

Worship



Teaching Letter
by Derek Prince

Thanksgiving and praise – our appropriate responses to the goodness and greatness of God – are primarily utterances. We speak them, we sing them, we may even shout them. But few people realise that worship is not primarily an utterance; it is an attitude of the whole being. I personally believe, as I said at the outset of our study, that worship is the highest activity of which any human being is capable. By worship we acknowledge God's holiness.

Worship involves our whole body – not just our vocal organs. Every word for worship used in the original language of the Bible, so far as I know, either in the Hebrew of the Old Testament or in the Greek of the New, describes a bodily attitude or posture. Thus, certain specific attitudes are characteristic of worship.

First of all, bowing the head. When Moses, following his interview with God at the burning bush, returned to the elders of his people in Egypt with the news that God was going to deliver them, they all bowed their heads in worship. This was their first response – not an utterance, but an attitude.

Often worship involves not just the head but the upper part of the body. And accompanying this maybe the stretching out of the hands, palms upwards. It is interesting that in Hebrew – a language that specialises in concretes – the word for 'thank you' (*todah*) is directly related to the Hebrew word for 'hand'. When we stretch out our hands to God, we are saying 'Thank You'. We also stretch out our hands upwards to receive anything God wants to impart to us.

Kneeling is another distinctive attitude of worship. I appreciate the liturgical churches that have retained the practice of kneeling. (Having been brought up in the Anglican Church, I used to know all the time sin the liturgy when it was appropriate to kneel.)

Kneeling, I believe, is an important part of our worship, and some charismatic and Pentecostals are missing out on it. At times when God has brought a particular meeting to a climax and I have suggested that the whole congregation kneel, we have experienced some of our most powerful visitations of the Holy Spirit. It can be simply areligious formality, of course, that has lost most of its meaning, but do not let that deprive you of the blessing of kneeling before God.

The main word in the Bible connected to worship means to fall prostrate on your face before God. Sometimes I smile when I hear people singing the line from the hymn 'All hail the Power of Jesus 'Name' that says, 'Let angels prostrate fall', because most of them would never dream of falling prostrate themselves. It is good enough for angels, but don't ask us dignified human beings to fall on our faces! Yet there are few great men in the Bible who did not end up at some point with their faces to the ground before God. This is perhaps the ultimate act of worship.

When Ruth and I plan to travel on some preaching assignment, we seek to prepare ourselves beforehand. Usually (though not always) we end up prostrate on the floor before God. We are acknowledging, 'God, we are totally dependant on You. We have nothing to give, no strength, no righteousness, no wisdom, unless they come from You.'

I love those words of John Bunyan:

> "He that is down need fear no fall,
> He that is low, no pride.
> He that is humble ever shall
> Have God to be his guide."

When you have reached the floor, you cannot go any lower. You do not need to fear falling after that. It is a safe position to be flat on your face before God.

Having examined these various attitudes of worship, let us look at Isaiah 6 for an example of the way that worship is conducted in heaven. In this scene, Isaiah has a vision of the Lord in His glory. This has always been a meaningful passage to me because it was the basis for the preacher's message the first time I ever went to a Pentecostal meeting.

I did not know it was a Pentecostal meeting. In fact, I did not know there were such people as Pentecostals. Without going into details, I was a soldier in the British Army, living just as soldiers live in the British Army. Then, in this meeting, I heard the words of Isaiah. Having seen the Lord in His glory, he said, 'Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.'

When I heard those words, unconverted as I was, I said to myself, No one has ever described you more accurately than that. From then on, although I really didn't understand what the preacher was talking about, he had my attention.

Let us read the first three verses of Isaiah 6, in which Isaiah is speaking:

> "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim [or seraphs]..."

The word seraph is directly related to the Hebrew word for 'fire'. Whatever else they are, seraphs are fiery creatures. They are described thus:

> "...each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory!'"

I have always believed that those three *holys* are for the three Persons of the Godhead: holy is the Father, holy is the Son, holy is the Spirit. If you picture the scene for a moment in your imagination, it will give you a wonderful concept of the relationship between worship and praise. Praise is an utterance, and the seraphs were praising the Lord and declaring His holiness.

Isaiah's first observation, however, was not of the seraphs praising. The first thing he noticed was their attitude of worship. Those seraphs each had six wings. With the first pair they covered their face and with the second pair they covered their feet. That is worship – the face and the body covered in reverence before God. And with their two remaining wings each of the seraphs flew.

If you take covering the face and feet as worship, and flying as service, then you find the proportion of four wings for worship, two wings for service. I believe that is a correct proportion. In our ministry to the Lord we should give twice as much time and emphasis to worship as we do to service.

Futhermore, I believe service should proceed out of worship. We should never become involved in God's service without having first related to God in worship. Our service would be much more effective if it always proceeded out of worship.

The progression from worship to service is affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 4:10, after Satan had tempted Jesus to fall down and worship him. Jesus answered with a quotation from Deuteronomy 6:13.

> "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.'"

Notice the order again – first worship, then service.

On the other hand, worship should always be followed by service.

There was a time when very little worship took place inmost churches. The Sunday morning service was called a worship service, but in fact, although there were both praise and proclamation, there was no direct worship. In the last two decades or so, worship has begun to comeback into the Church. Some congregations have even made a speciality, as it were, of worship, proud of how good their worship is.

But if we make worship a form of spiritual self-indulgence without translating it into service, it is hypocrisy. If we enjoy a wonderful Sunday morning worship service and then go home and live for ourselves the rest of the week, we have not heard the words of Jesus: 'You shall worship the LORD you God, and Him only you shall serve.' Service should never be separated from worship, nor worship from service.

Let us look now at the progression in our response to God from thanksgiving and praise into worship. There is a beautiful passage in Psalm 95 that depicts this progression. The first two verses depict loud, jubilant praise – a lot louder than some churches will permit! It says:

> "Oh come, let us sing to the Lord;
> Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation."

Shouting does not mean singing loud. It means shouting.

> "Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving;
> Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms."

Notice again the two stages of access: thanksgiving and praise. There is no other way into the presence of God.

The Bible is very logical. It does not just ask us to thank and praise God; it tells us why. You remember the three unchanging reasons given in Psalm 100 to thank Him: the Lord is good, His mercy is everlasting and His truth endures to all generations. Now, in Psalm 95:3–5, we are given additional reasons to praise God. First:

> "For the Lord is the great God, And the great King above all gods."

The word great is used twice, reminding us that by praise we acknowledge God's greatness. This we do by loud, jubilant, excited praise.

> "Then we see Him as the mighty Creator:
> In His hand are the deep places of the earth;
> The heights of the hills are His also. The sea is His, for He made it;
> And His hands formed the dry land."

So we come to Him thanking and praising Him for the marvels of His creation.

But that is only the access. Praise and thanksgiving, as we have already seen, are really the way of approach. You will notice that in verse 6 we come to worship:

> "Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
> Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker."

We have passed from utterance to attitude. We began with praise and thanksgiving, but that was not the goal. When Christians stop with praise and thanksgiving, they have missed the goal – worship – which is not an utterance but an attitude.

Why do we worship? Verse 7:

> "For He is our God…"

Worship belongs only to God. The act of worship is the supreme way by which we acknowledge that He is our God.

> "And we are the people of His pasture…"

And the sheep of His hand.

It is appropriate for God's people to worship Him. Worship acknowledges the relationship between us as God's people and God as our Creator and Redeemer.

But verse 7 does not end there. The first part of the next sentence is included at the end, revealing a wonderful secret:

> "Today, if you will hear His voice:
> Do not harden your hearts…"

Why is this particular admonition included in the section on worship? Because it is when we worship that we really hear God's voice. When we worship, we have come to the end of talking. When we have done all our shouting and praising, we find ourselves quiet, in a position of reverence before God.

Somebody has said charismatics are afraid of silence. This may be true. The fact is, there comes a time for silence. Who

knows how long that silence might be? Are we willing to give God ten minutes? Most churches would consider ten minutes of silence totally out of order. Only God, of course, determines how long our silence before Him should be. But in that attitude, for however long, we are open to hear His voice.

Ruth and I take time regularly, almost every day, to praise and worship God. (Ruth is our worship leader since I do not have much of a voice!) And many times when we come into an attitude of worship, with our spirits quiet before God, He speaks to us. We have had much direction, warning, and encouragement from Him in these times. And even though I am very cautious about prophetic utterances, if one comes in an atmosphere of worship and does not disturb the harmony, I am usually ready to believe God is speaking to us.

But if we never come into that place of worship, we may never give God an opportunity to speak to us.

Notice the progression, then, reflected in Psalm 95: loud, jubilant, excited praise brings us into the presence of God. We praise Him for the reasons we have already seen – and more. But when we have come into His presence, then our response to Him changes. It is no longer the utterance of thanks giving and praise, but an attitude of reverence and worship in the presence of almighty God, in which we are open to hear His voice.

Jesus has some key words to say about worship in John 4:23, which He addresses to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well:

> "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such to worship Him."

That is a remarkable statement, isn't it? Almighty God is seeking those who will worship Him. But we have to worship Him according to His terms. Verse 24:

> "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

According to the Bible, man consists of three parts – spirit, soul and body. Our souls are very active in praise and thanksgiving. But when it comes to worship, it is our spirits that are in direct communion with God's Spirit. This is something of which our souls are not capable.

It is the Holy Spirit who gives us this direct union with God. Those of us who have had an experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit know that it changes the way we worship. We have moved into a new dimension. Being filled with the Holy Spirit does not make us perfect or superior to other people, but it does release something in us enabling us to appreciate what worship ought to be.

We must also worship God in truth. Truth, I believe, requires sincerity. It is extremely important to be sincere in our worship. To illustrate, I want to take a little picture from Leviticus, the Old Testament book that describes priestly ordinances and sacrifices.

The Lord is giving directions as to what may be offered in a sacrifice and what may not. In Leviticus 2:1–2 He demands that frankincense, a certain aromatic gum from a tree, be offered on every sacrifice:

> "When anyone offers a grain offering to the Lord, his offering shall be of fine flour. And he shall pour oil on it, and put frankincense on it. He shall bring it to Aaron's sons, the priests, one of whom shall take from it his handful of fine flour and oil with all the frankincense. And the priest shall burn it as a memorial on the altar, an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the Lord."

Sacrifices consisted of various elements, including flour and oil (the latter is a type of the Holy Spirit). Only a portion of these was burned; the rest went to the priest.(Our offerings given to God today also serve the ministers of God – today's priesthood.) But all the frankincense was burned because frankincense, in the Old Testament, is a type of worship, and that is one part of our offering that never goes to anyone but God. How important is it not to offer worship to any human being at any time, but only to the Lord.

Frankincense has no beauty in itself, but when it is burned, it gives forth a beautiful fragrance. That is exactly what our worship becomes to God: a beautiful, aromatic fragrance that rises up in His nostrils.

There is another substance, on the other hand, that must not be included in any offerings to God. From Leviticus 2:11:

> "No grain offering which you bring to the LORD shall be made with leaven, for you shall burn no leaven nor any honey in any offering to the Lord made by fire."

Honey in its natural state is sweet and tasty. Burned, it becomes a black, sticky mess. What the Lord is saying, then, is this: 'Don't offer to Me any worship that won't stand the fire. Offer to Me frankincense because the more it's burned, the sweeter it becomes. Do not offer to Me worship that,

when tested and tried, becomes a black, sticky mess.'

Think of that. Ask yourself, 'Am I putting honey on my prayers, or am I offering frankincense? Am I telling God things that I won't live out? Or am I praying to Him in spirit and in truth?'

One final, very vivid picture of worship is found in 1 Corinthians 6:16–17. This is a frank passage, just as the Bible is a frank book. Paul says:

> "...Do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For 'The two,' God says, 'shall become one flesh.' But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him."

We need to be equally frank ourselves and see the contrast. Paul's first example is immoral sexual union. But, parallel to this, he speaks about the person joined to the Lord in spirit. There are two kinds of union, in other words – physical and spiritual. Worship is spiritual union – the only way our spirits can unite directly with God. And out of that union comes procreation.

So when you think about worship, remember that this is the way your spirit becomes united with God's Spirit. Out of this union there comes fruitfulness. In the spiritual, just as in the physical, union leads to reproduction.

Take time to ponder this progression that climaxes in union with God: thanksgiving – praise – worship. Be liberal in your thanksgiving and your praise, but always remember that the climax is worship.



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