

The heart of worship



1. A Passion for God (Psalms 103, 145)

What is your passion? By this I mean apart from Christianity. What really motivates you? What do you spend most time doing?

Your passion - that thing that will consume you and you would feel bereft without. That thing which lights you up, which stirs up the emotions. It may be a person. Being in love drives people to make romantic gestures.

Something that is passion driven works best than if it is driven by something else. What other things drive us to do things.

- Guilt Driven - we do something because we'll feel guilty if we don't
- Fear Driven - we do something because we fear the consequences if we don't
- Obligation Driven - we feel obliged to someone to do something
- Necessity Driven - we do something because its a necessity of life

So what of our Christian faith? Why do we come to worship? As we have read both these psalms this morning, I'm sure you like me have been struck by the passion of the psalm writer. Poetry and song are ways in which our feelings can be expressed, which is why since time immemorial they have been used in the worship of God. Let's look at some of the words again.

103:8 The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. 9 He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever; 10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. 11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him;

Here's a man who just looks at who God is and what He's like and he just says - WOW! Bless the Lord O my soul. He's someone who realises what God is like and what He has done and he is filled with awe and praises God. Is that our experience as we come for worship. Do we say to ourselves - I must get to worship because God is mighty and glorious, but He's gracious and compassionate in my life and I just want to bless and praise Him. Or are we here for some other reason. Maybe we are driven here because we feel guilty if we don't, or we fear God will bring retribution on us if we don't, or maybe we come out of obligation, or that it's just one of those things we do. David came to worship because he was in awe of God but he clearly loved to be in His presence.

This is a short series of sermons on worship and I'm going to base it around the words of hymns. Yes, hymns. But not on our hymns but the ones that come supplied in the Bible - the Psalms. I've come across quite a few people recently that say "why read the OT?" I can't see the relevance. What we see in the OT is a consistency in the way that God deals with man.

It's a consistency in grace. The Lord is gracious and compassionate. He pours out His grace and compassion on people. He showed His grace and compassion to Israel. He didn't choose them because of their faithfulness and their good law-keeping. Quite the contrary. He chose them in their sin and was faithful to His promises despite their failure and despite the fact He had to judge them after they fell away - but only then after being very very longsuffering. And he Hasn't changed.

The psalms go through the full range of human emotions and it isn't surprising because such is the nature of music and poetry. They reflect the human soul which is why God created them. The largest book in the Bible is the Psalms and the longest chapter is Psalm 119.

Why so? Because music and the poetry that goes with it are an important part of our response to a God who pours out His grace and His mercy on a fallen human race. Or to be more precise - pours out His grace and mercy on me; and you!

As we'll find out in the coming weeks, we often confuse music with worship - or more specifically, praise. We sing and that's worship and the worship leaders in churches are people in charge of music. Whether you come from a more traditional background or are into the latest praise choruses you are equally susceptible to the same trap of equating worship with singing.

Music helps express the soul - what we feel about God. The problem comes when the music becomes the end in itself and it often does and I have found the same problem in the most traditional churches and also in the most charismatic. Worship is praise and its music to many Christians. In fact that's what the word has come to mean for many Christians. Words change their meaning over the years and this is true of the English word worship.

That said, if you go to some Baptist Churches and to other more traditional denominations, they see worship in a quite different light. Worship is *liturgy*. We worship when we say and do certain things. We do regular services of worship here. That's what morning and evening services are. And we say we have come to worship and think by doing the act we have worshipped. As we put the spotlight of scripture on outward religion, we'll find that it is as equally an inadequate concept of worship.

When we look at the words used for worship in the OT and NT we find that worship just isn't the same.

The OT is consistent: shachah {shaw-khaw'}

- 1) to bow down
- 1a) (Qal) to bow down
- 1b) (Hiphil) to depress (fig)
- 1c) (Hithpael)
- 1c1) to bow down, prostrate oneself

In the NT, the main word that's used has much the same meaning.

Proskuneo - as in OT

Sebomai - reverence, standing in awe

Latreuo - to serve, render homage to

Eusebeo - to act piously - to live a godly life - or seek to do so.

There seem to be four elements that come out of the words for worship in the Bible and all of them appear to be based on one notion: reverence for a holy, righteous, gracious, loving and compassionate God - what the Bible calls *the fear of God*. It appeared in the Palm 103 reading

8 The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. 9 He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever; 10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. 11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.

Fear of God in this respect means two things and we explored this a few months ago. It firstly means that we should fear God because He's a holy God and Father and He hates sin now, as much as before we became Christians and, as a loving Father, He corrects us so therefore we should fear Him in that context. But we should also fear in terms of reverence and we'll explore that more in a minute. This fear and reverence of God is what is behind worship. As we realise what sort of God we have, His graciousness and compassion toward us when we were without Christ. The love which He had for us, that to His Son, Jesus to the cross, His continuing love to us as a Father, the work of His Spirit in us - then like the psalmist the praise and thanks well up within us.

And that in fact is the first of the four things that these OT and NT words suggest to use about what worship is about.

🕒 Standing in Awe

It goes on the OT to suggest that worship has a WOW factor and this is much clearer in the NT. We think on the things of God and go "wow!" That's what comes through the psalms we read today. God loves our praise as we come before Him and tell of His excellent greatness. We will explore this element much more in later weeks, but as I have already suggested, most people think this is worship. It isn't and it goes much deeper.

🕒 Subjection

The word worship in the OT and NT is the state where one comes before someone in reverence, recognising their sovereignty over them. Why do we bow to a king or for that reason to our own Queen? In one sense it is a mark of respect but it goes further - it is a mark of subjection. You are subject to the monarch and all her laws. It is a mark of fealty - obedience.

It is also a recognition that you have been allowed into the presence of the monarch as commoners even though we don't deserve to be. And why are you there - because the monarch has graciously desired you to be there - you have been summoned.

We enter into the presence of God deserving of being in His presence but by His grace and compassion, He has invited us to be with Him and better still, we are not there as subjects but we are there as His children. If you look at the Royal Family, you will find that each are subject s in the same way that we are and they bow in her presence on formal occasions but they also desire the informality of family.

Let's give God praise that we are in His presence but our worship should be one of obedience and subjection.

🕒 Service

But worship is also service. That's no surprise because if we are subject to God we do His will - follow His commands. Our rendering of homage to God is to serve Him as he

will. I haven't got time to explain the following verses today. In one sense they explain themselves but they are deep and a sermon or two in themselves.

Romans 12:1 I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, [which is] your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (NASB)

Our understanding of the mercy of God to use should lead us into giving all our lives for Him to do His will - because that is our spiritual service of worship that comes from that. If our worship is words and we are not following Him in doing His will - we are not worshipping as we should. In both traditional and modern worship, this notion of service is almost absent. People like to avoid it. We prefer to talk about praise when we talk about worship but true worship also involves both obedience and service.

Seek a godly life

Worship also places us in such a frame of mind as to desire to serve the Lord and live a godly life. It links to what we have already said about subjection and obedience.

W E Vine commented this way:

The worship of God is nowhere defined in Scripture. A consideration of the (Greek) verbs shows that it is not confined to praise; broadly it may be regarded as the direct acknowledgement of God, of His nature, of His attributes, ways and claims, whether by the outgoing of the heart in praise and thanksgiving or by deed done in such acknowledgement.

The English language seems to bundle all these ideas up in the word worship. The word worship comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *wercscipe* which means to appreciate the worth of and represents the value placed upon an object or person. Worship is worth-ship. It isn't the wishy- washy word we have turned it into that means praise. It is an expression of worth - what God is worth to us!

If God is the sovereign God of creation, if God is our Father, if through the Son we have salvation, if by His Spirit He dwells in us, then what is His worth. He is more precious than gold or silver or precious stones. We have that passion that the psalmist had. A passion to obey, a passion to serve. We stand in awe and in reverence in the fear of God. Anything else is less than God *deserves*.

What we have come to is that worship isn't about doing things like singing or having services. Worship is an outward expression of our inward reverence and fear for God our Father, of His Son our Saviour and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Worship comes from an attitude of reverence - a state of heart that brings forth our response to the God who is gracious and compassionate.

The trouble is that in worship we are sometimes like children who are made to say sorry. They have a fight and we say "You must say sorry". So, they say sorry in an insincere way. "That isn't sorry". It isn't meant, it isn't from the heart so we know that it's not respect. Adults are the same. No-one likes people that give no respect. They may go through the politeness motions but there's no respect - ask people in our African Caribbean communities. They will tell you about respect.

And sometimes that's what our attitude to God is when we come to worship. It's polite but what's our real attitude? Is it reverend?

The trouble is that we put our own culture into what worship should mean. In English society, being reverend is being reserved, respectful, formal. We do things in a dignified way don't we?

I remember the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977. I was in my sister's village outside Newport and the Queen's car came along and slowed down. Of course we all wore dark suits and had our hair cut short. As the Queen's car passed we all fell silent in respect for her and bowed our heads. No we didn't! it was a summer's day and we were in our T shirts and shorts and as the car went past everybody cheered and waved. People took photos. The Queen and Prince Philip smiled and waved back at the crowd. And why did the crowd cheer? Because it was a way by which they showed their appreciation for the monarch and clearly she enjoyed the praise. Were the people being irreverent - no, they were expressing their hearts to an appreciative monarch. Wherever did we ever get the idea that reverence was being stiff, formal and po-faced! The Queen does very few po-faced duties and her most favourite duties involve meeting ordinary people. That said, she hates it when people don't take the formal ceremonies seriously as she has an enormous sense of history.

So what's right - that our worship is formal, or informal? What brings a smile to God's face? Is it a reverent traditional Baptist service? Or is it a modern informal worship service with worship songs? Or is it a noisy African celebration? Or maybe is it a place where people exercise spiritual gifts? Or is it where people sit in silence and wait on God?

I'll give you the answer - it can be all of them - or none of them. Look at the following scriptures:

Amos 5:21 "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. 22 Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. 23 Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. 24 But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

Ps 51: 15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. 16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

What was wrong. They did the outward expression, but they showed no reverence of fear for God. They did the worship, but inside there was no desire to deal with their sins and there was no desire to obey God and serve Him as they should. The worship they had wasn't worship because it would have reflected otherwise in the other elements of worship - subjection, service, godly lives.

It's a waste of time going through outward expressions if our hearts are inwardly not right with God. However reverend we think we're being is just a waste of time unless the measure of worth we have for God reflects in our service and godly living. If our coming to church on Sunday to worship isn't reflected in our lifestyle and service for Him, then what does that say of our act of worship?

If you remember nothing else from the service remember that.

What worth -ship have you brought this morning? Is it like the psalmist out of your passion to worship God. Your passion to call out to Him in praise, to be in His presence, to listen to His voice, to do what He says?

Or have you come because of Guilt, Fear, Necessity or Obligation. None of these things make us bow before God and thank Him for His mercy and compassion. None

of them are expressions of our praise. And none of them reverend, none of them fearing God. They may come with our mouths, but do they come with our hearts.

God knows. He doesn't look on the outward appearance, but looks on the heart.

Why worship - Psalm 84 *My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.*

Are you yearning for Him this morning? Is your flesh crying out?

Next week, we'll explore a little more of what praising God is about and what hinders us from praising Him.



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