

SHEPHERD

Reviving Worship

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Is worship really important? Some people aren't comfortable singing praises in a group. Some choose to skip the singing and slip in later for the sermon. If you're one of those, could you be missing something—something beyond the music and the singing?

Of the few glimpses we are given in Scripture of Heaven, where God has His throne, they are all filled with explosive, expressive, radical worship. What is God trying to tell us?

This isn't about preferred styles, or chosen musical instruments, or physical postures. It's about what is in your heart and how it comes out. It's about learning to love God with *everything* that is within us.

Let's see how the Christmas story informs and inspires our path.

Out of insignificance

Matthew 2:1 *Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, ² "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."*

³ *King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem.*

⁴ *He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"*

⁵ *"In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote: ⁶ 'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.' "*

Bethlehem is about five miles south of Jerusalem. It is first mentioned in the Bible as the place where Jacob's wife, Rachel, died and was buried. It was also the setting for the story of Ruth. Later, it was David's birthplace, and the place where he was anointed by Samuel to be king.

Located on one of the highest summits of Judea, Bethlehem was a place of shepherds since David's time, at least, surrounded by cultivated fields, among the many ravines.

Here, shepherds raised and tended the sheep that would be used in the worship practices of the Jewish people at Jerusalem.

Bethlehem was the place predicted to be the birthplace of the Messiah. A fitting site for the One who would become the Shepherd for His people, Israel.

What do you need?

It was David—also a shepherd—who gave us an inspired description of shepherding God’s people in Psalm 23.

Psalm 23:1 The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need. ² He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. ³ He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name.

As you reflect on these words for a few moments, think about how the Lord shepherds His people—and how He shepherds *you*.

Do you know the difference between your “wants” and your “needs”? Jesus does. And God has promised to generously supply “*all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 4:19). When you know the Lord as your Shepherd, you may say, “I have all that I need.”

This is a time of year when we are provoked by advertisers to think of all that we *want*, whether we need it or not. In fact, it is the year-round task of advertisers to persuade us to imagine that whatever we lack is in fact just what we need. As I scan sale catalogs, I discover things that I never knew of, was perfectly content without, and never thought I needed, until I begin to imagine having it and using it and sharing it with others.

In my imagination, with their skillful help, I begin to see myself in those new clothes, or driving that new car, or eating that juicy burger, or wielding that new super laptop computer, or skiing that glassy lake under blue skies and brilliant sunlight, kicking up a wall of spray. And, all of a sudden, I *need* a new swim suit and sunglasses, a new pair of water skis, accessories, a sleek motor boat, a trailer to haul it, a 4-wheel drive vehicle, and a rented lodge by the lake—I *need* it, all while it is still the dead of winter and I can see my breath when I step outside in the morning!

That’s the power of quality advertising.

I wonder, with just a little more imagination, if you could persuade someone you know, that they *need* what Jesus Christ offers, and that they *need* to become part of a life-giving church family. Could you take them from “I wasn’t even thinking about it” to “That sounds like something I really need”? It’s part of making disciples.

The Lord not only meets our common and everyday needs, He's also here for the difficult days. Don't abandon the Lord when times grow tough and demanding; He doesn't abandon you—ever.

Do you need protection? Do you need comfort? Do you need provision? Tender care? Joy overflowing? He's got it for you!

⁴ Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.

Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me. ⁵ You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honor me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings. ⁶ Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.

David knew how uncertain life could be, especially for his sheep. Since the goal of a shepherd is not just putting in the hours, but actually caring for the sheep and helping them prosper and become fruitful, David learned what was required of him. And he recognized how the Lord cared for him and helped him prosper and become fruitful.

When David said, "The Lord is my Shepherd," he was expressing his appreciation for the Messiah's active care in his life. David was lending us insight, and inspiring our imaginations, to recognize the same and give God thanks and praise.

Sheep worship

Sheep worship their shepherd—that is, they give him their attention and they follow him, as he feeds them, cleans them, protects them, shelters them, and guides them.

People, too, need a Shepherd.

When Moses was old, and ready to die, he prayed to God about his people's future.

Numbers 27:15 ¹⁶ *Moses said to the Lord, "May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community ¹⁷ to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd."*

The Lord is my Shepherd.

Matthew 9:36 *When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*

He then urged us, His disciples, to follow the same impulse of compassion—to see the greatness of the harvest of souls around us and go to work in the fields with the message about Christ.

Modern shepherds raise sheep for the slaughterhouse. Christ raises sheep for worship. Sheep were offered in sacrifice by the Jewish priests; but we get to give our bodies to God, as living sacrifices.

Romans 12:1 *And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.*

“This is truly the way to worship Him.” Let that sink in this morning.

How do I do that? Read on...

Romans 12:2 *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.*

It begins by getting serious about God's Kingdom, and His Kingdom coming to the earth (*in you*). Let Christ teach you a new model of behavior and customs from another world—a heavenly world. Let Him change the way you think—about God, about His Kingdom, about your life (including your past and your future), about other people in your life (even strangers and enemies).

If you won't let Him change the way you think, you'll never discover God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

“This is truly the way to worship Him.”

You say, you can't sing or play a musical instrument? Well, this isn't necessarily about music or singing. This is about serving. *“This is truly the way to worship Him.”*

Whatever your gifts or talents or skills may be—whatever you have in your hand—offer it in service for the Lord. *“This is truly the way to worship Him.”* And that's what sheep do.

Whatever you may know and appreciate about worship—you can do more, you can become better. Love God with your whole heart and mind and physical energy and ability.

As Jesus sat beside Jacob's well, waiting for His disciples to bring Him lunch, He met a woman and struck up a conversation with her, in which He inspired her imagination to think about her life as worship. He said,

John 4:23 But the time is coming—indeed it's here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way. ²⁴ For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.

God is looking for worshippers. Will you be one? Will you offer Him your worship? In the true way? Like the sheep of the Lord do?

As we wrap up this story, we'll discover three things God has given every one of us, with which we can worship Him—even if you can't carry a tune in a bucket.

Wise men give it up

Matthew 2:7 Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. ⁸ Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!"

⁹ After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! ¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

These wise men, however many there were, had traveled a great distance, with significant cost and danger to themselves, to find the Coming One—the Christ child. Before they began their trip, and all the way along those long and perilous trails, they had one guiding, encouraging vision in their thoughts: to see and to worship Him. They had prepared for it; they had planned for it. And when, at last, they found Him, they fell to their knees to worship and present to Him their gifts.

When you worship the Lord, it will always involve giving.

First, because giving is loving. You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving.

That's why our hearts, bent and broken by sin as they are, are so much about getting for ourselves.

Sometimes, a giving heart is expressed by restraining yourself, so that others also may get something for themselves. Other times, giving means taking what you already have and freely offering it to someone else. *“Freely you have received, freely give”* (Matthew 10:8).

Worship always involves giving what you have—what God has first given you.

They gave Him gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Today, let gold represent material wealth—money, property, stuff. And let frankincense represent spiritual wealth—prayer and praise. Let myrrh represent emotional wealth—the kind that is brewed and developed by enduring hardship. Give them to Jesus. *“This is truly the way to worship Him.”*

God doesn’t need your gold. He paves His streets with it! But you need Him to bless your gold. When He does, it multiplies. When He does, it becomes useful and effective. And *you* need that!

Religious wealth is worthless. But true spiritual wealth is precious! Time spent with God in prayer is not wasted. And it’s not just what you want or need God to do for you, but what God wants to do through you. You’ll seldom be ready and in the right place at the right time, if you haven’t prepared yourself in prayer with God.

Praise is prayer on steroids. Since He knows what we’ll ask before we even speak, praise acknowledges with thanksgiving, the heart of God toward us—His unfailing love and mercy—and sets us free from imprisoning imaginations. Get your thoughts on the Lord and give Him your frankincense.

You will never have myrrh to offer if you run from every trial and difficulty. God allows these into your life at precisely the right times to prune away the lifeless branches and strengthen your fruitfulness. He knows what He is doing, even when we cannot understand His methods. If you read the Book of Job *all the way to the end*, you’ll see that it is so. If you read the Bible all the way to the end, you’ll see that it is so.

Don’t throw away your myrrh—the fruits of your pain—offer it to Jesus. Don’t bury the myrrh in your life—just to know that you endured and made it through can be a source of comfort to others.

You can trust the Shepherd with your gold, your frankincense, and your myrrh. He will bless it. He will guard it. He will multiply it. He will transform it. *“This is truly the way to worship Him.”*