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True
WORSHIP

WHAT IT TAKES TO REALLY PRAISE THE LORD

DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

TRUE WORSHIP

WHAT IT TAKES TO REALLY PRAISE THE LORD

Very few of us have ever actually worshiped God. Some *Christians* have never really worshiped Him. The evidence is the lack of vitality and vigor in our worship, and it's further reflected in a lack of meaning and an abysmal ignorance of what worship even is. In this day when people say, "We want reality in our Christian faith," our worship has been reduced to an empty shell of ritual and cold liturgy. There's no warmth of life in our worship; it's just cold form.

A rather amusing story 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."

When it comes to worship, people are tired of the sham, the substitute; they want reality. You could examine a bin of books on the subject of worship, and most would not actually deal with the heart of the subject at all. They have to do with the accessories, the adjuncts, the accouterments that go along with worship. Generally there is a chapter on "Preaching" and one on "Music," perhaps one on "Lighting and Mood" 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.

Airports used to be known as "flying fields," but the airport is only a taking-off place; the flying is done up yonder in the air. Likewise, the church is called a house of worship, but worship is not really done there; the church is simply the place from which we take off. Worship is done up yonder. Sometimes we just go out to the field, warm up the motor, race down to the end of the runway, and then come home and say we've worshiped God. We have not worshiped Him at all.

But do not misunderstand. I believe we should go to the house of God where people are to worship Him, because it is the taking-off place. 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 the Sea of Galilee than down at the local beach. We are more apt to worship God on the road to Emmaus than on the freeway. 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

Let's begin with the broad question, "What is worship?" To do this we turn to one succinct statement:

Praise ye the LORD. –Psalm 150:1 (KJV)

The emphasis is on "the Lord." He is to be the object of worship. If God is the object of worship, we would do well to define worship at this point.

Attempting to define worship presents 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." So he took her a bottle of sea water. 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 the courts of some countries where attorneys address the judge on the bench as, “your worship.” The intent is to show courtesy to someone who represents the law.

That is what worship is. It is courtesy or reverence paid to something or someone of worth. The psalmist does this very thing in the great singing psalm that shall be sung in the eternal ages which lie before us:

For the LORD is great and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Honor and majesty are before Him; strength and beauty are in His sanctuary. Give to the LORD, O families of the peoples, give to the LORD glory and strength. Give to the LORD the glory due His name; bring an offering, and come into His courts. –Psalm 96:4-8

David composed this great psalm when the ark was brought into the sanctuary in Zion. It’s 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.

This psalm removes, as do the first two commandments, all competitors from the field of worship. God said to man, “You shall have no other gods before Me.” He has a monopoly on this matter of worship. He alone is to be praised, He alone is to receive adoration from man. He also says, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything” that represents deity at all (Exodus 20:3-4). 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 God is the *Creator* and the fact that He is the *Redeemer*. God made this earth on which we live, as well as the entire universe.



GOD'S
great purpose
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The lovely sunshine you enjoy 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.

Scripture says God is a jealous God, and nowhere does He ask 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 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. 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 that you do not do that.... Worship God" (Revelation 22:9). 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 has breath praise the LORD" (Psalm 150:6). He has created everything so that it might praise Him.

WHO IS TO WORSHIP?

Now let's turn our focus to the second word of our verse: "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 38:7 says 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." Why? He made the heavens that they might be a musical instrument to sing forth His praises throughout the eternal ages of the future (Psalm 96:8-9).

So we know mankind was created for that high purpose, but we got out of harmony—out of tune, out of fellowship—with God. Shakespeare expressed it like this 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 humans are out of tune. Mankind is in discord, and God's great purpose is to bring people back into the harmony of heaven.

I know nothing about the realm of music, but I've made careful inquiry. I am reliably informed that on every good organ there are four principal stops:

1. The diapason, the main stop
2. The flute stop
3. The string stop
4. The Vox humana, the "human voice"

I am told that the Vox humana is very seldom in tune. If you put it in tune while the auditorium is cold it will be out of tune when the auditorium warms up, and if you put it in tune when the auditorium is heated it will be out of tune when the auditorium cools down. My beloved, it is hard to keep Vox humana—the human voice—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. When He did, the solar and stellar spaces broke into mighty song. Then He reached down and pulled out the flute stop, and 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

A person stands on the peak of a large, dark rock formation in the foreground. The background is a vast, rolling mountain range covered in dense green forests, bathed in the warm, golden light of sunrise or sunset. A thin vertical line descends from the top center of the image towards the text.

Worship

IS A DIVINE INTOXICATION.

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redemption—the giving of His own life—He might bring man back into harmony with God’s tremendous creation. And, my beloved, it is the redeemed today who are to lift their voices in praise. They are the only ones that can. The psalmist says again, “Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever” (Psalm 106:1). “Let the redeemed of the LORD say so” (Psalm 107:2). And if they don’t say so, no one will!

Oh, to be in tune with heaven! Today sin has intruded into this world and taken mankind out of God’s choir, but anyone can come back in—and many have—through Jesus Christ, the Son of David, our Creator and Redeemer. The Lord Jesus brought us back into a redemptive and right relationship with God so we might lift our voices in praise to Him.

WHY WORSHIP?

Next let's move the emphasis over to the verb—to that which is active. “*Praise ye the LORD.*” Perhaps you're beginning to see why I said at the beginning that very few people actually worship God. There really is no such thing as public worship. The great early church father, John Chrysostom, 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.”

How many today actually go to the church to worship? The old joke goes that some people go to church to eye the clothes and others to close their eyes. How many go to church in order to 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. They were filled with the Holy Spirit.

How many people today would get the impression that *we* are intoxicated with God? We need an ecclesiastical ecstasy. We need a theological thrill today.

There are three words we must associate with worship, and they denote an experience of the human heart and soul as one comes into God's presence to worship.

PROSTRATION

In some cultures, people are accustomed to getting down on their faces. But in the West we talk a great deal about having a “dignified” service. Now don't misunderstand me—I'm not contending for a posture of the body. Victor Hugo once said the soul is on its knees many times regardless of the position of the body. I'm not trying to insist on a posture of the body, but we need to have our souls prostrated before God.

Notice two Bible words. The Hebrew word *hishtahaweh* actually means to “bow the neck.” The Greek word *proskuneo* means to “bow the knee” to God. 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 worshipping God. And, friend, if you don't like to worship God, you wouldn't like heaven anyway, because that is how they're occupied. Most of the time they are worshipping God, prostrating themselves before Him on their faces. Beloved, how 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, 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 you prostrated yourself before Him? Oh, it would do us good; it would deliver us from deep freeze; it would



Bow before Him

AND BRING YOUR
OWN LITTLE *soul* AND
YOUR OWN *heart* INTO THE
harmony of heaven.

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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

“Adoration” is a term of endearment. There is passion in the word. “Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness” (Psalm 96:9). Worship is a love affair with God. David’s first wife, Michal, witnessed the day he brought the ark into Jerusalem and composed this 96th psalm. It is said in the historical book of 2 Samuel that she despised him. Sure she did—she discovered that David loved God more than he loved her. 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 have no more life or vitality in them than going into a clothing store and holding the hand of a mannequin. A young fellow wrote to his girl 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. P.S. If it doesn’t rain Wednesday night, I’ll be over to see you.” There is a whole lot of worship like that today. It doesn’t take very much to keep us away from God.

When performing marriage ceremonies I occasionally 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, today to have a heart that goes out to God in adoration and love to Him. 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.” Have you found that adoration in your worship?

EXALTATION

Last of all, there is exaltation in worship. When you and I are down on our faces before Him, we are taking the place that any creature should take before the Creator. We put God in His rightful place when we worship Him. But I am not speaking of the exaltation of God at all. Rather, I am speaking now of the exaltation of man.

Humanism, with its deadening philosophy, degrades humankind. 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 mankind, there is nothing that will give dignity to a person, like worshiping God. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote a sermon way back in the 1920s titled "The Peril of Worshiping Jesus," and in it 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 getting 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 your feet" (Acts 26:16). 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. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, 'Do not be afraid'" (Revelation 1:17). 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. Muretus, a great scholar of the seventeenth century, was going through Lombardy when 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, “Let’s try an experiment on this worthless creature.” 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 and brought back into harmony with heaven, but that day is coming. In the great 150th Psalm, you start out with His pulling the stop diapason and read, “Praise God in His sanctuary; praise Him in His mighty firmament!” Then the flute stop is pulled out: “Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet; praise Him with the lute and harp!” Then the string stop is pulled out: “Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; praise Him with stringed instruments and flutes!” Then listen, my beloved, “Let everything that has breath praise the **LORD!**” God breathed into man a life—soul and spirit—and man departed from God. There is coming a day when everything that has life, everything that has breath, will praise the Lord. But in this day in which you and I live, we can lift our hearts and lives to Him in adoration and praise.

As we look about 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 mankind 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.

A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, smiling and talking to each other outdoors. They are gesturing with their hands as if in conversation. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in a park-like setting.

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A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone. The phone screen displays a list of booklets from the TTB.org website. The text on the screen is partially visible, showing titles like 'The Antidote to Anti-Semitism', 'Armageddon: What? Where? When?', 'Back to Bethel', and 'Balaam: A Prophet for Profit'. Each item has a 'Download' button next to it.

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