

What is Worship?

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Published and distributed by
Thru the Bible Radio Network
P.O. Box 7100
Pasadena, California 91109-7100
(800) 65-BIBLE
www.ttb.org

Scripture references are from the *King James Version Bible*.
(This message is also included in the hardback book, *The Best of J. Vernon McGee, Volume 1*,
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On next Lord's Day morning, if the ministers over this land of ours were to ask this question: "How many of you have ever worshiped God?" no doubt virtually every hand would be lifted. Therefore, it would be presumptuous, would it not, for me to say that very few people have actually worshiped God? But there are some Christians who have never really worshiped Him. We feel that is revealed today in the lack of vitality and vigor in our worship. It is a fact that public worship is anemic and aimless for the most part. It is further reflected in a lack of meaning and an abysmal ignorance of worship. It has been reduced to an empty shell and a hollow sham of ritual and cold liturgy – no warmth of life, just cold form! This, in a day when folk are saying, "We want reality in our Christian faith, we want reality in experience."

There is a rather amusing story that comes out of the days when oil was first found in East Texas. Several dirt farmers who had been on the very margin of starvation found themselves overwhelmed with untold riches. One such family that had been extremely poor became virtual millionaires overnight. As usual, they wanted to go the limit and make up for all the things they had been missing in life, so the wife in the family went to the beauty parlor. She wanted the "whole works." And when the beauty operator asked, "Do you want a shampoo?" she arose indignantly and said, "I do not want a sham-poo; I want a genuine poo."

And so in the matter of worship, people are tired of the sham, the substitute; they want reality. We have probably examined a bin of books on the subject of worship, most of which have not actually dealt with the heart of the subject at all. They have to do with the accessories, the adjuncts, the accouterments that go with it. Generally there is a chapter on "Preaching" and one on "Music," perhaps one on "Lighting and Ventilation" and then one on "Prayer" and one on "Reading the Scripture." But, in the strict sense, that is not worship. It may contribute to worship, but it is not worship.

Again there comes to us the story of the "flying field" which we have used with reference to prayer. The "flying field," known today as "the airport," no more flies than the "horseflies." Nevertheless, they were originally called "flying fields." It was tragic when a plane attempted to fly on the field, for it was only a taking-off place, and the flying was to be done up yonder in the air. The church is called a place of worship; actually it is the house of worship. But worship is not really done there; it is the place from which we take off. Worship is done up yonder.

Sometimes we just go out to the field and warm up the motor, race down to the end of the runway, and come home and say we have been to church and have worshiped God. We have not worshiped Him at all. But do not misunderstand this statement. I believe that we should go to the house of God where people are to worship Him because it is the "taking-off" place, and we are more apt to worship God in church than in nature. We are more apt to worship God in the singing of the hymn, "There Is a Green Hill Far Away," than on the third green of the golf course. We are more apt to worship God in John 6, the feeding of the five thousand, than at a picnic lunch on a mountainside some Lord's Day morning. We are more apt to worship God by Lake Gennesaret than at Lake Arrowhead. We are more apt to worship God by the Sea of Galilee than down at Redondo Beach. We are more apt to worship God on the road to Emmaus than on Highway 66. We are more apt to worship God in the Gospel of Matthew than in our city's evening paper. But remember, it is possible for us to go to God's house and not worship Him at all.

The Object of Worship

We want to note several of the major aspects involved in worship, the first of which is the *object* of worship. This will require that we answer, in a general sort of way, the question, “What is worship?” To do this we shall deal with one statement found in Psalm 150:1: “Praise ye the Lord.” We find in this first aspect that the emphasis is on “Praise ye the LORD.” He is to be the object of worship. If He is the object of worship, we would do well to define worship at this point. We realize that in giving a definition we are using a crutch, and crutches are for cripples. But how else can we understand worship unless we begin with a definition?

Attempting to define worship is, for us, much the same problem as that of the soldier stationed on the West Coast when his mother, a native of Kansas, wrote saying: “When you come home, please bring a souvenir that will tell me something of the Pacific Ocean about which I have heard so much.” And he took her a bottle of sea water.

Now that bottle of sea water may have said something about the ocean, but it told nothing of its vastness, of the breakers along the shore, nothing of the beauty of the sunlight on the whitecaps. It told nothing of the things of the deep, of the breeze that gently hovers. But such are the limits of a definition.

However, we know that the root of the word *worship* goes back to an Anglo-Saxon word meaning “worth.” Webster defined worship as “courtesy or reverence that is paid to worth.” We can see the carryover of this Anglo-Saxon word in our courts today in the manner in which the attorneys address the judge on the bench. They call him, “Your worship.” The intent is to show courtesy to someone who represents the law – courtesy or reverence that is paid to that of worth.

That is what worship is. It is courtesy or reverence that is paid to worth. Listen to the psalmist as he does this very thing in Psalm 96, the great singing psalm that shall be used in the eternal ages which lie before us. It reads:

For the LORD is great, and greatly to be praised. he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols: but the LORD made the heavens. Honour and majesty are before him: strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. Give unto the LORD, O ye kindreds of the people, give unto the LORD glory and strength. Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name: bring an offering, and come into his courts. (Psalm 96:4-8)

We have here this great psalm which David composed when the ark was brought into the sanctuary in Zion. And it is one of those great psalms of praise and adoration of God. Someone has said that an apple a day will keep the doctor away, but a psalm a day will keep worry away. And here is one of those psalms that will keep worry away. This psalm removes, as do the first two commandments, all competitors from the field of worship. God said to man, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” There is no competitor. God has none in this matter of worship. He recognizes none. He has a monopoly on this matter of worship. He alone is to be praised, He alone is to receive adoration from man, and He says, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness,” or anything that represents deity at all. God stands alone in the field and alone is worthy of worship. He is worthy of all your adoration and praise.

The Psalms put the emphasis upon two things: the fact that He is the *Creator* and the fact that He is the *Redeemer*. God made this earth on which we live, as well as the universe. This lovely sunshine that you are enjoying is His. He is the Creator. There is not a thing at your fingertips

that He did not make. He is worthy today of our worship because He is the Creator. He is also worthy of our worship because He is the Redeemer. He is the *only* Creator and He is the *only* Redeemer. You see, God works in a field where He has no competition at all. He has a monopoly on the field of creation and on the field of redemption, and because of that He claims from all of His creatures their worship, their adoration, their praise.

The Scriptures say that God is a jealous God. I can't find where He asks us to apologize for Him for this. He has created us for Himself. He has redeemed us for Himself. On the human level marriage is used to illustrate the believers' relationship to Christ. A husband, if he loves his wife, does not share her with other men. He is jealous of her. Her love is to be for him alone. So believers, called in Scripture the bride of Christ, are created solely for Him. He doesn't like for us to give our hearts to anyone else except to Him. He alone is to have our adoration, and He alone is to have our praise today. And you will recall that John, on the Isle of Patmos, felt constrained to fall down and worship the angel who had been so helpful in bringing all of the visions before him, but the angel rebuked him and said, "See thou do it not; worship God." He does not even want His angels worshiped; He does not want Mary worshiped! He wants none worshiped but Himself. He alone is *worthy* of worship, and He says there is coming a day when, "Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord." He has created everything that it might praise Him.

Who is to Worship?

And here we come to the second aspect, objections to worship. God is the *object* of worship. There are, however, *objections* to worship. And in this we must answer the question, Who can worship? Will you notice our verse again? It is very brief: "Praise YE the Lord." The emphasis now is upon *YE*. He is saying to mankind, "Praise YE the Lord." God apparently created man for one purpose, to have fellowship with and to praise Him. There is no other reason for man's existence. What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

God created the universe that it might glorify Him. It was not brought into existence for you and me. Job says in chapter 38, verse 7, that when the morning stars sang together, they were praising God. And the psalmist says in Psalm 96:5, "But the LORD made the heavens." He made the heavens that they might be a musical instrument to sing forth His praises throughout the eternal ages of the future. You know man was created for that high purpose, but he got out of harmony and out of tune with God; he got out of fellowship with God. Perhaps Shakespeare expressed it when he wrote in *The Merchant of Venice*:

There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubims.
Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But, whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot bear it.

Today you and I are living in a created universe that is actually singing praises to God. But man is out of tune. Man is in discord, and God's great purpose is to bring man back into the harmony of heaven.

I want to move into the realm of music about which I know nothing but have made careful inquiry. And I am reliably informed that on every good organ there are four principal stops. There is the main stop known as “diapason,” then there is the “flute” stop, the “string” stop, and then the “vox humana,” the human voice. I am told that that stop is very seldom in tune. If you put it in tune while the auditorium is cold, it would be out of tune when the auditorium is heated. And if you put it in tune when the auditorium is heated, it would be out of tune when the auditorium got cold. My beloved, it is hard to keep “vox humana” in tune.

This great universe of God is a mighty instrument, and one day Jesus Christ went to the console of God’s great organ – His creation – and He pulled out the stop known as “diapason” And when He pulled that stop out, the solar and stellar spaces broke into mighty song. Then He reached down and pulled out the “flute” stop, and these little feathered friends, the birds, began to sing. Then He reached in and pulled the “string” stop, and light went humming across God’s universe and the angels lifted their voices in praise. Then He reached down and pulled out “vox humana,” but it was out of tune.

Now the great Organist was not only a musician, but He knew how to repair the organ. So He left the console of the organ yonder in heaven and came down to this earth, that through redemption – the giving of His own life – He might bring man back into harmony with God’s tremendous creation. And, my beloved, the redeemed are the ones today who are to lift their voices in praise. They are the only ones that can. The psalmist says again, “Oh, give thanks unto the LORD, for he is good; for his mercy endureth forever” (Psalm 106:1). “Let the redeemed of the LORD say so” (Psalm 107:2). And, brother, if they don’t say so, no one will! Oh, to be in tune with heaven! Today sin has intruded into this world and has taken man out of God’s choir, but he can come back in – and many have – through Jesus Christ, the Son of David, his Creator and Redeemer. The Lord Jesus has brought man back into a redemptive and right relationship with God that he might lift his voice in praise to Him.

Why Worship?

There is the object of worship: God. There are objections to worship: man. And there are *objectives* of worship, and we want to answer the question now: Why worship? Here we move our emphasis in this verse from “Praise YE the Lord” to “PRAISE ye the Lord.” Move it over to the verb – to that which is active. “PRAISE ye the Lord.” Perhaps you are beginning to see why we said at the beginning that very few people actually worship God. There really is no such thing as public worship. It was the great Chrysostom who put it like this: “The angels glorify, men scrutinize; angels raise their voices in praise, man in disputation; they conceal their faces with their wings, but man with a presumptuous gaze would look into Thine unspeakable glory.” Today how many actually go to the church to worship? Some person, in a very facetious manner, said that some people go to church to eye the clothes, and others to close their eyes. How many go to church in order that they might worship God? Worship is a divine intoxication, and if you don’t believe that, there is a fine illustration of it. On the day of Pentecost Simon Peter got up and preached a sermon. We talk a great deal about that sermon, but actually it was an explanation to the people that these Spirit-filled men were not drunk at all. Drunkenness was not the explanation. How many people today would get the impression that *we* are intoxicated with God? We need an ecclesiastical ecstasy. We need a theological thrill in this day in which we live.

There are three words that we must associate with worship, and these three words denote an experience of the human heart and the human soul as it comes into God’s presence to worship.

Prostration

The first is *prostration*. In the Orient people are accustomed to getting down on their faces. In the West we talk a great deal about having a dignified service. Now don't misunderstand me; we are not contending for a posture of the body. Victor Hugo once said that the soul is on its knees many times regardless of the position of the body. We are not trying to insist on a posture of the body, but we need to have our *souls* prostrated before God.

Two Bible words are used. The Hebrew word *hishtahaweh* actually means to "bow the neck." The Greek word *proskuneo* means to "bow the knee" to God. And today we need to get down on our faces before God in heaven. In the book of Revelation there are some things we don't understand about heaven, but there is one thing we are sure about – that every time we read of those in heaven, they are either getting down on their faces or getting up off their faces from worshiping God. And, friend, if you don't like to worship God, you wouldn't like heaven anyway, because that is the thing with which they are occupied; most of the time they are worshiping God, prostrating themselves before Him on their faces. Beloved, we need that today.

When my spiritual life gets frayed and fuzzy at the edges and begins to tear at the seams, I like to get alone, to get down on my face before Him and pour out my heart to Him. Friend, when was the last time you got down on your face before God? When was the last time that you prostrated yourself before Him? Oh, it would do us good; it would deliver us from deep freeze; it would deliver us from the shell in which we live; it would create within our hearts a different attitude if we would learn to prostrate our souls before God.

Adoration

There is a second word that goes with worship. It is the word *adoration*. It is a term of endearment. There is passion in that word. "Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness." That is what this 96th psalm says. Worship is a love affair; it is making love to God. You know Michal, the first wife of David and the one who witnessed the day he brought the ark into Jerusalem and composed this 96th psalm. It is said in the historical book of 2 Samuel 6:16 that she despised him. Sure she did; she discovered that David loved God more than he loved her and that he was making love to God. Worship without love is like a flame without heat; it is like a rainbow without color; it is like a flower without perfume. Worship should have spontaneity. It should not be ersatz bread; it should not be synthetic. It should have an expectancy, a tenderness, and an eagerness in it. My friends, some types of worship today compare to going downtown and sitting in a department store window and holding the hand of a manikin down there. It has no more life in it, it has no more vitality in it than that. Oh, today to have a heart that goes out to God in adoration and in love to Him.

A young fellow wrote to his girl and said to her in very elaborate language, given to much hyperbole: "I would climb the highest mountain for you, I would swim the widest river for you, I would crawl across the burning sands of the desert for you." Then he put a P.S. to the letter: "If it doesn't rain Wednesday night I will be over to see you." There is a whole lot of worship that is like that today. It will not take very much to keep us away from God. In the marriage ceremony there is something I occasionally use. I think how sacred it is. I have the two being joined in marriage say, "With my body I thee worship." Leander swam the Hellespont every evening to be with Hero, the girl he loved. One evening he did not come. She knew something had happened, and the next day she found his lifeless body washed ashore. Oh, my friend, to have a heart that

goes out to God in adoration. Gregory Nazianzen said, “I love God because I know Him; I adore Him because I cannot understand Him; bow before Him in awe and in worship and adoration.” Oh, have you found that adoration in your worship?

Exaltation

And then, last of all, there is *exaltation* in worship. And I do not mean the exaltation of God; we put God in His rightful place when we worship Him. When you and I are down on our faces before Him, we are taking the place that the creature should take before the Creator. But I am not speaking now of the exaltation of God at all; rather, I am speaking now of the exaltation of man. Humanism, with its deadening philosophy, has been leading man back to the jungle for about half a century, and we are not very far from the jungle. It is degrading to become a lackey, a menial. And think of the millions of people who got their tongues black by licking the boots of Hitler! Humanism did that. They turned their backs on God, and when you turn your back on God, you will worship a man. No atheist, no agnostic has ever turned his back on God who did not get his tongue black by licking somebody’s boots. There is nothing that will exalt man, there is nothing that will give dignity to man like worshiping God.

Dr. Fosdick wrote a sermon way back in the 1920s. The title of it was “The Peril of Worshiping Jesus,” and in that sermon he commented that men have tried two ways to get rid of Jesus, one by crucifying Him and the other by worshiping Him. The liberal doesn’t like you to worship Jesus. My friend, *I* worship Him; He is my Lord, He is my God. I do not find it humiliating to fall down before Him. There is nothing as exalting and as intoxicating as to get down on your face before Jesus Christ. Paul fell off that little donkey into the dust on the Damascus road, and the Lord Jesus dealt with him. Then do you notice that He said to him, “But rise and stand on thy feet.” Only the Christian faith has ever lifted a man out of the dust and put him on his feet. John, on the Isle of Patmos, saw the glorified Christ and said, “I fell at His feet as dead.” Then he continued, “He laid His right hand on me, saying, Fear not.” The creature now can come to the Creator. Man, who has been lost in sin and in the gutter, can come up and worship God. It was during the seventeenth century when Muretus, a great scholar of that day, was going through Lombardy. He suddenly took ill and was picked up on the street. Thinking he was a bum, a passerby took him to the hospital of that day, and when he came to, he heard the doctors talking in Latin. They had no notion he could understand it, and they were saying something like this, “Let’s try an experiment on this worthless creature.” And Muretus answered them in Latin and said, “Will you call one worthless for whom Jesus Christ did not disdain to die?”

My friend, only Jesus Christ and the worship of Him has lifted man up. Man is yet to be restored to his rightful place some day and brought back into harmony with heaven. In that great 150th psalm you start out with His pulling the stop “diapason.” And as you read that tremendous psalm – “Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in the firmament of his power” – then listen, the “flute” stop is pulled out: “Praise him with the sound of the trumpet; praise him with the psaltery and the harp.” Then the “string” stop is pulled out: “Praise him with the timbrel and dance; praise him with stringed instruments and organs.” Then listen, my beloved, “Let everything that hath breath praise the LORD!” And God breathed into man a life, soul, and spirit, and man departed from God. Now there is coming a day when everything that has life, everything that has breath shall praise the Lord. But in this day in which you and I are living, we can lift our hearts and lives to Him in adoration and praise.

As I look about me in this world today, there is nothing but bedlam. Every man playing his own little tune. One of these days out from the wings will step the Conductor – the Lord Jesus Christ. And when He lifts His baton, from the ends of God’s universe those galactic systems will join in, and every bird, every angel, and then man will join the heavenly chorus. In the meantime, you can bow before Him and bring your own little soul and your own heart into the harmony of heaven.