

PASSION FOR GOD

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, June 14, 2015

God is passionate about you! His love for you (and all people) is relentless. He has loved you with an everlasting love, and demonstrated that love to us in concrete terms: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us, the Just One for the unjust ones.

It should be natural for our response to His love to be similarly passionate, but, in some cases, it never even takes off. More commonly, we get bogged down by life's obligations, or distracted by circumstances.

It's time to get back our passion for God, and give Him the glory due His name!

What is Worship?

Worship is an almost universal description of the central actions of people of our faith, as well as most religious people in the world. Here are five examples, pulled from the pages of the Bible:

Abram (Abraham)

Genesis 12:7 Then the LORD appeared to Abram (1830 BC) and said, "I will give this land to your descendants." And Abram built an altar there and dedicated it to the LORD, who had appeared to him. ⁸ After that, Abram traveled south and set up camp in the hill country, with Bethel to the west and Ai to the east. There he built another altar and dedicated it to the LORD, and **he worshiped the LORD.**

Moses

Exodus 34:5 Then the Lord came down in a cloud and stood there with [Moses] (1430 BC); and he called out his own name, Yahweh. ⁶ The Lord passed in front of Moses, calling out, "Yahweh! The Lord! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness. ⁷ I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But I do not excuse the guilty. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children and grandchildren; the entire family is affected— even children in the third and fourth generations." ⁸ Moses immediately threw himself to the ground and **worshiped.**

King David

² Samuel 12:20 Then (1000 BC) David got up from the ground, washed himself, put on lotions, and changed his clothes. He went to the Tabernacle and **worshiped the LORD**. After that, he returned to the palace and was served food and ate.

King Nebuchadnezzar

Daniel 4:34 “After this time had passed (600 BC), I, Nebuchadnezzar, looked up to heaven. My sanity returned, and I praised and **worshiped the Most High** and honored the one who lives forever.

Magi

Matthew 2:9 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.

From these brief excerpts, we can see that across nearly two thousand years of Hebrew history, this fact prevails: their leaders worshiped God (and the people worshiped God, too). What fascinates me is that so little is said to describe their expressions of worship.

All that we may learn from Abram and Moses is that they bowed to the ground as they worshiped. David went to the Tabernacle to worship. Nebuchadnezzar looked up and spoke praises to honor God. The wise men bowed down before Jesus, then they offered Him gifts.

The First Covenant, which God gave to Israel under Moses, meticulously described the times and methods and implements of Jewish worship. Curiously, what it did not prescribe was the *manner* of worship. It seems that the attitude of worship has been intuitively known from generation to generation. The only question, that also passed from generation to generation, was whether or not people would express it toward God or other things.

Will We Worship God?

People do not worship God because they are told to do so. People cannot be forced to worship God. And, of equal importance to us, people cannot be forced *not* to worship God. Worship can neither be legislated nor prevented. But worship can be withheld, or it can be offered. It's every person's choice.

God is passionate about YOU! He has loved you with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3). He will never leave you without support, never abandon you (Hebrews 13:5). He demonstrated His love for you by dying in your place and taking the judgment that was due your sin. He loves you THAT MUCH!

And that's why we love Him. We return His love. The love He first gave us (1 John 4:19).

Similarly, we worship God—not because He first worshiped us, but because He first set His love upon us and, in so doing, He ascribed value—great value—to us. He chose us. He called us. And now we are known by His name.

Why worship?

The first reason for worship will always be that God is worthy. He deserves the praise of those He has created, and especially of those He has redeemed.

^{1 Peter 2:9; NIV} But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, **that you may declare the praises of him who called you** out of darkness into his wonderful light.

We have been chosen as a people, so that we might praise God. We have been made a kingdom of priests, so that we might worship Him. We have become a nation set apart, so that we might give God the glory due His name. We are uniquely God's possession, so that we might offer Him the worship of those who have been redeemed.

Was there darkness in your past, from which God called you? Has Christ shown you wonderful marvelous light—the light of life? That's your reason to praise Him! That's the source of your praise! If your worship seems to have run out of steam, think about this again. Acknowledge the light that has come your way, and the Giver of light, who has sent it to you.

- Who saved you?
- How did He save you?
- What did He save you from?
- What has He saved you to?

The answers to these questions are the sources of continuous worship renewal.

So, God initiated His plan of worship among the early Hebrews. He reminded them of what He had done for them.

2 Kings 17:36; NIV But the LORD, who brought you up out of Egypt with mighty power and outstretched arm, is the one you must worship. **To him you shall bow down and to him offer sacrifices.**

This is the fundamental meaning of the word “worship” in the Bible: to bow down and bring an offering. And it is always a response based on an act of kindness by God.

For the people of Israel, it was based on God’s mighty acts to deliver them from slavery. For us today, it is also based on God’s mighty acts on our behalf—the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus—by which He canceled our debt for sin, forgave our guilt, removed our shame, granted us everlasting life, and saved our souls. Praise Him!

Whom Shall We Worship?

To worship anyone or anything other than God—our Creator and Redeemer—is ludicrous. One does not worship a peer; one worships one who is greater. And one does not worship anything that was merely created, when one can worship the Creator Himself.

If we do not know the Creator, we may naturally choose some thing to represent Him, or some place that reminds us of an encounter with Him our object, but that is idolatry—something God has expressly forbidden.

He neither requires nor allows substitutes or stand-ins. However it may tweak your mind because God is invisible, or humiliate your ego because God is bigger and better than you, God commands us to worship Him alone.

Our propensity to make idols out of things we can sense—see, hear, feel, taste, or smell—is unstoppable; it is in the fabric of human sinfulness. Therefore, we must be alert to it and refuse to give in to it.

If the rhythm of a song or its harmonies or instrumentation strikes a chord in your heart and helps you to express your worship to God, that is a good thing. But if that same song subtly shifts from being a vessel for worship to being the object of worship (“I just *love* that song!”), that song may become an idol that now stands *between* you and God.

If a particular place or setting evokes a sense of God’s presence or a memory of God’s grace, beware it becoming a shrine to which you retreat in search of that old feeling. Instead, seek the God who generated that feeling, not just the old place or the desired atmosphere.

An even more common danger is that we will worship our worship—love the experience, desire the feeling—rather than worship God.

How Shall We Worship?

I am not suggesting that an invisible God requires unfeeling worship—certain stoic forms and routines. God is seeking worshippers who will worship Him “in spirit and truth.” At the very least, that means with heart and mind, feeling and thought.

I am simply saying that idolatry is such a perpetual snare, we must frequently re-examine and renew our expressions of worship to keep it vibrant and real.

Our expressions of worship are more cultural and contemporary than we imagine. It wasn't that many years ago that churches were debating whether clapping was appropriate during songs of worship. Now applause has become a primary expression of praise, just like it is in a theater or at a lecture.

Some people seem to think that you are not really worshipping if you are not standing when you sing, no matter how long that may be. But it wasn't that many years ago, when it was deemed most appropriate to remain seated during songs of praise.

All such features are faddish—they come and go through the generations of worshipers. They are neither good nor bad, unless they distract from worship or become hollow substitutes for genuine worship.

Over these summer months, we may intentionally try a number of different forms of worship. I have two designs for introducing this variety of expressions of worship: (1) to break you out any rut you may have fallen into, and (2) expand your worship horizon. You will not be forced to do anything, but invited to step out of what has become your “comfort zone,” because comfort that is not occasionally rocked leads to laziness, and laziness in worship inevitably leads to idolatry.

Posture and practice are just tools. If they do not awaken genuine worship, they are not serving us and should be adjusted or changed.

But the essence of true worship (its heart and soul) never changes. It is what Jesus described as “in spirit and truth.” This was so for Abram and Moses and David and Isaiah and the wise men, and it is so for us today.

This is my focus today.

THE HEART OF WORSHIP

Matt Redman

When the music fades, all is stripped away
And I simply come
Longing just to bring something that's of worth
That will bless Your heart

I'll bring You more than a song
For a song in itself
Is not what You have required
You search much deeper within
Through the way things appear
You're looking into my heart

*I'm coming back to the heart of worship
And it's all about You, it's all about You, Jesus
I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it
When it's all about You, it's all about You, Jesus*

King of endless worth, no one could express
How much You deserve
Though I'm weak and poor, all I have is Yours
Every single breath

I'll bring You more than a song
For a song in itself
Is not what You have required
You search much deeper within
Through the way things appear
You're looking into my heart

*I'm coming back to the heart of worship
And it's all about You, it's all about You, Jesus
I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it
When it's all about You, it's all about You, Jesus*

The heart of worship is deeply intuitive. We don't need to teach it to people; we only need to help clear away the thinking that may have buried it, or the distractions that have veiled it.

My earliest memory (before speech or intelligible thought)—a memory that was refreshed in the same week that I met the Lord Jesus Christ—is of sitting on the ground, holding a pebble in

my hand. I rolled it over between my fingers, admiring its appearance, feeling its weight, and was impressed with its Creator. My earliest worship.

You might do the same as you contemplate a painting or sculpture of a great master. That may only evoke wonder at his technique, or surprise at his apprehension of the subject. But it might also take you farther—to admire the One who gave him such a grasp of his surroundings and the talent to express it. It might lead you to worship God.

I remember such an experience when I took my father to the Academy of Sciences in Golden Gate Park. We wandered into the vault where they kept and displayed precious stones. I was captivated by what I saw! It seemed that many of the gems bore the unmistakable fingerprint, or some likeness, of their Creator. It was as if I could see something of the invisible God I had met through faith in Jesus Christ—His beauty, His strength, His precision, His endless creativity—expressed in the colors and shapes and designs of the stones. There, in the Academy of Sciences, I worshipped God in silent awe.

What is the essence of worship? Ron Allen says, “It is the celebration of God.”

Whether in silent awe and stilled wonder, or in loudest praise and fervent movement, worship is the joyous recognition of who God is and what He is like. It is the heart appreciation of something of His character, and the mental apprehension of the same. It is heart and mind, spirit and truth.

Today, it is popular to applaud, to shout (even to whistle), and to jump. These aren’t better expressions than others, they are simply popular—which means we can participate in them without feeling too awkward. That is contemporary culture. Nothing more.

Essentially, worship is the apprehension, appreciation, admiration, and adoration of God, our Creator and Savior. It may initially be expressed in silent awe and wondrous contemplation. It usually graduates to some verbal expression, whether in intelligible words (like, “You are eternal, without beginning or ending, unchanging, immutable, unfailing, reliable.”) or simple exclamations (like “Wow!” or “Awesome!”) or expressions in a language the Holy Spirit gives. Further contemplation may inspire a physical expression (like, raising the hands or clapping, or waving the arms, or spinning).

What I hope we will take away with us today is this: the essence of worship is awe. If you do not experience that, you have not yet worshipped. It will be expressed in many ways—some quiet, some boisterous—but it must be expressed. And it is this—how to express it—that we shall explore in more detail next week.

WE FALL DOWN

Chris Tomlin

We fall down
We lay our crowns
At the feet of Jesus
The greatness of
Mercy and love
At the feet of Jesus

*We cry, "Holy, holy, holy!"
Is the Lamb
We cry, "Holy, holy, holy!"
Is the Lamb
We cry, "Holy, holy, holy!"
Is the Lamb*

We fall down
We lay our crowns
At the feet of Jesus
The greatness of
Mercy and love
At the feet of Jesus

*We cry, "Holy, holy, holy!"
Is the Lamb
We cry, "Holy, holy, holy!"
Is the Lamb
We cry, "Holy, holy, holy!"
Is the Lamb, Is the Lamb*