

What is Worship?

Leader's Notes

A sacrificial act of service

It was a reckless thing to do. Going to Pilate to ask for Jesus' body. Joseph of Arimathea knew that of course. He was an intelligent upstanding member of the Sanhedrin; the ruling party, the council that had been conspiring to have Jesus killed for long enough, and had now finally succeeded.

And to what purpose? It was too late now to make a stand, exert influence, or make any difference.

If he and Nicodemus handled the body personally, rather than delegating the burial to servants, they excluded themselves from being able to participate in the Passover, the chief festival of the year. But that was just a minor matter.

Far more significant than that, for a member of the Sanhedrin to make such a bold stand, Joseph was committing political and social suicide. And to what purpose? Jesus was already dead and no one at that point had any hope of a resurrection. It was the end, as far as they were concerned.

Why alienate yourself for a lost cause? Yet something compelled him to do it. What could it have been?

An overwhelming sense of love and devotion, or a quiet outrage and the resolve that someone had to take stand at such a perversion of justice. Both perhaps.

Joseph was desperate to do something and there was only one thing he could do, so he did it, despite the cost to himself personally.

Joseph's actions in asking Pilate for the body of Jesus, and then burying it in his own tomb are surely one of the most beautiful, reckless, and sacrificial acts of worship we encounter in the Bible.

Simple acts of service: A story from a head teacher

"I was sitting in the playground of another school in a very deprived situation, watching my pupils loving and serving others, and I had such a profound sense of gratitude. These were ordinary pupils who had gone far beyond what they had believed possible. Many of them lacked confidence in themselves and their abilities, many of them had never worked in this type of setting with the simple skills they had acquired.

Despite all of this, they had overcome significant obstacles and grown in their capacity to operate in an idea which had grown in their imaginations. If I had been looking for proven numbers of pupils making a commitment to follow Jesus, I would not have found much evidence of success. What I did see, however, was a group of young people who had begun to see greater possibilities for themselves. Possibilities of greater value than examination success, or the latest version of the iPhone.

As I sat there, I heard something I was not aware I had heard before. I heard the Lord say, 'Thank you'. It broke me, I simply sat there and wept. I wept because I could feel His grace flooding through me and in response, my own love and gratitude overflowed back to Him.

This was not in a worship meeting, though it was worship. It was not in a celebrating crowd of thousands, though I believe there were thousands in Heaven celebrating with me. It was not in a church building, conference hall or festival marquee, it was in a very run-down playground next to a school building in desperate need of serious attention, but it was drawing the attention of Heaven at that moment.¹

Using our God-given gifts

Using our gifts can be an act of worship as long as we don't let them take over our whole lives. I know one lady who used her gift of art within her times of prayer every day. Some athletes experience this. Jarryd Wallace, disability athletics world champion says, "I look at practice as a form of worship, an opportunity to spend time with the Lord."²

Shelley-Ann Fraser-Pryce, Jamaican Olympic gold medallist also experiences this. "When I run the first thing I say is: 'I hope you are pleased with my worship,' for running is my worship."²

The film 'Chariots of Fire' tells the story of Eric Liddell, 400 m gold medallist 1924 Olympic games who said, "When I run I feel his pleasure and to give it up would be to hold him in contempt."²

Praying

"The first time I walked into a 24/7 creative prayer room, I immediately felt that I should take my shoes off. Because I could sense the presence of God. I could have stayed there all day; it was so wonderful. My first experience of using a labyrinth also amazed me. I was a little sceptical when I set foot on the large labyrinth sheet borrowed from the Diocese of Oxford, but the Holy Spirit surprised me."

So what is worship?

What does the word actually mean? How many ways of expressing worship are there?

The Bible uses several Hebrew and Greek words when depicting worship. Their meanings cover a range of things:

- To bow down
- To kiss or pay homage
- To be in awe of
- To serve
- To offer gifts

These are all actions which – unless done out of pure duty – express love, respect, gratitude, devotion.

¹ Graham Coyle: To Infinity & Turn Left: Exploring God's Purpose for Christian Teachers

² Stuart Weir: 'The Track is My Church', article Christianity magazine July 2021

We show love to different people in different ways. It's the same with God. Worship is about different ways of expressing love to God.

Worship is anything that we do which expresses our love for God. It includes not only worshipping alongside others, perhaps in large popular gatherings but also in the privacy of our own space. It includes finding out as much about him as we can.

Tozer described worship as "the missing jewel of the evangelical church" and said that "...for millions of Christians, God is no more real than he is to the non-Christian".³

God has been at work in his Church since Tozer wrote, and there is now a sense of God's Presence in many places which lacked it before. But there is still a deep hunger and emptiness in many, or a sense of distance and longing for something more intimate and deeper.

If God has always seemed distant, then any act of worship is likely to feel like a duty. It is only as we enter a relationship with him and we start to 'see' him, that worship becomes more meaningful. And if 'love' feels like too strong a word for some people at first then 'gratitude' may be an easier one to begin with.

It's difficult to love someone who may not seem real to you. One of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to make God real to us, to bring the reality of God's presence into our lives. He promises that those who seek him will find him and that he will draw near to those who draw near to him. (Jeremiah 29:13 / James 4:8)

The idea of service involves every aspect of our lives. In the broad sense we can worship God in the way we do just about anything e.g. our work, our speech, the way we treat people. Anything we do in a way which brings honour to God is an act of worship. Of course we can serve out of duty, or we can serve out of love. If we are going through a difficult time, it might feel like we are serving out of duty. This is sacrificial worship, and it is very precious to God. Habakkuk 3:17-18

Worship blesses the worshipper

Worship takes us beyond ourselves, restores our sense of perspective, frees us from self-importance, renews our hope, refreshes our spirits, feeds our souls, and empowers us to really live. So as well as honouring God, it's very good for our own well-being. God does not need our worship, it's us who have the need to worship.

Our spiritual life was created by the 'breath of God'. Worship enables us to connect to God so that we breathe in the breath of God. It keeps us spiritually healthy and able to reflect the image of God that is within us, more truly.

Application

- What difficulties do you sometimes encounter with worship?
- Which expressions of worship are most natural for you?

³ A. W. Tozer: The Pursuit of God 1948

What can hinder our worship and how can we resolve this?

- God has never really felt real to you.
Keep seeking God
Pray that his Holy Spirit will fill you and reveal God to you,
Ask others to pray for you
- A wrong attitude or unconfessed sin
Ask God to show you what is wrong and clear the blockage between you
- A worship style that is really uncomfortable for you.
Do something different!

Which expressions of worship are most natural FOR YOU?

Here are some that are currently in use. Perhaps try something new

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Praying – silent, spoken, collective or written/painted • Giving an offering • Meditating on a Bible verse/passage • Taking Communion • Collective reading of Bible verses, prayer, or liturgy • Singing / Clapping • Raising hands • Dance / Waving a flag | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading the Creed • Lighting a candle • Burning incense • Playing an instrument • Silence - Habakkuk 2:20 • Giving ourselves - Romans 12:1 • Serving - Joseph of Arimathea • Loving/caring for others - Isaiah 1:17 • Using your God-given gifts |
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Extra notes

Origins and meaning of 'worship'

- 'Histachawah' or 'hishtakhve' = Hebrew = "to prostrate oneself", "to bow down" or "to worship". It is the main word used in the Old Testament for worship.
- 'Proskuneo' = Greek = "to kiss towards" or "to go towards in order to kiss".
This originates from ancient times when the worshipper would kiss the hand or feet of the one being worshipped or even the ground in front. An act of homage to a king might involve kissing his hand as you may have seen on TV.
- 'Sebomai' = to revere", emphasizing the feeling of awe or devotion.
- Threskeia is translated in James 1:27 as "pure religion" and refers to lifestyle.
- The Hebrew word 'abôdâ' and the Greek word 'latreia' refer to service and originally signified the labour of slaves or hired servants and refers to service.
- The English word "worship" comes from the Anglo-Saxon 'weorthscipe' or 'wyrthscipe'. It refers to being worthy or honorable. It came to be applied to a religious activity, such as a prayer, church service, or other rite showing reverence or devotion for a deity.

What different postures are there for worship/prayer?

Every word in the Bible that we translate as 'worship' refers to a posture or movement of the body. When would it be particularly appropriate to kneel – to stand etc.?

- Barefoot:
Exodus 3:5 God to Moses at the burning bush - Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground.
- Standing:
Exodus 33:10 Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent (of meeting), they all stood and worshipped, each at the entrance to their tent. NIV
- Kneeling:
Daniel 6:10 Daniel ... went to pray in an upstairs room in his house ... Three times each day Daniel would kneel down to pray... NCV
- We lift our hands, arms, eyes, face, voice to the Lord
Psalm 28:2 Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help, as I lift up my hands towards your Most Holy Place.
Psalm 134:2 Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord.
Psalm 141:2 May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.
Isaiah 1:15 When you raise your arms to me in prayer... NCV
Psalm 123: I lift up my eyes to you, to you who sit enthroned in heaven.
Ezra 9:6: 'I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.
Psalm 142:1: I cry aloud to the Lord; I lift up my voice to the Lord for mercy.
- Bowed low/prostrate:
Genesis 17:3 Abram bowed face down on the ground... NCV
Joshua 5:14 Then Joshua fell face down to the ground in reverence, NIV

Further information and resources

Sam & Sara Hargreaves: <http://engageworship.org/ideas>

<https://www.24-7prayer.com>

Doug Horley: <https://www.duggiedugdug.org/>

<https://www.prayerspacesinschools.com/>

Stuart Weir: [Meet the Christian Olympians heading to Tokyo | Magazine Features | Premier Christianity](#)

Writer: Brenda Lord; last updated: Aug 2021