Hebrews 10:22 *Force of Habit: Draw Near to God*

***A Solitary Exercise?***Several years ago there was a magazine ad for a Christian record label. The ad featured a thirty-something woman seated in a chair. She had closed eyes and a contented smile and seemed oblivious to anything else around her as she listened to music under headphones. The caption to the ad said simply: WORSHIP.

The impression given is that the heart of worship involves blocking out everyone and everything else and simply focusing on God while listening or singing along with music. (from Bob Kauflin, *True Worshippers*, p. 84)

I don’t know if that’s what the ad meant to convey, but it does seem like that is a pretty common idea about worship: it’s just me and Jesus. I couldn’t find that specific ad back on the internet, but I did do a Google image search of the word “worship” and one of the most common images that **came up looked a lot like this.** The way to worship—that picture implies--is to block out all distractions, close your eyes, turn up the music, and focus all you attention toward God.

Worship is typically thought of as an individual activity—"we all worship in our own way,” we say.

But that is not what scripture communicates. Consider **Psalm 111:1**:

**1**Praise the Lord,

I will extol the Lord with all my heart
    in the council of the upright and in the assembly.

And **Psalm 35:18**:

**18**I will give you thanks in the great assembly;
    among the throngs I will praise you.

In both verses, the intention of the Psalmist is to praise God in the midst of other people. In the assembly. “In the council of the upright” means in the company of others who feel the same way about God. The picture is of throngs of people worshipping God together.

Or, go to the end of the Bible, **Revelation 7:9-10:**

**9**After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. **10**And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

This is a picture of heaven, a snapshot of what it will look like when history has come to an end and God’s rightful rule over the universe is fully acknowledged. And what we have described here are people from all over the world—an innumerable multitude—wearing white as a symbol of their redemption in Christ’s blood--gathered around the throne and singing praise and worship. Together.

David Mathis writes:

We were made to worship Jesus together. Among the multitude. With the great horde. Swallowed up in the magnificent mass of the redeemed. God didn’t fashion us to enjoy him finally as solitary individuals, but as happy members of a countlessly large family.

He goes on:

When the fog of everyday life clears and we catch a glimpse of heaven’s bliss, we don’t find ourselves sequestered at a study desk or hidden alone in a prayer closet in paradise, or even standing alone before the great Grand Canyon or mountain peak of God’s majesty, but joyfully part of the worshipping throng of Christ’s people from every tongue and tribe and nation. (*Habits of Grace*, p. 155-156)

I’ll put it like this, our big idea for this morning’s message:

**The song of the redeemed is a song we are meant to sing together.**

We were made for corporate worship**.** We are meant to worship God in community.

***Let Us Draw Near***Let me pause here and give a quick reminder of the series we are in. We are calling it *Force of Habit*, and we are talking about making regular attendance on Sunday mornings a habit. We are talking about why it matters that we join others in worship week after week. And the key passage for the series is **Hebrews 10:19-25:**

**19**Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, **20**by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, **21**and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **22**let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. **23**Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. **24**And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, **25**not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The key verse is 25, where it talks about the habit of meeting together. You can have the good habit of meeting together, or you can have the bad habit of giving up meeting together.

And we said last week that the rest of the passage fills in the reasons why this habit is so important. We said you need to pay attention to the salad portions of this text. That is, the “let us” parts. Verse 22: “Let us draw near to God”; verse 23: “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess;” and verse 24: “Let us consider how may spur one another on.” Those verses are the basis for the rest of the sermons in this series, with one more, the end of verse 25, “encouraging one another.”

Today’s sermon, then, is verse 22. We should not give up the habit of meeting together because when we meet together we draw near to God. One of the reasons for being here on Sunday mornings is that we have the opportunity worship together. We draw near to God together.

It could be argued that drawing near to God is the whole point of Christianity. The message of verses 19 through 21 is that Jesus has opened the way to God—by His sacrifice on the cross He tore down the curtain that kept us distant from God and made it possible for us to have a relationship with Him. Because of Jesus, God does not have to be a distant thought, but a near and present reality.

To me, drawing near to God is a pretty good definition of worship. It’s not necessarily a physical act. It’s not building a tower of Babel to get to heaven, it’s not walking to an altar in a temple, it’s not even something that requires going to a church building. It’s an invisible act that occurs as we direct our hearts through faith towards God.

You can--and you should!--draw near to God on your own. You can draw near to God in Bible reading, in prayer, and even listening to music under headphones. You can and you should have quiet times with God.

But, the thrust of this passage, and (as I said) the picture painted throughout scripture, is that worship is a group activity. I don’t think it is accidental that the exhortations in this passage are plural—“let us”. Drawing near to God is something we do together. Or, as the Big Idea of the sermon says:

**The song of the redeemed is a song we are meant to sing together.**

Let’s think about why singing together matters. I have seven reasons we sing together:

***Enthroned On Our Praises*1. Singing awakens us to the presence of God.**

There is one sense in which God is always near us. We believe God is omnipresent, so there is nowhere we can go where we are distant from Him. But, there is another sense, in our spiritual sluggishness, where we are often unaware of His presence. That’s why the Bible exhorts us to Draw Near to Him, we need to wake up to the fact that He is here.

Corporate worship is a great way to do this. Martin Luther once said: “At home, in my own house, there is no warmth or vigor in me, but in the church when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through.” (quoted by Mathis, p. 160)

This is also the experience of the Psalmist Asaph. In Psalm 73 he begins by lamenting the apparent triumph of evil in the world. He looks around and he sees people who have no time for God apparently enjoying all sorts of comfort and success. He even begins to wonder if his own efforts to honor God have been a waste of time. **Psalm 73, verse 13:**

**13**Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure
    and have washed my hands in innocence.

Then he goes to worship, and things change. **Verses 16 and 17:**

**16**When I tried to understand all this,
    it troubled me deeply
**17**till I entered the sanctuary of God;
    then I understood their final destiny.

He was beaten down. The spiritual haze was thick. He thought God was distant and aloof. But then he went to worship and the fog lifted. He became aware, once again, of the presence of God, and his faith was strengthened. So much so, that the Psalm concludes with **this declaration of faith:**

**25**Whom have I in heaven but you?
    And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
**26**My flesh and my heart may fail,
    but God is the strength of my heart
    and my portion forever.

**28**…as for me, it is good to be near God.
    I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge;
    I will tell of all your deeds.

Instead of staying away from corporate worship when God seems distant or absent, perhaps what we need most is to come and sing with God’s people so that we can be awakened to His presence once again.

***This is How We Fight Our Battles*2. Singing is a spiritual weapon.**

There is a song that has been on Christian radio by Michael W. Smith called “Surrounded.” Full disclosure, this is not one of my favorite songs. At least not the way Smitty sings it. The version that he sings only has three lines:

It may look like I’m surrounded
but I’m surrounded by you.

And:

This is how I fight my battles.

That’s all he sings, over and over again, for like 6 minutes. It’s not my favorite song. But there is a version of the song that has actual verses, and they explain what is meant by “this is how I fight my battles.” The second verse says:

In the valley I know
That You're with me
Surely Your goodness
And Your mercy follow me
My weapons
Are praise and thanksgiving
This is how I fight my battles

My weapons are praise and thanksgiving. As Kurt said in the bumper video, one of the ways we can prepare ourselves for the battles of faith is by gathering here Sunday after Sunday to sing together, to remind each other of God’s presence, and to hide songs of praise in our hearts so that when challenges and disappointments and temptations come our way, we can answer them with praise and thanksgiving.

One of my favorite stories in scripture is the story of King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20. Two of Judah’s enemies—Moab and Amnon—have joined forces against Judah, and it doesn’t look good. As reports trickle back in, it becomes clear that Judah is outmanned and outgunned. So they hold a prayer meeting where they say to God: “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you.” (2 Chron. 20:12) Then they prepare for war.

But instead of sending out the army, Jehoshaphat sends out a choir. **2 Chronicles 20:21-22** tell us what happened:

**21**After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying:

“Give thanks to the Lord,
    for his love endures forever.”

**22**As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated.

It’s not something that will get mentioned in the U.S. Military Handbook, but it is a powerful illustration of how praise and thanksgiving help us to fight our battles.

***Hidden in Our Hearts*3. Singing helps us remember God’s Word.**

How does music become a spiritual weapon? One of the ways is by impressing God’s truth onto our hearts. **Colossians 3:16 says:**

**16**Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

Music helps us remember words. Singing psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit is one of the ways that we can hide God’s word in our hearts. That’s what it means when it says “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly.”

Dr. Oliver Sacks has studied the effect of music on the brain for years. In his book *Musicophili*a he writes: “Every culture has songs and rhymes to help children learn the alphabet, numbers, and other lists. Even as adults, we’re limited in our ability to memorize series or to hold them in mind unless we use mnemonic devices or patterns—and the most powerful of these devices are rhyme, meter, and song.” (quoted by Kauflin, *True Worshippers,* p. 104)

There’s a reason why—even though I didn’t sing it or play it—if you have ever heard Michael W. Smith’s “Surrounded” song it is now stuck in your head. Probably one of the reasons it repeats so much. Because music has a way of engraving itself in your mind. Alzheimer’s patients will struggle to remember their own children, but play a favorite song from their childhood and they will sing along. Turn on a radio station for your favorite decade of music—for me it would be the 80s—and even though it has been years since you last heard many of the songs, you’ll find you know an alarming amount of the words.

God himself designed music this way. When the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land God told Moses to teach them a song so they would be prepared for the evil and troubles about to come their way (Deut. 31:21). There’s a reason the longest book of the Bible is a songbook. Music helps us remember. Singing together is one of the ways we mutually reinforce what we believe.

Which leads to this:

***Teach and Admonish One Another*4. Singing helps us teach and be taught.**

When we sing as a body of Christ, we are singing not just to God, but also to one another. There is a horizontal focus, as well as a vertical one to our singing. Instruction is taking place right alongside of praise. Look at **Colossians 3:16** again**:**

**16**Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

When we sing psalms and hymns and songs from the Spirit we are teaching and admonishing one another. That means, when we sing, for example, that “All of God’s promises are Yes and Amen” we’re not just thanking God for this incredible truth, we are also reminding one another.

So it might be, as we gather on Sunday, that some of the people sitting next to you, or across from you, or behind you or in front of you, are struggling to know if God is even faithful. They might be here, like Asaph the Psalmist, wondering if all their efforts to be godly have been worth it. They might be this close to throwing in the towel.

But maybe, hearing you sing, and hearing 250 other people sing, that God is indeed faithful, that all of His promises are “Yes and Amen” in Jesus, that might just be the reminder they need to go on. In this way, you are helping to teach one another when you sing. And you are being taught.

The songs that we sing on Sunday mornings are not just chosen because we like the beat or because they have a good hook or because we hear them a lot on the radio; the songs we sing are chosen because they convey rich and important Biblical truths. And so, it is important to pay attention to the words and let them teach us.

***Music in Your Heart*5. Singing helps us engage and express our emotions.**

There is something about singing together that helps us to tap into and express the emotions of our relationship with God. In every culture, in every age, music is a language of the heart. It expresses, arouses, and connects with what we feel. We could gather together every week and just read the lyrics to the songs, or just read in unison passages of scripture, but it would be hard to express and feel the same depth of emotion that comes when we sing together.

**Ephesians 5:19-20** says:

**19**speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, **20**always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I don’t think it is a mistake that music is linked to our hearts. Singing helps us to give voice to what is going on in the seat of our souls. John Piper writes:

The reason we sing is because there are depths and heights and intensities and kinds of emotions that will not be satisfactorily expressed by more prosaic forms, or even poetic readings. There are realities that demand to break out of prose into poetry and some demand that poetry be stretched into song… Singing is the Christian’s way of saying: God is so great that thinking will not suffice, there must be deep feeling; and talking will not suffice, there must be singing. (quoted in *True Worshippers*, 107)

Talking will not suffice, there must be singing. The emotions that singing help us to express are a response to who God is and what He has done. Bob Kauflin writes: “Vibrant singing helps us to combine the truth about God seamlessly with passion for God. Doctrine and devotion. Mind and heart. Suppressing or ignoring your feelings when you sing contradicts what singing is designed to do. Passionless singing is an oxymoron.” (108)

***Members of One Body*6. Singing helps us express our unity with the church.**

In the same Colossians passage where we are told let the message of Christ dwell richly in us through singing, Paul talks about the importance of being unified in the church. **Colossians 3:15:**

**15**Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

While meeting together weekly is in and of itself an expression of our unity in Christ; singing together is an opportunity to deepen that expression and that experience. Better than simply reciting or shouting words in unison, singing enables us to spend extended periods of time communicating the same thoughts, passions, and intentions towards God and towards one another.

There is a Swedish proverb that says: “A shared joy is a double joy”. In corporate worship, one of the graces and benefits we uniquely enjoy is the accentuated joy of deeper and rich and greater adoration and awe, as we delight in Jesus together and share that delight with one another. David Mathis writes:

The secret of joy in corporate worship is not only self-forgetfulness—or, to put it positively, preoccupation with Jesus and his glory—but also the happy awareness that we are not alone in having our souls satisfied in him. (163)

One of the implications of this is that when we gather, and when we sing, every voice matters. You may not have a great singing voice. You may not sing in any other venue or part of your life. You may not even be willing to sing in your car when the radio is turned way up and you are the only person in the vehicle and nobody is around you for miles around. But that doesn’t matter… when you are here, you should sing. If you are one whose soul has been redeemed by Christ, then you are in the choir.

As Bob Kauflin says:

In the church God calls us not simply to listen to others sing, but to sing ourselves. No one else might notice, but God hears every voice and heart distinctly (Heb. 4:12). (*True Worshipers*, 112)

The critical question is not Do I have a voice? but Do I have a song? And if you’re a true worshiper, forgiven and reconciled to God through the atoning work of Christ, the answer is a resounding yes. It’s not a song we originated or created. We can’t add to it, change it, or improve upon it. It’s the song of the redeemed for their great Redeemer. (98)

Which brings us full circle, and to my last point:

***Around the Throne*7. Singing prepares us for heaven.**

Let me put up the passage from **Revelation 7** again:

**9**After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. **10**And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

Sometimes we picture heaven as a place where we sit around on clouds and strum harps all day long. For those without much musical interest, nothing could seem more boring.

Let me assure that heaven will be much more than 24/7 choir practice. The best of everything we know on earth will be present in heaven.

But that doesn’t mean there won’t be signing. Because, clearly, there will be. And the singing we do on Sunday mornings is meant to be preparation for that great and glorious day. Bob Kauflin writes:

Very soon you and I will be standing before the majesty and glory of God. We’ll take our place among the throngs of heaven, made up of people from every tribe, language, people, and tongue who have been purchased by the blood of the Lamb. We’ll understand that our lives on earth were only the cover and title page to what lies ahead… (*Worship Matters*, 142)

A man named Allen Ross adds:

If we even begin to comprehend the risen Christ in all his glory, or faintly hear the heavenly choirs that surround the throne with their anthems of praise, or imagine what life in the presence of the Lord will be like, then we can never again be satisfied with worship as usual. We will always be striving to make our worship fit for glory; and we will always be aware that our efforts, no matter how good and noble, are still of this world and not yet of that one. (quoted in *Worship Matters*, 142)

We should make coming to church on Sunday mornings into a habit because when we do, we draw near to God collectively. We get the chance to sing the song of the redeemed. And the song of the redeemed is a song we are meant to sing together.