

The Imperative to Worship

Psalm 150

Two angels were walking through God's universe, and one was asking the other questions.

"What is this for?", the one asked, pointing to a star.

"That is to give off light and be a sign and a light to the earth."

"And what is that for?", he said, pointing to the clouds wrapping around the earth.

"Those are to give rain on the earth, and provide shade and cool."

Pointing to the ocean, he said, "What is this for?"

"This is to separate the land, to control the weather cycle, to store the billions of sea animals, and to humble man's heart."

Finally, the angel pointed to man, and said, "And what is this for?"

The angel responded, "Oh – just one thing: to worship God."

Man was made to worship God. Adam was made to bring God glory. Since the fall, our race has been like zebras trying to fly or fish trying to walk. We are made to bring glory to God and find our deepest joy in doing so. The greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. Now man cannot do that in his natural state. He needs something to be able to do that. He needs the good news – the Gospel that Jesus Christ has died to forgive him his rebellion and God-neglect, and will grant him a new life where God is again at the centre. The Gospel is the doorway back into living life as you were designed to do it.

Once you are a Christian, a born-again believer in Christ, you begin an eternal life of worship. As we go through the Scriptures, we find three forms of worship that believers have the opportunity to participate in, and indeed, should participate in. It is an enormous privilege to worship our God, and it is our ultimate obligation. It is our duty to delight in God.

The three forms of worship are private worship, lifestyle worship and corporate worship. Let's begin with the first kind of worship – private worship.

I. Private Worship

Psalm 119:147-148 *I rise before the dawning of the morning, And cry for help; I hope in Your word. ¹⁴⁸ My eyes are awake through the night watches, That I may meditate on Your word.*

Daniel 6:10 *Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days.*

Mark 1:35 *Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed*

Acts 10:9 *The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour.*

Now you'll notice that these are not commands; they are examples. But the fact that they are spread out throughout the Bible suggests that God's people have almost instinctively sensed the need to meet with God alone regularly. If you read biographies of Christians through the ages, you will see mention of their times alone in private worship. If you read the devotional works of the church, you will see Christians exhorting each other to spend time alone with God. In fact, I am sure that if we asked most of the Christians in this room, they would tell you that they almost knew without having

to be told that one you are a Christian, you want to meet with God alone. You want to talk to Him, thank Him, ask Him. You want to hear from him as well.

Now I want to suggest to you that every Christian must take this privilege of worshipping God alone. What a delightful thing – to be able to appear before God and tell Him things too personal and private to be shared with others. To praise Him and thank Him for the particular way He has worked in your life, to confess your private and secret sins. To ask Him for particular and pressing needs in your life and in that of those you know. It is to re-dedicate your whole being to God afresh every day.

It is your chance to just stop and reflect on what God is teaching you. It is to hear what he is saying to you. Here is unmatched intimacy. It is to come before your Father and know Him. It is to break bread, that is, share a one-on-one with your Lord and Saviour.

As individual Christians, we need to spend time with God alone. We need to simply commune with Him personally. Any relationship that does not involve personal communion and communication between the two people will slowly become distant, cold and even brittle. On the other hand, when we do spend time alone with God, we bring glory to Him, and we find our deepest satisfaction in God.

George Mueller was a Baptist pastor who lived during the 19th century. He ended up taking care of thousands of orphans, pastoring churches and went on the mission field in his eighties. He wrote a little pamphlet called 'Soul Nourishment', which I've shared with many of you. This is one of the things he wrote in there;

“I saw more clearly than ever that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord...How different, when the soul is refreshed and made happy early in the morning, from what it is when without spiritual preparation, the service, the trials, and the temptations of the day come upon one”

Now I want to say something about private worship which could really be taken the wrong way if I don't say it carefully, or if you don't listen carefully. As I've just said, private worship has always been a part of the lives of God's people Old Testament and New. I believe we should do it. It is a mighty privilege. It is a source of great joy and strength. Above all – God saved you personally; He deserves your personal adoration. But having said all that, I believe there has been a modern overemphasis on the 'quiet time' as the be-all and end-all of the Christian life. Certainly in the circles I grew up in, it seemed like having a quiet time was the source of spirituality. In fact, I have heard messages which suggest that the quiet time is the greatest source of your own spiritual growth – that having a quiet time is the biggest part of your Christian life.

When that is the attitude, a few things will happen. Firstly, a kind of spiritual pride develops where the external work of 'quiet time' becomes the means of obtaining merit from God. It becomes the way of 'feeling' accepted by the group – if I am totally regular with my devotions. Negatively, it becomes a kind of all-or-nothing event for your day. No quiet time – the day is a write-off as far as loving God goes; have a quiet-time, and you feel God will bless you and prevent you from having any car accidents.

That is not Scriptural, and it is a return to the Law, which breaks the backs of those who try to keep it. The truth is the so-called quiet-time as we see it is a fairly modern phenomenon. By that I mean reading or skimming a chapter or two – keeping to a Bible-reading programme, saying a few

prayers for pressing needs and then feeling that you have ticked off the big one on the to-do list. Most believers in history have had no personal copy of the Scriptures. That is a very recent thing. So what did believers through history do without a John MacArthur Study Bible and a One-Year Bible reading plan? They got alone, they reflected on Scripture they had heard, and they thought. And they turned their thoughts into prayers. And they simply worshipped.

Secondly, if you read the New Testament, you will find that when it comes to spiritual growth, the emphasis is always on corporate worship and discipleship. Read the big chapter on spiritual maturity in the Bible – Ephesians chapter 4. How do saints come to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ? Through the church which gives pastor-teachers to equip the saints for the work of the ministry for the edifying of the body of Christ. It is primarily in the body that the members grow. Your spiritual growth is not a private affair, but something which happens in the body. In other words, an overemphasis on private devotions is unbalanced. This is exactly why you have people saying things like, I don't need church, I can read my Bible and pray at home – because they have missed the fact that God intends your greatest growth to take place in corporate worship and discipleship.

Now I am not saying private worship is unimportant. I am not saying it is dispensable. I think we should fight against the flesh, which wants to neglect private worship. I simply want to release you from a kind of inflation of the importance of mechanically reading a few chapters and saying some prayers, as supposedly the most important thing in your Christian life.

The most important thing in your Christian life is worship - to love God. And you should worship God privately. But understand that worshipping God privately is only the start. It flows into the two others, which are in some ways, more important and more significant.

So let me encourage you to take up the example of the ancient Hebrews and the New Testament church. Find time to be with God. Morning is probably best. A lunch break is good. A quiet hour at night is fine. A bit of both is great. Any time is beneficial. Tune out the sounds of the world. Come to God for no other reason than God Himself. Come to know Him and love Him. If you can, open His Word and read. But don't just read. Think. Meditate. Reflect. You don't have to do a Bible reading plan to meditate on Scripture. You can meditate on the mental or physical notes you took during the Sunday sermon. You can meditate on Scriptural truth contained in a solid devotional book, or hymnal. I'm not against well-written prayers either – they contain truth and help us respond to God well. Think about God. And then respond to truth. That's worship – appropriate responses to truth about God. Praise Him, thank Him, fear Him, desire Him, trust Him, and hope in Him. Confess your wrongs, and rest in his finished work. Present yourself again a living sacrifice. Yield to His will. Purpose to make the changes he has showed you need to be made. Ask for grace for others.

And when you are done, come out determined to keep worshipping. Don't treat private worship like an appointment with a guru on a mountain which you climb and then leave him there and climb down to the 'real world'. No, treat it as a time of focused and intimate worship with the God who will be present with you all day long.

And that leads us to the second kind of worship, which we could call

II. Lifestyle Worship

1 Corinthians 10:31 *Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*

Eating and drinking are some of the simplest and most common things we do. Yet the Bible says, do those things, and in fact, all things for the glory of God. In other words, worship God all the time. Let every act of your life be an act of worship. We know of many other Scriptures which echo this idea of worshipping God in your life, as a lifestyle.

Colossians 3:17 *And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*

For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.

Proverbs 3:5-6 *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.*

These speak of living towards God and thinking towards God not just at selected times – but in all of life.

We also see lifestyle worship in several commands which suggest that our response to God should be ongoing, not merely here and there.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 *Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Joshua 1:8 *"This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.*

Finally, there are a number of terms which the Bible uses to describe our response to God which suggest an ongoing, moment-to-moment type of worship. We are told to 'walk in the Spirit'. That is a step-by-step ongoing relationship. We can kneel to worship God in private worship, but we walk with Him through the day. We are told to 'abide in Christ'. That means to remain in Him. Like branches which stay connected to the main trunk and get their sap, we are to stay in communion and fellowship with Christ as we go about our business.

The reason for this is that not only is our God everywhere present, but He dwells within us as believers. Therefore, our worship is not localised. We do not visit God, or go to see God at one place. We get to have the joy of worshipping Him continually because He is with us everywhere we go, whatever we do.

If you haven't already done so, I'd encourage you to pick up the book the Practice of the Presence of God by a man named Brother Lawrence. There was a man who had learned lifestyle worship - worshipping God throughout his waking hours.

Now once again, I think I need to offer some correctives to some thinking. We often hear the truth that we should be praying without ceasing, or remaining in fellowship with God, and then take that to mean that we are to have a non-stop mental focus on God Himself and that to break off praying or thinking about God is to break these commands. They have taken the idea of abiding in Christ to mean that we should do nothing but think about God, and whenever we are not thinking about God, we are somehow breaking fellowship with God and falling short of worship.

When Paul tells the church, I do not cease to give thanks for you; he does not mean that that is all

he ever does because he says that to more than one church. And further, you can bet that when he was being stoned or shipwrecked or beaten, he wasn't particularly thanking the Lord for the Corinthians or the Philippians at that moment. Paul means that he is praying for those believers as a pattern in his life. He frequently, regularly comes back to praying for them. He does not give up praying for them.

This is the sense in which lifestyle worship takes place. It is not that all we ever do is mumble prayers under our breaths or that all we ever think of is Scripture.

To worship God in your life is not to try to think about two things at once, or to torture yourself because you weren't memorising Scripture while fixing that flat tyre.

We worship God, not merely by enjoying his presence and offering Him our praises, but also by serving Him. Serving Him requires us to focus, not upon God Himself, but upon the task that we are performing for His glory. That is, a Christian mechanic worships not by trying to sing How Great Thou Art while under the car, but by fixing the car skillfully. A Christian pilot worships God not by holding a prayer meeting in the plane, but by landing it safely. A Christian computer programmer glorifies God not by trying to quote a chapter from memory while programming, but by programming well. There were times when Adam walked with the Lord and worshiped privately, but there were other times he tilled the garden, and planted and watered, and cultivated. And when his focus was on the material, he was reflecting His Creator and worshipping Him with his good service.

So how do we do that? Can I suggest that you take Romans 11:36 as your key verse for lifestyle worship?

Romans 11:36 *For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.*

This statement is a truth about reality. God is the source of all things. He is the sustainer and providential worker of all things. And he is the ultimate goal of all things.

But for the Christian, this has very personal and specific applications.

Look at the first part. **All things are of Him.**

For the believer, you can be sure that every situation you experience is part of God's loving plan to make you more like Christ. Romans 8:28 and verse 32 reverse Murphy's Law ("If something can go wrong, it will"). For the Christian in Christ, if things can go right, they will. For the Christian, nothing can ultimately go wrong. Because all things, as 1 Corinthians 3:21 puts it, are yours. Does that include suffering? Insults? Hardships? Attacks? Weaknesses? Needs? Accidents? Calamities? Sickness? Yes. Does it include friends, food, hobbies, and simple pleasures? Yes. All of life is from God. So lifestyle worship means acknowledging that. Simply acknowledging – God, this is from you. Now obviously you don't blame God for your sin, but you can accept the consequences as being permitted by God. All of life, you can simply be aware of it in your heart. You can pray and thank God for the situation. You can simply submit to Him and yield to His decision.

What's the next part of Romans 11:36? All things are **'through Him'**

If you are a believer, then God is the power

"In Him we live and move and have our being." God is the one who is present to grant us what we need for life: direction, wisdom, understanding, desires to please Him, strength to please Him, perseverance. So again, whatever situation it is, you can simply commit it to God. God enable me, help me, strengthen me. I need you. Please grant me what you promised. (Wit, hope, call, look,

trust, seek). The secret is this- the more we acknowledge and seek God's help, the more blessing we receive – the more aware we are of His presence.

You realise – this is from God, this is to be done through God, and then, what is the last part of Romans 11:36? **All things are to Him.**

You dedicate what you do to God. In the end

You return your completed act to God - your finished work, or journey, or meal, or meeting, or rest, or discussion, or lesson. You return it to God and offer it up to Him. “Thank you God.

If you are a believer, then everything you face in your life is 'of Him'. Whatever you do, from start to finish, everything you face in life is something prepared and permitted by God for you.

Corporate Worship – gathered people of God come to exalt God by learning truth about God and responding appropriately to that truth.

This is not an incessant, non-stop prayer. It is the pattern of life whereby you enjoy life in God. Realise everything is from him. Everything can only be done through Him. Everything is to be done to Him. When that is your focus, you are not under some kind of bondage where you measure your spirituality by how many specifically spiritual thoughts did I think today? It becomes a manner of living with God, and in God. It's walking with God.

This leads then to the final kind of worship:

III. Corporate Worship

Corporate worship is when believers come together at the appointed time and unite in responding to God's glory. God cares about this. Exodus devotes 25 chapters to the building of the Tabernacle – the centre of Israelite corporate worship. Leviticus is 27 chapters of instructions on corporate worship. Psalms is a book of 150 hymns to be sung. Once you're in the New Testament, the emphasis doesn't end. We see the early church in the book of Acts coming together to worship. We see commands like Hebrews 10:25 to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together.

But perhaps the strongest evidence for New Testament corporate worship is the fact that God refers to believers (plural) as the Temple of God.

Ephesians 2:19-22 *Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²² in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Also 1 Peter 2:5,9, 1 Cor 3:9)*

What happened in the Old testament Temple? Worship. What is the gathered New Testament church? It is the living body which together worships God.

Biblically, private worship flows into lifestyle worship which then climaxes in corporate worship, meaning that corporate worship is the most important kind of worship we can do. I meet with God alone, which leads me to live with God all through the week, which comes to a highlight once a week when I join with other believers in corporate worship.

But today, the thinking is, because we only do it one day in seven, it is the least important kind, and the one most easily dispensed with. Ask the average Christian today and they will tell you that it doesn't make that much difference if they miss corporate worship because they are having their own

quiet time. I wonder if part of this isn't the individualised, privatised worlds we live in, and then we import that into the Bible, thinking the most important kind of worship is my own private time. In truth, that's probably ranked third.

I can give you several biblical reasons why corporate worship is the culmination of the other two, and therefore the highlight.

- 1) Corporate worship is where Christ is especially present. He promises that where two or three are gathered in his name He is there amongst us. Is He with us privately? Yes. But a greater manifestation of Him is to be expected when we come together.
- 2) Corporate worship is where we are authorised to partake of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is one of the highlights of knowing and enjoying Christ. The Lord's Supper is not something I can have in private worship or lifestyle worship.
- 3) Corporate worship is always a maximising of our joy in God. Have you noticed that whenever the psalmists are talking about joy in God, they are almost always calling others to join them in praise? "O Come let us praise the Lord. Magnify the Lord with me." If you have ever travelled alone, you will know it is not at all the same when you see a beautiful sight and you are there by yourself. Your very first inclination when you see beauty is to turn to another and say, "Isn't that beautiful?" And when they agree with you, the joy is greater than if you had enjoyed it alone. And for all the beauties of God we might enjoy in private worship and lifestyle worship, it is only in corporate worship that our joy in God is magnified. Other agree -Yes, he is worthy; He is trustworthy, faithful, kind, powerful. '
- 4) Corporate worship is where the promise of greatest edification lies. I mentioned this earlier – Ephesians 4, I Timothy 4 – are speaking of church. Think on your own life. Where has the greatest growth happened? Isn't it usually as a result of the body of Christ?
- 5) Worship commands are almost always addressed to believers in the plural. "Singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord"
- 6) Perfected worship when we are glorified will be corporate worship. Did you ever think that the highlight of our worship, when God sets up His kingdom on the earth, will be when we travel to the New Jerusalem? And what will we do there? We will worship Him as a group - an innumerable group.

I hope by now you are seeing that each of these forms of worship needs the other. Sometimes people make this mistake: they say, "Well, I don't need to go to church, because I worship God at home".

Or, they say, "I pray all the time. I don't need to meet God alone. I don't need to go to church."

Or the other form is people who say, at least to themselves, "I go to church on Sundays. I don't need to worry about meeting with Him privately or praying or living life to Him."

But each of those responses is wrong. Private worship strengthens lifestyle worship and corporate worship. Lifestyle worship strengthens private worship and corporate worship. And corporate worship feeds back into your private worship and lifestyle worship. You need all three.

So what do we do at corporate worship?

If I can simplify it to its most basic, it is probably this: In corporate worship, we are presented with truth about God, and we respond to that truth together. When we sing, we are singing truth. By joining our hearts and voices, we are agreeing on the validity of the truth, and on the response. When someone leads in prayer – he represents our desires and gratitude and praise and confessions. Therefore we pray with him, and say Amen, verbally or inwardly. When the truth of God is set forth in the preaching of the Word, we together concentrate on its meaning so as to understand. We respond. Some of that response is immediate – praise, conviction, new understanding. Some of the

response will come in your lifestyle. And we may even leave and together respond to the Word – wasn't that truth precious? Wasn't that truth just so timely? Isn't God's Word always relevant? This is why unity is so fundamental. The power of corporate worship is to have believers who are likeminded and loving one another together responding with one mind towards the Lord Jesus Christ.

So what can you do?

Well, **prepare** for worship. If you are busy with private worship and lifestyle worship, you are preparing. In fact, your thoughts will start going towards the Lord's Day when you can come and respond to God with others. Prepare also by giving some thought as to what you are going to do when you come, what this is about. We recently studied Ecclesiastes 5:1 which says, "*Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.*"

Think about the occasion, its opportunities, its privileges and its responsibilities. In that light, part of preparation is prevention. Do your best to prevent things that will distract on Sunday morning – try to get things ready in advance so that Sunday morning has less stress, especially for families.

And then when you come, participate. The goal is not to be a spectator, but a member who praises, prays and ponders the Word together. Before coming, pray prayers that God would open your heart, grant your understanding and show you Himself. And then come expectantly, and participate.

Let me close with this question. If you are designed to find your deepest satisfaction in worship, why would you want to do anything else? Answer: our sinful natures, which don't believe and don't want to. Solution? Trust God that it is your deepest joy. Deny that old flesh; pursue God in private worship, lifestyle worship and corporate worship.