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Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at His holy hill;  
For the LORD our God is holy. Psalm 99:9 (NKJV)

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In devotion I read a little while ago someone made a comment that stood out, and it was along the line: “Thank You, God, for the privilege of faith”. We may not always of faith this way: as a ‘privilege’. Sometimes we may think of ‘faith’ as somewhat of a ‘duty’ (something I ‘have to do’, maybe because my parents want me to have it). We may see ‘faith’ as a ‘chore’ (what do I ‘have to do’, like ‘get out of bed to go to church’).

In reflecting on this theme “the privilege of faith”, we may also speak of the ‘privilege of worship’. And, although at a notional level, we may easily speak of the ‘privilege of worship’ (rejoicing in the relative freedoms we currently have in relation to assembling for worship and the focus of our worship), our human nature is such that we may not always look at worship as a ‘privilege’. After all, there are many ‘commands’ and strong Biblical examples to gather in worship (Exodus 20:8: “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy”; Hebrews 10:24, “Do not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you (*plural*) richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” Hebrews 12:28: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.” Revelation 14:7: “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.” Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”)

Sometimes we may also think of ‘worship as somewhat of a ‘duty’ (something I ‘have to do’, maybe because my parents want me to have it). We may also be frightened about worship because it speaks of something to our human nature (ie: death). And we may resent worship because it challenges us at the very depths of our souls (that we are indeed sinners in the sight of God). And yet, as St. Augustine has said (Confessions Book 1): ““You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.”

This picks up several themes from our Psalm (Psalm 99). First, Psalm 99:1 says, “LORD is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!” (Note in OT times what it meant to ‘tremble’ before a king!). Psalm 99:9 also says, “Exalt the LORD our God, And worship at His holy hill; For the LORD our God is holy.” Psalm 99 is the last of a group of four psalms (Psalms 96-99) which speak about the kingship of God ,and begins: “The Lord is King” (or, “The LORD reigns”). And when we look at the Moses standing before the Lord (Exodus 33:12-23), we do gain something of a vision of the challenge that also lies

before us in relation to worship – our human nature which cannot truly bear to see God in all His holiness. The Psalmist says (Ps.99:9): “Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at His holy hill; For the LORD our God is holy.”

A Note on the Meaning of "Holy": The fundamental idea behind the Hebrew word for 'holy' which occurs three times in this psalm (verses 3,5,9) is 'apart' or 'separate'. A place where the Lord once appeared may be called "holy ground" (Ex. 3:5). Or a place where God is especially present may be described as a "holy temple" (Ps.11:4; Hab.2:20). Thus to say that God is holy is to stress the otherness or separateness of God. Isaiah saw the Lord and heard the angels singing "holy, holy, holy" (Isa.6:3). Yet, according to the Bible, the Lord has not cut off contact with humans but is active among them. Hosea put it this way, "I am God and no mortal, *the Holy One in your midst*" (Hosea 11:9).

But sometimes we wonder about 'God in our midst'. We see the suffering and pain of the world. We see the suffering and pain people inflict upon people. We experience suffering and pain in our own lives. And sometimes we wonder about the whole 'purpose' of life (and we may even 'question' the presence of 'God in our midst'). How are we to 'exalt the LORD our God, and worship at His holy hill' when there seems to be so much suffering?

Often we may 'tremble' before the Lord not in 'fear', but in 'doubt' (although this 'doubting' may lead to 'fear' in our lives). We 'tremble' and wonder if God is strong enough to deliver us from death, and we 'tremble' and doubt if His love is great enough to take away our shame. We may "tremble before the LORD", but do so because we 'tremble' at the nature of our sin.

However, as we ponder the nature of our world, and as we remember how Moses ascended Mount Sinai and was given a special and holy revelation of God Himself, we are also to remember that our Lord Jesus ascended another 'hill': the hill of Calvary. The 'glory' of Jesus is revealed on Mount Calvary. And, as we reflect on the cross of Jesus we may remember that the same power that conquered sin and death is at work in you and me. This is where we begin to see the 'privilege of faith' at work: with that privilege of faith we may begin to see that life's 'challenges' are not meant to 'break us' but to 'bend us toward God'.

Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (the German Lutheran Pastor executed by the Nazis because of his opposition to Hitler)... Bonhoeffer once wrote this (in his book, 'Life Together): "*So between the death of Christ and the Last Day it is only by a gracious anticipation of the last things that Christians are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians. It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God's Word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing.*" Bonhoeffer reminds us that what we 'do' in worship is a 'gift', a 'privilege'.

How often do we see 'worship' as a 'privilege'? How often do we see 'worship' as 'something we have to do'? How often do we take the whole notion of 'worship' for granted – especially that gathering together with God's people around Word and Sacrament? And think about this also... Where else may we sit together with

a group as diverse as this? And, as we 'gather together', we do not do so as some sort of 'social group', but as people who seek to listen to God in His Word: to listen to Jesus.

What do you have if you don't have Jesus? Those who look to Him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. We are born to worship God. Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at His holy hill; For the LORD our God is holy

We acknowledge that the LORD our God is holy, who has made us 'holy' through Jesus' suffering and death, and we are called to 'do more of what makes you holy'. From the cloud, the voice of our heavenly Father said, "Listen to Him." That is still the word that comes to disciples today. Listen to Jesus. His sacrifice was part of God's larger plan. Listen to Jesus as He calls us to join Him in 'holy living'. We are to take up our own cross (to 'sacrifice' those things that turn us away from God) and to follow Him. Listen to Jesus as other voices call to us and try to get us to abandon the narrow path. The 'worship of the Lord' is not simply what we 'do' on a 'Sunday', but includes the whole of life (cf. Rom.12:1, etc). Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at His holy hill; For the LORD our God is holy.

The 'faith' God has given you is a 'gift' and a 'privilege'. As the Scriptures say (2 Cor.6:2): "we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain."

The great 'privilege of faith' reminds us that even if we do not have faith in ourselves, God is faithful. Faith is a 'privilege' simply because we 'have faith'. We are not to see 'faith in God' as some 'right' or 'power' that 'exalts us above other people'. The Psalmist says, "The LORD reigns, let the people tremble". And that 'privilege of faith' enables us to 'see' that even when we struggle to 'hold on to God' and 'worship at His holy hill', He fiercely holds on to us through the hill of Calvary. As we come to the cross of Jesus, how can we stand here and not be moved by His love?

There are many people who struggle in life and faith. And there are many people who long for a clearer vision of life. Those of us who have the privilege and opportunity to climb and reach the summit of a mountain have stood in wonder and awe at the beauty and splendour of creation. Jesus and His disciples were given a glimpse into the far expanse too. When He was transfigured, Jesus' disciples were given the vision of His resurrected state. This mountaintop experience was preparing them all for the future events of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection.

It is a transforming experience to be in the presence of God. It is a privilege to have faith in Jesus, and to gather in worship of Him.

May you, like Moses and Elijah, like Peter, James and John, live with a deep sense of God's Holy Presence. May you live with a deep sense of God at work in our world, in the lives of others, and in your own life. May the mountains you climb, and your 'mountaintop' and 'valley' experiences fill you with wonder and awe. May we value life in all of its fullness for the marvellous gift from God that it is ours in Christ Jesus. Amen.