

PRACTICE OF PRAISE

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Essential Wonder

In recent talks about worship, I have shown you that the essence of worship is awe. Awe and wonder. Simple amazement. Wondrous delight. Anything that stirs that up in you, also gives you an occasion to worship God, who created all that is wondrous, along with our capacity to recognize it.

Of course, that still leaves you an option: whether or not to give God the praise that is due His name. Because worship simply *cannot* be compelled. Remember the adage, “You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink”? Similarly here: “You can force a person to bow down, but you cannot make him worship.”

This makes worship one of the greatest demonstrations of independent strength. It cannot be forced, but it can be freely offered. Worship is not for the weak-hearted, not for the weak-willed. Worship demands a pioneer’s vision, an explorer’s courage, and an archeologist’s perseverance. It’s not for wimps.

Yet, as the Bible says, *“Out of the mouths of toddlers and infants, You have perfected praise.”* Worship is basic enough that a child can participate naturally and heartily. It does not require theological training or developed skills. It is simply a response to wonder.

It begins with your attention. Stop and smell the roses. If you can’t pay attention, you are poor, indeed.

Pause and look up at the sky. Feel the breeze, the heat, the cold, the dampness, the dryness. Take in the beauty of God’s handiwork. Listen to the sounds of life. Pursue wonder.

Let your attention evolve into appreciation. Learn to recognize the interdependence of all that God has made. Appreciate the harmonies, even the dissonance. Practice giving God thanks for each element and each interaction.

Your appreciation will develop anticipation—hopeful expectation. If you lack hopeful anticipation of what is to come in your life, it is probably because you have become inattentive to your surroundings in the context of God’s activity, and lost your appreciation (or never developed it) for God’s creative hand.

Perhaps you have never given thought to such things. But this is the introduction to worship.

Expressed Praise

I have also discussed the expression of worship, which is praise. Whether silent or loud, whether in stillness or with movement, worship, to be authentic, must be an expression of praise to that which creates wonder.

While a glorious sunrise may inspire awe, the praise does not belong to the sun, which is but one element of the scene, but to the One who created the sun, and the earth and sky, and the eyes to behold it, and the mind that is amazed. *“The heavens declare the glory of God and the sky reveals His handiwork.”*

Praise to God has a multitude of expressions—from a breathless sigh to shouting and leaping. And though all contain some aspect of personal spontaneity (however subtle), many are highly structured (and likely rehearsed), as in choir music, or group dancing, or congregational praying or singing.

There may actually be an advantage to rehearsed praises, in that when it is offered self-consciousness is reduced to a minimum by the rehearsal, and one’s imagination is released to engage both the object and the expression of praise.

Here is a key to “praising well”: *use your imagination*. Imagination is at the intersection of spirit and truth, where the heart’s impulse and the mind’s understanding merge. Expressions of praise that lack imagination also lack feeling and appear hollow, lifeless, routine.

This is probably why many people lean toward spontaneity in worship as insurance against a dull routine. But this lays the blame at the wrong feet. Every classically-trained musician or dancer or singer understands that routine is not the enemy of artistic freedom, but the means to it. They also know that an effective performance, however much it has been rehearsed, demands imagination.

What are you imagining as you offer God your praise?

Let’s pause for a moment and experiment with this. Let’s sing a song that many of you are acquainted with. Its melody and lyrics are simple, leaving a lot of room for imagination. We’ll depend on our memories, which makes the mind most active. And do not forget to *imagine* what we are singing as we are singing it. Here we go...

AMAZED

Jared Anderson

You dance over me, while I am unaware
You sing all around, but I never hear the sound

*Lord, I'm amazed by You, Lord, I'm amazed by You
Lord, I'm amazed by You and how You love me*

You paint the morning sky with miracles in mind
My hope will always stand, for You hold me in Your hand

*Lord, I'm amazed by You, Lord, I'm amazed by You
Lord, I'm amazed by You and how You love me*

How deep, how wide, how great is Your love for me
How deep, how wide, how great is Your love for me

*Lord, I'm amazed by You, Lord, I'm amazed by You
Lord, I'm amazed by You and how You love me*

What did you imagine as we began to sing?

How did your imagination shift as we got into the song?

What thoughts and feelings will you take away from this praise experiment?

Extending Worship

But worship of our God is far more than personal expressions of praise. Today's church in America is often guilty of promoting a religious consumerism, driven by people's felt needs and desire for certain spiritual experiences.

If your expressions of worship can be offered just as effectively in isolation as in community, then you have only begun to worship. The heights of worship look very different from my personal times of worship and prayer. For instance, take a Bible and turn with me to the last book, the Revelation. Find chapter 4, and look at verses 6-11.

Notice the activities of creatures around the throne of God. The four living beings act as a group, a choir. See their routine (*"Day after day and night after night they keep on saying..."*). Notice the responsive interactions of the 24 elders (falling down, laying down their crowns,

and crying out in praise). This is not an occasional circumstance; it is an everyday event (numerous times each day and each night).

Chapter 5 is even more emphatic. God is seen upon His throne. He holds in His hand a scroll, a message, that is sealed with seven seals. All of heaven is eager to know what is in that scroll, to hear the words of God proclaimed, released. They are desperate to hear, but there is no one worthy to break the seals and open the scroll. No one is able to deliver those life-giving words, until they are presented with a Lamb, who looks as if it was slaughtered, yet is now standing in their midst.

They catch their breath in hope as the Lamb steps forward and takes the scroll. When He does so, they realize that their longings, their hopeful prayers, are about to be fulfilled. They break into song together:

“You are worthy to take the scroll and break its seals and open it. For you were slaughtered, and your blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. And you have caused them to become a Kingdom of priests for our God. And they will reign on the earth.” (Revelation 5:9-10)

Their song is heard by others, and stirs a response, as millions of angels, and the four living beings and the 24 elders join in the chorus:

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered— to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing.” (Revelation 5:12)

This, in turn, propels every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea to sing aloud together:

“Blessing and honor and glory and power belong to the one sitting on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever.” (Revelation 5:13)

And the four living beings conclude with, *“Amen!”* (Revelation 5:14)

And the 24 elders fall down (again) and worship the Lord.

Worship, at its highest, is a group expression that involves conversations and events and actions and responses and singing. It is both rehearsed and spontaneous. And it is practiced in the context of community.

Praise extends even beyond the community of the faithful, beyond the church.

Worship extends outward from its point of origin, like ripples on a lake or waves in the ocean, with an ever-widening influence. It is intended for community. Worship builds community.

This is true in the home, as well as the church. In fact, it works everywhere—though you may need to adjust the languages of words and actions that you use to express it, according to your environment.

In business circles, a cheerful, “Amen!” may not communicate as well as a thoughtful word of commendation to a co-worker.

In fact, to be most effective, the language of worship must develop beyond words and what we might call “praise activities,” such as may see in church—lifting hands, singing, flag waving, and so on.

I urge you to add to your worship vocabulary the language of work. Work is more than penance for the fall. And work is more than a means to a paycheck or a ticket to the weekend.

Jesus said, “*My Father is always working, and so am I.*” (John 5:17)

Work is creative expression. Work can be sacred (a means of enjoying God and experiencing His presence). This can be discovered, just like sacred worship can be discovered, through practicing attention, appreciation, and anticipation, as I mentioned earlier today.

Any wholesome, productive work can be grounds for worshipping God—in your business, in your home, or in your community.

This is the full extension of worship: *your service*, offered out of faithfulness to God.

Its essence is wonder, its expression is praise, and its extension is service.

How fruitful is *your* worship? What service is it producing?

Where does it need the most improvement? In the attention you give God? In your appreciation for God’s immediate activities around you?

How will you begin to make a change this week, in order to offer God the praise that is due Him? Settle on one significant adjustment to pursue each day.

Now, let’s pray about your answers to these questions.