

# September 8, 2019

## Words to Worship By

### Psalm 148

As we begin a new Fall, it is good refocus. As we're preparing for a new season in life – going back to school, going back to work, settling into retirement, reestablishing "normal" routines after the summer – where does God fit in?

Most of us would say God is an important part in our lives. This morning it is good to simply spend some time worshipping, honouring, and glorifying Him. This morning we'll use Psalm 148 to remind us of who we are, who God is, and how we can keep Him central in our lives.

#### 1. Why Worship?

The psalms teach how to adore and how to praise. We're not very good at that. As Canadians we don't have the tradition of the British, who bow/curtsy to the queen, never interrupt her, or touch her. We feel more comfortable roasting politicians in comedy revues than bowing to them. So how do we find language to worship God?

The Bible commands us to praise God. Psalm 148 is an eloquent appeal for all of creation – including, but not limited to, people – to worship God. In Jewish thought, the phrase, "*the heavens and the earth*" encompasses everything there is – the entire universe (see Genesis 1:1). Note the structure, then, of Psalm 148:

- a. Verses 1-6 are a poem urging "the heavens" (including space and sky) to praise God. The angels are to praise him. The sun, moon, and stars are to praise him. The sky and the rain are to praise him.
- b. Verses 7-14 are a parallel poem commanding "the earth" (including land and sea) to praise God. Ocean creatures are to praise him. Fire, hail, snow, and storm are to praise him. Mountains, trees, animals, reptiles, and birds are to praise him. Among the creatures of the earth called to praise God are people: powerful people (royalty), and ordinary folk like you and I.

There are couple of points of interest to note:

- There have been times in the past (and the present) when people have been tempted to worship angels (Colossians 2:18) and to consult the stars as the controllers of destiny (horoscopes?). Some people worship the natural environment as divine. This psalm makes it clear that these are all creations of Almighty God and subject his will. They are created by God, beloved by God, and sustained by God. But we are called to worship the Creator, not the creation.

- ALL of creation worships God. It is difficult for us to imagine the sun, whales, hillsides, or trees praising God (e.g. Romans 8:18-22). Of course, birds and mountains do not worship God the way we do ... but Scripture emphasizes they do worship God in their own unique ways. That's one key reason why, as Christians, while we do not believe the environment is divine, we believe it is God's holy and precious creation, so we ought to be concerned about the environment.

Christians ought to be on the forefront of the environmental movement – this is God's, good creation we are talking about (see [www.arocha.org](http://www.arocha.org)). It is worship of God we are concerned about.

## 2. What is Worship?

*"Frankly, the whole notion of God asking us to sit around saying nice things about him can seem rather alien,"* observes Philip Yancey. *"Why does God need our praise anyway? The author, Somerset Maugham, had a devout relative who went through the Book of Common Prayer and crossed out everything on praise. People are uncomfortable with compliments to their face, he reasoned, so surely God would not want them either."*

Yancey's comments beg the question, *"What is worship, anyway?"* Is it a matter of sitting around, saying nice things about God? Notice, however, that Psalm 148 says virtually nothing "nice" about God (except vs. 13b-14a). In fact, it's as repetitive and empty of deep theological content as some of those repetitive new worship songs – or as some of those repetitive old gospel hymns.

Consider your instinctive response to a magnificent view ... or a fantastic symphony ... or a spectacular work of art. Your first response is usually a speechless awe – you simply pause and enjoy the beauty, almost as if kneeling before it. Then you want to tell others about it. Sometimes we struggle to find the right words: *"The view from the top of the mountains was ... awesome."* *"The symphony was ... incredible."*

I see this kind of praise, approaching worship, on the occasions when I've gone to a big sporting event or to a major concert. People line up for hours to get a glimpse of Kawhi Leonard or the Taylor Swift. People jump up and down, wave, scream, clap, try to get a selfie ... anything. People go to rallies with celebrities or politicians and hang on every word. How odd that a culture that readily gives adulation to Tom Brady, or even naughty role models such as Dennis Rodman or Madonna, finds praise to God so alien.

Psalms that speak of praise tend to fall into two types.

1. Some recount the great things God has done (see Psalm 44). It is good to remember the great faithfulness and provision of God – certainly that merits the response of praise. Just as the person stranded by the roadside, praises the good Samaritan who stopped to help him, we ought to praise God for how He has cared for us, provides for us, forgiven us, and loves us.

2. The other praise psalms are nature psalms. People in the past, without modern conveniences, lived more directly in touch with nature. I find that when I am in the wilderness, I can be brought to a place I'd prefer not to be (especially in bad weather): very aware of my creature-liness. The natural world is God's art gallery – with canvases as varied as Takkakkaw Falls and the Milk River Coulee, as different as the peacefulness of a winter morning after a gentle snowfall and the slashing rains of an Atlantic hurricane. How can we not offer praise to God?

Worship is acknowledging that something – Someone – is greater than we are. The Creator is infinitely more powerful than we are. The Artist creates masterpieces more beautiful than we can put into words. The Designer's knowledge is more profound than we can begin to comprehend. The great Physician's ability to heal is more mighty than we can imagine.

*"Worship,"* writes Eugene Peterson, *"is the strategy by which we interrupt our preoccupation with ourselves and attend to the presence of God."* Worship is the time and place we assign to spend, deliberately and attentively, with God, because we tend to forget about Him otherwise. Our "self-importance" is so relentless, he argues, that if we do not purposely carve out time for God, we will lose all contact with Him.

Worship brings us back to our true centre – God.

### **3. How do we Worship?**

According to psalms, worship may be quiet and reflective. Or it can be downright noisy and boisterous (see psalm 150). Worship can draw upon the images of the past – the great things God has done (echoes of "Great is Thy faithfulness").

Other times, the psalmists exclaim, *"Sing to the Lord a new song ..."* (Psalm 149:1). Worship happens when people speak about the Lord, when they sing, when they play instruments, when they dance, even when nature simply is nature (see Psalm 98:8).

*"The psalms wonderfully solve the problems of a praise-deficient culture by providing the necessary words. We merely need to enter into those words, letting the content of the psalms realign our inner attitudes"* (Yancey, p. 127).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has referred to the psalms as "God's language course"; just as infants learn their mother tongue from their parents, Christians can learn the language of worship from the psalms. *"The psalms train us in a conversion of language, from talking about God to talking to God."*

We don't always know how to talk **to** God. Often when deep emotions are involved in a relationship, we struggle to find the right words. In a love relationship, words often seem so inadequate. We say, "I love you. I love you." time and again. It's the best we can do.

Sometimes people find music can express emotions easier than words ... Jim Croce sings, "Every time I tried to tell you the words just came out wrong; so I'll have to say I love you in a song." When we struggle to express our emotions to God we often find music can express our feelings – of praise and sorrow – helpful.

When the ancient Hebrews experienced a great event their lives, their first response was not to figure out what happened and why ... they praised God and wrote a poem. When they saw a particularly beautiful sunset or view, they didn't just contemplate it ... they praised God and wrote a poem. Praise, for them, was joy expressing itself in song and speech, what C.S. Lewis calls an "inner health made audible."

One of my dreams for the church is that we would cultivate more poets. Remember back in elementary school when you were encouraged to write Haiku? Other forms of poetry? Why did you every stop? Children still have that knack for poetry ... and remember Jesus' admonition that we should nurture such childlike faith ... children know how to express spontaneous praise.

Do we need to relearn the language of praise? Do we need to sing a new song?

***"Poetry and religion have changed the world more than anything else"*** (Larry Koma) ... what about the awesome combination of poetry and religion?

Try writing a poem or a story. Try drawing or painting a picture. Try writing or singing a new song to God ...

This Fall, don't allow the busy-ness of life to take over your life. Take time to worship. Take time for praise. Take time for God.

Maybe it's a matter of counting your blessings and remembering all that God has done for you. That's great. Maybe it's a matter of spending some time in God's amazing creation, praising and worshipping God. Maybe it's a matter of reading the psalms or a good book. Maybe it's a matter of taking on a new cause and finding a deeper purpose. Maybe it's time simply to praise God.

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