

## **Worship: It's About God**

Psalm 138:1-3

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*I give you thanks, O Lord, with all my heart;  
I will sing your praises before the gods.  
I bow before your holy Temple as I worship.  
I praise your name for your unfailing love and faithfulness;  
for your promises are backed  
by all the honor of your name.  
As soon as I pray, you answer me;  
you encourage me by giving me strength.*

A number of years ago when our daughters were still in high school, we traveled to Montana to spend Christmas with my brother's family. During our time there we visited Yellowstone National Park. Yellowstone is a geological hotbed with hundreds of geysers and hot springs. One of our first stops in the scenic wilderness was the geyser known affectionately as Old Faithful. Old Faithful is the most visited of all the geysers for a simple reason: It is faithful.

It is not the tallest geyser or the most beautiful, but it is faithful. One can count on Old Faithful erupting every eighty minutes. The National Park Service has built a boardwalk that encircles the old geyser with benches around one side. (You can stand on the other side, but when the geyser erupts you will get a shower.) The historic hotels and quaint shops fan out from the geyser. No doubt about it, Old Faithful is the center of attention.

As the time for the eruption got closer, more and more tourists joined our family, settling on the benches or on the boardwalk. Latecomers stood behind. Many had their cameras trained like weapons on the famous hole in the ground.

From the steam rising from the opening in the earth, first there was a sputtering of water. "There she goes," exclaimed one observer who thought he was in the know. But the sputtering ceased, and I refrained from making any more comments! A moment later came the sputtering again, turning into a fountain of hot water streaming toward the heavens a hundred feet high. Everyone looked up. Jaws dropping. Eyes popping. The sense of wonder filled everyone encircling Old Faithful as the geyser sent cascading waters up and up. The crowd was spellbound, awe-filled, as the dancing water performed its magic for a minute and then quietly returned to earth. Its water supply depleted, but in another eighty minutes its subterranean plumbing would be filled again ready to burst forth toward the sky. And other onlookers would witness its majesty.

I noticed something that day. Onlookers displayed a sense of awe, a worship-like quality. They had witnessed something powerful, something from beyond themselves.

With a sense of reverence people returned to their cars or the gift shop knowing they had witnessed something spectacular.

The same dynamic occurs when we come to worship God. Or, I guess I must say, should happen! We ought to witness the spectacular hand of God active in our lives and in our worship. We are supposed to witness something beyond ourselves. We are to be in awe, spellbound, mesmerized by the life-giving, life-flowing, power of God. And, we should be motivated to tell others about what we have experienced.

What Old Faithful does for the tourist in Yellowstone, our worship of God should do for those who worship God in church.

I believe the psalmist is expressing those sentiments in our scripture text for today. The idea of gathering to praise God for who God is, Creator, Redeemer, and Savior should be a priority for all Christians.

- We praise God for God's goodness, grace, and mercy.
- We praise God for God's love, joy, and peace.
- We praise God for God's righteousness and holiness.
- We praise God in the morning, evening, and all the time in between.

As expressions of praise we bless, exalt, glorify, magnify, and oh, by the way, thank God as well. In fact, it's God's breath in our lungs that gives us physical and spiritual life, so we should pour out our praise to God.

Think about it this way. When people are invited to a dinner party, I suspect they come for many different reasons. Some come for what they will be fed. Others come for the fellowship. Some may come because they don't want to hurt the hosts feelings and they feel obligated. Some come out of curiosity and others figure it's the thing to do. Whatever reason they come, I wonder if people who go to a party ever fail to thank their host?

Why do you come to church? Is it to see your friends? Is it out of habit? Is it a drug problem? – you know, “Someone drug me here!” Is it to catch up on your sleep? Is it to be fed spiritually?

There are many reasons for church attendance, but there's one that is primary for the Body of Christ. At a worship conference I attended a few years ago, I heard a speaker say, “You can have as much of God as you want.”

So, let me ask you this morning, “*How much of God do you want?*” Because, worship is an expression of how much of God we want! If we want God very little, then our daily life is not centered around God very much, and therefore I suspect our corporate worship experience is routine and lacking.

How high up on your list is expressing your love and gratitude for God in coming to church?

The prophet Isaiah said we are to come together in order to proclaim God's praise amongst the congregation, Isaiah 43:21.

Psalm 33:1 (NIV) says, “*Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise God.*”

Praising God should be in everything we do. The Apostle Paul addresses this in his letter to the Corinthians church and their lack of understanding in the worship of the Lord.

“*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do,*” Paul said, “*Do it all for the glory of God.*” (1 Corinthians 10:31)

But the Psalmist in Psalm 138 brings out the ultimate expression of praise. Let's take a look at verses one and two.

*I give you thanks, O Lord, with all my heart;  
I will sing your praises before the gods.  
I bow before your holy Temple as I worship.  
I praise your name for your unfailing love and faithfulness;  
for your promises are backed  
by all the honor of your name.*

There are three aspects of a praising heart that are found in Psalm 138. The first is offering praise with "a whole heart."

*"I give you thanks, O Lord, with all my heart."*

Someone said, *"We worship our work, work at our play, and play at our worship."* This describes our worship more than many of us would like to admit. We come to a worship service, where the Lord is the one we have gathered to honor, only to half-heartedly sing of God's worthiness. We then leave thinking we've done something great for God.

When we gather with other believers we need to have our focus where it belongs, on God and not on others, or the game coming up on TV, or what's for lunch, or on what time it is. When we're not fully engaged in our praise, then we're not really worshiping God. This applies not only to our singing songs of praise, but also when God's Word is being read or proclaimed.

Jesus kind of nails this on the head when He said, *"This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me."* (Matthew 15:8-9a NKJV)

The psalmist understood that praise isn't supposed to be half-hearted. Rather it is to be with one's entire heart. Several times we read in the Psalms:

*"I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds."* (Psalm 9:1)

*"Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright; in the congregation."* (Psalm 111:1)

Half-hearted praise, therefore, is insincere praise. It's praise without worth, and not worthy of those who call themselves believers in Jesus Christ.

If this then is so important, to praise God with the whole of our heart, then what does a "whole heart" mean? It's praising God with the entirety of who we are. It's leaving nothing behind but unreservedly giving praise to God.

And *"unreservedly"* is an interesting word, because when we say that we are to praise God with the entirety of who we are, that means we're to praise God the same way we are to love God, that is, with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, the first part of the Great Commandment.

The next aspect of a praise-filled heart is that it is "a humble heart." The Hebrew and Greek words for worship are primarily two, "hawah" and "proskuneo". These are both expressions of humility. In our worship we bow before our God,

we offer our confessions, we submit our whole self, our true self, before the Lord. This attitude demonstrates an understanding of who we as children of grace.

In verse two it says, *“I will bow before your holy temple as I worship”*. The word “worship” here in the Hebrew language means to bow down in reverence. It means to bring down, to have an attitude of lowliness. This is seen in Psalm 95:6. *“Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.”*

It is such a humble heart that God takes notice of, and the psalmist continues, *“Though the Lord is great, the Lord cares for the humble; but keeps some distance from the proud.”* (Psalm 138:6)

The Apostle Peter picks up on this in his first letter saying,

*“All of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”* (I Peter 5:5)

Humility isn’t denying who God made us to be; rather it’s being honest about who we are before God, that is, our weakness as compared to God’s strength.

Humility is often referred to as the greatest virtue a man or woman of God can possess, because it’s getting the focus off us and onto the One who truly deserves it, that is, Jesus Christ.

Worship is always, whatever its actual form, a response to God’s initiative and an expression of obedience to God. Our attitude should not be determined by the styles of music, the flow of the service, the dynamics of preaching, but as a response to a God of grace.

Constance Cherry is professor of Worship and Pastoral Ministry at Indiana Wesleyan University. In an article in Circuit Rider Magazine titled “What’s Next? What’s Now?” she has this to say about our consideration of worship:

***Instead of asking “What’s next?”, perhaps we should ask, “What’s now?” Asking “What’s now?” takes us to the narrative concerning worship. “What’s now” centers on the unchanging reality of worship that is already in play. Something real and profound is underway each time the church gathers for the express purpose of worshipping the triune God. This risen Lord is truly present among us as recipient of our worship, leader of our worship, and mediator of our worship. Through his ongoing, incarnate ministry as one of us in worship, we are invited to join him in his worship of God through the Spirit. This is always what’s going on whether we recognize it or not.***

Finally, a praise-filled heart is “an encouraged heart.” In verse three the psalmist says that when I cried out to God, God encouraged me.

*“As soon as I pray, you answer me; you encourage me by giving me strength.”* (Psalm 138:3)

Encouragement is described as a cool breeze, or a cold drink, on a hot summer’s day. It revitalizes and refreshes our hearts. Therefore, encouragement is a vital element for life of faith and trust in God. When we feel overwhelmed we need to find encouragement to help us overcome and be resilient.

A good verse to guide our attitude for worship is Romans 5:8, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

To be encouraged when pain and problems threaten to swamp our lives, we need to start speaking encouraging words to our hearts as well, which is what the psalmist counsels. *“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise God, my Savior and my God.”* (Psalm 42:11 NIV)

When our hearts are encouraged and strengthened, then we’ll be able to praise God without hesitation or fear and declare God’s mighty works to the world.

I want to close with this. Chris Jack, in his book *Heart of Worship*, lists 10 things I want you to think about as regards worship: (Heart of Worship, pg. 173)

1. Worship is relational; it involves engagement with a personal God.
2. Worship is required. It is a must for our lives.
3. Worship is a response to God’s initiatives.
4. Worship involves submission, service and reverence.
5. Worship has both individual and corporate expressions.
6. Worship may be informal as well as formal.
7. Worship changes in form yet is constant in its essence.
8. Worship is about attitude, not just activity.
9. Worship is holistic, it involves the whole person.
10. Worship is lifestyle as well as liturgy.

Often at communion we will sing a song that begins with these words:

*I come expecting Jesus*

*To meet me in this place*

*I come expecting to receive*

*His mercy and His grace.*

I pray that that is how we come to worship every Sunday.