

The Nature of True Worship

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An Exposition of Exodus 15:1-21

Introduction

A number of years ago Donald Grey Barnhouse traveled through Texas on a preaching tour. As he was leaving Beaumont, he saw a large sign along the highway calling upon people to acknowledge God. It read, "Go and worship God in the church of your own choice." Just then he pulled to a stop in front of a red light. Another car drew alongside. A child in that car read the same sign, then said, "Daddy, what does worship mean?" The father replied, "It means to go to church and listen to the preacher preach."

Could there be a more horrible definition? Yet that is the sum total of worship to millions of Americans today. If your child were to ask you that question, how would you answer it? What *does* worship mean?

Three salient elements of genuine worship emerge from the Song of Redemption in Exodus 15. First, worship acknowledges the worth of God. Second, worship may be expressed in music. Third, worship is reserved for the redeemed.

Worship Acknowledges the Worth of God

Six or seven hundred years ago the word *worship* was pronounced "worth-ship."

C. H. Mackintosh somewhere says worship "is simply telling out, in the presence of God, what He is, and what He has done. It is the heart occupied with and delighting in God and in all His marvelous actings and ways."

This is precisely what the sons of Israel did and were in Exodus 15. In this Song of Redemption they acknowledged the worth that is in their God. The entire song is summed up in the one phrase of verse 2, "*I will extol Him.*" The [\[EmJ 6:2 \(Win 97\) p. 224\]](#) word *Lord* (Yahweh) occurs no less than twelve times in the first eighteen verses. The pronouns *He, Him, Thy, Thou, and Thee* are found thirty-three times. How significant! They sang not only *unto* the Lord but *about* the Lord. He was the theme of their song. Beyond the blessings they saw the Blesser, and in His presence they declared His worth. That is worship.

This is a Hebrew hymn which gives us a glimpse of true biblical worship.

The Introduction to the Song, 15:1

Then Moses and the sons of Israel sang this song to the Lord, and said, “I will sing to the Lord, for He is highly exalted; The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea.

The immediate occasion for the song is stated in the introduction. It is, of course, the destruction of the Egyptian armies. *“I will sing to the Lord, for He is highly exalted; The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea.”*

What a remarkable verse! We would never have started here. We imagine that the first thing for which we should praise God is our own blessing, for what He has done for us. Would we not have written, “I will sing to the Lord, for He has saved us”? Or “I will sing to the Lord, for I am wonderfully blessed”?

Although this is the natural order, it is not the spiritual order. When the Spirit of God is in control, worship begins with God. It is because *He* is highly exalted that Israel worships. It is because He has gloriously triumphed that they sang unto Him. Here is where true worship always begins. Self and blessings are forgotten. God and His glory alone are seen.

From a literary point of view, the song now can be divided into two stanzas:

The superiority of Yahweh over Pharaoh and his hosts, 15:2–10.

The transcendence of Yahweh above all the gods of the world, 15:11–17.

The Superiority of Yahweh over Pharaoh and His Hosts, 15:2-10

How is Yahweh’s superiority demonstrated?

He Delivered His People Israel from Pharaoh, 15:2

The Lord is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation; This is my God, and I will praise Him; My father’s God, and I will extol Him. [EmJ 6:2 (Win 97) p. 225] “My strength—my song—my salvation!”

What a beautiful portrait! What a glorious tribute with such a vision! Little wonder they praise and extol Him. He is their deliverer. Do not miss the point

here. It is not their deliverance that is in the forefront of their thinking. It is what their deliverance demonstrated about God. He is superior to the greatest monarch in all the earth. He delivered Israel from the grasp of Pharaoh.

But more than that.

He Destroyed Pharaoh and His Hosts, 15: 3-10

The Lord is a warrior; The Lord is His name. Pharaoh's chariots and his army He has cast into the sea; And the choicest of his officers are drowned in the Red Sea. The deeps cover them; They went down into the depths like a stone. Thy right hand, O Lord, is majestic in power, Thy right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy. And in the greatness of Thine excellence Thou dost overthrow those who rise up against Thee; Thou dost send forth Thy burning anger, and it consumes them as chaff. And at the blast of Thy nostrils the waters were piled up, The flowing waters stood up like a heap; The deeps were congealed in the heart of the sea. The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; My desire shall be gratified against them; I will draw out my sword, my hand shall destroy them.' Thou didst blow with Thy wind, the sea covered them; They sank like lead in the mighty waters.

The superiority of Yahweh is vividly portrayed in these few verses. The action of God is seen in these picturesque verbs. He *cast* Pharaoh's chariots and his army into the sea. He *overthrew* the choicest of Pharaoh's officers. He *shattered* the enemy forces. He *consumed* them all as chaff. He *blew* with His wind; the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters. "The violent intentions and the deep hatred of the Egyptians did not find full expression...for God stepped in and the waters ended their insidious pursuit of the largely unprotected Israelites."²

The superiority of Yahweh could no longer be disputed. He had delivered Israel and destroyed Pharaoh! As the Hebrews sang of His greatness, they worshiped God. This worship reached a still higher note in the second stanza.

[\[EmJ 6:2 \(Win 97\) p. 226\]](#)

The Transcendence of Yahweh above All the Gods of the World, 15:11-17

Who is like Thee among the gods, O Lord? Who is like Thee, majestic in holiness, Awesome in praises, working wonders? Thou didst stretch out Thy right hand,

The earth swallowed them. In Thy lovingkindness Thou hast led the people whom Thou hast redeemed; In Thy strength Thou hast guided them to Thy holy habitation. The peoples have heard, they tremble; Anguish has gripped the inhabitants of Philistia. Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed; The leaders of Moab, trembling grips them; All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. Terror and dread fall upon them; By the greatness of Thine arm they are motionless as stone; Until Thy people pass over, O LORD, Until the people pass over whom Thou hast purchased. Thou wilt bring them and plant them in the mountain of Thine inheritance, The place, O Lord, which Thou hast made for Thy dwelling, The sanctuary, O Lord, which Thy hands have established.

“The eloquent question which introduces this strophe is one that rings with theological importance.”³

Who is like Thee among the gods, O Lord?

In this exquisite treatment of the transcendence of God a parade of His divine attributes passes in review.

1. His majestic holiness, v. 11.

2. His wonder-working power, v. 11.

3. His lovingkindness, v. 13.

This is His loyal love by which He is lovingly loyal forever to His covenant promises.

4. His strength in guiding them, v. 13.

5. For those who rebel and challenge the power of God, there will be fear and judgment, v. 14.

6. So great is this deliverance of Israel that:

[[EmJ 6:2 \(Win 97\) p. 227](#)]

the inhabitants of Philistia will be gripped with anguish.

the chiefs of Edom will hear and be afraid.

the leaders of Moab will be gripped with trembling.

the inhabitants of Canaan will melt away.

Terror and dread will fall upon them all! The past tenses in verses 14–17 may be “prophetic perfects.” So certain are these future events that they are described as if they had already taken place.

There is no doubt about it! Yahweh is above all the gods of both the ancient and modern polytheistic world. There is none like unto Thee, O Lord! As Israel lustily expresses this in the presence of God, they worship.

The Conclusion of the Song, 15:18

“The Lord shall reign forever and ever.”

How fitting it is. “Fully assured that God is *sovereign*, sovereign because omnipotent, immutable, and eternal, the conclusion is irresistible and certain that, ‘The Lord *shall reign forever and ever.*’”⁴

Here is a pattern of true worship for believers of every age. Here is a simple but sincere acknowledgment of the worth that is in their God. They are simply telling out, in the presence of God, what He is and what He has done. That is genuine worship.

Someone has put it this way, “Worship is the occupation of the heart, not with its needs, or even with its blessings, but with God Himself.”⁵

A. P. Gibbs writes:

Worship could well be spelled, “worthship,” for it consists of an ascription of worth to One who is worthy. A striking example of this can be seen in the last book of the Bible. In chapter four, the living creatures and the elders are described as falling down and worshipping the One who occupies the throne, and saying: “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive honor and glory and power, for Thou hast created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created.” In chapter five, the [\[EmJ 6:2 \(Win 97\) p. 228\]](#) numberless hosts, who surround the Lamb, join in a glorious crescendo and sing: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing!” It will be seen in these two instances, that not a single petition occurs. It is worship in its purest form, for it is the ascription of worth to One who alone is worthy, or in other words, worthship.⁶

Now that we know what worship is, the next question is “How may it be expressed?” The second element that emerges from our text is that:

Worship May Be Expressed in Music, 15:1

Other Means of Worship

To be sure, music is not the only medium for worship. We may consider other means.

Worship through Prayer

The highest form of prayer is that prayer which in the presence of God simply rehearses Who He is and what He has done. It flows from a heart that is delighting in God and in all His marvelous actings and ways. It is a prayer that exalts God.

There is no prayer that I enjoy more or that stirs my cold heart more than that prayer which focuses upon the glorious attributes and the gracious ways of our God. That kind of prayer delights the heart of God. That is worship.

Worship through Giving

The first occurrence of the word “worship” in our New Testament is in Matthew 2:11:

And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

They worshiped by giving, and their giving was an acknowledgment of the worth of their Lord. The Philippians also worshiped by giving (Phil. 4:18). The [EmJ 6:2 (Win 97) p. 229] monetary gift they gave to the work of the Lord was an acknowledgment of the worth of the Lord to them. Giving may and must be worship.

Worship in Celebrating the Lord's Supper

This, too, is an act of worship. As we give thanks for the bread and the wine—especially for what they represent—we are acknowledging to the Father the worth of the Son to us. As we are occupied with and delighting in His glorious Person and Work, we are worshipping. As we are simply telling out in the presence of God who He is and what He has done, we are worshipping. This may well be the highest form of worship—a believer giving back to God the glories of His own dear Son. W. B. Dick beautifully expressed this thought when he wrote:

We would, O God, present before Thy face
The fragrant name of Thy beloved Son;
By faith we view Him in that holy place,

Which, by His dying, He for us has won.
We share Thy joy in Him who sitteth there;
Our hearts delight in Thy delight in Him;
Chiefest of thousands, fairer than the fair;
His glory naught can tarnish, naught can dim.⁷

Worship through Dedication to the Lord

The first occurrence of “worship” in our English Old Testament is in Genesis 22:5:

And Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship and return to you.”

And what did they do yonder? There on Mt. Moriah he offered his son up to God. This was his supreme act of worship. It was his acknowledgment of the worth of God to him. The Lord meant more to him than Isaac.

Could there be a greater act of worship than presenting yourself as a living sacrifice to your God? What an expression of His worth to you that is! You are saying, “Lord, you mean more to me than my own self. You are more precious to me than my own life.” That is worship.

[[EmJ 6:2 \(Win 97\) p. 230](#)]

But perhaps the most common channel for expressing our worship is in singing.

Worship in Singing

Hymns in Scripture are a superb expression of worship. In Exodus 15 we are studying the very first hymn in all the Bible. Its theme is the Lord.

This is the nature of hymns of worship in the Scriptures. After the miraculous birth of Samuel, Hannah, his mother, worshiped in a song (1 Samuel 2). Her theme was the Lord. After the announcement of her supernatural conception of Jesus, Mary worshiped the Lord in a song (Luke 1:46–55). She began, “*My soul exalts the Lord,*” and He is the theme throughout the hymn. When the angels, elders and living creatures fall on their faces before the throne and worship God, they say, “*Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen*” (Rev. 7:12). This is but a sampling of the hymns of Scripture. They are expressions of worship. They focus upon His marvelous acts and attributes.

Much contemporary music is nothing less than a device of Satan to destroy, to distract, to divert, and to dilute. It is a superbly designed counterfeit that appeals to the soul but not to the spirit. It is poison put to sound. It is extremely dangerous and should be labeled such.

In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* the king says, "If music is the food of love—play on." The sentimental, superficial, sensual love of our day thrives on the secular and often Satanic music of our age. There is no question about it—music is food. But there is every reason to wonder how the secular music of our day can ever feed our love for Christ or our Christian love for one another. The young person who lives on this kind of diet can expect nothing but the subtle side effects of such poison in his spiritual system. Parents who allow their children to indulge in such food are slowly but surely poisoning their minds and their morals.

Unfortunately, much of our modern so-called sacred music is only a short step removed from the secular. Against the background of the lofty themes of Israel's Hymn of Redemption, A. W. Pink observes:

How entirely different from modern hymnology! So many hymns today (if "hymns" they deserve to be called) are full of maudlin sentimentality, instead of Divine adoration. They announce *our* love to God instead of *His* for us. They recount our experiences, instead of His mercies. They tell more of human attainments, instead of Christ's

[[EmJ 6:2 \(Win 97\) p. 231](#)]

Atonement. Sad index of our low state of spirituality! Different far was this Song of Moses and Israel: "I will exalt *Him*" (v. 3), sums it all up.⁸

Christian music that is spiritual, worshipful music plays a significant role in the lives of believers.

"Music supplies the sparks in the hour of power"—John Huss.

"Music washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life"—Auerback.

By the time Isaac Watts was a teenager, he found church music to be very monotonous and dry, so Watts complained to his father. The lifeless repetition of Psalms set to dreary tunes did not seem conducive to warm worship. His deacon father gave him a terse challenge, "Try then, said his father, "whether you can produce something better."⁹

At the age of twenty, Watts began his bold adventure by writing, "Behold the glories of the Lamb." Our hymnbooks contain many of his pieces: "Joy to

the World,” “Alas and Did My Savior Bleed,” “At the Cross,” “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” “Jesus Shall Reign,” and “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.”

On his three-hundredth birthday anniversary, Norman V. Hope wrote as a tribute: “At his best Watts deals with the greatest themes of Christian experience, of ‘ruin, redemption, and regeneration,’ with a depth of conviction, a grace and dignity, and a cosmic range and sweep, that few hymn-writers have ever equaled, much less surpassed.”¹⁰

Such hymns acknowledge the worth of God. They are the overflow of a heart occupied with and delighting in the Lord. They feature His person and work. Singing such songs is an act of worship.

If we now know what it is, and how it may be expressed, there remains but one more question—“Who?” Who is eligible to be a worshiper of God? This is answered in the third element which emerges from our text.

[\[EmJ 6:2 \(Win 97\) p. 232\]](#)

Worship Is Reserved for the Redeemed

Our chapter begins, “*Then Moses and the sons of Israel sang this song to the Lord.*” When is this “then”? Chapter 14 ends in verse 30 saying, “*Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians.*”

On the Passover night they were redeemed by blood, delivered from the sentence of death. At the Red Sea they were redeemed by power, delivered from the bondage of Pharaoh. Now delivered—redeemed—they sing, they worship the Lord. It is only a redeemed person, conscious of his deliverance, that can really praise God.

Worship is impossible for those who are dead in trespasses and sin. If we have no knowledge of God and no faith in His Son, how can we worship Him? I must know God through His Son Jesus Christ before I can worship Him. I cringe every time I see a sign in front of a church extending an invitation to the public to “Come and Worship with Us.” How misleading! How erroneous! They may come and hear the Word of God with us. They may come and sing with us. But they cannot worship if they do not know God, if they are still in their sin. It is a privilege reserved for the redeemed.

Intelligent worship is impossible for those who are in doubt as to their salvation before God. Without the certainty of salvation, the assurance of forgiveness, there is no joy of the Lord, no spirit of worship. The Christian who can say, “I know whom I have believed,” has the basis for intelligent worship.

True worship is reserved for the redeemed, those who have appropriated by faith the provision made for their deliverance, those who have trusted Jesus

Christ in a personal way as their Savior, those who have come to know God and His Son Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The Jews have a legend that when Abraham started on his journeys he saw the stars in the heavens and said, “I will worship the stars.” But ere long the stars set. Then Abraham saw the constellations—the Pleiades and the rest of them—and he said, “I will worship the constellations.” But the constellations also set. Then Abraham saw the moon sailing high in the heavens and he said, “I will worship the moon.” But the moon also vanished when her season was over. Then Abraham saw the sun in all his majesty, coming out of his chamber like a bridegroom and rejoicing as a strong man to run a race. But when the day was spent, he saw the sun sink on the western horizon. Stars, constellations, moon, [EmJ 6:2 (Win 97) p. 233] and sun—all were unworthy of his worship, for all had set and all had disappeared. Then Abraham said, “I will worship God, for He abides forever.”

God alone is worthy of your worship. Whatever else you worship—ambition, money, appetite, beauty, affections, friends—all of them, one by one, like the heavenly bodies, set and disappear. But God remains. Jesus Christ remains. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Give Him first place in your life. Give Him your devotion, your strength, and your love.

Worship God. Worship Him exclusively. Worship Him supremely. Worship Him humbly. Worship Him gratefully. Worship Him consistently. But above all else—Worship Him! He alone is worthy.

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2 John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 185.

3 John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*, 185.

4 A. W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus*, reprint ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 117.

5 Quoted in A. P. Gibbs, *Worship: The Christian's Highest Occupation* (Fort Dodge, IA: Walterick, n.d.), 14.

6 A. P. Gibbs, *Worship*, 15–16.

7 “O God Our Father, We Would Come to Thee,” Hymn #67 in *Hymns of Truth and Praise* (Fort Dodge, IA: Gospel Perpetuating Publishers, 1971).

8 A. W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus*, reprint ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 114.

9 Norman Victor Hope, “Isaac Watts and his Contribution to English Hymnody,” No. 13, *The Papers of the Hymn Society*, ed. Carl F. Price (Springfield, Ohio: The Hymn Society of America, 1947), [3].

10 Norman Victor Hope, “Isaac Watts and his Contribution to English Hymnody,” [9].

[\[EmJ 6:2 \(Win 97\) p. 235\]](#)