

PRAISE FOR GOD

By Rev. Will Nelken

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Worship is deeply intuitive. We have attached a multitude of forms to it, but essentially worship is known to every human being. The essence of worship is awe and wonder. It may be evoked by the majesty of a sunset, or the brilliant flash of lightning and the rumble of thunder, or a breath of salt air at the beach, or the song of a bird in the trees. In this respect, an unchurched person, or even an atheist, may experience the heart of worship, without knowing who to give it to.

Before I knew who Jesus was or what He had done for me, I had numerous experiences of protection or provision for which I was thankful, though I did not know to whom I should offer it, nor was I conscious that there was someone to whom it was due. While I was unaware of any benefactor, I did enjoy the benefits.

Or worship may be induced by a revealing word of Scripture, or the lyric of a hymn of praise, that point us to the God of heaven and earth, our Savior and Deliverer.

Again, the essence of worship is awe. If you do not experience that, you have not yet worshipped.

Worship may be given to no one at all, as is so often the case, or it may be offered to another human being who is mistaken for a god, or to some representation of a god, such as a painting, a statue, or an amulet.

When the awe of worship is expressed, it is expressed in praise. Let me say it this way: worship is the inward experience, of which praise is the outward expression. Praise may be offered in a variety of ways—some quiet, some boisterous: from a voiceless exclamation or heavy sigh to shouting and clapping and leaping.

Which is more important, the inward or the outward? Well, it depends on who you ask!

In some social contexts, your outward manner of praise determines the level of people's approval or disapproval. However, in the spiritual context, the inward *target* of your praise is the most important thing. Worship, especially Christian worship, belongs only to God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and not to any intermediary, whether saint from earth or angel from heaven.

What I hope you will take away today is this: the essence of worship is awe, and the expression of worship is praise.

You may notice that in our church's culture of praise, such expressions as clapping hands, lifting or waving the arms, commenting or shouting an "Amen" or "Hallelujah," or even waving flags are regarded as appropriate. Of course, that wouldn't be so in all church cultures, but it is here.

Four Stages of Worship

For the remainder of our time together today, I want to present what I call Four Stages of Worship, so that you might understand how worship may grow deeper and richer. Some may offer more than four stages, or different stages, but these work for me and they also correspond to the key ministries of Jesus.

"Stages," because worship is a fluid thing—it increases as we focus our attention on the Lord, and it decreases as we are distracted from Him.

If you are able to identify these four stages, you will know how to proceed—how to develop your worship and praise—on any particular day of your life. You will be able to assess where you are, at any particular time, and then know what to do next.

Perhaps that sounds too contrived to you. I assure you it is not. However, some people consider worship to be completely spontaneous, only to be stimulated by outside events. I, too, love those unplanned, spontaneous moments of worship, and enjoy them, I think, every single day. But God *deserves* our worship. And that means we should *intentionally* give it to Him. And that means planning.

Therefore, we *plan* to meet together on Sunday mornings to offer united praise to Jesus Christ. Some regard that timeframe as optional; I do not. I consider it a Christian discipline. Every believer should make time *regularly* and *frequently* to worship with the church. Worship is not a matter to be left to moments of convenience. You demonstrate the value of God in your life by how you prioritize worship. Simple as that.

Here they are, then, four stages of worship:

- Humiliation
- Contemplation
- Adoration
- Incarnation

As we look briefly at each of these stages, I will show you how they correspond to the four key ministries of Jesus Christ, which are:

- His Cross
- His Resurrection
- His Ascension
- His Return

Humiliation (His Cross)

Humiliation is about bowing yourself low before the Lord Jesus. It is about acknowledging your weaknesses, confessing your sins and your need of the Savior. This is the time in worship when you reflect on your natural condition and how Jesus has addressed that, how He answers your need.

Jesus answers your human need by His death on the cross, suffering in our place and for our sins. This is where Jesus most closely identified Himself with being human like us.

When you reflect on this, it melts your natural pride, it brings you down to the feet of Jesus, and lifts Him up as Comforter, Savior, and Redeemer. This is the beginning of communion with God.

Isaiah 6:1 It was in the year King Uzziah died that I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of his robe filled the Temple. ² Attending him were mighty seraphim, each having six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ They were calling out to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Heaven's Armies! The whole earth is filled with his glory!" ⁴ Their voices shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire building was filled with smoke.

⁵ Then I said, "It's all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the Lord of Heaven's Armies."

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ He touched my lips with it and said, "See, this coal has touched your lips. Now your guilt is removed, and your sins are forgiven."

This humiliation says to God, "**I am** in need of Your grace. I receive Your love. I praise You for your generous and faithful kindness to me."

Here's a song that helps us to express these perceptions:

GREAT REDEEMER

Paul Baloche

Beneath my great Redeemer's cross
I kneel in streams of mercy
His blood removes my guilty stain
His grace has made me worthy
To stand before His holiness
And bow my grateful soul
Beneath my great Redeemer's cross
I worship Christ alone

Great Redeemer, Jesus!
Great Redeemer, Jesus!

I long to see my Savior's face
To gaze upon His beauty
To lose myself in His embrace
At last behold His glory

The Lamb of God Who died for me
Has made my sin His own
And bore my shame upon the cross
I worship Him alone

Contemplation (His Resurrection)

Contemplation is about deep and prolonged thought. From bowing in humiliation before the grace, the compassion, the kindness, the love of the One who took your place and took away your stain of sin—now rising in wonder at His courageous greatness and conquering power. Who is this One? What is He like? What has He done?

Jesus did not cease to be after His death. He did not remain only as a memory in the minds of those He left behind. He rose from the dead, by the will of the Father and the power of the Holy Spirit, and showed Himself verifiably alive to His disciples. His resurrection from the tomb validated His sacrifice and authorized our redemption. Here, then, is another sort of man—the sort of human we, too shall one day be—one worthy of wonder. How great! How awesome is He!

Ephesians 1:19 I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power²⁰ that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms.²¹ Now he is far above any

ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else—not only in this world but also in the world to come. ²² God has put all things under the authority of Christ and has made him head over all things for the benefit of the church.

When you think deeply of the love that planned your rescue, and the power that pulled it off, you will begin to realize the love and power available to you now, as a part of His Church, His redeemed people.

This contemplation says to God, “**You did** wondrous things for me, not only blotting out my record of sins, but reviving my spirit and renewing my life. I praise You for Your endless life and Your victory over death and hell.”

Think about the words of this song of praise:

YOU ARE GOD ALONE

Billy & Cindy Foote

You are not a god created by human hands
You are not a god dependent on any mortal man
You are not a god in need of anything we can give
By Your plan, that’s just the way it is

*You are God alone from before time began
You are on Your throne, You are God alone
And right now in the good times and bad
You are on Your throne, You are God alone*

You’re the only God whose power
none can contend
You’re the only God whose name and
praise will never end
You’re the only God who’s worthy
of everything we can give
You are God, and that’s just the way it is

Unchangeable, unshakable, unstoppable
That’s what You are

Adoration (His Ascension)

Adoration is about enjoying God, in the fullness of who He is. It is heartfelt and exuberant.

Whether quiet or loud, it is the expression of praise to God for who He is. It recognizes His eternal nature and His sovereign rule as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Adoring worship draws the heavenly into the realm of earth, invoking God's presence, and declaring His glory.

Jesus did not rise from death to live forever as a man of the earth, but, before the wondering eyes of His disciples, He ascended back to the Father to receive His Kingdom and His glory. He ever lives to intercede for you and I, that we will trust Him to the end and be with Him, and be as He is, for eternity.

It is from this position that Jesus has poured out the Holy Spirit and His supernatural gifts on the Church.

Ephesians 4:8 That is why the Scriptures say, "When he ascended to the heights, he led a crowd of captives and gave gifts to his people."

⁹ Notice that it says "he ascended." This clearly means that Christ also descended to our lowly world. ¹⁰ And the same one who descended is the one who ascended higher than all the heavens, so that he might fill the entire universe with himself.

¹¹ Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. ¹² Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. ¹³ This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. ¹⁵ Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. ¹⁶ He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

Adoration is the enjoyment and celebration of God, for who He is and all that He is doing today among and through His people, the Church.

Adoration says to God, "**You are** amazing! You work wonders! You reign in heaven and in all the earth. Let Your Kingdom come and Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Consider the lyrics of another song we sing:

HOLY

Jason Ingram, Matt Redman, Jonas Myrin

What heart could hold the weight of Your love
And know the heights of Your great worth
What eyes could look on Your glorious face
Shining like the sun

*You are holy, holy, holy
God most high and God most worthy
You are holy, holy, holy
Jesus You are, Jesus You are*

Your name alone has pow'r to raise us
Your light will shine when all else fades
Our eyes will look on Your glorious face
Shining like the sun, Who is like You God?

Who shall we say You are? You're the living God!
Who shall we say You are? You're the Great I Am!
The highest name of all, You're all You say You are

And You will come again in glory
To judge the living and the dead
All eyes will look on Your glorious face
Shining like the sun, Who is like You God?

Incarnation (His Return)

Incarnation is about God and man becoming one. It is about elevating humanity to the level of partnership with God in His works. It is about the glory of God revealed in the context of human life. So, this expression of praise is about bringing glory to God Almighty. The glory that is due His name!

When Jesus returns, He will not come again as our suffering Savior, but as our ruling Emperor, to turn the kingdoms of this world into the Kingdom of Christ and of God.

Revelation 1:5 All glory to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us. ⁶ He has made us a Kingdom of priests for God his Father. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen.

⁷ Look! He comes with the clouds of heaven. And everyone will see him—even those who pierced him.

When He returns, we will not be simply the masses who occupy His Kingdom, but judges and priests, who rule with Him.

Therefore, this stage of worship anticipates the full activation of Christ's Kingdom and the corresponding actions of His Church.

Incarnation says to God, "**I will** serve you, because I love you. Here I am, Lord, send me. The life I now live in my body I live for the glory of the One who rescued me. I must decrease, but You must increase. Lord, be glorified!"

Here's a song that expresses such thoughts:

10,000 REASONS

Matt Redman, Jonas Myrin

The sun comes up, it's a new day dawning
It's time to sing Your song again
Whatever may pass and whatever lies before me
Let me be singing when the evening comes

*Bless the Lord O my soul, O my soul
Worship His Holy name
Sing like never before, O my soul
I'll worship Your Holy name*

You're rich in love and You're slow to anger
Your name is great and Your heart is kind
For all Your goodness I will keep on singing
Ten thousand reasons for my heart to find

And on that day when my strength is failing
The end draws near and my time has come
Still my soul will sing Your praise unending
Ten thousand years and then forevermore

Worship is itself a response to who God is and what He has done. "*We love, because He first loved us.*" And the act of worship inevitably leads to corresponding actions in the world.

God's worshippers are His servants, and His servants are His worshippers. What are you?

What is your intent, with respect to worship? Will you engage worship as a Christian discipline?

Will you worship Christ in...

- Humiliation before His Cross
- Contemplation of His Resurrection
- Adoration at His Ascension
- Incarnation for His Return

If so, by these very means, your worship will proclaim:

- I am (because)
- You did
- You are (therefore)
- I will

Lord Jesus, may your praise be glorious!