

Unity in Worship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Rev. 4:8, 11; Matt. 4:8, 9; Dan. 3:8–18; Rev. 14:9; Rev. 14:6, 7; Acts 4:23–31.*

Memory Text: “Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people—saying with a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water.’ ” (*Revelation 14:6, 7, NKJV*).

Soon after the Day of Pentecost, the early Christians spent much of their time in worship. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (*Acts 2:42, NKJV*). The joy that came from knowing Jesus as the Messiah, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, filled their hearts with thanksgiving and gratitude to God. What a privilege to know this wonderful truth. These early Christians felt the need to spend time together in fellowship, study, and prayer, all in order to thank God for His revelation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and for what He had done in their lives.

The church of Jesus Christ is by definition a worshipping community, called into being by God to be “a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (*1 Pet. 2:5, NKJV*). Gratitude to God expressed in community worship transforms people’s hearts and minds into the likeness of the character of God and prepares them for service.

This week’s lesson focuses on the meaning of worship and how it preserves unity among believers in Jesus.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 15.

Worshipping Our Creator and Redeemer

In discussions about worship, we often highlight elements of worship, what it includes and how it is done. But what is the deep meaning of worship? What does it mean to worship God? And why do we do it? In Psalm 29:2, David states: “Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness” (*Ps. 29:2, NKJV*). This psalm points us in the right direction to understand the meaning of worship. To worship the Lord is to give Him the glory and honor He deserves.

Read Revelation 4 and 5. What reasons do the inhabitants of heaven give for worshipping God and Jesus, the Lamb of God? See Rev. 4:8, 11; 5:9, 10, 12, 13.

This depiction of worship in the throne room of heaven as Jesus is introduced as the Lamb of God and Savior of the world is awe-inspiring. Worship happens when God’s creation responds to Him with words of adoration and thankfulness for what He has done. Worship is the response of a grateful person for God’s creation and salvation. At the end of time, the redeemed also will join in adoration and respond in a similar way to God’s salvation. “ ‘Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints! Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You, for Your judgments have been manifested’ ” (*Rev. 15:3, 4, NKJV*).

So, worship is a response of our faith in God for His mighty works: first, for creating us, and, second, for redeeming us. In worship we give to God the adoration, reverence, praise, love, and obedience we believe He is worthy to receive. Of course, what we know about God, as our Creator and Savior, comes from what He revealed to us in Scripture. Furthermore, what Christians know about God was revealed more fully in the person and ministry of Jesus (*see John 14:8–14*). That is why Christians worship Jesus as Savior and Redeemer, as His sacrificial death and resurrection are at the very core of worship.

When Christians come together in worship, it is out of this sense of awe and thankfulness that our worship should proceed.

Think about what we have been given in Christ as our Creator and Savior, about what He has spared us from, and about what He offers us—all because He willingly died in our stead. Why should these truths be the foundation of all our worship?

False Worship

Read Matthew 4:8, 9. What was Jesus' third temptation in the wilderness?

With pride and arrogance, Satan declared himself to be the rightful ruler of the world, the owner of all its riches and glory, claiming the honor and respect of all who live in it, as if he had created the world. What an insult to God, the Creator. Satan revealed that he knows exactly what worship is about: it is to give honor and respect to the rightful owner of the universe.

Compare the experience of the three Hebrew friends in Daniel 3 (especially verses 8–18) with that of the believers who will face the end-time power of Revelation 13:4 and 14:9–11. What is at stake at the time of the end? What is the core issue in both accounts?

From Cain and Abel, to the three Hebrew boys in Babylon, to final events regarding “the mark of the beast” (*Rev. 16:2*), Satan seeks to establish a false system of worship, one that takes people away from the true God and, even if subtly, direct worship toward himself. After all, even from before the Fall, he wanted to be like God (*Isa. 14:14*). It’s no coincidence that just as the three young men faced the threat of death unless they were to worship an “image,” in the last days God’s faithful people will face the threat of death unless they will worship an “image,” as well. Why worship any “image” when we are called to worship the true God instead?

“Important are the lessons to be learned from the experience of the Hebrew youth on the plain of Dura. . . .

“The season of distress before God’s people will call for a faith that will not falter. His children must make it manifest that He is the only object of their worship, and that no consideration, not even that of life itself, can induce them to make the least concession to false worship. To the loyal heart the commands of sinful, finite men will sink into insignificance beside the word of the eternal God. Truth will be obeyed though the result be imprisonment or exile or death.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 512, 513.

What are different ways, even now, that we can be tempted into worshipping anyone else other than the only Being worthy of our worship? How might false worship be a more subtle threat than we realize? What are some things that we might even now be tempted to worship?

The First Angel's Message

Seventh-day Adventists see the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6–12 as depicting their mission and the core of their message just before the second coming of Jesus (*Rev. 14:14–20*). These are the important messages to be preached with “a loud voice” to all inhabitants of the earth.

Read Revelation 14:6, 7. What is the first angel's message, and what does it say about God? Why is there a reference to worship in this message?

The first of the three angels' messages proclaims a message to the entire world. This is the fulfillment of Jesus' prediction in Matthew 24:14. There is a sense of urgency and haste in the depiction of these three angels and their mission. The first message urges people to focus on God because “the hour of His judgment has come” (*Rev. 14:7, NKJV*). The second coming of Jesus is the catalyst for the judgment.

“Fear God,” the angel says (*Rev. 14:7*). For those who do not take God seriously, this message and call to action will indeed generate fear in their mind. But for those who have been followers of Jesus, this call invites awe and respect. They look up to God and see the fulfillment of His promises. A sense of grateful reverence for God overtakes them.

“And worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water” (*Rev. 14:7, NKJV*). This language makes an unmistakable allusion to the Sabbath commandment, with its reference to Creation (*see Exod. 20:8–11*). The God of Creation, who instituted the Sabbath as a memorial of His creative power, is the One who is to be worshiped and revered.

It is interesting to note that at the end of time worship is identified as a key issue in the great controversy for the allegiance of the human race. This worldwide announcement is a call to worship the Creator.

“The central issue in the final crisis will be worship. Revelation makes clear that the test will not be denial of worship, but rather who is worshiped. At the time of the end, only two groups of people will be in the world: those who fear and worship the true God (*11:1, 18; 14:7*) and those who hate the truth and are worshipers of the dragon and the beast (*13:4–8, 14:9–11*). . . .

“If worship is the central issue in the final conflict, no wonder then that God sends His end-time gospel urging the inhabitants of the earth to take Him seriously and worship Him as the Creator, the only One worthy of worship.”—Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2002), pp. 444, 445.

Bible Study and Fellowship

Read Acts 2:42. What were some of the elements of early Christian worship?

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship” (*Acts 2:42, NKJV*). From the earliest moments of the church, worship has been characterized by the centrality of the study of the Word of God given to us by the apostles. The first Christians were faithful in studying the Scriptures for what they said about Jesus the Messiah. They were in constant fellowship to share with one another the blessings God had given them and to encourage each other in their spiritual walk with God. In the Word they mined the sacred truths that became the foundation of their message to the world.

What do the following passages say about the importance of studying God’s Word in fellowship with other believers?

2 Kings 22:8–13 _____

Acts 17:10, 11 _____

2 Tim. 3:14–17 _____

“Wherever the truths of the gospel are proclaimed, those who honestly desire to do right are led to a diligent searching of the Scriptures. If, in the closing scenes of this earth’s history, those to whom testing truths are proclaimed would follow the example of the Bereans, searching the Scriptures daily, and comparing with God’s word the messages brought them, there would today be a large number loyal to the precepts of God’s law, where now there are comparatively few.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 232.

We are a united people because of the truths that we proclaim, truths that we find from the Word of God. This was true of God’s church in the early days, and it is true of it today. The study of God’s Word forms the core of both our worship to God and our unity as a people who have been called to proclaim the three angels’ messages to the world. When we come together as a family to fellowship and worship, the Scriptures speak to us words from God to guide our lives in preparation for our mission and for Jesus’ second coming.

How firmly grounded are you, from the Bible, in what we believe? That is, are you grounded enough in it to the point where you could, like the three Hebrew boys, stand firm in the face of death?

Breaking of Bread and Prayer

Whatever the challenges the early church faced, they were united in their common faith in Jesus and in the truth He had entrusted them to spread to the world. It's what Peter even called "present truth" (*2 Pet. 1:12*). And thus, united in the truth, they expressed their unity in a number of ways.

"And they continued steadfastly . . . in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (*Acts 2:42, NKJV*). This reference to breaking of bread probably refers to a fellowship meal or to regular meals shared between believers. At some point during a fellowship meal, someone would offer a special blessing over the bread and drink in memory of Jesus' death and resurrection, in expectation of His soon return. Early Christians thus devoted their time to remembering the meaning of Jesus' life and ministry, and loved to talk about it in fellowship meals. The meals they shared became moments of worship. "So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (*Acts 2:46, 47, NKJV*). No doubt this time of fellowship together greatly helped strengthen the sense of unity they had in Jesus.

What examples do we have in the book of Acts of early Christians praying together? What did they pray for?

Acts 1:14 _____

Acts 4:23–31 _____

Acts 12:12 _____

The early church cherished the opportunity for direct communication with God and never failed to offer up petitions to Him when gathered together in worship. Paul in his First Epistle to Timothy mentions the importance of prayer when Christians are together (*1 Tim. 2:1*). To the Ephesians, he also emphasized the need of prayer: "praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints—and for me" (*Eph. 6:18, 19, NKJV*).

What are ways that we can experience a deeper unity through the power of intercessory prayer for common causes? How does this prayer help unite us as a church?

Further Thought: Read the articles “Prayer,” pp. 1044–1046, and “Worship,” pp. 1290, 1291, in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*.

“ ‘The importance of the Sabbath as the memorial of creation is that it keeps ever present the true reason why worship is due to God’—because He is the Creator, and we are His creatures. ‘The Sabbath therefore lies at the very foundation of divine worship, for it teaches this great truth in the most impressive manner, and no other institution does this. The true ground of divine worship, not of that on the seventh day merely, but of all worship, is found in the distinction between the Creator and His creatures. This great fact can never become obsolete, and must never be forgotten.’—J. N. Andrews, *History of the Sabbath*, chapter 27. It was to keep this truth ever before the minds of men, that God instituted the Sabbath in Eden; and so long as the fact that He is our Creator continues to be a reason why we should worship Him, so long the Sabbath will continue as its sign and memorial. Had the Sabbath been universally kept, man’s thoughts and affections would have been led to the Creator as the object of reverence and worship, and there would never have been an idolater, an atheist, or an infidel. The keeping of the Sabbath is a sign of loyalty to the true God, ‘Him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.’ It follows that the message which commands men to worship God and keep His commandments will especially call upon them to keep the fourth commandment.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 437, 438.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Since the biblical concepts of worship, creation, and salvation are so closely intertwined, how do you think the celebration of the Sabbath could be God’s antidote to false worship? What role does the Sabbath play in this end-time prophecy of Revelation 14:6, 7? Why is the Sabbath referred to in the first angel’s message?
- 2 Oftentimes we talk about worship as a matter of content—things we should do or not do during worship. Is that good enough? What is worship really about? How is your local church experiencing meaningful worship?
- 3 In some societies, Christian community worship slowly is being forgotten or abandoned, even in Adventist communities. What can your local church do to counter this trend?

Summary: Worship is the Christian believer’s thankful response to God for His gift of salvation. It also is an essential element of the Christian community’s experience of unity and fellowship. Without prayer and Bible study in a desire to know God’s truth for us, our community will fail to experience oneness in Christ.

Ukrainian Builds 22 Churches

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Construction company chief Vladimir Vladovskyy knew it would take a miracle to build a Seventh-day Adventist church in the northern Russian seaport of Arkhangelsk.

He had no blueprint for the project. He had only a few summer months to build the church. And a senior city administrator, without giving a reason, had vowed never to sign the paperwork.

So, Vladovskyy secured a blueprint for the church's foundation and started work.

"Summer is very short in Arkhangelsk, and we didn't have time to deal with bureaucracy," said Vladovskyy, a Ukrainian native who has built 22 Adventist churches and other church facilities in Russia, Ukraine, and Mongolia over two decades. "So, we started building."

After laying the foundation, Vladovskyy received the blueprint for the second stage and put his construction crew to work on the walls. Then came the next blueprint and the roof.

Remarkably, no one from the city government tried to stop the construction. Vladovskyy, however, had not forgotten about the official paperwork. Vladovskyy gathered his crew every morning to pray for a miracle at the construction site.

A month passed. Two months. Three months. Arkhangelsk's summer lasts for only three months, from June to August. The exterior of the church was completed before the first snow fell in September. The interior was finished in December.

Vladovskyy returned to the city administrator to ask for the documents. He didn't know what to expect, but he felt at peace, knowing that he had prayed daily and that the weather had stayed warm long enough to finish the church.

The city administrator didn't say a word. He simply signed every document. "In the end, he signed everything," Vladovskyy said. "I don't know why. It was a miracle."

Vladovskyy, a third-generation Adventist who restored old buildings for a state construction company during Soviet times, has encountered many miracles since he first teamed up with the Adventist Church by constructing the Euro-Asia Division's headquarters in Moscow in 1995. Currently, he is building churches in Krasnoyarsk, Tomsk, and a third Russian city.

But no miracle has been quite as remarkable as the one in Arkhangelsk in 1999, he said in an interview in Ukraine's capital, Kiev.

"We built a church without a blueprint and without permission," he said.



VLADIMIR VLADOVSKYY holds a photo of the Arkhangelsk church.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Revelation 4:8–11*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Define true worship and its role in the great controversy between God and Satan.

Feel: Have a sense of awe and thankfulness for who God is and what He has done for him or her.

Do: Worship God with both heart and mind.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: True Worship

- A** What is meant by the word “worship”? What actions might be considered part of worship?
- B** How can we distinguish true and false worship from each other?
- C** How can we ensure that God remains the center of our worship?
- D** What role does worship play in each of the three angels’ messages?

II. Feel: The Greatness of God

- A** What aspect of God’s character is the most meaningful to you? Which aspect speaks most to your situation today?
- B** What feelings and emotions come to mind when you consider what God has done for you?

III. Do: Responding With Our Whole Being

- A** How is worshipping God with our hearts different from worshipping God with our minds?
- B** What do these two aspects of worship look like in practice?
- C** How is it possible to magnify God when we cannot make Him larger? What is magnified in the process of our worship?

► **Summary:** Worship involves showing honor and respect, as well as service and obedience. The character and redemptive actions of God call forth a response of worship from His creatures as together they recognize their dependence upon God.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Revelation 14:6, 7*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: True worship is a heartfelt response to who God is and what He has done for us.

Just for Teachers: Worship is a key issue in the end times. The identity of who is worshiped defines our allegiance. As you open the lesson, emphasize the importance of identifying correctly who is worshiped.

Opening Discussion: One summer day, John decided to pick a few of the abundant mushrooms that grew near his home. He had taken a course in mushroom hunting and knew something about the identification of mushrooms. He spotted a group of mushrooms that he thought were edible and picked them for his evening meal. He intended to check them with a field guide on his return home to be sure they were edible, but by the time he reached home, he was running late for an appointment. Sure in his own mind that the mushrooms were indeed edible, he cooked and ate them. But John's identification of the mushrooms had been wrong. He had eaten a dangerously poisonous species of mushroom that destroys the liver and frequently results in death. Eight hours later, John started vomiting, and tests showed that his liver and kidneys had been damaged badly. While John survived, his mistake nearly cost him his life.

The apostle John warns us that we need to be equally careful about the identification of the object of our worship. God should be the only object of our worship, and our worship should reflect our allegiance to Him.

Discussion Questions: Why was distinguishing between edible and poisonous mushrooms difficult? What could John have used to distinguish between them? How might your answer help you to think about how you distinguish between true and false systems of worship?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: This study section examines the nature of worship and its role in the great controversy. Emphasize that understanding what constitutes true worship is essential to preventing Satan from deceiving us with counterfeit forms of worship. Don't let the class get sidetracked into discussions about worship styles and preferences.

Bible Commentary

I. The Nature of Worship (*Review Revelation 4:8–11 with your class.*)

The Bible uses multiple words in Greek and Hebrew to describe different aspects of worship. The Hebrew words for worship emphasize honor, respect, and reverence by focusing on the actions of bowing down, prostrating, or otherwise humbling oneself before another person. However, worship in the Old Testament is not confined to bodily actions. It also includes the concepts of obedience and service that demonstrate the reality of our worship. Isaiah clearly indicates that simply going through the motions of worship activities without obedience is not worship at all (*Isa. 1:10–17, Isaiah 58*).

In the New Testament, we find a similar variety of words that can mean to bow down, revere, show honor and devotion, or to serve. The most common word for worship in the New Testament is *proskyneō*, which literally means “to kiss toward.” It likely reflects the custom of showing honor to a king or official by bowing before them and kissing their feet, an action understood as an admission of dependence or submission to the person in authority (see William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], p. 882). In using this word to describe the worship of God, we can therefore deduce that more than the physical action of kissing or bowing down is intended. To worship God is to recognize the greatness and majesty of God, to understand that He is the Creator and we are creatures, and to admit one’s own unworthiness, helplessness, and absolute dependence upon Him. Such admission also carries with it the implication of willingness to accept God’s lordship over our lives.

True worship has several important features. First and foremost, it is directed at God and Him alone (*Deut. 6:13, Matt. 4:10*). Second, it is never forced. It is a spontaneous response to the character of God and His redemptive actions on our behalf. It begins from the heart and not from the expectations of others. Third, worship is not simply a Sabbath morning activity or a part of a worship service. It is a lifestyle. We are to live and breathe our responses to what God has done for us. The living creatures in the throne room, pictured in Revelation 4, worshiped continually day and night. While such intense focused worship is not possible in our lives, this figure underscores the idea that each word and action of ours should bring honor to the name of God.

True worship has the potential to unite us in ways not possible otherwise. When we focus our lives on worshipping the Center of our faith, we are less likely to see the things that divide us. Whether alone or in a worship service,

we worship with others around the world, giving praise to God. Thus, worship gives us the opportunity to recognize that we are part of something beyond ourselves. At the same time, worship reminds us of our dependence upon God. Pride and jealousy, which contribute to disharmony, dissolve when we recognize that we are all creatures who depend on God.

Consider This: In what sense can obedience be considered worship? What does a life of worship look like?

II. Worship and the Great Controversy *(Review Revelation 14:6–12 with your class.)*

The importance of understanding true worship is highlighted by the central role that worship plays in the three angels' messages and in the wider context of the great controversy between God and Satan. The battle commenced with Satan's rebellion in heaven and his pride-filled comparison of himself with God (*Isa. 14:14*). The cosmic war continues with his challenging the very character of God. While God demonstrates His character through an outpouring of love and grace, which calls forth a response of worship, Satan calls forth worship through deceit. Satan seeks to remove focus from God by setting up an alternate system of worship. The message of the first angel is a reminder that the only person who deserves worship is God, the Creator of the universe. Honoring the seventh-day Sabbath that He sanctified is an act of worship and allegiance to Him. However, to limit the meaning only to the day of worship is to miss the sweeping implications of the message. Worship of the Creator occurs not only by direct worship of Him on the day that He appointed, but also by valuing His creation. You cannot truly worship the Creator while you destroy and abuse what He has created. The message of the second angel displays the love and grace of God, providing a warning for those who have been deceived by counterfeit approaches to salvation and worship. Finally, in the third angel's message, we see that choosing the wrong focus of worship ultimately leads to death, while choosing to worship God alone leads to life. Because God is the Creator and Sustainer of life, we would expect nothing less. When we are disconnected from the Source of life, there is only death.

Consider This: Why do you think that worship is central to the three angels' messages? How can you be sure that you are worshipping the Creator and not falling for one of Satan's schemes to distract you? In what ways do the messages of the three angels draw us together in unity?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: We often limit the extent of worship to what happens on a Sabbath morning. However, worship is much broader than this. Help your class to explore the wider dimensions of worship.

Application Questions:

① Worship is much more than the singing of songs and praying. Why do you think we rarely consider worship outside of the Sabbath and other religious services?

② Why do you think that some individuals find a lack of meaning in worship services? How might this relate to the rest of their week?

③ How can we make worship a lifestyle?

④ Is your current participation in worship activities a response from the heart?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: We are called to worship the God who has created and redeemed us. The activities provided help participants to focus on God, the Center of our worship.

Activities:

① Create a responsive reading for a worship service that helps people to focus on different aspects of God's character.

② Plan an evening of prayer. Structure it so that participants are presented with a clear focus for prayer on a regular basis over the evening, and vary the mode of prayer for each focus.

③ Listen to a song that extols the greatness or majesty of God. Then pray that God will help you to experience the beauty and character of God in new ways.

④ Present a basket of common household objects to your class. Ask the group to consider how God is like each of the items in the basket. Then thank God for helping you to remember the many dimensions of His nature and character.