

THE MEANING OF WORSHIP

The English word “worship” was derived from the Old English combination of *weorth* (“worth”) and *scipe* (“ship”). “Ship” means a state, quality, or condition, as in *friendship*, *fellowship*, and *relationship*. “Worth-ship” (worship) expresses the quality or state of worth found in the object of one’s devotion. God—in His greatness, awesomeness, and wondrous acts—has a worth that deserves our devotion, respect, and adoration. Ralph P. Martin wrote,

[“Worship”] connotes actions motivated by an attitude that reveres, honors, or describes the worth of another person or object. In the context of the OT and NT worship refers specifically to worship of the divine.¹

Neither the Hebrew of the Old Testament nor the Greek of the New Testament has a word that is equivalent to the English word “worship.” However, both have words that define worship activities. The Hebrew *shahah*, most often translated “worship,” means “to prostrate oneself.” The Hebrew verb *abad* means “serve,” as does the Greek verb *latreuo*.²

The Greek word *proskuneo*—literally, “kiss toward”—is the word most frequently used in the New Testament to connote worship (Matthew 4:10; Luke 24:52; John 4:20, 21). The custom normally practiced was to prostrate oneself before a person and kiss the ground, his feet, or the hem of his garment. This was done by the Persians toward their deified kings and by the Greeks in honor of their idols and other sacred objects. While its meaning is not exactly the same as our word “worship,” *proskuneo* expresses the idea of

worship more nearly than any other Greek word.

Other New Testament words are infrequently translated “worship” or “worshiper.” These do not contain the meaning of adoration or formal worship, as does the Greek word *proskuneo*, but they are translated using forms of the word “worship.”³

PAST ATTITUDES ABOUT WORSHIP

Attitudes of the past can help us to understand worship. In the ancient Mesopotamian creation epic, Marduk is represented as choosing to create human beings to serve the gods. The following statement is attributed to Marduk as he was creating man: “He shall be charged with the service of the gods that they might be at ease!”⁴

This view presents man as a servant of the gods to relieve them of labor and to bring them enjoyment. Through such service, mankind was to worship the gods by respecting them and meeting their needs. The idea that man could meet such needs makes the gods dependent on the service that man can give them. A good observation was made by John E. Burkhart:

For the Hebrews, God is God, whether served or not; and God deserves to be served, not for any reward to God’s servants but for God’s own worth. God does not require praise to be God; but as God, God demands it by right of being God.⁵

In *Euthyphro*, Plato argued that gods are not

¹Ralph P. Martin, “Worship,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 4:1117–18.

²*Latreuo* appears in Philippians 3:3; Hebrews 9:9; 10:2. The noun form *latreia* is translated “service” in Romans 12:1 and Hebrews 9:1, 6.

³Some examples are *eusebeo* (meaning “be devout,” “pious”; Acts 17:23); *sebazomai* (“show reverence”; Romans 1:25); *sabasma* (“object of reverence”; Acts 17:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:4); *theskeia* (“religious”; Colossians 2:18); *sebo* (“fear” or “reverence” for God; Matthew 15:9; Mark 7:7; Acts 16:14; 18:7, 13; 19:27).

⁴James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 36.

⁵John E. Burkhart, *Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 16.

affected or changed by our worship. They do not benefit from what we can give them and are beyond needing anything from us. They have everything and need nothing. Burkhart noted,

It was left to Thomas Aquinas, among medieval theologians, to take this argument so seriously that he argued that worship is not for God's sake, but for ours. To this, in the sixteenth century, Calvin responded that the proper adoration of God is the prime purpose of Christianity. . . . And, in the twentieth century, picking up the theme of adoration, Evelyn Underhill speaks of a "disinterested delight" and a "total adoring response." By such delights, worship is truly a matter of worth-ship. It is the adoring response to God as the center of value, to God understood as intrinsic worth.⁶

A SCRIPTURAL CONCEPT OF WORSHIP

The concept presented in the Scriptures is that God, who is set apart from evil and is holy by nature, identifies with us so as to provide lovingly for our needs. We should worship God in recognition of His greatness and in response to Him as the supreme giver of all good gifts (James 1:17).

Our worship is not to be based on what we can do for God, but on what He does for us. Because we realize His awesomeness and graciousness, we should seek to do what we can to show our adoration, admiration, devotion, and appreciation in worship. Such is expected by God and is acceptable only if it flows from a grateful heart. Forced activities and robotic responses are only external manifestations; they are not considered worship by God.

Worship must be the result of our realization of God's majestic power and gracious acts. We are to respond to these with gratitude expressed according to His will. God is the focus and the source of our worship. Worship does not originate with us, except in the sense that our consciousness of God moves us to worship Him.

God does not need our worship, but we need to worship Him because of His greatness, goodness, and lovingkindness. Our response should come from an overflowing appreciation for all that He is and does. If we fail to worship, we disregard and disrespect the deserving God who so graciously acts on our behalf.

⁶Ibid.

Outward expressions unaccompanied by sincerity of heart are empty, meaningless, and worthless to God. Andy T. Ritchie, Jr., said,

. . . we have often tragically mistaken the outward form and "acts" for the thing itself. "Going to church" does not mean that the one who has gone has worshiped at all. If we said "going to worship" rather than "going to church," we would be more accurate in the use of words, and yet the terminology improved would not mean the practice corrected. . . . No exercises are acceptable to God until they are the worshiper's own expressions. . . . The mere fact that we have gone through these "acts" in a perfunctory, mechanical manner cannot be equated with worship.⁷

God desires corporate worship. While our worship is not limited to public gatherings in edifices constructed for worship, Christian assemblies are important. Worshiping together provides shared moments that can lift human hearts to heights of devotion which individual worship may not provide. J. L. May wrote,

God wants His people to meet together for worship (Hebrews 10:25). Worship should be both vertical and horizontal. That is, it should build relationships not only with God, but also with each other. Private or family worship is very important to spiritual growth, but corporate worship provides something that private or family worship cannot. Joint participation in a faith-building event fosters a sense of fellowship and mutual encouragement.⁸

Our purpose in worship, in addition to appealing to God for blessings, is to make known to Him our innermost thoughts concerning Him and our appreciation for His provisions. Even though we can be greatly benefited from worship, our greatest need—a need of our inner being—is to reach up to God and communicate to Him. In our worship, personal benefits are secondary to that inner need to express to our Creator His worth in our lives.

As we consider the various actions and attitudes involved in worship, we must first be aware of what worship is not. Worship is not necessarily feelings and emotions expressed in extreme or frenzied physical activities. It is not

⁷Andy T. Ritchie, Jr., *Thou Shalt Worship the Lord Thy God* (Austin, Tex.: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1969), 6-7.

⁸J. L. May, "The Call to Worship," in "Worship," *Truth for Today* (August 2000): 5.

just an outstanding performance or a display of human abilities and effort. It is not freedom of human expression.

At the same time, worship is not just ritual. What appeals to God is more than pomp of ceremony. God wants us to gather in His name, but just assembling with others is not what constitutes worship.

Now we will move to what is to be included in worship of God.



Worship includes . . .

- ◆ Glorifying God
“Glorify”—Heb.: *pa'ar* (Is. 60:21b; 61:3b; 66:5); Heb.: *kabed* (Ps. 22:23; 86:12); Heb.: *kebod* (Ps. 29:2); Gk.: *doxazo* (Mt. 5:16; 9:8).
- ◆ Expressing awe
Express “awe”—Heb.: *gur* (Ps. 33:8); Gk.: *phobeo* (Mt. 9:8); Gk.: *deos* (Heb. 12:28). The basic meaning behind these words is fear, perhaps in the sense of respect.
- ◆ Magnifying God
“Magnify”—Heb.: *gadal* (Ps. 35:27; 40:16; 70:4; Mal. 1:5); Gk.: *megaluno* (Acts 19:17).
- ◆ Honoring God
“Honor”—Heb.: *kabed* (Is. 29:13); Gk.: *doxazo* (Rom. 1:21; 1 Tim. 6:16). Both of these words are also translated “glorify” (Rev. 4:9, 11; 5:12, 13).
- ◆ Reverence
“Reverence”—Heb.: *yare'* (Ps. 2:11; 5:7; 119:38); Gk.: *eulabeia* (Heb. 12:28).
- ◆ Blessing Him
“Bless”—Heb.: *barak* (Ps. 16:7; 26:12).
- ◆ Praising Him
“Praise”—Heb.: *halal* (Ps. 104:35); Heb.: *tehillah* (Is. 42:8, 10, 12); Heb.: *zamar* (Ps. 30:4; 40:3); Gk.: *aineo* (Lk. 19:37; Acts 2:47).
- ◆ Exalting Him
“Exalt”—Heb.: *rum* (Ps. 18:46; 21:13).
- ◆ Rejoicing
“Rejoice”—Heb.: *gil* (Ps. 35:9); Heb.: *samach* (Ps. 63:11); Gk.: *chairo* (Phil. 4:4).
- ◆ Thankfulness
“Thank”—Heb.: *yadah* God (Ps. 7:17; 9:1); Gk.: *eucharisteo* (Lk. 17:16; Col. 3:17).

WORSHIP THAT IS WORSHIP

True worship is based on reflective thought about what God has done, meditation of His greatness and goodness, and realization of His awesome presence. The worshiper does not need a cheerleader to excite, arouse, awaken, or stimulate worship. Such tactics are necessary only for those with no thanksgiving or praise in their hearts. Worship flows freely from the recesses of hearts filled with gratitude and love, hearts that are moved by reflecting on the goodness and worthiness in the God they seek to worship.

No external attempt to excite worship can substitute for a humble heart that is anxious to look up in adoration and devotion to the Lord. While we should try to provide arrangements and settings that will be conducive to worship, these cannot ensure or produce worship. Increased noise levels, special lighting, bodily movements, and rapidly moving activities may create excitement and stir emotions; but they cannot put praise in an empty heart. Worship is more than activity and commotion.

Worship cannot be instilled from outside, but must come from within the human heart. It is the result of a heart that seeks to express praise, devotion, and love to the gracious and powerful God of the universe. These thoughts and feelings can be expressed in a quiet and solemn manner or in manifestations of exuberance and joy. True worship comes from what has been stirred within rather than stimulants outside the heart.

Those who desire to worship God should forget the programmed efforts of religious groups to stimulate worship. Instead, we should get to know God, understand His ways, and consider the blessings He provides. Realization of who God is and what He does will lead to a desire to worship Him—a feat that all the programs devised by man cannot accomplish. In seeking to worship God based on this approach, we must be sure that the avenues through which we are expressing our worship are acceptable to God.

SUMMARY

We are at our best when we reach up with our hearts to worship God. No other activity in worship has the importance of fellowship with God. The expression of our hearts when attuned to God in recognition of His worthiness may have no rival in human experience. ◆