coal taken from the altar is what purifies Isaiah in his vision. Jesus' sacrifice offered on the altar of the cross is the place from which our cleansing from sin comes.

Q.2 In what ways are we sometimes made aware of our sinfulness, or God's amazing forgiveness, as we worship?

Illumination



In verse 8, God speaks again, this time with a direct challenge to Isaiah which he can either respond to or ignore. God is looking for someone to send, to go for him as a witness into the world around. Suddenly, the very purpose of the rest of Isaiah's life is lit up before him.

In worship, God always speaks directly into our lives and situations. Sometimes it is a word of challenge, at other times it is a word of encouragement. This reminds us that God's Word is living and active as the Spirit brings the illumination of his truth to our hearts.

Q.3 Although God seems to be asking a general question here about who he will send and who will go for him, Isaiah knows God is speaking to him.

Describe a time in worship when listening to the Bible reading or sermon, it felt like you were the only person in the building and God was speaking directly to challenge or encourage you.

Response



Following God's challenge in verse 8, Isaiah responds by saying "I hear you" and "here am I".

What God says in worship always calls for personal response. Because of that, worship always involves asking ourselves what change in attitude or action God is calling us to through our meeting with him.

Q.4 Give an example of how your response to something you heard God say in worship changed what you think, an attitude, action, reaction, relationship or situation in your life?

Blessed & sent



Having experienced God's blessing in worship, Isaiah is sent out into the world at God's command, and in his power, to be his witness and bring his message to others. We don't leave worship, we go, sent by God, to carry his message out into the places in which he puts us to be his representatives.

Q.5 In what ways have you found that what happens in worship strengthens and equips you to live for God throughout the rest of the week?

Mapping the journey

It is not just in Isaiah's encounter with God that this pattern in worship emerges. We also find it in the stories of Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-12) and the disciples encountering Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35).

So, let's return to the journey of worship and try to capture something of who is speaking and what is happening at different parts of the service. We will use a series of arrows to picture what is happening.

An arrow down for God speaking to us



An arrow up for us responding to God



Arrows outward for God sending us out from worship into the world



Gathering

Often expressed in some words of Scripture, the opening hymn and prayer



Confession

Often expressed in a prayer

God's assurance of forgiveness

Often expressed in a prayer



Illumination

The part of the service where we read Scripture and listen to the sermon



Response

Often expressed in silence, prayer or a song



Blessed & sent

Often expressed in a closing song and the benediction



Of course, not all that happens in any worship service fits neatly into this pattern.

However, being aware of this basic flow should help us better focus on all that is going on. The journey followed is a weekly re-enactment of the gospel in which, God calls us from sin to be forgiven through Christ's death and resurrection and sends us out to share his blessing with the world.

Q.6 How might understanding worship as both a conversation with God and a weekly gospel journey help you better enter into the fullness of meeting with God each Sunday?



Ideas for prayer

- Pray that your congregation might move beyond the familiarity and routine of worship as you gather each Sunday to a greater sense of meeting with God.
- Pray for an awareness of God's presence and worship and an expectation that he will speak to you.
- Pray for an increasing honesty in worship in which we really do own up to our sinfulness and respond to what God is saying.
- Pray for an appreciation of God's blessing on your congregation as the people of God, as you go out from worship to live and witness together for him.

SESSION 2

Gathering

Coming to worship

"Those kids were hard work to get ready for church this morning."

"I must make sure to catch Norman for a chat after the service."

"I wonder have I got everything ready for work tomorrow?"

"Oh, look who is leading today."

"I'm puffed getting up those steps."

We often arrive into worship straight out of the hurly-burly of life and straight into a multitude of potential distractions.

It is hard to slow down, be still and focus on meeting with God. This is one reason why the way the start of the service gathers us matters.

- It gathers our thoughts to focus on God.
- It helps us gather ourselves, heart, mind, soul and strength to worship him.
- It gathers us with others to worship God together.

Called to worship

In the Presbyterian form of worship, the service begins with a call to worship. Often a verse of Scripture is read, some words are spoken by whoever is leading, or the opening praise is announced in such a way that reminds us that it is God who invites us to worship him.

Discussion starter

Talk about how you feel arriving for worship most Sundays?



Bible passage:

Entering into the conversation



Psalm 100 is a good example of a call to worship used by God's people in the Old Testament.

Read Psalm 100

The psalmist's call to worship God is filled with words which can be read as either command or invitation. God commands worship as the creator, the Lord of all, who 'made us'. But he also invites us to enjoy being in his presence because "we are his people" (v3).

Q.1 The word 'worship' comes from the idea of 'worth-ship' – giving God his worth for who he is and all he does. What reasons does the psalmist give for why God is worthy of our praise?

Q.2 How do these pictures of worship, as something we are both commanded and invited to do, help us prioritise worship as a duty, but approach it with joy?

Tuning our hearts to sing his praise

A good opening praise offers us reasons to praise God. Think of the words of these well-known songs. What reminders do they offer for why God is worthy of our worship?

Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven

Praise is Rising

Come, Now is the Time to Worship

What other songs do you sing in your congregation that help you call to mind the many reasons you have to praise God?

Connected in worship

In the final verse of the Psalm, we are reminded that one of the reasons we praise God is that his faithfulness is unfailing down through the generations. This is a reminder to be passed on in worship from older, experienced believers for the encouragement of younger generations. Preferences for different worship styles cause much debate. The focus throughout the Bible is on our attitude and approach to worship, whether the worship style is to our preferences or not.

Q.4 What are the benefits of worship which connects different generations?

Q.5 What are the challenges of making worship both simple enough for the youngest to participate, but deep enough for the most mature Christian to grow?

Q.6 What might intergenerational worship look like in your congregation?

A last word on who gets the first word in worship

So, we gather together to worship God at his command and invitation. He takes the initiative, in calling us to worship him. Jesus makes the way for us to do so. We do not invite God to be present or have to impress him by how we worship. The person who gets the first word in any congregation usually sets the tone for what comes next and shapes what follows.

Q.7 What difference might understanding that God calls, commands, invites and has the first word in worship have on the way we approach what happens in our Sunday services and our attitude to worship?

Q.8 What has most captured your attention as you have thought about approaching and gathering for worship?

To think about next Sunday

How might you arrive at worship better able to enter into God's invitation to worship him right from the start of the service?



Ideas for prayer

- Pick one of the reasons the psalmist gives for why God is worthy of our worship and use it as a basis for a short prayer of praise.
- Pray for those who lead worship in your church each week, that they would approach it using their gifts with freshness week by week.
- Pray for all who gather for worship Sunday by Sunday, that they would come with expectation and hearts prepared to meet with God.

SESSION 3

Confession

and assurance of forgiveness

Saying “sorry” and hearing God say, “You’re forgiven”

“I’m sorry...”

*“I’m sorry for shouting at the
kids (and my spouse!)
on the way out the door.”*

*“I’m sorry I let my
colleague at work down
earlier this week.”*

*“I’m sorry I haven’t had a
thankful heart recently.”*

The first prayer in many worship services is what is usually referred to as a prayer of adoration and confession.

The adoration part expresses our praise and worship to God for who he is and what he is like. We often struggle to find the words for doing this, so the prayer of adoration can be really helpful in giving expression to what we know about God and how we feel about him.

The confession part follows on. It brings the failings and faithlessness of our lives into stark contrast with God, who is completely faultless and ever faithful to us. But this is quickly followed by a decisive turn to assure us of God's forgiveness. Being reminded of, and receiving afresh, God's pardon in Christ is an important part of participating in worship.



For many of us, a mixture of shame, embarrassment and lack of self-worth means that owning up to our sins and shortcomings is something we struggle to do. But it is an essential part of what it means to meet with God and to know him as our Father and our friend in worship.

Although we all have plenty for which to say sorry to God and others, the section of confession in the opening prayer can only be general, acknowledging how we often stray from God in our attitudes and actions, referring to things we have done that we shouldn't have and things which we haven't done which we should have.

To participate meaningfully in this part of the service calls us to come honestly before God and to consider and confess the particular sins and shortcomings that come to mind when joining with others in prayer. Sometimes there may be space in the prayer to confess our sins in silence to God, or our participation may be expressed by simply acknowledging our confession by joining in the 'Amen' at the end.

True-faced or two-faced before God

Having true fellowship with God or other people depends on our relationship with them being 'true-faced', rather than 'two-faced'. Instinctively, we know the difference. In the former we have a confidence in the relationship, based on trusting that nothing is hidden from view. It brings a beautiful intimacy, founded upon truth and knowing and being known by those with whom we are in relationship. In the latter, all of that is absent because of pretence and what remains unspoken. The Holy Spirit is the one who enables us to recognise and own up to our sin and to know the peace and freedom of our forgiveness in Christ.

Q.1 Verse 6 reminds us that we can only have fellowship with God when we are true-faced in his presence. How is confessing our sin essential to the health of our relationship with God?

Q.2 Fellowship also involves being together with other people with whom we share something special in common. In verse 7, what two crucial things do Christians share in common?

How might these things enable us to be more true-faced in our dealings with one another?

How does a prayer of confession, which gives us language and which acknowledges that all of us in the church are sinners, help us be realistic about our relationships with one another?

Hearing God say, "You're forgiven"

In verse 9 there is a promise of forgiveness for our sins. Verses 1 and 2 of chapter 2 tell us the reason why we can be assured of this forgiveness when we confess.

Q.3 Express these verses in your own words.

Q.4 Explain why God's forgiveness is possible.

Only fooling ourselves

Verse 8 reminds us that if we claim not to be sinful people, we are only deceiving ourselves and denying the truth. Verse 10 calls attention to how our unwillingness to confess the sinful things we do makes God out to be a liar.

The prayer of confession and God's assurance of pardon act as a crucial weekly reminder of the realities of our life before God and our shortcomings in our relationships with others. More than that, it points us beyond denial and pretence to experience the freedom of knowing God's forgiveness in Christ.

Q.5 In what real-life situations do we sometimes find ourselves:

Claiming to be without sin (v8)

Claiming we have not sinned (v10)?

Q.6 How do these verses in 1 John help us to view confession in a new light as an invitation to own our sin honestly, but to find freedom in fresh awareness of God's forgiveness?

The note of confession and the melody of grace

Well-chosen praise at this point in the service gives us words to recognise our sin, own it and articulate how it makes us feel before God, then move to an appreciation of his forgiveness.

Think of the words of these well-known songs. How do they give us words to express our confession of sin and our joy at the experience of his forgiveness in Christ?

Before the Throne of God Above

Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing

O Breath of Life

What other songs do you sing in your congregation that help you call to mind our sin and salvation in Christ?

To think about next Sunday

(Reflect on one or other of these – choose whichever most clearly matches your experience)

1. Next time you arrive at church feeling you are ‘up to date’ in confession with God, think about how the prayer of confession and assurance of forgiveness can still help you as a follower of Jesus.

2. If you are prone to doubt the assurance of God’s forgiveness in Christ and continue with niggles or even pangs of guilt, think about how you might more fully take on board God’s grace in a prayer of confession and assurance of forgiveness.



Ideas for prayer

- Pray that the Holy Spirit would reveal to you the specific sins and habits which you need to confess; assure you of God’s forgiveness; and help you to change to be more like Christ.
- Individually think of a few attitudes or actions for which you need to say sorry to God and turn them into a short, silent prayer of confession.
- Individually think of areas of your life in which you still struggle to be assured of God’s promise of forgiveness. Silently ask God to help you turn from honest confession to faith and trust in his “You’re forgiven”.
- Pray for your next church service, that the prayer of confession and assurance of God’s forgiveness would be a powerful moment, reminding everyone what God has done for them so that their worship will be even more heartfelt.

SESSION 4

Illumination

We hear God speak

"The sermon went five minutes over."

"That sermon was a wake-up call for me!"

"What was the sermon about? I don't know. I switched off by looking at my smartphone/letting my mind wander/counting the bricks on the wall."

"I never thought of it that way before until I heard today's sermon – it gave me a new perspective."

"I was so encouraged by the message today."

"That opening illustration was hilarious."

Through the Bible reading and the sermon, God speaks to us, shining the light of his Word into our minds and hearts, showing us the way to go as his timeless truth helps us make sense of the situations and sensitivities of our daily lives. And yet, sometimes, it all passes us by and washes over our heads.

Why is that?

We shouldn't expect that every sermon will obviously connect with, and speak into, our immediate life circumstances.

Sometimes, we are brought back to important foundational things that we already know, but of which we always need to be reminded. At other times, we are storing up truths for circumstances yet to arise in our experience.

The power of God's Word doesn't come from the ink on the page or the imagination of the preacher, but from the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. This is what we should pray for and open our hearts to as we listen to hear God speak and receive his 'take away' for our lives.



Discussion starter

Do you ever find yourself thinking any of the quotes on page 26 in response to the sermon? Which ones? Describe a good 'take away' from a recent sermon you have heard?

Bible passage:

Entering into the conversation



Exodus 3:1-15 is one of the most powerful moments in history of a human being hearing from God.

Read Exodus 3:1-15.

Seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary

Moses was not in a good place when this encounter with God happened. Forty years before he had murdered an Egyptian and fled to the wilderness to be a shepherd. Not exactly fulfilling his destiny. Life was very routine, mundane, ordinary. Then he sees something strange, unusual, extraordinary – but now perhaps overly familiar to Presbyterians – a burning bush that remains alive. Moses was certainly intrigued.

Sometimes we lose our appreciation of the extraordinary power of God speaking through his Word because we come to worship with little expectation and a familiarity that makes what is holy seem ordinary.

Q.1 What do you often find ordinary about worship on Sundays?

Q.2 To what extent do you have a sense of anticipation and interest before God speaks to you in a worship service? Why or why not?

Empowered by a renewed focus on God

In response to Moses' fear and reluctance, God reminds him of his power to equip for service. God reveals to Moses that he is the same God who acted in the past in the lives of the ancestors of the Israelites: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Then, in response to Moses' request for God's name, God responds with, "I AM WHO I AM". This is an empowering response to Moses' question, "Who am I that I should go..." implying that he is nobody special.

One of the impacts of God speaking to us through his Word is to give us confidence in the God he shows himself to be for us and through us as we serve him.

Q.5 Moses came away from his encounter with God with his focus shifted from his own sense of inadequacy to God's total sufficiency. How might we adjust our attitude and approach to listening to God's Word in worship to share this expectation?

Q.6 Moses also came away from his encounter with God with a definite plan of action. How might we adjust our attitude and approach to listening to God's Word in worship to have a greater expectation of God bearing fruit in our lives?

Setting the tone for illumination

The words of the praise we sing just before the sermon are meant to help us prepare our hearts to hear God speak.

Think of the words of these well-known songs. How do they help us approach the sermon with expectancy and desire that God would shine his light in our lives?

Speak, O Lord

Lord, Thy Word Abideth

Show Us Christ

What other songs do you sing in your congregation that help you open your mind and heart to what God wants to say to you?

To think about next Sunday

1. In that moment before the sermon, be aware of how you are consciously preparing to hear God speak.

2. Pay attention during the sermon for moments of particular illumination when God is shining his light upon your life to show you the error of your ways or direct you into the glory of his.



Ideas for prayer

- Pray for your minister or other preachers who will be delivering the sermon this week, this month and this year, that they would prepare well, faithfully preach the message of the Bible and, most of all, be empowered by the Holy Spirit.
- The power of God's Word doesn't come from the ink on the page or the imagination of the preacher, but from the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. Pray for open hearts among your congregation, listening to hear God speak and for his 'take away' for their lives.
- Pray that the effect of God's Word in worship would be to lift your focus off self and place it on God in all his glory and power that was revealed to Moses in this story.

SESSION 5

Response

We respond to God speaking to us

"I felt a deeper sense of God's love."

"I prayed for God to help me have a closer walk with him."

"I resolved, with God's help, to be salt and light in my workplace."

"I decided I needed to work at mending that broken friendship."

"We realised we have been too inward looking and need to reach out to the lost."

"We felt a deeper sense of being connected together as the body of Christ."

"I took communion with a deeper understanding of its meaning."

"I felt joy and peace."

"I felt ashamed of my sin but assured of forgiveness."

The end is the beginning

Have you ever thought about what level of engagement you feel at different parts of the journey of a worship service?

Often, we have a tendency to feel we have reached the high point of the service with the sermon. There is a sense of everything building up to it, and then afterwards the rest of the service feels like it is petering out, perhaps with the offering, prayer, closing praise and benediction. But if the aim of listening

to a sermon is that we “do not merely listen to the Word”, but “do what it says” (James 1:22), then the end of any sermon is only the beginning of our response.

So, we must not let the energy go out of our participation in worship, lose our focus, start to think about a million other things we need to do, before we have some hold on what God has said to us and the response he is calling from us.

Discussion starter

In which parts of the worship service do you find the greatest and least energy of engagement and participation? Why?

What variety of responses have you felt as a participant in worship?



Bible passage:

Entering into the conversation

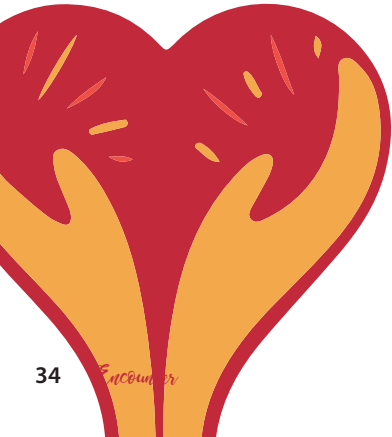
Acts 2:36-42 describes several different responses to the Apostle Peter's first sermon in Jerusalem – not long after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension to heaven – on the day of Pentecost when the disciples of Jesus received the Holy Spirit.

Read Acts 2:36-42.



A shocking sermon

Acts chapter 2 records one of the best known sermons in the Bible. It finishes with a great climax in which the preacher, Peter, hammers home the big surprise of the gospel. Jesus, who the people of Israel had put to death on the cross, was actually the Messiah for whom they had been waiting all along. As the Holy Spirit brought that reality to dawn on the listeners and its truth came home to their hearts, it provoked a range of responses. Each response helps us to reflect on the ways in which receiving God's Word into our hearts and lives brings change.



Emotional response

Verse 37 describes the emotional reaction experienced – “when the people heard this, they were cut to the heart”. Listening and responding to God’s Word involves our emotions. It is not just something to think about. Neither is it just emotionalism, because the emotion experienced quickly moves the crowd to a follow-up question, “What shall we do?”

Spiritual response

In verse 38, the crowd are moved to spiritually respond as they hear Peter’s call to repent and do so. Repentance describes a deep inward change of mind, heart and life that comes from a response to the Holy Spirit’s work within.

Symbolic response

In verse 38, being baptised was the outward symbol of the inward reality of the change that the hearers had experienced during the sermon. It showed that they wanted to publically acknowledge that they had died to themselves and risen again to new life in Christ.

Action response

In verses 42-47, we see that the response to the sermon brought deep and lasting change. It moved beyond emotion, inward change and symbolism to a renewed commitment to live God’s way.

Q.1 In what way does what happens in verse 37 help us to understand a response to God’s Word that engages the emotions, but isn’t just the emotionalism of the moment?

Q.2 In what way does the meaning of repentance help us to grasp the depth of inward change that responding to God’s Word often requires of us?

Q.3 In what simple ways might we do something symbolic in response to a sermon that shows a public commitment to be changed by what we have heard God say?

Q.4 Look again at verses 42-47. Pick out the practical ways in which responding to God’s Word changed the inward and outward facing life of their church community.

Getting ready to go

As we move into the final part of the service it is not about winding down and getting ready to go back home. It is about gearing up and getting ready to go forward with God into the rest of our lives – our personal circumstances, the home, work, social situations in which we spend most of our time and the relationships we have with others.

We go, challenged, changed, encouraged, enriched, instructed, inspired, repenting, renewed – all expressions of responses to encountering God in worship.



The overflow of response

A well-chosen closing praise should connect to the theme of the sermon and help us give expression to our response.

Think of the words of these well-known songs. How do they help us express kind of responses that we have seen in Acts chapter 2?

Take My Life and Let It Be

All to Jesus I Surrender

I Will Offer Up My Life

What other songs do you sing in your congregation which help you respond to God's Word in worship?

To think about next Sunday

1. Think of ways you can better prepare for, and participate in, listening to a sermon with an ear to the response it might be calling from you.

2. Think about whether your response to what God says in worship tends to be more emotional or thoughtful. Consider how you could give fuller expression to the full range of biblical responses in Acts 2.

3. Think about what you do immediately after church and whether it helps you fasten upon an appropriate response to his Word, or distracts you from it. Consider how you can make sure you are making space to process God's Word.



Ideas for prayer

- Pray that in the next sermon you, and others, would respond as God intends emotionally, spiritually, symbolically and with action in a meaningful and appropriate way.
- Pray for a deeper understanding of the symbolic responses to God, especially the Lord's Supper and baptism – that the symbol would help you engage more deeply with

God's grace and love emotionally, spiritually and spurring you on to action.

- Pray that your congregation, like the church in Acts chapter 2, would know the evidence of the presence of God as a direct result of having hearts and lives responsive to what he says week by week.

SESSION 6

Blessed & sent

We go out in love and serve the Lord

"I feel blessed – not just because of all the good things God gives me to enjoy, but with a deep inner sense of being blessed."

"For me, the end of the worship service in church is the beginning of serving in the world for that week."

"I like it when we say together, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all' – it's a lovely, visible way of expressing that we are all part of God's family."



Famous last words

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God,
And the fellowship of the
Holy Spirit,
Be with us all,
Now and forevermore.
Amen

These, or some similar words, tend to mark the last word of worship. If the service begins with God's call and invitation to come and be with him in worship, it ends with his promise that he will be with us as we go out into the world.

How good to know that grace, love and fellowship of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, of which we have been reminded and by which we have been renewed in worship, are ours now and forevermore.

The benediction is one of the most familiar, yet least understood parts of worship. In the benediction God speaks a final word to us. He has the last word in worship. Because we often close our eyes for the benediction, often we regard it as a closing prayer, asking for God's blessing. But it is actually the opposite, in which God looks us full in the face and speaks his beautiful and powerful promise to bless us.

This final session is about the blessing or benediction which closes a typical Presbyterian worship service.

Discussion starter

Although the benediction is much more than a farewell, it is something we share together as we part as the people of God who have gathered for worship. The word 'goodbye' in English is a shortened form of 'God be with you'. 'Adieu' in French means literally 'to God' or 'I commend you to God'.

Share about a time when you said goodbye and you wanted to say more than the one word we normally say – what sort of things did you say?

Bible passage:

Entering into the conversation



Numbers 6:22-27 is a well-known blessing given to Aaron by God to use in worship. We might recognise it best as something we sing at a baptism, but it helps us to unpack the idea of a benediction in the Bible.

Read Numbers 6:22-27.

Q.1 The word 'you' is repeated in these verses six times. Its repetition is a sign of God being personal in his relationship with his people. While it is repeated to God's people as a body gathered together for worship, we are also to receive it personally.

What would it mean for God to bless your congregation as a people he has gathered together?



Blessing from God to us

The journey of worship sees us called and invited by God, confessing our sin to him, assured of his pardon in Christ, illumined and enriched by his Word for our lives and readied to respond. It is a positive journey and it is meant to end with the resounding reminder that God is with us, for us, around and ahead of us.

Often we struggle to know and experience God's acceptance, but the benediction underscores God's desire not only to accept us, but to go further and bless us in our lives. In doing so, it takes us right back to the start at creation when God blessed Adam and Eve who he had made. It also lifts our eyes to the horizon of the future when we will know all the blessings of living in God's new heaven and earth. And, in between, as we experience all life's joys and sorrows, we are reminded that God is always there to bless us with his unfailing presence and power.

Q.2 We often think that God blessing us in our lives will mean that we will be prosperous, successful and problem free. But what is God promising in these verses?

Q.3 The promise to 'keep you' means to protect from harm. It challenges us about what, or who, we look to for our security. In what ways might trusting in God to bless us call us back to centre our lives on him?

Q.4 The picture of God 'making his face shine on us' and 'turning his face towards us' expresses the intimacy of eye contact and the delight of a smile. How do those ideas challenge and expand your view of God's relationship with you?

Q.5 God promises that he will be gracious to his people and give them peace. Grace is God's unearned favour. Peace speaks of a whole, balanced life. In your own words, express what receiving these promises from God means to you.

To think about next Sunday

1. Observe how the words of benediction are spoken in your congregation whether they are pronounced by the person leading worship or said together, with eyes closed or open. However they are spoken, reflect on how you can more fully appreciate the rich meaning of this part of the service.

2. Remember that God's last word in worship reminds us that he is with us and for us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit as we go out into his world to live for him.



Ideas for prayer

It is suggested that this session is closed with prayer – as usual some ideas are given below. This prayer can be a prayer of thanks for God's blessing, a prayer asking for God's blessing in particular situations and a prayer of sending out with God's blessings.

- Pray for a greater understanding and appreciation of what it is to be blessed by God – thank God for specific personal blessings and the deeper blessings we have in common with all believers.
- Pray for God's keeping – in the face of specific concerns and an overall sense of his close presence with us in all things.
- Pray for a greater intimacy in worship as we experience God turning his face towards us.
- Thank God for his grace and peace towards us and pray that something of him would overflow from our lives and draw others to know him.



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