Worship at its best is a social experience where people of all levels of life come together and communicate with a common father. Here the employer and the employee, the rich and the poor, the white collar worker and the common laborer all come together in a vast unity. Here we come to see that although we have different callings in life, we are all the children of a common father, who is the father of both the rich and the poor. This fellowship and sense of oneness that we get in public worship cannot be surpassed.

What does worship do for us? Worship helps us to transcend the hurly-burly of everyday life and dwell in a transcendent realm. Worship is the type of escape that is both healthy and normal.

Through worship, ones worse self comes face to face with his better self, and the better self comes face to face with something still better still. No man can be at his best unless he stands over and over again in the presence that which superior to his best.

1. Howard Thurmond

In the sermon outline, King concluded with these words: "So in a real sense worship is the highest of all activities. It must therefore be taken seriously, following a definite pattern. Worship is not only the mother of the arts, but is also an art itself."

King may refer to observations on worship made by Howard Thurman in a 1949 sermon titled "The Commitment." The center of our undertaking, the heart of our commitment, summarizes itself in terms of the worship of God. I mean by the worship of God, the immediate awareness of the pushing out of the barriers of self, the moment when we flow together into one, when I am not male or female, yellow or green or black or white or brown, educated or illiterate, rich or poor, sick or well, righteous or unrighteous—but a naked human spirit that spills over into other human spirits as they spill over into me. Together, we become one under the transcending glory and power of the spirit of the living God" (Thurman, "The Commitment," The Growing Edge, March 1949)

"Looking Beyond Your Circumstances,"
Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

[18 September 1955]
[Montgomery, Ala.]

King illuminates the challenges of African American life in this handwritten manuscript: "His birth automatically throws him into the tragic circumstances of segregation and discrimination."

Acknowledging the temptation to turn painful situations into contempt, he writes, "The Negro who experiences bitter and..."
agonizing circumstances as a result of some [ungodly] white person is tempted to look
upon all white persons as evil " Rather than capitulating to difficulties, King urges a
strong and patient faith in God. "We as Negroes may often have our highest dreams
blown away by the pestling winds of a white man's prejudice, but wait on the Lord."

I had fainted unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of
the living—Ps 27:13

Life constantly presents each of us with circumstances which are beyond our con-
trol. There is a point in every man's life beyond which the gift of choice cannot
reach. There is an area in which every man must bow to the surging swept of life's
determinism. Even the most extreme indeterminist must admit that there are areas
in which man's life is determined. Freedom is always within limits. Our freedom
must operate within the framework of an already existent determinism. We are
continually confronted with circumstances which we did not have the freedom to
choose, but which we are forced to deal.

These piercing and almost always unwanted circumstances take many form. The
child that is born in India has no choice as to his social status. At the moment of his
birth he is automatically thrust into the circumstance of a caste system. The Negro
that is born in America has no choice as to his social, political and economic status.
His birth automatically throws him into the tragic circumstances of segregation
and discrimination. The persons who are forced to live with some dread disease, in
most cases, did not choose such circumstances, they were thrust upon them. When
we stand and see a loved one carried away by the chilly winds of death, we do not
choose it, but it a circumstance that we must accept. These are but few of the myr-
ad circumstances that life thrusts upon us. They come so often to blot out the high-
tening joy of life's noon, leaving us grouping in the bleak and desolate moments of
life's evening.

One of the great temptations of life is to become too absorbed in one's circum-
stances. There are many people whose visions are turned totally inward, and they
can never see beyond their particular circumstances. This always leads to tragic
consequences. Whenever a man looks merely at his circumstances he ends up in
despair, disillusionment and cynicism. Indeed this is one of the causes of suicide
and schizophrenic personalities. In the former case the individual becomes so
absorbed in his tragic circumstances that he can see no way out other than getting
rid of the center of all circumstances, namely, life itself. In the latter case the
individual becomes so absorbed in his circumstances that the personality gradually
becomes thinner and thinner, ultimately splitting and disintegrating under the
pressing load.

The great burden of life, then, is to master the art of looking beyond one's circum-
stances. Ultimately, the test of a man's life is how he responds to his circum-
stances.

One day the Psalmist was meditating upon on his circumstances. He remem-
bered the moments when roaring waters of trouble poured upon him in staggering torrents. He remembered days when his enemies came upon like tidal waves, leaving him sinking in the rushing waters of defeat. He had noticed on so many occasions how the wicked were elevated to the throne of prosperity, while the righteous were trodden and crushed by the iron feet of suffering. In the midst of these circumstances, the Psalmist cries out “I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”

By fainting here the Psalmist does not mean physical collapse, rather he means spiritual collapse. He is saying in substance “I would have lost my courage and spirit, I would have fallen into a state of dejection, I would have collapsed spiritually, I would have fallen under the sultry sweltering heat of cynicism if I had looked only at my particular circumstances. But I gained the courage to look beyond my circumstances, and by so doing I was able to see the goodness of God winning its victory in history.”

What are the specific gains in looking beyond your circumstances? First it helps one to see reality as a whole. The person who fails to look beyond his circumstances is tempted to judge the whole of reality on the basis of a partial view of reality. It leaves one vulnerable to the fallacy of generalization. The girl who has an unfortunate love affair with some ill-mannered man is tempted to conclude that all men are no good, if she does not look beyond her circumstances. The man who has a tragic disappointment is tempted to conclude that all life is meaningless. The Negro who experiences bitter and agonizing circumstances as a result of some ongody white person is tempted to look upon all whites persons as evil, if he fails to look beyond his circumstances. But the minute he looks beyond his circumstances and sees the whole of the situation, he discovers that many some of the most implacable and vehement advocates of racial equality are consecrated white persons. We must never forget that such a noble organization as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was organized by whites, and even to this day gains a great deal of support from northern and southern white persons. The most vocal and impetuous abolitionists were not negroes, but whites. As a race we fail to see this if we get bogged down in the partial view of our particular circumstances.

One of the most noble characters of all the Old Testament was Elijah. The tragedy of his life was that he allowed himself to become victimized with the chronic

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3 Psalm 27:13 King wrote this quote on a separate sheet of paper and probably intended to link it to the asterisk in the document. “Behind that unless is an affirmation of cosmic significance. Behind that unless is a radiant star of hope that brings light to every cloud of despair. Behind that unless is a joyous daybreak that comes to end every bewildering night.”

4 In 1909 white civil rights supporters joined African Americans in founding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). They included Mary White Ovington, Oswald Garrison Villard, Henry Moscowitz, Leonora O’Reilly, and William English Walling.

5 King may refer to radical abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879) and John Brown (1800–1859).

6 In notes for another version of this sermon, King wrote “The plane trip—No wind of adversity can stop him. No storm of failure can overwhelm him” (King, When Your A String Breaks, 1959, p. 355 in this volume).
disease of over absorption in his circumstances. He started out in the venture of life with courage and hope. In one majestic sweep he ascended to the heights of prophecy. But then one day he found that his circumstances had brought disappointment and difficulty. The cloud of perplexity was hovering. All of the sunshine of joy had been obscured from his vision by the cloud of perplexity that was hovering so low. In the midst of this Elijah fainted spiritually. The lamp of hope was gradually flickering. One day while lying under a tree he said to God, “take away my life. I am disgusted. All the people have forsaken thee. They have torn down the altars. They have slain the prophets. I am now the only one left who has not turned to Baal.” You remember God’s response to Elijah. He asks “What doest thou here? Go to Damascus.” In other words God is saying to Elijah, “What are you doing bogged down in your circumstances? No wonder you are cynical and blue. Get up and look beyond your circumstances—go to Damascus.” God also reveals to Elijah that because he has become the victim of his over absorption in his circumstances he has become the victim of an unwarranted generalization. He feels that all the prophets have deserted God. But God affirms to Elijah in terms bristling with certainty that there are seven thousand prophets that have never bowed their knees to Baal. 

This, then, is the first advantage of looking beyond your circumstances. It enables us to see our particular experiences in the light of the totality of all experiences.

(The second gain that comes from looking beyond one’s circumstances is that of seeing that your particular circumstances, however tragic, are not unique.)

The third gain that comes from looking beyond one’s circumstances is that of being able to see the ultimate triumph of goodness—a fixed structure of goodness that can master every circumstance. There is something inherently unstable about our present circumstances. They can’t be depended on. Even if our circumstances happen to be fortunate we cannot bet on them. We may abound in the grandeur of riches today and starve in the clutches of poverty tomorrow. We may be elevated to the throne of popularity today and dropped in the abyss of obscurity tomorrow. We may be at the pinnacle of good health this week and in a few weeks sink to the nadir of bad health. There is something tenuous, elusive, and vacillating about circumstances. So whenever we look merely at our circumstances we end up with a frustration shrouded with devastating cynicism. This is why it is necessary to look beyond our circumstances for something fixed and permanent which can master every circumstance. This was what the Psalmist did. When he looked beyond his circumstances he was able to see the permanent structure of God’s goodness which could master every circumstance in this life. Herein lies our hope. This is why the simon-pure Christian can stand up in his circumstances and never be overcome by them. He has faith in a God that can master every circumstance, and he knows that God’s goodness will ultimately win out over every state of evil in the universe. God is working every moment in history for the triumph of goodness. Wait therefore on the Lord. So as the Psalmist says “Wait on the Lord.”

7 Cf. 1 Kings 19:1-18
8 Psalms 27:14, 37:34
In an inscription to the Kings in a copy of Thurman’s 1955 book *Deep River*, Howard Thurman writes, “The test of life is often found in the amount of pain we can absorb without spoiling [our?] joy.”
Many will probably ask, Why do we have to wait? Why doesn’t God straighten out things right now? The answer is found in the fact that God seems to work in strides. He does not do things all at once. Even the Genesis writer realized this. In his conception God could have spoken and the whole universe would have come into being all at once, but instead he chose to spread it out over six days. Apparently God sees that his purpose in the universe can best be realized by working in strides. An all at once method of creation would not give man a chance to grow and develop. He would be a blind automaton. So God chooses to work in strides. This is why a theory of evolution should never frighten us. May it not be that God is working through the evolutionary process.

Wait, therefore, on the Lord. Your circumstance may seem to overwhelm you now, but wait on the Lord. Some disappointing experience may have you shivering in the cold winter of despair, but wait on the Lord. We as Negroes may often have our highest dreams blown away by the jostling winds of a white man’s prejudice, but wait on the Lord. You may now be quivering in the midst of the chilley winds of adversity, but wait on the Lord.

Isaiah waited on him, and in the dark and dreary day of the exile he could cry out. “The grass may wither, the flowers may fade away, but the word of our Lord shall stand forever.”10 Job waited on him11

AD CSKC Sermon file, folder 121, “Looking Beyond Your Circumstance”

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9 Genesis 1
10 Isaiah 40:8
11 King refers to the perseverance of Job’s faith in God despite overwhelming adversity

“Pride Versus Humility:
The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican,”
Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

[25 September 1955]
[Montgomery, Ala.]

King draws upon George Buttrick’s interpretation of Jesus’ parable in this handwritten sermon. He observes that “the perpetrators of many of the greatest evils in our society worship Christ,” and uses the jurors in the Emmett Till case as an example of those who “worship Christ emotionally and not morally.”1

1 Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus, pp 87–91. On the inside of the file folder in which he kept this sermon, King wrote “Preached at Dexter, Sept (4th Sun), 1955.”