

Worship and Fear

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 20, #14 April 3, 2005

O sing unto the LORD a new song: sing unto the LORD, all the earth. Sing unto the LORD, bless his name; shew forth his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the heathen, his wonders among all people. For the LORD is great, and greatly to be praised: he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols: but the LORD made the heavens. Honour and majesty are before him: strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. Give unto the LORD, O ye kindreds of the people, give unto the LORD glory and strength. Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name: bring an offering, and come into his courts. O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth. (Ps 96:1-9)

As we've gone through our study of the fear of God in the poetic books of the Old Testament, we've observed that Scripture associates the fear of God with respect and reverence for God, as well as faithful obedience to His commandments. Our study verses in this chapter add another dimension to the list of adjectives that describe the fear of God, *worship*. Although true worship should occur when a church gathers on Sunday morning, it doesn't always take place. Sometimes the gathering slips into rituals and forms without substance, conscience conviction, or life-changing power. I especially observe this problem in public prayers that are offered in church assemblies. Much of what folks say in their prayers is memorized and repetitive. Seldom do you sense that they are truly and spontaneously "talking with God," what Biblical prayer should be. One wonders; is the person thinking as he chooses the words about talking with God or about how his words will sound to the people who listen? Many years ago I visited a church in west Texas. On that particular day the pastor asked someone in the congregation to lead the public prayer before the preaching service. He asked the man to "word" the prayer of the whole congregation. In other words the man speaking the words of the prayer was to prayerfully seek to put into words the collective prayers of every person in the audience. That term caught my attention and powerfully reminded me that this is what public prayer should be about.

To be sure, often the sermons that we hear from the pulpit after the prayer are barely less repetitive than the neatly memorized prayers that precede them. Did you ever hear a man preach several times and reach the conclusion that he was preaching the same sermon over, but just happened to start the sermon with a different passage of Scripture?

A study of the poetic books of the Old Testament is as enlightening to true worship as it is to our understanding of the fear of God. True worship, fittingly framed and offered to God, is alive and dynamic. It moves, and it moves us to examine our lives intimately. It sends us flat on our faces before a gracious, wise, and holy God, not in arrogant rebellion and self-directed conduct that ignores God and Scripture's teachings. Worship is God-centered, not man-centered. Many of today's "mega-churches" are praised as examples of success because they built the whole church to be "seeker-sensitive" and responsive to what people perceive as their immediate needs and desires. This description is a well framed way of saying that the church was formed to be man-centric, not God-centric. Perhaps its success more reflects its ability to please the people who attend than to transform their lives and nudge them to "...be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Ro 12:2).

The New Testament word for worship (as in Heb 1:6; "...let all the angels of God *worship* him.") is the Greek word *proskuneo*. Literally it means to "prostrate oneself in homage to." One of Strong's dictionary analogies is that of a dog licking its master's hand. Folks, worship of God doesn't occur while we work to get our personal way or to do what we wish. It occurs when we *surrender all of self* to the glory and dignity of the God before whom we bow with no more self-serving than a dog that licks its master's hand. Many years ago I visited a church not far from my home. As the visiting

minister, I asked one of the church's members to lead the morning prayer. This particular brother was quite ill. He stood slowly and with obvious pain to his body. He walked to the front of the auditorium with the help of a cane. Then with profound deliberation he stooped, but he didn't say a word. He further labored till he was laying face down on the floor. Then he prayed. Oh, he truly prayed! I can't recall much of my sermon that day, but I will never forget that man's prayer. That day I witnessed a man truly worshipping God! And his profound act of self-effacing worship drew me like a magnet to join him in worship.

"For the LORD is great, and greatly to be praised: he is to be feared above all gods." Follow the convention of Hebrew poetic parallelism. Acknowledging the greatness of God leads us to greatly praise Him. Such praise the psalm equates with fearing God above all the false gods that we invent to ourselves.

"Honour and majesty are before him: strength and beauty are in his sanctuary." This sentence adds more adjectives to our understanding of the fear of God; honor, majesty, strength, beauty. All of these words frame our attitude toward God that compels us to turn *exclusively* to Him in worship, to bow prostrate in homage *only* to Him.

"O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth." If I asked you to define "holiness," how would you respond? "Holiness" is about as difficult to define as the fear of God. Of the 468 times the Hebrew word translated "holiness" in this verse appears in the Old Testament, it is translated as "sanctuary" 262 times. It refers to something or someone wholly dedicated to God, set apart for God's exclusive use. Likely this simple definition is not what you would have said if asked to define "holiness." A double-minded person who tries to serve God at times and indulges self at other times dreadfully confuses observers. The lack of a consistent sense of "set-apartness" is striking in such a life.

If each of us took an objective inventory of our motives and conduct, we might discover more dividedness than we normally confess. Lack of consistency is fatal to anyone's efforts to credibly represent the Christian faith to others. When our three daughters were in high school, they cryptically referred to a group of fellow-students as "Jesoids." I asked what they meant by this term. Their response made their skepticism clear to me. They used this term to describe a group of students who were "hard-selling" Jesus one week and strung out on drugs the next week. They wholly lacked a life-changing commitment to Jesus that consistently altered their lives.

Sometimes our search for a clear sense of an idea is enhanced by finding antonyms, words that mean the opposite to the word in question. As I ponder this passage and the sense of Biblical holiness, "set-apartness," that it describes, the word "hypocrite" strikes me as a near opposite.

In the New Testament the word "sanctified" picks up that same sense of exclusive dedication to God. We struggle with the idea because we fail to live it. Western culture tends to compartmentalize life. You live several different lives, all simultaneously. You live one life in your family, another in your career, another in your community, and still another in your church. Seldom do these various dimensions truly integrate. This fact confronted me rather dramatically recently. I am working to end my secular career in the near future. One of my daughters asked about a big party to celebrate my retirement. She had thoughts of inviting family, church members, current work associates, and former work associates who, in the process of work, became personal friends. I nixed the idea. When I reflected on all of these people, all associated with me in one way or another over the years, I realized that the only thing they really have in common with each other is me. I have tried to live my faith in each of these areas, but often that effort has required me to do things differently than my peers. I have worked for eighteen years in a company that—at best—has a questionable reputation for integrity. Yet insurance company representatives have sought me out because they knew that I would represent my clients with integrity.

Despite my best efforts, my conduct hasn't changed the ethics of many of my professional associates. We share professional careers, but not the same sense of ethics. At this stage of life, I am increasingly impatient with compromising ethics and the accepted—almost expected—double standard of conduct. Modern ethics says that if you can do anything, however underhanded or dishonest, and get away with it, you've done nothing wrong. Biblical ethics lives with the fact that God knows our deepest thoughts, motives, and secret-most actions. This realization alters the way we live.

May we learn the lessons of worship as we enlarge our sense of the fear of God.