

Christian Worship.

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Worship is the highest possible exercise of the renewed soul, whether here or in glory. Prayer and thanksgiving are both unspeakably blessed in their place, but the one takes cognisance of our wants, and spreads them out before God; and the other has in view the blessings wherewith He has blessed us in His grace; whilst worship rises up to God Himself, and the heart loses itself in the blissful contemplation of His excellencies and deep perfections. Prayer will cease when we attain to the rest of God; worship is unending, and indeed will only be exercised in its fulness when we are with the Lord above.

Worship varies in its character according to the character of the different dispensations, and God's revelation of Himself. In patriarchal times, He was adored as "El Shaddai" — God Almighty. The fathers, while waiting in faith for the fulfilment of His promises, rested in Him as the all-sufficient and ever-faithful God. Worship then had rather a family character, the head of the house acting as a kind of priest for the household. Job is an instance of this (Job. 1: 5).

We mark a great change in the order when Israel was called out to be the people of God in the earth. God dwelt among them in the tabernacle, an inestimable privilege and blessing quite unknown by man before, either in his fallen state or in the condition of innocence. This involved the institution of the priesthood, for man in his natural condition is unfit to draw near to God. Sacrifices had always been (though not defined so clearly as in the opening chapters of Leviticus); for Israel the priesthood was added. But this necessarily put the people at a distance. It was the desire of God that they should be "a kingdom of priests and an holy nation" (Ex. 19: 6), but the realization of this awaits another day when they are restored to God on the ground of sovereign grace. In the past the priests acted for them. They dealt with the blood of the sacrifices and they presented the sweet incense before Jehovah in the sanctuary.

All this is changed now, for Christ has come. God is no longer hidden behind a veil, but has revealed Himself fully in the person of His beloved Son, so that we who believe know Him as the Father. Not only this; redemption being accomplished, Christ has gone back to God, and sits at His right hand on high. Hence, the whole character of worship is altered in this period of grace.

Turn now to John 4: 20-24. Here we have the Lord Jesus dealing with the conscience and heart of the woman at the well. Feeling pricked in her conscience by His word, she sought to avert its keen edge by turning to the subject of worship. To this the Lord graciously responded, and spoke of the great change then being brought in. The woman referred to Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans had their false temple, with its imitation of Jewish rites, and reminded the Lord of the Jewish assertion that Jerusalem was the place where men ought to worship. To which He replied, "Woman, believe me, the hour cometh when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship; for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a spirit; and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth " (John 4: 21-24).

Several things must be noticed here. First, the Lord completely sets aside Samaritanism as false and evil — "Ye worship ye know not what." Secondly, He vindicates Judaism as intelligent and of God

— "we know what we worship," &c. He then proceeds to show that the hour had come to set both aside, that a better thing might be established. *There are no holy places in Christianity.* Simple as this is, how few comparatively understand it! To recognise and serve a holy place on earth now is to rob one's soul of the enjoyment of all that is distinctively Christian. Alas, this is where the great majority of professors of Christianity are to-day, and where they have been for centuries.

Further, we worship "the Father." What nearness and affection is implied in this! We stand now in the relationship of children through Christ's work, and can lift up the heart in worship in the conscious liberty of sonship. Is not this infinitely higher and more blessed than groaning that the burden of our sins is intolerable, beseeching Him not to remember against us our offences, and the sins of our forefathers, and not to be angry with us for ever? Assuredly it is. But this quite shuts out all who are not children of God. For such the gospel is intended; until that is received in faith, none have title to join in worshipping the Father, neither indeed are they in a spiritual condition to do so.

The Father seeketh worshippers — precious thought! But He seeks those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth. This implies that the inner man is engaged under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and that His truth is known and controlling the soul. This is in direct contrast with mere forms, which require neither God's truth nor His spirit, and can never satisfy His heart.

Further, not only does the Father *desire* spiritual (in contrast with ritual) worship, but His solemn "must" comes in — "they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." His nature is now fully revealed; what God requires — what is suitable to Him — is now declared in consequence. Men who come before Him with mere external rites treat Him as if He were a nonentity as the deities of the heathen; the Christian who has been brought to know Him, yea, who has been born of Him, understands that spiritual worship alone can suit such a God as ours. May we ever delight to render it according to His word.

The Epistle to the Hebrews introduces to us an entirely different line of truth. Throughout the Epistle, the believer is regarded as in the wilderness, passing onward to the rest of God. His infirmities are recognized, and the priesthood of Christ is brought in for help on the road. As to worship, we have liberty of access by faith to the heavenly sanctuary. This is all quite different from John's line of instruction. There, as we have seen, the family relationship is prominent — we are viewed as children, worshipping the Father in spirit and in truth.

Let us examine Hebrews 10: 19-22. The apostle says we have boldness (or liberty) to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus. Under the law, the worshippers could not go into the presence of God. The veil barred the way. But there is no hindrance now. The work of Jesus has so satisfied God's claims that the veil is rent, and the way into the holiest is now made manifest. Moreover, our consciences are purged, so that we are able to stand in peace before Him. We have the assurance that the one sacrifice of Jesus has removed all our sins, and has perfected us for ever. His present seat at the right hand of God is the glorious proof that the question of sins has been settled once and for ever. If we had not this confidence, we could not worship. A man who is uncertain and unhappy as to his position before God is not in a condition to worship, however upright and good his desires.

The flesh of Jesus having been rent — His work being accomplished, the way to God is open, and every believer may draw near with holy boldness. 'Full assurance of faith' glorifies God really, whatever some may think. We constantly fall in with those who have no certainty about anything, and who think it a right and proper Christian condition. Far be the thought. If aught depended on ourselves, we might well be filled with fear and trembling; but knowing that our Christian privileges are all based upon the work of the Lord Jesus, we dare not dishonour Him by entertaining a doubt.

Yet we do well to remember our present imperfect condition. To be "perfect, as pertaining to the conscience," is not necessarily to be perfect in every other sense. In fact, while we are in the body, every service will fall short of God's standard and of our own desires. I do not now speak of positive sin, but of the shortcoming which is due to our infirmities. Here the priesthood of Christ comes in as our aid. "Having an high priest over the house of God," through Him all our spiritual sacrifices rise up to God acceptably. He presents them to God for us, accompanied by all the excellency and fragrance of His ever blessed person and work. What comfort for our hearts! Who has not felt the truth of the words, "Weak is the effort of my heart, and cold my warmest thought?" How dependent we are on Him, not only for our general need in the wilderness, but even in the highest possible service of our renewed hearts!

In verse 22 we have an important allusion to the installation of the Aaronic priests. "Our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water," reminds us of the sprinkling of the blood of the sacrifice, and of the washing at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, see Lev. 8: 6-24. The latter is typical of the new birth, without which none can serve the living and true God; the former is the token that we are clean in His sight, and that no sin can ever be laid to our charge.

Such, in brief, is our Christian position, yet how little is it understood by the many! When Paul wrote, souls were slow to grasp the blessedness of the new order which Christ had brought in, because of the blinding power of ancient religious prejudices; and the same thing accounts for the darkness which covers many minds today. Earthly systems have been reared up in imitation of a judged Judaism, and the tendency of them all is to keep the soul more or less at a distance from God. May He establish our souls more completely in His own grace and truth.