

The heart of worship



3. A Passion for Relationship (Psalm 55, 51)

We saw in the first week that contrary to many people's perception, that worship is not the same as singing but is a way by which we show homage and reverence to a holy and righteous but loving God. We stand in awe of Him, we submit to Him, we desire to serve Him and seek to live a godly life. Worship is having a passion for God.

We saw last week how that passion comes out in a passion for praising God. At the root of our worship is a desire to affirm what He has done for us and for His faithfulness to us. And as we realise how exciting that is, it should make us want to shout to the Lord. It's a foundation idea and on it builds other aspects of worship.

The weakness of much of the worship that is experienced in churches is that it never gets beyond the superficial. We like to sing God's praises, but we saw in the first week how true reverence ends in submission. So when we sing God's praises, are we shouting to the Lord, singing His praises - or are we just singing?

If worship is more than praise, then what else is involved? In the previous two weeks we examined praise psalms that caused the psalmist to shout to the Lord - to make a noise and celebrate towards God. But many of them are much darker. Psalm 51 is quite a classic in this class. Here is a man coming before a holy God, knowing he has sinned.

How come we find this amongst such great statements of worship? I believe this is here because it typifies what worship is about. We do not worship a distant God, but one who has established a relationship. He's not just God, but He's *our* God because He's made it that way - we are in relationship. When we come into the presence of God, we are coming before Him because we have a relationship with Him.

The two psalms we read this morning involve worship based on relationship. They are about real relationship not pretend relationship. What do I mean? A few years ago I used to run a children's club called Thursday Club. Part of the club involved a quiz and what was interesting is the way in which the children gave us the answers to questions that they thought would please us.

You've heard this story before I know but a preacher once went to a church which was rather, how shall I say, strict. He thought *that it may be good to inject a little bit of friendliness for his children's talk to, perching himself against the communion table he said "Now boys and girls, who can tell my what is grey and has a bushy tail?" There was a blank row of faces before him. He said "now come on, you must know what's*

grey and has a bushy tail.” After a while a boy gingerly put up his hand and said “I know the answer must be Jesus, but it sounds like a squirrel to me.”

Funny maybe, but we often do that with God. We believe we must sing God’s praises in worship. God loves our praise, but as we have now said for two weeks, what’s the point of praise if it does not come from our hearts and only from our lips?

Our two psalms this morning are psalms of honesty. They are psalms of relationship. Psalm 55 is the psalm of a man in distress.

Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my plea; 2 hear me and answer me. My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught 3 at the voice of the enemy, at the stares of the wicked; for they bring down suffering upon me and revile me in their anger. 4 My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. 5 Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me. 6 I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest-- 7 I would flee far away and stay in the desert

That’s a prayer of distress and despair. Lord - I wish I wasn’t here! I wish I had wings and could flit off somewhere else. It’s more poetic than that and there’s a nice hymn about it. But this is a worship hymn - my troubles assail me so much that I wish I was somewhere else.

Is that how you feel this morning? Some people would say that knowing what my sermons are like, they wish they *were* somewhere else. What I mean is that you feel so surrounded by the pressures of other people, or the pressures of life that you feel overwhelmed.

What do you do? Do you tell God all about it? Or do you just keep it to yourself, or sweep it under the carpet? Or maybe just not come to Church because you don’t feel you can worship?

In my last church we had quite a few people who always took “time out” when they were hit with spiritual and personal problems. As Elijah found, running away from God and hiding isn’t an option. He’s everywhere and all He wants us to do is talk to Him.

Worship is about relationship - the psalmist went straight to God and told Him all his woes. God wants honesty from us and He ministers through that honesty. Because in worship we bring those problems and put things into perspective as He is the One who shows us His grace, who has expressed His love, continues to express His love, makes us His children and pours out His Spirit upon us. And when we understand that context we find relationship:

Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall. 23 But you, O God, will bring down the wicked into the pit of corruption; bloodthirsty and deceitful men will not live out half their days. But as for me, I trust in you.

And that’s where God wants you to get to with your problems this morning. But the psalms go further than that by facing up to the fact that our relationship with God can sometimes fall into crisis. That’s always our fault. Someone once said “*If you feel far away from God: which one of you moved?*” The answer is obvious - you did.

And that’s what happened to David in his desire to have Bathsheba. He had Uriah the Hittite killed - murdered - in order to fulfil his own lustful desire to have Bathsheba. And God’s judgement fell on him.

How do we respond when we fail God, when we sin? it's the same as my friends in the last church - or even worse - they don't just take time out - they leave the match. They certainly don't find themselves in the place of worship.

But worship is the place where a gracious and loving God wants us to meet Him. To recognise our faults and to come to Him for forgiveness. The simple truth is that sin separates us. Whereas it's true as God's people I believe, that Christ will never leave us or forsake us, our sin separates us from our family relationship with our Father. We all know either as parents and children how family relationships can be torn apart by disagreement and one wronging another. I have had cause to watch programs like Kilroy on occasions. Usually it's about family rifts and these arguments that they want to air on TV have often lasted years.

This piece of worship has been left in scripture for us to understand that God doesn't want us to be separate from Him, but find forgiveness anew and afresh as we come into His presence. He wants us to cry out to Him like David did:

51:1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.

The prayer was acceptable to God; we know that because his relationship was restored. And this relationship was restored through worship. We often feel this is an issue for our private prayer time. In one sense it is, but in another, as we worship and recognise our own worthlessness, we see all the more the praise that is due to God as He forgives us.

What is it then that we have to do to renew our relationship with God?

✠ Confess

David came before God and confessed His sin *Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.* He recognised himself for who he was: a sinner unfit to be in the presence of a holy God.

✠ Ask

David asks that God would cleanse him from his sin, recognising that only God can do that: *10 Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. 11 Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*

David realised that only God can deal with this issue and asks for cleansing so that the relationship with God will be restored and the joy of that salvation.

✠ Repent

But lastly, David's rehabilitation in worship came when he accepted that he needed to repent. He needed not just to say the words but that he needed for his words to come from his heart and in his life. That is the nature of repentance. We can all say sorry, but what of the resolve to do things God's way in the future. Repentance is a turning away from our ways and into God's.

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. 18 In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of

Jerusalem. 19 Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

It's important that as we come before God that we recognise our own unworthiness to do so and that we need to deal with the issue of sin in our lives, because without it we cannot worship in proper relationship with God. And we think we can. We have seen something like verse 16 and 17 last week. We may have the words, but if it isn't coming from our heart then it's a waste. ***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.***

And we find ourselves in the same position as last week. What is our heart this morning?

I believe that this morning we have all brought into worship things that have blocked us from really worshipping our God. These are worries and problems or sin. And they damage our relationship with God. And as we come to communion this morning, we need to remember afresh that God has dealt with our sin. But most of all, He has poured out His grace and love on us. We needn't feel distant from God this morning because He wants to renew relationship with us this morning and this was all achieved by the blood of Christ - let's come before His table.



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