

## Church Worship: Doing It Alone

A common thread through the biographies of great men and women of God is time spent alone with God. Moses spent forty years in the wilderness outside Egypt. There he met God in a special way that prepared him for the next forty years of service to God. Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in the wilderness being tempted by Satan, but he also often took time to be alone with God. Paul was in the desert for three formative years between his conversion and ministry.

We often think of worship as corporate but it can and should be a part of our times alone with God. Many committed Christians have a daily devotional time, usually consisting of Bible reading and prayer, but worship is often a missing ingredient, more out of ignorance than choice. We don't spend much private time worshipping God because we don't know what to do. Nobody ever told us. So let's take a practical look at private worship and what it includes.

The Bible is a good place to start. Bible reading is more than a routine and a source of direction. It is a means of worship. Let's take a minute and look at Psalm 23 in two different ways. The first is us-centered; the second is God-centered. Note the difference:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside quiet waters; he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the*

*house of the Lord forever.*

That is a correct and right reading of God's word. If we're hurting and need comfort, if we need direction and correction, we can find it all in the inspired word of God. But those same words, with a different emphasis, can focus on God rather than on me. Watch:

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*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Make a special effort to find and know God in the Bible. Pause in your reading to acknowledge his greatness, his goodness and his worth. It

may be necessary to read the same passage two or three times just to switch from being self-centered to being God-centered.

We may be less familiar with worship by meditation. Meditation is a combination of considering,

thinking, dwelling, reflecting and concentrating on someone or something.

Every day before I went to school I had to recite for my mother Psalm 19:14: "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer." David wrote these great words with the assumption that we all meditate. To him

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the issue wasn't whether or not we meditate but whether or not our meditations are acceptable to God.

There are many different kinds of meditation. Lust is a form of meditation where one person dwells on improper sexual thoughts about another person. So there is visualization, there is imagination, there is consideration, there is repetition and there is planning. Call it meditation, call it lust, but it is a form of meditation. Worry is another form of meditation where we dwell persistently on some problem or concern. It monopolizes our thinking as we examine the issue over and over again from every point-of-view.

I remember once reading a magazine story about a TV movie entitled *The Day After*. That night before going to sleep I meditated on it. I rehearsed what I had read, wondered at the how and why of nuclear war and imagined what it would be like if a nuclear bomb exploded in the Twin Cities. I fell asleep with these thoughts and awakened the next morning to realize I had dreamed at night about the same things I had meditated on while I was falling asleep,

How much better to use our meditations to worship God! Think about God. Wonder at how he does things. Dwell on his greatness. Go to sleep at night mulling over the names of God found in the Bible. Imagine what it will be like to meet God in heaven.

Now I don't think that's easy. It's work. It takes a deliberate effort. But it's worth it . . . because God is worth it!

A third way to worship privately is by using hymns. It used to be that Christians kept and used hymnals in their homes. People carried their hymnals to church much as we carry our Bibles to church. Hymnals were regularly used for singing and for devotions in Christian homes. When our Elder Board decided to include new hymnals in our church budget I suggested that we order enough extras to encourage every church family to buy a copy for home use.

One of my favorite hymns deals with the Christian home. It is sung to the majestic tune of Finlandia. I am particularly impressed with the third verse. It goes like this:

*O give us homes where Christ is Lord and Master;*

*The Bible read, the precious hymns still sung;  
Where prayer comes first in peace or in disaster;*

*And praise is natural speech to every tongue;  
Where mountains move before a faith that's vaster;*

*And Christ sufficient is for old and young.*

Let's look at some hymns that we can sing or study privately in worship. Imagine being alone in your place of private devotion and singing or reciting the words to the hymn *Blessed Be The Name*. Reflect and meditate on them; they are tremendous tools for worship:

*All praise to him who reigns above in majesty supreme.*

*Who gave his Son for man to die that he might man redeem.*

*His name above all names shall stand, exalted more and more*

*At God the Father's own right hand where angel hosts adore.*

*Redeemer, Savior, Friend of man, once ruined by the fall,*

*Thou hast devised salvation's plan, for Thou hast died for all.*

*His name shall be the Counselor, The Mighty Prince of Peace,*

*Of all earth's kingdoms Conqueror; Whose reign shall never cease.*

*Blessed be the name, blessed be the name,  
blessed be the name of the Lord!*

*Blessed be the name, blessed be the name,  
blessed be the name of the Lord!*

Imagine putting that together in your own private worship time with a study of the names of God that are in the Bible! What a marvelous time of adoration for God that would be.

A less familiar hymn but one that has marvelous words that focus very much on God's greatness and his attributes is the hymn *Immortal, Invisible*. You could take a verse a day, a verse a week, a verse a month of this hymn and meditate on it and use it as a means of worship.

*Immortal, invisible, God only  
wise,  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.  
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of  
Days,  
Almighty, victorious—Thy great name we  
praise.  
Unresting, unchanging, and silent as light;  
Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in  
might;  
Thy justice, like mountains, high soaring  
above  
Thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness  
and love.  
To all, life Thou givest, to both great and  
small,  
In all life Thou livest—the true life of all;  
We blossom and flourish, as leaves on the tree,  
And wither and perish—but naught changeth  
Thee.  
Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,  
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their  
sight;  
All praise we would render—O help us to see  
'Tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee!*

I am certainly no musician, but I'll tell you a secret. When I am absolutely sure no one can hear me I sing hymns, alone, in private devotional worship. It doesn't sound very good, and I don't sing very loudly. If you heard me you would probably laugh. But I think God loves it. And, some of my most soul-searching, most memorable and most significant private worship experiences have come as I quietly, inadequately and off-key have sung worship and praise to my Lord.

Add to that worship through prayers. Evangelical Christians have not done much with written prayers of other Christians. Yet all the prayers we have in the Bible—from the Lord's Prayer to Paul's prayers to the prayers of others—are all written prayers. Great inspiration and worship can grow from reading and meditating on and even praying the prayers

of others—whether they are prayers found in the Bible or the prayers of others from devotional books.

But that's not sufficient by itself. To the prayers of others we must add our own personal prayers. I have always tended to pray silently in private worship and devotions. But lately that has been changing and I find myself praying aloud more and more. When I do that my worship and praise to God is clearer, more powerful and more significant. There is a greater sense of God's presence when the words are spoken audibly.

Likewise, I have never given much thought to any particular position for prayer. But lately I have discovered that my worship is enhanced when I get down on my knees to pray and worship God. That is because I don't kneel for anyone else. Kneeling is powerfully symbolic of my relationship to God, of how great he is and how small I am.

Set aside a significant part of your daily prayer time to tell God you love him, to tell him how great he is and to thank him for all he has done.

Writing out your prayers of praise and worship can add significantly to private worship. It gives opportunity to be precise, to be meaningful and to include Bible verses.

If we were assigned to make a statement to the President or to some royalty we would probably write out our speech in advance and either memorize or read it. Why do less for God? Not that all prayers should be written. By no means!

But it can be a very helpful aid to serious worship of God.

Another way to worship God is with our offerings. This doesn't mean money offerings at church. This means giving

things to God that are personal expressions of love, worship and thanksgiving. For example, give him your day. At the beginning of the day offer it to him as a present. Give him your obedience. Pick something he would like for you to do

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and do it as a gift to God. Give him something really important to you. Not because you have to but because you want to, because you choose to give it out of love and admiration.

Worship services are different for me than they are for you. For me it is not so much an opportunity to take in but to give out. Too often I have been concerned about what people in the audience are thinking. I leave quite exhausted and sometimes without much real worship having taken place. Then I tried something different. Instead of asking God to bless the sermon and make it good, I got down on my knees before the service with sermon notes in hand and offered them to God as a gift — hardly perfect, far from scintillating, surely not the best he gets — but what I have got I give to him as an offering. That has revolutionized public worship for me. Now it is far more centered on God and far less centered on people.

For you it may not be a sermon. Perhaps for you it's a solo or singing in the choir or teaching Sunday school. Maybe it's bidding a construction job or writing a computer program or running a sales meeting. Whatever it is, worship God by deliberately and consciously giving him what you have as an offering of worship.

There is a poem by Ruth Harms Calkin in the book *Lord, Could You Hurry a Little* that is entitled *Be Thou Exalted*. It quotes, first of all, from the psalmist David, "*Be thou exalted, Lord, in thine own strength; so we will sing and praise thy power.*" And then Calkin continues:

*Yes, Lord, yes!  
David's prayer is my prayer.  
Be exalted in my day-by-day agenda  
In my motives and dreams  
My priorities and goals.  
Even in my failures, Lord  
As you turn them into stepping stones  
Toward spiritual growth.  
Be exalted in my worship and praise  
In my sobbing and singing.  
Be exalted in my secret thoughts  
My emotional responses.*

*Be exalted in my daily routine  
The delays, the unexpected emergencies  
The disappointments that often come.  
Lord God, as you are exalted  
In heaven and on earth  
Be exalted in Your home—my heart.*

There are so many ways to worship our fabulous God! Worship him — tonight, tomorrow morning, soon. Worship him with Bible verses; worship him by meditation; worship him with hymns; worship him through prayers, worship him with offerings. Worship God — because he's worth it!

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