

## THE ESSENCE OF REAL WORSHIP

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 28, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Suppose that a child sitting next to you should turn and ask, "What is worship?" What answer would you give? Here are several answers given by thoughtful Christians who have taken the time to put into writing what worship means to them: "Worship is the outgoing of the human spirit toward God, recognizing in him the source of all life and love and goodness and holiness and righteousness." "Worship is man's response to God's revelation of himself ..." "Worship is the adoring reverence of the human spirit for the divine ..." "Worship is a group of specialized activities in which we draw near to and commune with God in an extraordinary manner..." "Worship is an act in which the redeemed person seeks to express his appreciation and gratitude for salvation, as well as to discover ever fuller enrichment of life and fellowship with God through Jesus Christ."

### The Difficulty of Worship

A typical Sunday morning in an average Christian home is a busy affair. Saturday is often a busier day than usual and the family often goes to bed at a later hour than on other week nights. After sleeping a little later on Sunday morning, the family hurries to dress, have breakfast, and to get to church on time. There is a great deal of hustle and bustle and rush. Often they arrive just a minute before the worship is to begin, almost exhausted and without any real mental preparation for the worship.

In the worship hour itself, there are also numerous hindrances. There are those who come late, and interrupt the worship of others. During the service there may be noisy interruptions of many kinds: a crying baby, a passing ambulance or fire engine, and innumerable other extraneous sounds. The building itself may be a problem if it is too hot or too cold, or too light or too dark, or too big or too little. In short, there are many factors which hinder or prevent worship.

It is a tragic fact that many people who intend to worship fail miserably. Worship is the most important and at the same time the most difficult thing that we do. In contrast, it is comparatively easy to do things that involve only the mind and body. For example, the driving of a car, the typing of a letter, the washing of dishes, the mowing of a lawn, and many other such activities are simple, by comparison with the act of worship. Worship involves man's spirit and this means that it is not simple or easy or ordinary. Many people do not know what worship is in its full and complete sense, and hence they do not know how to worship God.

Each Sunday morning between 1400 and 1500 people assemble in this auditorium for worship. We spend approximately an hour in this most important and most difficult activity. Another 1200 or 1500 hours are spent here during Sunday and Wednesday evenings. To see the magnitude of this whole subject, remember that this happens not once each year, but every seven days. What a tragedy it would be if all of this effort and intention should be in vain! Surely Christians need to study most earnestly the subject of worship.

### Important Scriptures

There are certain key scriptures which come to mind when the subject of worship is mentioned. One of the first that one thinks of in the New Testament is that wonderful conversation between Christ and the Samaritan woman by a well. In the course of their conversation Jesus said, "But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for such doth the Father seek to be his worshippers. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4:23-24). Jesus had just declared that neither Jerusalem nor Mt. Gerizim was the place where men must worship God, but that man could worship anywhere on earth. The emphasis was no longer to be where, but how. The primary concern in worship is to worship God in spirit and in truth.

The apostle Paul, in I Cor. 14:15, emphasizes this same point: "I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also." Our worship, in order to be acceptable to God, must be "in spirit"--with genuine feeling and sincere dedication. It must also be "in truth"--which means that we must worship according to the instructions given in God's word and with complete understanding of what God wants us to do in worship. We are not at liberty to introduce our own desires, but must worship according to his instructions.

### High and Lifted Up

Next, I want to read with you a message from the Old Testament that has in it one of the sublimest understandings of worship that is yet known. The first nine verses of Isaiah six have in them the essence of real worship. "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another and said, Holy, holy, holy, is Jehovah of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke."

The first emphasis in this passage is on Jehovah God--high and lifted up. Let the words “high and lifted up” take hold of you and carry you up until you get the overwhelming feeling of the majesty and grandeur of God. Isaiah pictures Jehovah in the holy of holies of the temple with the two seraphim above him. The scene sounds familiar, because when we come to the fourth chapter of Revelation, we find in the picture of heaven which John, the beloved apostle, has been given a similar scene. There is the throne of God, and around it the thrones of the four and twenty elders each of whom is dressed in white and wearing a crown of gold. The four and twenty elders bow down before the throne of God Almighty, saying, “Worthy art thou, our Lord and our God, to receive the glory and the honor and the power: for thou didst create all things, and because of thy will they are and were created.”

In that same scene John describes four great living creatures which hover about the throne constantly day and night forever crying, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.” (Rev. 4:8). There is nothing primitive about this. From Isaiah or from John, from 750 years before Christ to nearly 100 years after Christ, the idea of God high and lifted up, transcendent, splendid beyond anything that man can conceive, is the beginning of worship. Real worship begins when man pauses to see his heavenly Father high and lifted up.

#### The Sinfulness of Man

While that is the beginning of worship, it is not the end. Having seen God, we next look inward at ourselves. “Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, Jehovah of hosts.” (Isaiah 6:5). This is the antidote for man’s pride. Man is proud of his buildings, his inventions, his income, his education, his skill. Man is just proud. He thinks of the world as revolving around himself, until he lifts his eyes and sees the Lord God Jehovah, high and lifted up. When he can compare himself with God he has the means of seeing himself as he really is, weak and inadequate, sinful and undone. Like Isaiah in the long ago, it was only after he had gotten this vision of Jehovah that he realized that he was a man of unclean lips. Do we need to have our pride punctured? Do we, in this marvelous 20th century, in the most powerful nation on earth, among the richest people who ever lived, among the most pride-filled people on earth, need to humble ourselves? The answer comes echoing back from every ears, “Oh yes.” We feel this need when we get a conception of the greatness of God. Until man can see God he does not know how cheap and inferior he himself is.

#### Cleansed and Made Holy

Then comes the next stage. “Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar, and he touched my mouth with it, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin is forgiven.” (Isaiah 8:6-7). Our greatest need is to be cleansed and purified. We need to get rid of the hate, the greed, the selfishness, the lusts and the other evils that drag us down. But the only way that we can ever get rid of them is by bowing in humble submission before the majesty of God so that he may cleanse us. That is what Christianity it all about. Christ came that we might be clean, and that our hearts might be set on things that are holy instead of on things that are of the world. Christ came to take away the guilt of past sins so that we might go free. That is what Christianity is all about.

It all begins when a man becomes a Christian. The simple steps involved in becoming a Christian are clearly revealed in the Bible. Faith leads to repentance; repentance leads to confession; confession to baptism; and baptism to the new Christian life. Saul of Tarsus was told, “And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name.” (Acts 22:16). Having believed on the Lord, having humbled himself and repented of his sins, man makes known his faith and then is buried with his Lord in baptism. Isaiah spoke of it figuratively as a coal from an altar burning out the dross.

There are also those of us who having begun as Christians, have stumbled along the way. For us there is the need of continual cleansing. To a backsliding Christian of the long ago Peter said, “Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray the Lord, if perhaps the thought of thy heart shall be forgiven thee.” (Acts 8:22). In hours of worship such as this we again see the uplifted Lord, feel our own inadequacy, humble ourselves anew and are cleansed.

#### For a Purpose

It is wonderful when we are cleansed, but even that is not the end. Listen again to Isaiah, “And I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then I said, Here I am; send me. And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not.” (Isaiah 6:8-9). It was from this pulpit that Brother Cleon Lyles told the delightful little story of an elderly lady who had been to worship. As she came away, someone said, “Is the sermon done?” meaning, “Is it finished?” To which this elderly, mature Christian responded, “The sermon has been delivered, but it remains yet to be done.” As we go our ways each Lord’s Day morning, after we have been purified and cleansed by genuine worship of God, we go not aimlessly but for a purpose. We go back to life, back to the people of the world, to help them find the vision of God, high and lifted up. We go back to help them realize their lost condition, if they are without Christ.

#### The Motive Behind Worship

In the New Testament we read of the avenues of worship--singing, prayer, giving of our means, eating the Lord's Supper, and teaching the Bible. These are the acts of worship, or the avenues of worship, but too often a man can go through these acts for a lifetime and without ever getting a full and true conception of what worship is. We worship God not from the motive of fear, nor yet because we seek his blessings. We worship out of love. Our praise and adoration are given freely out of hearts which have been touched by deep and genuine feelings of devotion. If God wishes to bless us, it is good; but if not, it is still good. We worship God because it is right to worship him, because our innermost beings are unsatisfied until we do.

We have no feeling like that of the Indian woman in South America who was seen dousing the image of her god upside down in a bowl of water. She had prayed to him and he had not come through, therefore she was punishing him. Nor are we like the ancient Chinese who kept records of their gods. If a god failed to deliver he was replaced by another. We worship Jehovah because he is universal goodness, holiness, justice and love. We are made in his image. The finest thing we ever do in life is adore and worship him. This is the finest hour of the week, the hour in which we come to worship.