

WHY WORSHIP?

by Ray C. Stedman

When you heard that we shall explore together today the theme of worship many of you perhaps are saying: "What do you think we have been doing all morning?" Our bulletin even calls this time "Morning Worship Service." We have indeed been worshipping, but what may appear as worship to us, visibly successful in the eyes of men, may not be worship in the eyes of God. He sees and hears much more than we do.

Let me read to you a description of God's reaction to a worship service held some years ago. It is recorded in the first chapter of Isaiah, Verses 12 through 17. There God says:

**"When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?
Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
their incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths, and convocations --
I cannot bear your evil assemblies.
Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts
my soul hates,
They have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I will hide my eyes from you,
even if you offer many prayers,
I will not listen.
Your hands are full of blood;
wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds out of my sight!
Stop doing wrong,
learn to do right!
Seek justice,
encourage the oppressed.
Defend the cause of the fatherless,
plead the case of the widow." {Isa 1:12-17 NIV}**

Surely these words indicate that God looks at a worship service differently than we do because he reads our hearts. These words reveal that worship is not something we do. Worship does not deal with what we make our bodies do, (either singing, kneeling, or praying), but worship consists of who we are, what our heart is feeling. This is the aspect of worship I want to explore with you.

It is startling to realize that everyone worships! Everybody! Everywhere! Worship is the fundamental drive of life. Atheists worship. Infidels worship. Skeptics worship. Even Republicans and Democrats worship. Lawyers, insurance agents, and even Internal Revenue Service agents worship! All people worship for worship is the fundamental difference between humans and animals. Animals do not worship. They have no sense of the beyond or of the numinous. But God has placed eternity in man's heart, as the book of Ecclesiastes tells us {cf, Eccl 3:11}. This urge causes men everywhere to worship. If they are not worshipping the true God, they are worshipping a god of their own composition. Worship, therefore, is a universal phenomenon.

The word comes from the old English *worth-ship* which means "to ascribe worth or value to something or someone." Clearly there are two forms of worship. From the Christian point of view there is true worship and there is false. The worship of all the peoples on earth fall into these two categories.

True worship is to attribute worth to a real Being, one who is truly there and who is truly worthy. Dr. Francis Schaeffer wrote a book called *The God Who Is There* to make the point that, although God is invisible to our eyes, he is actually there. The function of believers is to learn what God is like and to acknowledge him -- to ascribe worth to him, to reflect upon the value, beauty, and character of God. This is true worship.

False worship, on the other hand, is to attribute worth to an illusion which is not really there, or which is not worthy. It is not worthy of worship because it is merely imaginary. In the ancient world, false worship usually took the form of bowing before idols or images. People created representations of gods, usually in the form of a human being or animal. Then they ascribed worth to it and regarded it as extremely valuable in their lives. They thought the god either helped them in causing their crops to grow or it protected them from some danger or evil. Thus they ascribed great worth to speechless images and idols.

Sometimes they worshipped deceitful spirits. Without the help of a visible image, they nevertheless worshipped an invisible spirit-being. The American Indians did this.

In my study at home I have a portrait of three Blackfoot Indians on horseback worshipping the rising sun with their arms outstretched and their faces turned upward. They saw the sun as a spirit-being, and they also worshipped other spirits such as those of the mountains or the waters. They assumed that some being was there even though they could not see it.

In our modern world, men still worship. Either they worship the one true God, or often they worship some idealized view of themselves. It is amazing how many millions of people worship themselves. You may be familiar with the bold words of the poem 'Invictus':

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

That is the worship of self. Sometimes worship is expressed in bowing down to or looking to some projected exaggeration of a living person. We know how easily many make idols of actors and actresses, rock stars, and athletes. They imagine what they are like, and then ascribe worth to that purely imaginary image. It then becomes a driving force in their lives. Think of how many people are still worshipping Elvis Presley. The cheap tabloids even try to convince us that he is still alive by showing pictures of him at some shopping center or rock concert. This is a form of idolatry, for it is ascribing value to him which is totally imaginary.

There are many today who are caught up in the New Age movement and who worship invisible sources of power. They believe in strange spirit-beings that appear to them, they say, and give them advantages or special insights into the secrets of life. This form of worship is widespread.

I offer these examples to show you that worship is indeed a universal practice. Everyone does it! The only question is: Are we practicing true worship or false?

It is apparent from this that worship is continually happening. It underlies every action and attitude we manifest. It colors all our life and goes far beyond a couple of hours on Sunday morning. Worship touches us all the time. Everything we do springs from our concept of what is important and valuable to us.

Since worship is the driving force of all human existence then when it is lost, whether it be true or false, life becomes dull, drab, and cheerless. Men and women ultimately sink into despair because life appears to be no longer worth the living. This fact alone indicates that worship is the most important and fundamental aspect of our existence. Millions today are turning to drugs because they have been disillusioned in the god they have been following, especially the god of their own selves. Out of their emptiness and absolute despair, out of their worshipless lives, they turn to anything that promises them a return of the feeling of significance. That is what drugs appear to offer them.

On the other hand, when true worship occurs, life becomes vital, real, exciting, daring, and adventurous. It is

felt to be eminently worthwhile. Those of us who have learned to worship the true God know this is true. Worship is the foundation to all we do and say, and we find ourselves worshipping in some form or another all day long. It is clear, therefore, we must give close attention to what true worship is. How do we learn it? How do we practice it? To answer these questions we must turn to the Scriptures. I want to explore the nature of worship now, and next week we will look at some of the methods of corporate worship.

In the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John, we learn about worship from the lips of Jesus himself. At that time, he was speaking to a woman at the well of Samaria who was lonely and miserable after five failed marriages. Obviously she had tried to satisfy herself and her longings by marriage, but it was all to no avail. Obviously she was thirsting for something and had probably reached the place where she no longer expected to find it. Without bothering with marriage she was now simply living with a man. Reading her lonely heart, our Lord offered her new life using terms derived from the spot where they were gathered. As they sat by the well, he offered her a well of living water which would constantly be flowing, springing up to give her continuous life. He told her she could come to it any time and it would refresh her. She did not need to return to the physical well for the slaking of her soul's thirst. Finally, Jesus said:

God is a Spirit; and they who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth. {cf, John 4:24 KJV}

With these words, Jesus indicated the fundamental elements of true worship.

God is a Spirit and so are we! We are spirits dwelling in bodies, which in the design of God creates a third entity, called *soul*. We have personality because we are spirits dwelling in bodies. Our human spirit is designed to communicate and interrelate with the Spirit of God. This is what Jesus means when he says we must worship God "in spirit." He is referring to our human spirit which is usually referred to in Scripture as the heart.

We talk about doing things with our whole heart. By this we mean our spirit is fully engaged -- we are functioning at the fundamental level of our humanity. We are said to be involved *wholeheartedly*. Therefore, to worship "in spirit" means that our worship must be genuine and heart-felt. We must mean it and feel it deeply. We must be fully committed to what we are doing as an expression of what we actually feel.

We can also express this truth negatively, as Scripture sometimes does. Worship is not to be phony or a put-on. It must not be mechanical. We ought not go through the motions of rising, standing, kneeling or praying without these actions reflecting what we are thinking or being. That kind of worship is unacceptable in God's eyes. It is a mockery. If we recite words that do not say what we really mean, we are insulting God and treating him with derision and scorn. In Isaiah 1, God was reading the hearts of the people who were performing an outwardly beautiful service, but their hearts were wrong, and their worship was not "in spirit." Therefore it was totally unacceptable to him.

It is clear in the Scriptures, from beginning to end, that the one thing God hates above everything else is hypocrisy. We do too -- in other people! We do not mind it in ourselves, but we do not like it in others. If we treat God this way in worship, he is deeply offended, just as we are when someone is hypocritical toward us.

The second phrase Jesus used in talking about worship was "in truth." This refers to our view of God. The God we worship must be the true God. He must be the God who actually exists -- the true and living God. This is the danger of films such as *The Last Temptation of Jesus*, which is now playing in our theaters. It draws a false picture of Jesus. It portrays a Jesus who never existed, a being distorted and even perverted. This film gives people the wrong impression of Jesus. Not only films do this; many books and sermons do the same. Even sermons about God can give a wrong impression as to what kind of a being he is. Any worship based upon these false conceptions is not "in truth." Our worship must be in line with what is actually there.

You may well be asking: "How do we know the true God?" As we sing in a great hymn, God is: "Immortal, invisible, God only wise, In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes." If God cannot be seen, touched, felt, or heard, how do we know the true God? The answer is that God has revealed himself to us. He discloses himself in three basic ways:

1. First, he reveals himself in the world of nature. Scripture tells us, and experience confirms, that we get a sense of God's wisdom, majesty, and power in the world of nature. You cannot study this marvelous universe -- with all of its complexity of design, its interrelatedness, and its universal manifestation of the same laws -- without coming to some comprehension of a Great Designer. There is a Mind involved in creation. It is incredible to me that some scientists who work in these areas never grasp this simple fact. Everything in nature is shouting at us that there is a Mind of great intelligence, wisdom, and power behind it. The majesty of God is visible in the beauty of his world, the lofty height of the mountains, and the roaring of the sea. These all evoke a sense of worship.
2. Second, God reveals himself in Scripture. The Bible is the most amazing book in the world. No other religious book has the qualities and characteristics of this one. Even though it has come from many different sources across hundreds of years, it presents an unusual manifestation of harmony. All of the books blend together and confirm each other. When you search deep into its pages, you discover that there are no errors or contradictions. Yet it speaks far beyond the understanding of the profoundest mind.

It is evident to anyone who reads the Bible carefully, and properly, that it is something greater than man could produce. God has spoken in his Word. It reveals his character, it tells us of his work both in creation and redemption, and it unfolds the great ultimate purposes of God -- what he is doing with the universe in which we live. We would know none of this without the Word of God.

3. There is still a third means of God's self-communication -- personal worship. When we take the facts of nature and the revelation of Scripture and begin to respond to them in prayer and obedience, this is true worship. Praising him, praying to him and ascribing value to him, do something to us. Our mind becomes illuminated and we begin to understand the words of his book more clearly. They sometimes glow with life and seem to leap off the page to grab your heart. We are enormously impacted by these great words of Scripture or even by standing on a mountain top looking out over a beautiful vista at a glowing sunset, we are moved by the majesty and greatness of God to know him in greater vision.

This, then, is God's self-revelation through his Spirit to our spirit, and it is another way of knowing God. The saints who have lived with God for years and years begin to reflect that knowledge by taking on his character. All of this is testimony to the witness of Scripture that we learn to know God through these three means.

The two major factors that we learn about God are his holiness and his grace:

The basic nature of God is holiness. I do not know how you feel about this word, but for years I became uncomfortable whenever I heard it. I knew some people whom others called holy, and I found them to be very disagreeable. I came to associate the word with grimness. They were the kind of people who seemed constantly worried that someone somewhere was having a good time! But that is not holiness at all! Four different times the Scriptures use the phrase "the beauty of holiness," {1 Chr 16:29, 2 Chr 20:21, Psa 29:2, 96:9}. True holiness is beautiful and attractive; it compels attention.

The word is difficult to define. Often it is defined as "separateness" and refers to something or someone who has integrity; who cannot be torn apart or easily manipulated. Holy people are strong and steadfast. Used of God, the term is the exact opposite of sinfulness. Sometimes the word is translated as "distinctiveness," or "uniqueness," or even "perfection." This is the meaning of God's holiness. He is a perfect being. All his attributes are in harmony and balance. There is nothing eccentric about God. He is flawless and remains so unchangeably.

That holiness becomes the ground of our stability. We are not dealing with a capricious God whose mood is different every time we come to him. We can trust God. Therefore, his holiness becomes the basis for our worship. It is such a beautiful holiness that it is awesome. Those who glimpse it usually fall on their faces in awe, and even fear. They marvel at such a glorious, holy God.

In Isaiah, Chapter 6, the prophet suddenly saw a vision of the greatness of God while in the temple. He saw

God lifted up and seated on a throne. The smoke of incense filled the temple and he heard seraphic beings, angels, burning creatures, bowing down before God and crying out endlessly, "Holy, Holy, Holy!" {Isa 6:3}. There is something very impressive about this scene.

The Hebrew language has no words to express comparison. In English, we have comparative words such as "good, better, best" or "big, bigger, biggest." The Hebrews express comparison through repetition. Many times, in both the Old and New Testaments, you will find words repeated to express intensity or comparison. If the Hebrews wanted to describe great joy, they said "joy, joy." If they wanted to speak of great fear, they said, "fear, fear." Notice in the King James Version of the Bible how many times Jesus says "Verily, verily, I say unto you..." This expression is derived from his Hebrew background. He is saying, "What I am about to say is really true, true, true!" This is a high degree of comparison.

When the Hebrews wanted to express a superlative, they repeated the word three times. This only occurs twice in the Bible, both times in very interesting places. One is found in Revelation, Chapter 8 where John sees the judgments of God being poured out upon the earth. A great angel in the form of an eagle flies through the heavens crying out, "Woe, woe, woe, to the inhabitants of the earth!" {Rev 8:12}. In other words, there could be no greater time of trouble, no greater woe could affect the earth, than during that time. The only other time this repetition is used is in Isaiah 6 where the angels cry, "Holy, Holy, Holy." Superlatively, they are saying, God is perfect! This perfection creates a sense of awe, and even fear, before him.

There is another characteristic of God in Scripture which is seen as frequently as his holiness -- his grace. Grace is God's love in action. This becomes the feature that draws our hearts to God. We read of his love in Romans 5:8 and 8:32: "God commends his love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," and "He who spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" The more we read of God's love manifested toward us, forgiving us at infinite cost to himself, through much pain, agony, and sacrifice to satisfy the demands of his justice, the more we are drawn to him. We are able to come to him, not as suppliants crawling on our knees pleading for help and mercy, but as beloved children, as part of his family. We are cared for and protected by a tender Father's heart. This is God's grace as seen in the Scripture.

When we begin to see God in his holiness and grace, it strikes deeply into our hearts. We find that our worship, our response to him, becomes the driving force of our life. It touches everything we do affecting our actions, words, and attitudes. Such worship becomes the reason behind everything.

David expressed this kind of worship in a psalm found in First Chronicles 16. Part of his hymn of praise to his God is in Verses 23-31:

**Sing to the Lord, all the earth;
proclaim his salvation day after day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous deeds among all peoples.
For great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise;
he is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the nations are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
Splendor and majesty are before him,
strength and joy in his dwelling place.
Ascribe to the Lord, O families of nations,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
ascribe to the Lord the glory due unto his name;
Bring an offering, and come before him;
worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.
Tremble before him, all the earth!
The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved.
Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
Let them say among the nations, "The Lord reigns!" {1 Chr 16:23-31 NIV}**

That is true worship! It is designed to remain in our hearts all through the day. If we believe this, it will color every single aspect of daily existence. For the true worshiper, God becomes the place to which he flees in times of pressure. In times of temptation, when he feels weak and assaulted, unable and uncertain, he runs to God in his mind and rests upon his great promises. From this base, he draws joy, calmness, strength, and courage to do what he needs to do, even though it may be painful.

As Christians, we need to carefully distinguish between prayer, praise, and worship. They are not the same even though they usually occur together, and properly so:

- Prayer is our occupation with our human needs and problems. We come to God with our needs and ask him for his supply.
- Praise is the occupation of our minds with his blessings. We are thinking of all that God has done for us and give thanks for how he has blessed us.
- Worship is our occupation with God himself, with the greatness of his being.

This is what many of our hymns reflect. When we say, "Lord, save me!" this is prayer. When we say, "Thank you, Lord, for saving me!" this is praise. When we say, "Thank you, Lord, for being such a great Savior!" this is worship.

When I was a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, the founder Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer told us that, as a boy, he woke up every morning to the sound of his mother singing a hymn in the kitchen. She always sang the same one:

When morning gilds the skies,
My heart awakening cries:
May Jesus Christ be praised!
Alike at work or prayer;
To Jesus I repair:
May Jesus Christ be praised!

What a profound influence this had upon his life. Her daily worship contributed to his godly development.

C. S. Lewis has expressed this in a practical way. He says,

"The moment you wake up each morning all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists in shoving it all back, in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in."

If you read the psalms frequently, you will see that many of them are evidently written about how to get up in the morning. When you are still groggy with sleep and need help waking up, it is not the fragrance of "Folgers coffee in your cup" that will help. You need to do what the psalmist does. I always picture Psalm 103 as coming from a man standing before a mirror shaving and saying to himself:

**Bless the Lord, O my soul;
and all that is within me, bless his holy name.
Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits: {Psa 103:1-2 KJV}**

Then he starts to list those benefits to himself:

**He pardons all your iniquities;
He heals all your diseases;
He gives you joy in the midst of your life, {cf, Psa 103:3-4a KJV}**

That is worship. Sometimes the psalmist has to struggle. In Psalm 42, he asks himself questions: "Why are

you cast down, O my soul? And why are you so disquieted within me?" {Psa 42:5a KJV}. He is saying, "What is the matter with me this morning? I don't think I can handle this day." He keeps asking the question until he gets an answer. This teaches us how to get up in the morning.

I try to do this myself each day. When I get up, I usually take a shower first. While the water is pouring over my body, I pray, "Lord, cleanse me inside as well as out. Just as this water washes away the dirt of yesterday, Lord, wash away the mistakes, the loveless words, the hurtful thoughts that I entertained, the wrong things I did, the selfish attitudes I manifested yesterday. Help me to learn from them and to start out this day with a clean slate knowing that you are here to help me." As I eat breakfast, and visit with my wife, we pray, "Feed us with your Word and your thoughts. Feed us with the sense of the Lord Jesus who is the bread of life unto us. Give us this day our daily bread."

You can do the same thing. As you go to work, you can pray, "Lord, work through me today. Help me to be an instrument of yours." While you are working, you can send him arrow prayers, flashes of prayer -- all through the day, "Lord, guide me ... protect me." When the Internal Revenue Service calls to audit your account, your heart may sink, but you can pray, "Lord, what is going on? Help me." If someone asks a question and it is obvious there is something deeper behind it, you can say, "Lord, use me, help me." When you are coming home, thank him for your eternal home, your certain destiny, and for your home now with your loved ones who share it with you. As you go to sleep, sing a chorus of *How Great Thou Art!* The God of glory who indwells you and walks with you throughout the week is the basis for your very life. Therefore, worship him all day long.

If you do this, when you come on Sunday morning, and sing the great words of the hymns, and hear the words of Scripture, your mind will not wander. You will be so caught up in the expression of what is valuable to you -- the worth of the God you serve -- that you will give yourself fully in heart, spirit, and truth to him. As Jesus said, "My Father is seeking such to worship him," {John 4:24b}.

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