



THE WONDER OF WORSHIP

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It's good to be with you for a few moments to talk about the word of God. God is worthy of all of our praise and worship. Stop and contemplate what an incredible privilege and awesome responsibility it is to be allowed an audience with the creator of the universe. That's what worship really is. Throughout time, either as a family in the early dispensation of the Patriarchs, or as a nation during the Mosaic or Jewish dispensation, or now as the church in the gospel age, God's people have had appointed times and means of offering true worship to God. When these times are described in scripture, they are scenes of great reverence and an outpouring of praise and devotion to God. And that is not only true of the worship that is described on earth, but also the worship that takes place in heaven.

In John chapter 4, Jesus settled a long-running dispute about worship when the woman He met at a Samaritan well asked Him where the right place was to worship. The Samaritans worshipped in one mountain, while the Jews believed the temple in Jerusalem was the place God had appointed. But Jesus said in verses 21 through 24, "...Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."

The Lord gave two prerequisites for acceptable worship. It must be genuine and well up from within the inner man, and it must be according to truth, which is the word of God. (John 17:17) Today, there is much tension between those two things. We treat them as though they are mutually exclusive. Insisting on only that which is authorized in the word of God is cast as cold, rigid, and legalistic. Emphasizing the spiritual nature of worship is seen as emotionalism. Admittedly, both extremes do exist and render our worship as unacceptable to God.

So, how do we restore or maintain the wonder of worship while preserving our commitment to keeping the ordinances of God as they were delivered? That's a good question and I would like to turn to the word of God for some answers today. We'll entitle today's program: THE WONDER OF WORSHIP and I'll return with that, after a song.

The greatest thing which you and I will engage in is worshipping God. In one form or another, God's people have always come together to offer worship as a people to God. When we read of such events, particularly in the Old Testament, they seem to be scenes of reverence and great wonder. It was not a trivial thing to come before God with worship and anyone who treated such occasions with contempt or even unconcern met God's wrath and swift judgment. When Cain brought sacrifices of his own choosing to God instead of what God had required, God refused to receive it and this rejection led to him murdering his righteous brother Abel in a fit of jealous rage. Moses encountered God in the burning bush, and we recall that he was warned to take his shoes off for he was standing on holy ground. Much later, when the two priestly sons of Aaron presented incense before the Lord, they carelessly bypassed God's strict instructions about where to obtain the coals for the fire used, and God consumed them with their own 'strange fire' there on the spot. When the temple was finally built, it was an incredible scene when the glory of the Lord filled that house. The very sight of the temple stirred awe and reverence in the heart of the Israelite. One may say, but that was in the Old Testament and worship today is just how we live and nothing more. Yet, Jesus told the woman at the well that worship would continue in the coming age. And in the book of Revelation, I read that worship takes place in heaven at this hour, and it is certainly not pictured as a mundane and uninteresting event. Some of the elements of worship may have changed between the old and New Testament administrations, but worship is consistently portrayed in the word of God as something humble and awe-struck people offer to a Holy and worthy God.

I would imagine all of us who make worship a regular part of our life, as well we should, would admit, though, that there have been times when worship seemed like little more than an empty ritual. There are times when the throne of God seems a million miles and thousands of years away from us and we find ourselves going through what seems like meaningless ceremonies and calling it worship. How does that happen? Does God's way of worship become outdated? Do the sacred things authored by God Himself lose their effectiveness and their ability to stir the heart and soul? Is the answer to re-invent worship or to help God out with engineering some experience that makes worship feel more right and more rewarding?

I read in the Old Testament about times when God's people were engaging in empty worship but the problem was never the system God had ordained but rather the problem was always with the attitudes, motives, and the lives of the worshippers. For instance, in Malachi 1:11-13, God lodges this complaint against them saying, "For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye have profaned it, in that ye say, The table of the LORD is polluted; and the fruit thereof, even his meat, is contemptible. Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness is it! and ye have snuffed at it, saith the LORD of hosts; and ye brought that which was torn, and the lame, and the sick; thus ye brought an offering: should I accept this of your hand? saith the LORD." The problem was not the system of sacrifice or what God required in the form of worship. The problem was the condition of the lives and hearts of the priests and the people they led. They gave far less than their best to the Lord and essentially yawned in His face. They considered His worship a weariness – a drudgery – a boring exercise in futility. Was the answer for God

to come up with some fresh new way of worshipping Him? No! The answer was to call them to repentance. I suggest the same is true today when worship loses its wonder in our eyes.

But we're living a restless age and though certainly not new, it is perhaps more obvious than ever before, that people are tired of the old and looking for something new and different. What has been done is old and outdated and ineffectual, and we must have something different if we are to be excited and joyful about serving the Lord. Many churches today are so afraid of boredom that they have gone chasing after novelty. On the other side of the coin, others rightly fear emotionalism and retreat into cold, lifeless formality. The bible offers a better way to keep the wonder in worship, and it does not involve abandoning the ordinances of the New Testament and changing the worship to make it fit our desires and expectations. Transforming the simple nature of biblical worship into an exciting performance that tries to stimulate and manipulate people's emotions is not the answer, in fact, it's wrong and it's dangerous.

Now, emotion is not a bad thing. It's a good thing. Of course, worship should leave us with a more fervent love for God and consequently, worship should bring us joy and comfort. But that is the natural product of true worship in the heart of a true worshipper. That's different than using novelty and things that appeal to the senses to conjure up an emotional high for an hour and because we saw or were part of something that made us feel good, conclude that we have rightly worshipped God. Mood lighting, vapid music that is designed to get people into an emotional frenzy, gimmicks, and stage productions are not the answer to mundane worship. The mind and heart of the worshipper are the answer, and those things cannot be manipulated for an hour but rather must be prepared long before the person enters an assembly for worship. The problem with dead worship is not outdated methods, but rather dead worshippers. And worshippers aren't dead because there isn't an exciting praise team or because there isn't enough fog, or enough lights, or because hymns just don't cut it with the young crowd, and on and on. Worship is not dead because the preacher still wears a tie and stands in one place while he preaches. Worship becomes dead because of a problem with the worshippers themselves. And let me add this, though the bible implies in 1 Corinthians 14:24 that outsiders may attend our assemblies and even be convinced by what they see and hear, the assembly of the church is not designed for them. The hour of worship, if we want to describe it that way, is not a branding tool for the church. And that's another reason public worship has taken the turn that it has in recent generations. Leaders want to craft their assemblies to appeal to the community but that's not really their purpose. They are to first and foremost, bring honor and glory to God, and God gets to decide what brings Him glory, not us. Second, our assemblies are to equip the saints to live out the truth and to GO OUT and win the lost for Christ. That alone, I think should help us keep these modern worship wars more in perspective.

No, if we want to restore wonder to our worship, we don't need novelty, we need truth. We need to be better acquainted with God we worship and that only happens through God' revelation of Himself – the truth of His word. After all, the word 'worship' means "worth ship". And with that in view, I want to mention four things that hold the keys to effectual, heart-felt worship. When we learn, teach, and emphasize these things in the church, worship will be a fresh and thrilling occasion for every true believer even as we do the same things that have been done for thousands of years.

First, we need to BEHOLD GOD'S BEAUTY. When we stand and view some breathtaking scene on earth, it stirs something inside. It's hard to stand on Glacier Point in California and look out over the vast beauty of Yosemite Valley and the high eastern Sierra and yawn. My wife and I were in Switzerland this past year and I can assure you, you don't look up at the Matterhorn or across the snow-covered Alps and shrug your shoulders and think can we go home now? It is thrilling. And no one had to improve that

view and embellish it with special lighting and play music in the background to create that feeling. It creates itself because you're overwhelmed by what's there naturally. It's that way with God. If you just spend time deeply in the word of God you learn more than just the will of God, a portrait OF God is painted on the canvas of your mind. His creation gives us one view of His glory and beauty. The Creator must love beauty because He made a world and a universe that is full of beauty and wonder and made us in His own image and gave us the ability to perceive and appreciate it. Think about the fact that if God made a world like this to enjoy and admire, what must His own abode in Heaven be like? Do you think someone has to whip the angels and the beings in heaven into an emotional lather to create the scene that John describes in Revelation 4? No! One glimpse of His throne and the beauty of all that surrounds it is enough to make them cast their crowns at His feet and worship Him day and night. But the ultimate picture of God is in His word. Read through the Psalms alone and see the high and lofty and beautiful images the Holy Spirit has painted on those pages of the God of the Ages and how can our hearts not be filled with humility and a sense of our own smallness and unworthiness, and an overwhelming sense of God's greatness. Psalm 50:2 says, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined." David said in Psalm 27:4, "One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple."

Second, not only do we need to behold His beauty, but also RESPECT HIS REGALITY. We worship our Sovereign King. And that, for the one thing, should remind us that worship is not about pleasing ourselves, it is about honoring and obeying HIM. If we lived the day of true monarchies such as have existed throughout much of time, we would not dare saunter into the presence of our King. Most people would not go to a palace today without looking their best, and being on their best behavior, and being careful to show respect for the one they've been invited in to see and gain an audience with. Even in our democracy, most people historically have had enough respect for the office of a President or a Senator, that it was an intimidating experience to enter their office or be in their presence. How much more our great and benevolent King in heaven. The problem today is, we don't have much respect anymore for anyone or anything. Decorum and reverence have flown out the window and as a society we are become more crude and crass and casual and even contemptuous. And it reflects in even how we approach the church and the things of God. Do you give God your best? Or do you treat it flippantly? Do you honor Him as the supreme Sovereign of the Universe or treat Him like your acquaintance down the street? Once again, God warns in Malachi 1:14, cursed is one who "sacrificeth unto the Lord a corrupt thing: for I am a great King, saith the LORD of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen." Psalm 47:6-7, "Sing praises to God, sing praises: sing praises unto our King, sing praises. For God is the King of all the earth: sing ye praises with understanding."

Then third, not only behold His beauty, and respect his regality, but we must HONOR HIS HOLINESS. Psalm 96:9 says, "O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth." The word holy means separate or set apart. God is absolutely holy. He is not a man. He is not a human being, and He isn't to be brought down to our level. He condescended to us in the person of His Son Christ Jesus so He might bring us UP to Him. And we are to be holy because He is holy, the apostle Peter tells us. The separateness of God should cause us to pause and realize what an austere thing we are doing when we enter a time of praise and worship to God. Some folks don't try to live a very holy life and then rely on some emotionally manufactured experience to put them in the throne zone for an hour on Sunday occasionally and call that worship. Isaiah the prophet said that even the angels in heaven around the throne of God cover their faces and their feet and cry 'holy, holy, holy, before the Lord. When the word of God forms the proper picture of God in our mind and we gain some understanding of His holiness, it transforms us to live holy lives, set apart by the power of His Spirit through His word, and then we will have no problem entering a time of worship with the proper frame of mind. No one will

have to emotionally manipulate us, rather the plain and simple worship of the New Testament will be rich and full of meaning and wonder by essence of its divine authorship and its object, its object being God Himself and not our shallow whims and feelings.

And finally, we need to ENVISION ETERNITY. I mentioned that the Book of Revelation gave John a view of heaven in the present, a glimpse of glory above us right now. And if we are living to please Christ, we expect that scene to envelope us when this earthly stage has passed. One day all of God's kingdom will be brought into the literal presence of the God the Father. Now, heaven will not be about seeing grandma again, as nice as that may be. Heaven will not be floating around on a cloud with nothing to do. Heaven is a real place filled with the activity of serving and worshipping God. Read Revelation 4 and if that is taking place now before the Lamb, what will it be when the Lamb delivers His kingdom up to God in the last day and all the redeemed dwell before Him? That expectation should cause our heart to beat a little faster, our eyes to glow a little brighter, and our faith be all the fonder as we stand as close to that as we can get on this side of eternity – when we worship God in heaven from here on earth below. Set your affection and mind on heavenly things and not things below; not just as you live from day to day, but just as much when you worship God with His people. Prepare your mind and heart for worship and it will bring the wonder back to your worship.

True worship, you see, flows from the right vision of God and a pure and responsive heart, not manufactured emotion or creative tricks and gimmicks. The heart engages when truth and affection meet. The heart responds to what the mind rightly sees. The deepest and truest emotions are formed slowly by truth not by a momentary experience. If we want to keep the wonder in worship, we need to be teaching people how to respond to truth – not telling them how much to feel. May we find TRUE joy and TRUE fulfillment in doing the things prescribed in the word of God because we want to obey, honor, and GLORIFY Him and not ourselves.

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