

DIVINE PREOCCUPATION, 2

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Worship is the one activity that brings us close to God. Worship is our chief access to God's superior ways and thoughts, to connecting with Him.

This is part two of a short series on this theme. Today, once again, I will not be discussing the expressions of worship, so much as the motivation for worship.

As I use the word worship today, I am defining worship as "being preoccupied with God." In whatever outward ways I may reveal and express my connection with the Father—whether through my work or creativity or service or sacrifice—I will be, at the same time, particularly aware of and engaged with His presence and His purpose. This is what I mean by "being preoccupied with God."

Preoccupation with God may occur at work or at play. Preoccupation with God may occur during the day or during the night. Whether you're cooking or cleaning, building or writing, driving or walking, to the degree that you are aware of God—His presence, His love, and His purpose—your task becomes an expression of worship.

Last week, I raised the question, "How do we learn to become preoccupied with God?"

I have suggested that we need to do three things:

- Cultivate intentionality.
- Focus your mind on the person of Jesus Christ.
- Develop personal worship habits and practice them repeatedly.

Let me now speak of each of these more specifically.

Cultivate Intentionality

An intentional worshipper does not go to church hoping that worship will *happen* to them; an intentional worshipper goes to church *determined to make worship happen*.

How much thought did you give to your own need or desire to worship God before you arrived here today? Did you thank God in anticipation of the opportunity of communing with Him and His people? Were you prompted to pray that we would worship God strongly or deeply? Did you pray that others would experience God's grace in powerful ways?

Or, did you just show up?

Now, if you did just show up today, I want to say how grateful I am that you chose to do that (most of the people who live on your street did not)! But I also want to say that you can do so much more! And becoming intentional about your offering of worship to the Lord is the first step in that direction.

After their amazing deliverance from four centuries of captivity in Egypt, Moses and the Israelites sang a song together to commemorate their liberation. It included these words:

Exodus 15:2; NLT The LORD is my strength and my song; he has given me victory. This is my God, and I will praise him—my father’s God, and I will exalt him!

Because of the positive change in their lives, they intentionally paused to reflect and compose a song that would become their chorus of victory for years.

will praise Him!” and “I will exalt Him!” Did you notice that?

Now, hear the psalmist:

Psalms 5:7; NLT Because of your unfailing love, I can enter your house; I will worship at your Temple with deepest awe.

His “I can” became his “I will.” The opportunity of worship offered the psalmist a choice, and he made a conscious decision. God provided the “awe” when he presented his “will.”

Before I read any more verses like these, please also notice this: each verse presents both *a reason to worship* God, and *a declaration of intent*. See if you can identify each in these verses.

Psalms 7:17; NLT I will thank the LORD because he is just; I will sing praise to the name of the LORD Most High.

Psalms 13:6; NLT I will sing to the LORD because he is good to me.

Psalms 30:1; NLT I will exalt you, LORD, for you rescued me. You refused to let my enemies triumph over me.

The Psalms contain dozens of such declarations! The people’s worship was intentional. It was motivated by who the Lord revealed Himself to be and what He had done—for others and for them.

You won't always *feel* like praising God, especially when circumstances seem contrary or difficult, but a Spirit-led Christian can always tap into the power of God and *choose* to worship God anyway.

Words of praise don't require a certain sound or a special feeling, but they do require the proper aim. As long as your aim is to honor God, you can praise Him while you're afraid, or unhappy, or sorry for what you've done.

Some people hesitate at this teaching, because they think they will be faking it by praising God when they don't feel good. Let's dispense with that nonsense right now. You're not faking it by choosing to worship God simply because He's worthy—even when you don't feel like it.

Such worship is only fake if you're trying to trick God into thinking you *do* feel like it when you don't. Don't hide or fake your feelings with God. He is pleased when you can recognize and respond to His love and worthiness in the face of your enemies—and those enemies are most often our own contrary feelings and thoughts.

Are you afraid? God is bigger!

Are you confused? God is wiser!

Are you sad? Jesus is the Comforter!

Are you weak? Jesus is the Strengthener!

Are you angry? Jesus is the Conqueror! Let Him fight your battle and win it for you.

Have you sinned? Christ is the Forgiver!

Don't let your feelings or your circumstances divorce you from God's presence. (Stop and think about that! God's presence is not a feeling; it's a fact!) *Choose* to worship Him and you will soon feel His friendship again.

Focus on Jesus

Focused worship is Jesus-centered. Jesus is the Man who is also God. He perfectly represents the Father to us. Jesus brings God before us. Jesus is God with skin on.

Hebrews 1:2 NIV *In these last days [God] has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word.*

Jesus told His disciples, "If you have seen me you have seen the Father. If you know me you know the Father. The Father and I are one."

When we honor the Son, we also simultaneously honor the Father. When we worship Christ the Son, God the Father is also worshipped.

Abstraction is the result of dealing with ideas or feelings instead of real persons. You abstract your worship when you appreciate God's attributes, but not God Himself; in other words, if you worship character traits, but leave Jesus out of the equation, you are no longer worshipping a person but an idea, a concept.

Actually, the more you abstract your worship, the more self-centered worship becomes. You will begin to worship your feelings, your experience, more than God. Or, to say it another way, *your feelings will become your God.*

God could have just given us a scroll or a book that defined His principles and expectations. Most of us would have been more comfortable with that, because it would leave us "in control" to pick and choose according to our personal interpretation.

Instead, He "sent His Son, born of a woman"—a real person, one of us—to embody the principles and exemplify God's expectations for us in ordinary life. Someone who would get "in our face" in ways we could not ignore.

More than that, God sent someone who could demonstrate divine love in human dimensions, so that we might put our trust in Him.

Worshipping Jesus keeps it "other"—external to us, but also relatable, and therefore, relational, and real.

John 5:23; NLT *Anyone who does not honor the Son is certainly not honoring the Father who sent him.*

Develop Worship Habits

Romans 12:1; MSG So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.

Of all the habits of faith that we may think of, I will say unequivocally that the most vital and significant is the habit of corporate worship. Yet, there are many others also.

What are some habits of worship that you have found effective? Here's my list:

- Meeting with God in the morning
- Saying the prayer Jesus taught us
- Expressing thanks for many things
- Praying for others by name and need
- Meeting with the church regularly
- Studying the Scriptures with others
- Memorizing Scripture
- Singing with fervor and expression
- Mini praise vacations
- Reading through the Bible repeatedly
- Audible Scripture

Do you want to make some changes in your offering of worship to Christ? Are you ready to develop good worship habits? Then consider this pathway:

Start with prayer. I don't mean the exercise of prayer. I mean, pray about the specific change you want to make.

Romans 8:26; NLT We don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. ²⁷ And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will.

Ask the Holy Spirit to help you make a change. Be as specific as you can about the change you'd like to make.

In order to add something new, you'll likely have to adjust something you're already doing.

You may possibly need to *stop* a bad habit in order to start a good one. If that's the case, there's no time like the present. However, even that bad habit is meeting some sense of need in your life, or you wouldn't be doing it. So, think about what need you have been feeling, and

ask God how *He* wants to fill that need in your life. Then you can *replace* that bad habit with one that pleases God and satisfies you.

Or, you may simply need to *delay* something familiar in order to introduce something new. (“No Bible, no breakfast.”)

You may need to *prepare* for the new habit. Laying out your clothes the night before and planning a quick and simple breakfast may help you develop the Sunday morning church habit.

Commit to accountable responsibility. Most people work better and more reliably when someone else is expecting them. So, commit to pray with someone at a particular time. Or, commit to participate in a project or team in the church. Other people’s expectations can often pull out the best in you.

Most importantly, when you’re attempting to alter your accustomed lifestyle, *don’t give up!* Failing at your plan may discourage you, but it’s not a failure unless you quit making the effort to change.

This brings me back to the idea of “mini praise vacations.” There will always be more work to do than time in which to do it. You must try to discern what is truly important and aim to get that done first. (I like the saying that “You don’t get to do what you want until you’ve done what you must.”) But part of getting things done well and profiting from the process is scheduling breaks for simple refreshment and re-orientation.

You are not a machine. You are a person made in the image of God with the aim of glorifying and enjoying God in your lifetime. This requires getting away—if only to the backyard or a nearby park bench—disconnected from electronic devices and the most common interruptions. Remind yourself that the world will not end and everything is likely to still be there in 30 minutes, and give yourself permission to turn off the incessant noise in your head.

Sit with the Word, or just sit, and become aware of your surroundings. Listen. Observe. Breathe.

Apostle James wrote: “*Come close to God, and God will come close to you.*” (James 4:8; NLT)

And the psalmist sang: “*I will not enter my house or go to my bed—I will allow no sleep to my eyes, no slumber to my eyelids, till I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob.*” (Psalm 132:3-5; NLT)

We need to work God into the ordinary affairs of our lives—what Eugene Peterson called “*your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life*”—not just the church-oriented aspects of our life.

The more you include expressions of worship in the mundane elements of your life, and practice worship in many ways on a daily basis, you'll find your sense of God's presence and favor growing. As a result, your faith in God and confidence in life will increase. Worship with the church on Sundays will not seem uncomfortable, because you've been meeting with Him through the week. In fact, Sunday worship will enlarge what has already been happening in your heart.

Here again are three things that are needed for worship—in its wide variety of forms and expressions—to remain vital and meaningful, regardless of your immediate occupation:

- Cultivate intentionality.
- Focus your mind on the person of Jesus Christ.
- Develop personal worship habits and practice them repeatedly.

In conclusion, for your consideration, I will quote the *only passage* in the New Testament that uses the word “habit”:

Hebrews 10:24; NIV *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. ²⁵ Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

By explicitly describing a bad habit that we must not develop — “neglecting to meet together” — the writer to the Hebrews is also making clear what good habit we should cultivate and feed: *meeting together*.

Today's temptation to underestimate the importance of the weekly assembly is not new; it is as old as the church itself.

Of course, we now have access to the Gospel through Christian books, television, and the Internet on a daily basis and on a variety of devices. This leads some to view the weekly assembly as optional in the process of Christian life and growth.

However, Sunday morning worship offers, not one, but all three essential principles of God's ongoing supply of grace for Christian life and service: hearing His voice (in His Word), having His ear (in prayer), and belonging to His body (in the fellowship of His church).

Settle it today. Don't revisit this every weekend and wrestle, “Will I go this weekend, or skip it?” Make this your habit. If you leave it open-ended, as so many do, excuse after excuse will keep you from God's storehouse of grace. And over time, as a result, your soul will become dry and shallow and lean toward unbelief.

Many are far too inclined to give themselves a pass on meeting together, when they should have made it a habit that they would consider breaking only for the rarest of exceptions.

Let me be clear: meeting together in worship will not save your soul, nor is not enough to fully power your Christian life (that's why "just showing up" won't cut it).

Instead, this is a summons to harness the power of habit to rescue us from the lame and empty excuses that keep us from genuine spiritual riches and increasing joy in Christ. Such negligence reveals something unhealthy about our spiritual condition. I pray you will resist it with firm resolve.

Romans 12:2; NLT *Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.*