

GATHERED WORSHIP

What are your best and worst memories of gathered worship? What was good and bad about them?

Read Psalm 95

Looking at the Psalm, what are the different things the worshipper is told to do?

What reasons does this psalm give for why we should praise God? What does this tell us about our worship together?

How important do you think kneeling, bowing and other physical acts of worship like raising hands (Psalm 63:4 and 134:2), clapping (Psalm 47:1) or dancing (Psalm 150:4) are for church worship? Are these commands that we must obey?

What do you think verses 7b-11 have to say about how God's people should worship?

Your friend says to you "I'm terrible at singing, and I hate worship music. I would prefer just to listen to the sermon. I'm thinking I might not bother signing at all." What would you say to this friend?

All of our worship in church should be a response of God's people for who he is and what he's done. How should this change how we approach worshipping with his people in church?

What steps do you think you will take to make the most of your time worshipping God with his people?

Leader's Notes
How do we worship together?
Psalm 95

What are your best and worst memories of gathered worship? What was good and bad about them?

Today we are thinking about how we worship with God's people - the worship we do in church. This is often a time that many people love. It can also be a time that some people find very difficult. See if you can hear what people in your group have loved and found difficult about times of worship with others. You may like to draw on these answers later in the study. However, be careful not to let this question turn into a time when people just air their gripes about everything they don't like about worship at church.

Read Psalm 95

Looking at the Psalm, what are the different things the worshipper is told to do?

There are a number of different actions that are commanded in this psalm:

Verse 1: Sing for joy, shout aloud

Verse 2: Come before God with thanks, extol God with music and song (extol means to praise enthusiastically)

Verse 6: Bow down, kneel

Verses 7-11: Hear God's voice with soft hearts

This psalm offers a great example of the different ways that God's people are to respond to him when they are gathered together. Gathered worship should not just be a staid service, nor is there just one correct way to respond to God. God is to be honoured in all sorts of ways.

What reasons does this psalm give for why we should praise God? What does this tell us about our worship together?

Verse one encourages God's people to worship "the Lord" the "Rock of our salvation". The Lord is God's name, Yahweh. This means that we are not called just to worship any God, but the God of Israel, the God of Jesus, the personal God who has revealed himself to the world. That he is the Rock of our salvation, reminds us that our worship of him is not just because he is God, but also because of what he has done. He has saved us. For those who the psalm was originally written for, they would have been remembering God bringing Israel out of enslavement in Egypt, as well as his many military victories on their behalf. As people who are followers of Jesus, we can praise him for his salvation of us through the sacrifice of his Son.

Verse 3 says that we praise God "For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods." This verse affirms not only the greatness of God, but his supremacy above all gods. While we do not often think of other gods as even existing, in the ancient times they believed that there were gods who ruled nations or geographic areas. The Bible speaks of these gods as dark spiritual forces, corrupt heavenly powers leading humanity astray. These are the demonic forces seeking to steal glory from God. God rules over these gods who should be serving him. For us it is important to see that whatever power may want our allegiance or whatever god we may be tempted to worship, they are a lesser god, with no lasting authority in comparison to Yahweh, the God above all gods.

Verses 4 and 5 shows us that God not only created the world, but controls the world and holds the world. There is no part of creation that is beyond his reach. Even the highest parts of the world are owned by God, and he has control of the deepest depths. Humanity only exists on the earth as caretakers and short-term sojourners in a creation that is entirely his. The sea, which was seen as untamed and chaotic by the ancients, is his. The land and the continents, too vast to be fully comprehended, are the work of his hands. The creation to which we must submit, submits to him.

Lastly in verse 7 we see that not only is God to be praised because of his power and authority, he is to be praised for his caring relationship. He is the shepherd of his people. Like a shepherd who knows his sheep by name, who protects them from wild animals, who leads them to green pastures, the Lord cares for us. He is to be praised in his vastness and his intimacy.

Verse 6 gives instructions to bow down and kneel. Why do you think it says this?

The act of bowing and kneeling is a sign of humility and submission. Verses 3-5 have just described the greatness of God. The only proper response to God's might, power and glory is to bow down, recognising his supreme nature. However, not only is bowing and kneeling the right response, the physical action can help our hearts also to feel appropriately respectful. Sometimes when we act, our hearts follow. Finally, bowing and kneeling in the presence of other believers is a public sign of humility. Public expressions, when done in reverence, can show others how great God is and move them to worship also.

How important do you think kneeling, bowing and other physical acts of worship like raising hands (Psalm 63:4 and 134:2), clapping (Psalm 47:1) or dancing (Psalm 150:4) are for church worship? Are these commands that we must obey?

This discussion can be a controversial one. For some people the physical response in gathered worship is essential to their full engagement. For others they feel that singing can be entirely adequate. Some see a physical response as the only way to wholeheartedly obey God, while others are cautious of what onlookers may think of them if they are overly emotive in their response.

The question of whether these are commands, while common in terms of worship, is perhaps the wrong question to be asking. Trying to classify if this is a command or not, to see if one must obey or not, misses the point. These verses tell us to respond physically to God because this is a great way to respond to him with all our being.

The question of "Do I have to?" would perhaps better be "Why shouldn't I?" If God tells us to do it in his word, wouldn't we trust him that these are good and helpful ways to worship him? What is holding us back? Is it our pride? Our fear of looking silly? Are we afraid of over-emotionalism? Do we just not feel like it? Are we unwilling to give up control?

If we have never lifted our hands, clapped in praise, shouted for joy, knelt, bowed or danced before God, perhaps it is incumbent upon us to try them. If God tells us to do it in his word, perhaps there are blessings and helpful ways of worshipping him we have not encountered because we have been unwilling to try them.

Many people speak of physical responses in worship as being a way to overcome a merely intellectual response to God. Raising hands can be a sign of praise or surrender, shouting can be an exultant verbalisation of Christ's triumph, dancing can be an expression of sheer joy.

Eugene Peterson points out another benefit of physical responses to God. When our hearts may not feel like praising him, our bodies can do it anyway: "You can lift your hands regardless of how you feel; it is a simple motor movement. You may not be able to command your heart but you can command your hands. Lift your hands in blessing; just maybe your heart will get the message and be lifted also in praise. We are psychosomatic beings; body and soul are intricately interrelated. Go through the motions of blessing God and your spirit will pick up the cue and follow along." (Eugene Peterson, "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction")

Given that the Bible is full of instructions to physically worship God, we should try them and see. To not attempt to find out what best allows you to worship him is to deny yourself an avenue of blessing, and worse, deny God an avenue of glory.

What do you think verses 7b-11 have to say about how God's people should worship?

Verses 7b-11 are harking back to Israel's rebellion in the desert. Even though God had saved them, and God provided for them, Israel rebelled. They grumbled and distrusted him. Though

he had saved them from Egypt, though he had promised them a land flowing with milk and honey (Numbers 14), they did not remember his faithfulness or trust his word. Their concern was with their immediate needs and they did not trust God to provide.

Hebrews 3:7 - 4:13 shows us a New Testament perspective about this passage, indicating that the "Today" of verse 7 is a perpetual today. Everyday is today, and everyday God's people are warned not to harden our hearts in unbelief, but to hear his voice and obey it, with soft hearts, in faith.

Worship then, is not just about praising God, telling of God's goodness, or physically responding to him. But about hearing from him and obeying his word. We must look to his faithfulness in the past and see his promises for the future, so they we might trust and obey his voice in the present. This is why our worship services will involve not just celebrating God, but also hearing from God in his word. We are not finished, we have not yet "entered his rest", till we do we are called to hearing him and obeying him faithfully.

Your friend says to you "I'm terrible at singing, and I hate worship music. I would prefer just to listen to the sermon. I'm thinking I might not bother signing at all." What would you say to this friend?

It would be worth pointing out to your friend that singing is a command from God all through the Bible. We see God's people doing it in both times of celebration (Exodus 15:1-21) and in times of difficulty (Matthew 26:30). The Psalms is a book full of songs, and in those songs are commands to sing. The New Testament commands God's people to encourage each other with song (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16).

So there is no excuse for a Christian not to sing. To say "I don't like singing, I won't sing" would be like a Christian saying "I don't like praying, I won't pray."

Being terrible at singing is not an excuse. When we sing, we do not sing to perform to those around us, but to tell of God's praises and encourage each other with this proclaiming of God's character and acclaim. We sing to God and for each other that we might be encouraged and spurred on. God is not looking for good singers, but obedient worshippers.

What's more, when we sing even though we don't want to, when we don't feel good, or when we aren't very good at it, we can encourage others that we are singing despite our feelings and abilities. We too can be carried along, and encouraged by people who do feel like singing, and who love to sing. Singing together serves one another, refusing to sing serves only yourself.

It is good to sing and be encouraged, sing and encourage, and sing and praise God as he has asked to be praised.

All of our worship in church should be a response of God's people for who he is and what he's done. How should this change how we approach worshipping with his people in church?

This means that all our worship must first and foremost be for God. That means that we don't worship as a chance to show off how skilled we are at singing, or how holy we are in our worship. Worship is directed to God, and therefore is only for God. All others are inconsequential. When we worship it may build others up, but this is never the goal and only a positive, secondary outcome.

We also do not worship because it makes us feel good (though this too is often a happy byproduct). Worship must first and foremost be for and about God. Michael Horton writes "Vagueness about the object of our praise inevitably leads to making our own praise the object. Praise therefore becomes an end in itself, and we are caught up in our own 'worship experience' rather than in the God whose character and acts are the only proper focus." (Michael Horton, "A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of Christ Centered Worship")

We also don't worship only when the music is up to our standards or of a genre we enjoy. Worship of God flows from his character and action, not the quality and genre of music the words are presented in. This means we can worship with an out of tune piano, three other

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singers and a dull preacher as well as with a full band in a stadium, with great lights and lasers and an exciting and inspiring preacher. We can worship with young and old, rich and poor, healthy and sick, happy and sad. We are oriented towards the God who draws us together, not around the vehicle by which the praise is presented.

If worship is for God's glory, then all other concerns are secondary, and as such, not vital. As the Body of Christ we celebrate together the God who has made us that body. There are more and less helpful ways to worship, but only inasmuch as there are more and less helpful ways to glorify God when we are gathered together with his people.

What steps do you think you will take to make the most of your time worshipping God with his people?

Spend some time together seeing what your group has been challenged by in regards to gathered worship. Challenge each person to be clear with really practical next steps.

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Spend some time in prayer praising God for who he is and what he has done. You may also like to spend some time singing together to praise God, putting this study into practice.