



FOUNDATIONAL TEACHING FROM

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M I N I S T R I E S

The True Heart of Worship

The theme of worship has been receiving increasing attention of late. This is a theme that God has been dealing with me about—and I believe God has given me new understanding of worship. I have always realized that worship was one of the main themes of the Bible and something that is of tremendous importance in our lives, but I never felt I had a real clear grasp of the nature of worship. I believe true worship is very different from what many contemporary churchgoers have become accustomed to. In many churches people talk about the “morning worship service.” Without being critical, it has been my experience that in many of those churches not much true worship is taking place. So I want to examine the steps to true worship as well as the nature of worship. And then I want to suggest to you the fruit of true worship, which I believe is rest.

I think you will agree there is one scarce commodity in the United States these days—it is rest. How many people really know what it is to rest?

So, let’s take a look at Psalm 95, and then I’m going to offer you some comments on it.

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did. For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, “They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways.” So I declared on oath in my anger, “They shall never enter into my rest.” (NIV)

Of all the attributes of God—and there are many—the hardest for the human mind to understand is holiness because it has no parallel on earth. We can talk about the wisdom of God, and we know wise people. We can talk about the greatness of God, and we know great people. We can talk about the power of God, and we see demonstrations of power. But apart from God there is no demonstration of holiness.

It is unusual to have a psalm that ends with such a negative statement as that, but I believe it has a special emphasis.

Three things are closely associated: thanksgiving, praise and worship; yet they are distinct. I would liken them somewhat to the colors of the rainbow that are distinct but blend into one another. Very simply, I would say that we *thank* God for what He does, particularly for what He does for us. We *praise* God for His greatness. But *worship* relates us to God in His holiness.

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Because it is hard to understand God’s holiness, it is hard to enter into worship. But I believe there are steps we can follow. In Psalm 100, it says we should “Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.” Those are two steps of approach to God. You come into the gates with thanksgiving, and then you move farther into the courts with praise. But neither of those is worship. Thanksgiving and praise are essentially utterances of our mouths.

Worship comes before service. I have often wondered whether our service is ever truly acceptable unless it’s preceded by worship. Worship, I believe we can safely presume, is twice as important as service.

Every word in the Bible, Old Testament and New, that means “worship” or is translated “worship” is always descriptive of an attitude. I think this is what God has been speaking to me about, that worship is primarily an attitude. There are also certain specific postures associated with worship all through the Scripture—bowing the head, bowing down the upper part of the body and, in particular, extending the arms with hands reaching upwards.

There is also one other posture spoken of many times in Scripture: falling on our faces before the Lord. I question whether any man who has never been on his face before God has ever been very close to God. You would be hard pressed to find any of the really key men of the Bible who had not been on their faces before God. For myself, I practice it not as a matter of legalism or ritual, but from time to time when I feel I need security. The most secure place I know is on my face before God. John Bunyan said, “He that is down need fear no fall.” When you are on the floor, there is no lower you can go. Jesus said that everyone who humbles himself shall be exalted; likewise, everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled (see Matt. 23:12).

Isaiah had a vision of heaven and the glorious creatures of heaven and the throne of the Lord in Isaiah 6. He saw worship conducted in heaven. The particular creatures that he focused on were called the seraphim. The Hebrew word *seraph* is directly related to the word for fire. The seraphim are the fiery creatures that are very close to the throne of God. It says there that each one of them had six wings in three pairs. They were crying day and night, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD.” What has always impressed me is what they did with their wings: with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet and with two they flew. I interpret covering the face and feet as worship, and flying as service.

Notice the order and the proportions. First of all, worship comes before service. I have often wondered whether our service is ever truly acceptable unless it is preceded by worship. And look at the proportions. Out of six wings, four were used for worship and only two for service. I believe that’s a correct proportion. Worship, I believe we can safely presume, is twice as important as service.

The Pattern

Let’s look in Psalm 95 at what I believe is a pattern for entering into worship. The first two verses speak of exuberant praise and thanksgiving.

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD, let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.

I believe it is hard for God to accept half-hearted praise. Scripture says, “Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised” (Ps. 48:1). In fact, if you are not prepared to praise Him greatly, maybe you shouldn’t do it at all. Psalm 95 definitely gives ample room for loud, vocal, excited, exuberant praise: “Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.” That’s what I call the entrance into His gates with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise. That is the way of access, and I don’t believe there is any access without it. In Isaiah 60:18 the prophet says: “Thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise” (KJV). In other words, if you want to come into salvation you’ve got to come by the gate and every gate is praise.

Verses 3–5 give us reasons why we should praise God:

For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.

As we look at the whole created universe, we witness the wisdom and the greatness of the Creator. That should elicit a response of thanksgiving and praise from us.

Having approached by these steps of thanksgiving and praise, we still haven’t arrived at worship. In verses 6–7, the mood of Psalm 95 changes, and we get to what I believe is the heart of the matter.

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.

As I see it, this purposeful worship isn’t the type of loud boisterousness that has become the norm; it is quietness. Then in verse 7, we are given two reasons why we should worship the Lord.

For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

The first reason to worship God is because He *is* God, and He is *our* God. He is the only being in the universe actually worthy of worship. We can praise men and women, but we must never worship men and women. Worship is the most distinctive way we have to relate to God as God.

I have become convinced that whatever we worship gains control of us. The more we worship it, the more like it we become—and the more it gains power over us. If we don’t worship God, how much is He really our God?

The second reason given that we should worship Him is that we are the people of His pasture, the flock under His care. Worship is the appropriate response to God’s care for us. It is the way we recognize Him as our God; it is the way we respond to His care for us.

It is significant that the psalm doesn’t end there. It ends with a solemn warning:

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah. [Then God discusses that generation.] For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, “They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways.” So I declared on oath in my anger, “They shall never enter into my rest.”

I have become convinced that whatever we worship gains control of us. The more we worship it, the more like it we become—and the more it gains power over us. If we don’t worship God, how much is He really our God?

This sets before us two alternatives: choosing to enter into true worship or choosing not to. In worship we hear God's voice. Upon hearing God's voice and obeying it, we enter into rest. The inescapable condition of this is the importance of hearing God's voice. In Jeremiah 7:23, God says to His people:

But this is what I commanded them, saying, "Obey My voice, and I will be your God." (NAS)

That is one of the simplest statements I have ever read of what God requires. "Obey My voice and I will be your God."

Deuteronomy 28 lists all the blessings of obedience and all the curses of disobedience. The blessings begin, "If you diligently obey [hearken] the voice of the LORD your God . . . all these blessings shall come upon you" (NKJ). The curses begin, "If you do not obey [hearken] the voice of the LORD your God . . . all these curses will come upon you." The watershed is listening, or not listening, to the voice of the Lord. I believe worship brings us to the place where we can hear God's voice.

I don't want to shock you, but it is not enough simply to read your Bible. Look at John 10:27.

"My sheep hear My voice, and [hearing My voice] . . . they follow Me." (NKJ)

Notice Jesus didn't say His sheep read the Bible, or go to church, or dress a certain way. He said His sheep "hear His voice." You cannot follow Jesus if you don't hear His voice. It's a good thing to read the Bible, but it is entirely possible to read the Bible without hearing the voice of the Lord. I believe worship is the appointed way to come into that attitude and relationship where we really hear God's voice.

In hearing God's voice, we enter into His rest. I believe worship is the way to rest. Only those who really know how to worship can really enjoy rest. As I said before, rest is very rare among contemporary Americans. Look now at Hebrews 4:9.

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience. (NIV)

Again the Scripture brings out the fact that because of disobedience they failed to enter into rest. The Scripture says, "There remains, therefore a Sabbath-rest for the people of God." I am not talking about observing the Sabbath or making Sunday the Sabbath or any of that, but there still is something there we can miss if we are not careful. I believe God can do something in your heart that will cause you to naturally keep His divine, eternal, unchanging laws. God is doing something in my heart about Sabbath-rest. I have come to believe that I am not pleasing God if I am busy every week, seven days a week. Furthermore, I'm sure to be endangering my own health.

Consider these questions as you meditate on this study: Are you making the best of your time? Do you really know what it is to rest? Are you capable of disciplining yourself to stop doing things and even doing them mentally? Can you ever lie down and stop thinking about what you ought to be doing?

So, when are we going to rest? Well, I have experienced something new in learning to worship and learning to rest, and I find they are very close together. I believe in thanking God and praising Him out loud—even dancing, clapping, singing. But there comes a time when I'll put my wings over my face and my wings over my feet and I'll hear what God says.

Today, if you will hear His voice; don't harden your hearts, don't miss His rest. God bless you.