
WORSHIP

“Let’s Go to the House of GOD”

*When they said, “Let’s go to the house of GOD,”
my heart leaped for joy.*

*And now we’re here, oh Jerusalem,
inside Jerusalem’s walls!*

*Jerusalem, well-built city,
built as a place for worship!*

*The city to which the tribes ascend,
all GOD’s tribes go up to worship,
To give thanks to the name of GOD—
this is what it means to be Israel.*

*Thrones for righteous judgment
are set there, famous David-thrones.*

Pray for Jerusalem’s peace!

Prosperity to all you Jerusalem-lovers!

Friendly insiders, get along!

Hostile outsiders, keep your distance!

For the sake of my family and friends,

I say it again: live in peace!

For the sake of the house of our God, GOD,

I’ll do my very best for you.

*There is something morally repulsive about
modern activist theories which deny contemplation
and recognize nothing but struggle. For them not a single moment
has value in itself, but is only a means for what follows.*

N I C O L A S B E R D Y A E V

One of the afflictions of pastoral work has been to listen, with a straight face, to all the reasons people give for not going to church:

“My mother made me when I was little.”

“There are too many hypocrites in the church.”

“It’s the only day I have to sleep in.”

There was a time when I responded to such statements with simple arguments that exposed them as flimsy excuses. Then I noticed that it didn’t make any difference. If I showed the inadequacy of one excuse, three more would pop up in its place. So I don’t respond anymore. I listen (with a straight face) and go home and pray that person will one day find the one sufficient reason for going to church, which is God. I go about my work hoping that what I do and say will be usable by the Holy Spirit to create in that person a determination to worship God in a Christian community.

Many people do: they decide to worship God, faithfully and devoutly. It is one of the important acts in a life of discipleship. And what is far more interesting than the reasons (excuses) people give for not worshipping is discovering the reasons they do.

Psalm 122 is the song of a person who decides to go to church and worship God. It is a sample of the complex, diverse and worldwide phenomenon of worship that is common to all Christians. It is an excellent instance of what happens when a person worships.

Psalm 122 is third in the sequence of the Songs of Ascents.

Psalm 120 is the psalm of repentance—the one that gets us out of an environment of deceit and hostility and sets us on our way to God. Psalm 121 is the psalm of trust—a demonstration of how faith resists patent-medicine remedies to trials and tribulations and determinedly trusts God to work out his will and “guard you from every evil” in the midst of difficulty. Psalm 122 is the psalm of worship—a demonstration of what people of faith everywhere and always do: gather to an assigned place and worship their God.

An Instance of the Average

The first line catches many by surprise: “When they said, ‘Let’s go to the house of GOD,’ my heart leaped for joy.” But it shouldn’t. Worship is the most popular thing that Christians do. A great deal of what we call Christian behavior has become part of our legal system and is embedded in our social expectations, both of which have strong coercive powers. If we removed all laws from society and eliminated all consequences for antisocial acts, we don’t know how much murder, how much theft, how much perjury and falsification would take place. But we do know that much of what we commonly describe as Christian behavior is not volitional at all—it is enforced.

But worship is not forced. Everyone who worships does so because he or she wants to. There are, to be sure, a few temporary coercions—children and spouses who attend church because another has decided that they must. But these coercions are short-lived, a few years at most. Most Christian worship is voluntary.

An excellent way to test people’s values is to observe what we do when we don’t *have* to do anything, how we spend our leisure time, how we spend our extra money. Even in a time when church attendance is not considered to be on the upswing in the

United States, the numbers are impressive. There are more people at worship on any given Sunday, for instance, than are at all the football games or on the golf links or fishing or taking walks in the woods. Worship is the single most popular act in this land.

So when we hear the psalmist say, "When they said, 'Let's go to the house of GOD,' my heart leaped for joy," we are not listening to the phony enthusiasm of a propagandist drumming up business for worship; we are witnessing what is typical of most Christians in most places at most times. This is not an exception to which we aspire; it is an instance of the average.

A Framework

Why do we do it? Why is there so much voluntary and faithful worship by Christians? Why is it that we never find a Christian life without, in the background somewhere, an act of worship, never find Christian communities without also finding Christian worship? Why is it that worship is the common background to all Christian existence and that it is so faithfully and willingly practiced? The psalm singles out three items: worship gives us a workable structure for life; worship nurtures our need to be in relationship with God; worship centers our attention on the decisions of God.

Worship gives us a workable structure for life. The psalm says, "Jerusalem, well-built city, built as a place for worship! The city to which the tribes ascend, all GOD's tribes go up to worship." Jerusalem, for a Hebrew, was *the* place of worship (only incidentally was it the geographical center of the country and the political seat of authority). The great worship festivals to which everyone came at least three times a year were held in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem everything that God said was remembered and celebrated. When you went to Jerusalem, you encountered the great foundational realities: God created you, God redeemed

you, God provided for you. In Jerusalem you saw in ritual and heard proclaimed in preaching the powerful history-shaping truth that God forgives our sins and makes it possible to live without guilt and with purpose. In Jerusalem all the scattered fragments of experience, all the bits and pieces of truth and feeling and perception were put together in a single whole.

The King James Version translates this sentence "Jerusalem is builded as a city that is compact together." Earlier Coverdale had translated the latter phrase as "that is at unity with itself." The city itself was a kind of architectural metaphor for what worship is: All the pieces of masonry fit compactly, all the building stones fit harmoniously. There were no loose stones, no left-over pieces, no awkward gaps in the walls or towers. It was well built, compactly built, skillfully built, "at unity with itself."

What is true architecturally is also true socially, for the sentence continues, "to which the tribes ascend, all GOD's tribes." In worship all the different tribes functioned as a single people in harmonious relationship. In worship, though we have come from different places and out of various conditions, we are demonstrably after the same things, saying the same things, doing the same things. With all our differing levels of intelligence and wealth, background and language, rivalries and resentments, still in worship we are gathered into a single whole. Outer quarrels and misunderstandings and differences pale into insignificance as the inner unity of what God builds in the act of worship is demonstrated.

When a person is confused and things refuse to fit together, she sometimes announces a need to get out of noise and turbulence, to get away from all the hassle and "get my head together." When she succeeds in doing this, we call that person "put together." All the parts are there, nothing is left out, nothing is out of proportion, everything fits into a workable frame.

As I entered a home to make a pastoral visit, the person I came to see was sitting at a window embroidering a piece of cloth held taut on an oval hoop. She said, “Pastor, while waiting for you to come I realized what’s wrong with me—I don’t have a frame. My feelings, my thoughts, my activities—everything is loose and sloppy. There is no border to my life. I never know where I am. I need a frame for my life like this one I have for my embroidery.”

How do we get that framework, that sense of solid structure so that we know where we stand and are therefore able to do our work easily and without anxiety? Christians go to worship. Week by week we enter the place compactly built, “to which the tribes ascend,” and get a working definition for life: the way God created us, the ways he leads us. We know where we stand.

A Command

Another reason Christians keep returning to worship is that it nurtures our need to be in relationship with God. Worship is the place where we obey the command to praise God: “To give thanks to the name of GOD—*this* is what it means to be Israel.” This command, to give thanks, runs right down the center of all Christian worship. A decree. A word telling us what we ought to do, and that what we ought to do is praise.

When we sin and mess up our lives, we find that God doesn’t go off and leave us—he enters into our trouble and saves us. That is good, an instance of what the Bible calls gospel. We discover reasons and motivations for living in faith and find that God is already helping us to do it—and that is good. Praise God! “A Christian,” wrote Augustine, “should be an alleluia from head to foot.” That is the reality. That is the truth of our lives. God made us, redeems us, provides for us. The natural, honest, healthy, logical response to that is praise to God. When

we praise we are functioning at the center, we are in touch with the basic, core reality of our being.

But very often we don't feel like it, and so we say, "It would be dishonest for me to go to a place of worship and praise God when I don't feel like it. I would be a hypocrite." The psalm says, I don't care whether you feel like it or not: as was *decreed* (RSV), "give thanks to the name of GOD."

I have put great emphasis on the fact that Christians worship because they want to, not because they are forced to. But I have never said that we worship because we *feel* like it. Feelings are great liars. If Christians worshiped only when they felt like it, there would be precious little worship. Feelings are important in many areas but completely unreliable in matters of faith. Paul Scherer is laconic: "The Bible wastes very little time on the way we feel."¹

We live in what one writer has called the "age of sensation."² We think that if we don't *feel* something there can be no authenticity in *doing* it. But the wisdom of God says something different: that we can *act* ourselves into a new way of feeling much quicker than we can *feel* ourselves into a new way of acting. Worship is an *act* that develops feelings for God, not a *feeling* for God that is expressed in an act of worship. When we obey the command to praise God in worship, our deep, essential need to be in relationship with God is nurtured.

A Word of God

A third reason we keep engaging in regular acts of worship is that in it our attention is centered on the decisions of God. Our psalm describes worship as the place where "thrones for righteous judgment are set . . . famous David-thrones." The biblical word *judgment* means "the decisive word by which God straightens things out and puts things right." Thrones of judg-

ment are the places that word is announced. Judgment is not a word *about* things, describing them; it is a word that *does* things, putting love in motion, applying mercy, nullifying wrong, ordering goodness.

This word of God is everywhere in worship. In the call to worship we hear God's first word to us; in the benediction we hear God's last word to us; in the Scripture lessons we hear God speaking to our faith-parents; in the sermon we hear that word reexpressed to us; in the hymns, which are all to a greater or lesser extent paraphrases of Scripture, the Word of God makes our prayers articulate. Every time we worship our minds are informed, our memories refreshed with the judgments of God, we are familiarized with what God says, what he has decided, the ways he is working out our salvation.

There is simply no place where these can be done as well as in worship. If we stay at home by ourselves and read the Bible, we are going to miss a lot, for our reading will be unconsciously conditioned by our culture, limited by our ignorance, distorted by unnoticed prejudices. In worship we are part of "the large congregation" where all the writers of Scripture address us, where hymn writers use music to express truths that touch us not only in our heads but in our hearts, where the preacher who has just lived through six days of doubt, hurt, faith and blessing with the worshipers speaks the truth of Scripture in the language of the congregation's present experience. We want to hear what God says and what he says to us: worship is the place where our attention is centered on these personal and decisive words of God.

Peace and Security

Worship, even for those who are most faithful at it, takes up just a small percentage of a person's life, an hour or so a week at

most. Does it make any difference to the rest of the week? The final words of Psalm 122 say that it does: "Pray for Jerusalem's peace! Prosperity to all you Jerusalem-lovers! Friendly insiders, get along! Hostile outsiders, keep your distance! For the sake of my family and friends, I say it again: live in peace! For the sake of the house of our God, GOD, I'll do my very best for you." Here we have prayers that overflow the bounds of worship and create new relationships in the city, in society.

The first word, *pray*, is a transition into the everyday world. It is not the word ordinarily used in formal worship, but the everyday Hebrew word for "ask." It is not improperly translated "pray," for when we ask from God we pray. But the asking is not a formal prayer in the sanctuary; it is an informal asking as we go about our business between Sundays. It is the word Hebrews would use to ask for a second helping of bread if still hungry, or for directions if lost.

Worship does not satisfy our hunger for God—it whets our appetite. Our need for God is not taken care of by engaging in worship—it deepens. It overflows the hour and permeates the week. The need is expressed in a desire for peace and security. Our everyday needs are changed by the act of worship. We are no longer living from hand to mouth, greedily scrambling through the human rat race to make the best we can out of a mean existence. Our basic needs suddenly become worthy of the dignity of creatures made in the image of God: peace and security. The words *shalom* and *shalvah* play on the sounds in Jerusalem, *yerushalayim*, the place of worship.

Shalom, "peace," is one of the richest words in the Bible. You can no more define it by looking up its meaning in the dictionary than you can define a person by his or her social security number. It gathers all aspects of wholeness that result from God's will being completed in us. It is the work of God that,

when complete, releases streams of living water in us and pulsates with eternal life. Every time Jesus healed, forgave or called someone, we have a demonstration of *shalom*.

And *shalvah*, “prosperity.” It has nothing to do with insurance policies or large bank accounts or stockpiles of weapons. The root meaning is leisure—the relaxed stance of one who knows that everything is all right because God is over us, with us and for us in Jesus Christ. It is the security of being at home in a history that has a cross at its center. It is the leisure of the person who knows that every moment of our existence is at the disposal of God, lived under the mercy of God.

Worship initiates an extended, daily participation in peace and prosperity so that we share in our daily rounds what God initiates and continues in Jesus Christ.

A Pause to Sharpen a Tool

We live in a pragmatic age and are reluctant to do anything if its practical usefulness cannot be demonstrated. It is inevitable that we ask regarding worship, is it worth it? Can you justify the time and energy and expense involved in gathering Christians together in worship? Well,

look at the mower in the summer’s day, with so much to cut down ere the sun sets. He pauses in his labour—is he a sluggard? He looks for his stone, and begins to draw it up and down his scythe, with rink-atink, rink-atink, rink-atink. Is that idle music—is he wasting precious moments? How much he might have mowed while he has been ringing out those notes on his scythe! But he is sharpening his tool, and he will do far more when once again he gives his strength to those long sweeps which lay the grass prostrate in rows before him.³