

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #118: THE ESSENCE OF WORSHIP

By John Temples

Let's let an Old Testament prophet teach us some valuable lessons about New Testament worship.

One of the unique markers of God's loving provision for Old Testament Israel (as well as the early church) was the presence of prophets. Prophets were inspired preachers who spoke by direct authority from God. A man did not "apply for the job" of prophet; he was called by God to the task. Sometimes, when a prophet was to have a particularly difficult assignment, God would give him some dramatic experience or sign of approval to bolster his courage. Such was the case of Isaiah, who received a vision that would sustain him, a vision he would never forget.¹ Here is the record of Isaiah's commission and call to be a prophet, from Isaiah 6:1-10:

1 "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. 2 Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one cried to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!' 4 And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 So I said: 'Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.' 6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth with it, and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.' 8 Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?' Then I said, 'Here am I! Send me.' 9 And He said, 'Go, and tell this people: "Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive. 10 Make the

¹ Three other prophets received similar visions to confirm their faith--Moses, Ezekiel, and the apostle John on Patmos.

heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed.”” (NKJV)

This account is valuable not only because it gives us insight into how God prepared and used prophets in Bible times, but also because it shows us *the essence of true worship*. “Essence” means the true nature of a thing; the real inner substance; that which makes a thing what it is as opposed to what it appears to be. If asked what worship is, most Christians would say, “singing, prayers, giving, the Lord’s Supper, and Bible teaching/preaching.” Those are indeed the acceptable, God-approved outward forms or expressions of worship; but what is the *essence* of worship--its real nature? Observe:

FIRST AND FOREMOST, WORSHIP IS *AN ENCOUNTER WITH GOD*

Verse 1 says, “I saw the Lord.” That’s really what worship is all about, isn’t it? But, one might say, I thought nobody has ever seen the Lord. That is true with regard to the Father (John 1:18, 1 John 4:12). So whom did Isaiah see? He must have seen Jesus, the second member of the Godhead. A New Testament passage confirms it.

In John 12, Jesus was rebuking the hardheartedness and lack of belief of the Jews of His day. In verse 40, He quotes Isaiah 6:9-10, part of our text. Then in verse 41, John says: “These things Isaiah said *when he saw His glory* and spoke of Him.” This is strong proof that the Figure Isaiah saw on the throne in the heavenly scene was Jesus, the second member of the Godhead.

So truly, “Isaiah saw the Lord.” That is the essence of worship. In our worship, we should “see the Lord”--not directly, of course, but with the eye of faith. What did Isaiah see that we should see?

He saw the Lord’s majesty. The whole scene in Isaiah 6 is that of a magnificent eastern king and his court. He saw a temple, a throne, massive doors with solid posts, and a host of throne attendants. Isaiah was particularly impressed by the king’s “train”(the lower, trailing part of a robe that lies gracefully behind as a person sits or walks). When we worship, are we conscious of being in the

presence of Almighty God? Do we sense the grandeur of His throne and the majesty of His being?

He saw the Lord's dignity. The Lord was sitting--not pacing to and fro. Sitting suggests composure, calmness, and dignity.

He saw the Lord's sovereignty and power. The Lord was seated on a throne, the symbol of royalty. He was "high and lifted up"--the position of authority.

He saw the Lord's holiness, glory, and greatness. He is surrounded by celestial winged throne-bearers called seraphim (verse 2). These seraphim ("flaming ones") covered their feet and their faces in the presence of the Lord. Now if I saw a seraph, I would be impressed! Yet these wondrous heavenly creatures do not even bare their feet and faces before God. If fiery angels cover themselves modestly in respect and honor to God, what does that say about our reverence and appearance in worship?

These seraphim cry constantly, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory" (verse 3). The word "holy" is repeated three times. Why? Probably as a reference to the three members of the Godhead, or a multiplier indicative of complete, perfect holiness. Isaiah was deeply cognizant of the Lord's holiness. We should be also.

He saw the Lord's immortality. Isaiah saw this vision "in the year King Uzziah died" (verse 1). Uzziah had one of the longest reigns of any king of Judah, over 50 years. Very likely, Uzziah was the only king Isaiah had ever known. But even Uzziah could not stop time. Isaiah was made to realize that kings come and go, but God ever lives.

First and foremost, therefore, when we worship we should "see" God. We should feel that we are in His very presence. We should meditate on His majesty, His sovereignty, His dignity, His holiness, and His immortality. Worship should be an encounter with God.

SECOND, WORSHIP IS A TIME TO CONTEMPLATE AND ACKNOWLEDGE OUR SINS

What was Isaiah's instinctive reaction upon seeing the Lord? "Then I said, 'Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips'" (verse 5). God is holy, but I am not!

Other godly individuals had the same reaction:

- Abraham: "I am but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27).
- Job: "Now my eyes see You; therefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6).
- Peter: "Depart from me [Lord], for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8).

We need more reverence, awe, and consciousness of our sins in the presence of God!

THIRD, THE ESSENCE OF WORSHIP IS EXPERIENCING CLEANSING FROM SIN

Verse 6 says, "Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.'" Notice how anxious God is to forgive us when we humble ourselves before Him--He immediately dispatches an angel to cleanse and comfort Isaiah.

Worship should not only involve sorrow for sin, but consciousness of forgiveness of sin. We should view the worship assembly as a place to be healed, to be made pure. In fact, we should have the attitude, "I can't wait to come into the presence of my Father and receive His cleansing." (Of course, we can repent of sin, confess it to God, and be forgiven in any setting; but the worship service is especially conducive to such.) We should leave worship feeling clean on the inside.

FOURTH, THE ESSENCE OF WORSHIP IS A CALL FOR SERVICE AND A RESPONSE

Verse 8: "Also I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Me?'" Wonder of wonders: God has a host of angels at His disposal, yet He depends on frail human beings like me to get His work done in the world!

Isaiah's response is seen in verse 9: "Here is my neighbor...send him!" Oh, wait-- that's the too-often-given human response! He said, "Here am I. Send me!" Worship should be seen as a call from God to serve and ought to invoke a personal response.

CONCLUSION

So if you and I would experience the essence and true power of worship:

- In worship, we should "see" the Lord with the eye of faith, marveling at His power, His majesty, and His holiness.
- In worship, we should be made aware of our own sinfulness and unworthiness.
- In worship, we should experience the joy of forgiveness.
- In worship, we should feel a call from God for our participation in His work.

That is the essence of true worship, as seen in Isaiah's vision of God. The particulars of worship are singing, praying, giving, the Lord's Supper, and teaching; but the heart of worship is a spiritual encounter with God. Every time we assemble with the saints, may we all look beyond the formal externals and enjoy a deeper fellowship with the Lord. --John Temples