

The Grace of God in Worship

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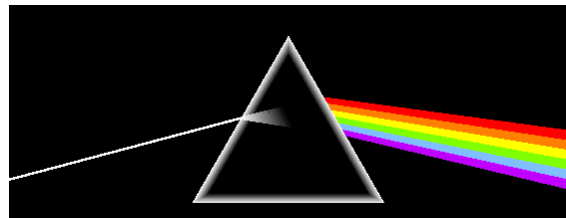
Introduction – “Give careful thought to your ways”

It's very easy to come together week by week and do what we do out of habit, without giving real thought to the significance of what we are doing.

In the book of Haggai we read a strong message that the prophet Haggai delivers to the Jewish people who had returned from exile in Babylon and had resettled the promised land. They are being rebuked because they are looking after their own needs but neglecting to restore the Temple of the Lord. As God through Haggai calls the people back to proper worship of Him, there is a key phrase that is repeated five times in the two chapters that make up this short book: “*Give careful thought to your ways*”.

What we do each week when we come together should be a powerful experience and expression of the grace of God at work in and through our lives. We've explored already the grace of God in speaking to us and shaping our lives through the preaching of His Word. We've explored the grace of God in keeping us in right relationship with Him and with each other through our celebration of communion. The grace that is at work in these two things are powerful but we can easily miss it if we don't give careful thought to our ways.

Today we are looking at the grace of God in worship. Worship is a huge topic to address. In fact, one of the biggest problems Christians have is a small understanding of worship, as if worship is just something that happens for part of a church service. My prayer is that as we grapple with the Bible's picture of worship today, that we will experience the grace of God in worship in every part of our lives, and that grace will infuse our time of shared worship with a new and fresh vitality.



As we look at the big picture of worship this morning I want you to imagine worship as being kind of like a beam of white light. When we apply a prism to that light we discover that it is actually composed of a range of different colours which combine together to create what we see as white light. In a similar way, biblical worship is composed of a whole range of attitudes and actions which combine together to be the worship that God desires from us.

Let me give you a very quick example of what I mean by that...

Amos 5:21-24

²¹ *“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies.*

²² *Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them.*

²³ *Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.*

²⁴ *But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!*¹

¹ All Scriptures taken from *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

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This passage echoes a theme that runs throughout the Bible – you cannot claim to be worshipping God just by observing the proper ceremonies and presenting “proper” gifts. It is important to do that and we read occasions where people were being rebuked for not doing that either – but just doing these things is not enough. God isn’t interested in being sung to and praised by a bunch of people who do not obey Him and share His heart for others. Treating others with justice and mercy and love is an essential part of our worship to God!

Now we cannot address the whole spectrum of biblical worship today. In fact I have observed that learning to worship God is a lifelong journey! There are seasons where God grows you in the depth of sincerity and significance in how you worship God musically. There are seasons where you grow in how you worship God prayerfully. There are seasons where you grow in how you worship God in how you relate to people. There are seasons where you grow in how you worship God in the choices you make about what you watch, what you listen to, what you buy and so on. We should all be on a journey of becoming better worshippers.

Even though we can’t cover all of that today what I want to do is introduce you to a very important Hebrew word that is translated as “worship” in the Old Testament. Of all the different attitudes and actions that make up worship, this is the foundational one. This is the one you need to get right or none of the others will be right.

The word is **שָׁחָה** *shachah* (shaw-khaw). Basically, it describes the action of bowing down, of prostrating yourself. I’m going to take you on a bit of a journey today that will help you understand the importance of this idea, and when you put it into practice you will discover the grace of God in worship.

To worship God begins with acknowledging the reality of the awesomeness of God.

Psalm 8 gives us this perspective:

¹ *O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

You have set your glory above the heavens.

² *From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.*

³ *When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,*

⁴ *what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?*

⁵ *You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.*

⁶ *You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet:*

⁷ *all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field,*

⁸ *the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.*

⁹ *O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

Notice here that David acknowledges the dignity and glory of humanity – crowned with glory and honour, ruler over all the world that God has created. Yet when confronted with the splendour and greatness of God himself, who are we that God would think of us and care for us? This is the attitude of shachah! “God, You are awesome, and I bow down to you”.

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This attitude is reflected in heavenly worship. Turn with me to...

Revelation 4:1-11

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."² At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.³ And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.⁴ Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads.⁵ From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.⁶ Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back.⁷ The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle.⁸ Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

*"Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come."*

⁹ Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever,¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

*¹¹ "You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being."*

Notice in this scene you have humanity and angels represented by the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures. These angelic creatures themselves are portrayed in such a way as to represent all living creatures. And they all worship God! The elders even lay down their crowns and prostrate themselves before Him – the attitude of shachah!

This attitude of bowing down before God is to acknowledge the reality of who we are and who God is. It is to choose to take joy in being an object of God's love and attention, and in doing so we receive His limitless grace.

However one of the angels was not content with this. There was one angel who decided to try and change reality after his own desires. Instead of worshipping God he desired to place himself above God and become an object of worship himself.

That angel's name was Lucifer, but he is now known as Satan among other names.

His attempt to usurp God's place is recounted in the 3rd chapter of Genesis. God has created humanity to live in right relationship with Himself. He is God and they knew Him as God.

Satan did not want to see humanity worship God, he craved that worship for himself. He wanted people to join in his rebellion against the created order. "God is not really that great, we are great!" he would whisper to them.

^a Or the sevenfold Spirit

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I won't retell the whole story – if you don't know it you can read it yourself later. Let's just zoom in on **Genesis 3:1-4**

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

² *The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³ but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"*

⁴ *"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. ⁵ "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."*

What is Satan doing here? He's undermining the attitude of shachah toward God.

Adam and Eve knew God as their Creator and the Creator of the whole world – the whole universe in fact! In their contact with God they would have discovered his goodness and love – they would have personally experienced His perfect nature.

They knew that God is far above us.

So Satan proceeds to try bring God down in their minds. Speaking to Eve, he accuses God of lying. That's not so great! He insinuates that God's purpose for lying was to keep them as subservient to Himself. To keep them under His thumb. To maintain the status quo of God on top and them down below.

It doesn't have to be that way, Satan tells them. You can be like God. You can go from worshipper to worshipped. You can be free to choose whatever you want. You can be your own bosses.

And so Satan tricks them into swapping the truth for a lie, and he has continued to do that ever since. He has been darkening the minds of people to try and hide the reality of the glory and goodness of God. He hates that reality. He rebels against that reality and he has conscripted certain other angels and humanity in general into his rebellion.

It is not an honest rebellion. He promised Adam and Eve that they would be like God – in charge of their own fate and able to choose between good and evil. Most people in our society think that is exactly what is going on! There is no God except ourselves! You can even buy the T-shirt!



In actual fact, it is a deception. By following our own sinful desires we actually honour the one who has incited us to rebel and we dishonour the One who made us.

The Apostle Paul gives his young friend Timothy this advice about how to treat others...

2 Timothy 2:25-26

Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

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The truth is that God is great and that we should order our whole lives around His reality and His revelation to us. The trap of the devil is to make God either non-existent or smaller in our minds so that we do not live for Him but for ourselves, inadvertently serving Satan instead.

The sins that we have all committed keep us from God. We cannot draw close to Him even to worship Him, because He is so great! He is morally perfect. He is completely pure. Anything evil cannot co-exist with Him. The Bible says that God is tolerating the existence of rebellious humanity and the masters we have chosen only for the sake of allowing time for some to choose to be reconciled to Him. Until the time comes to finally judge this world He is holding Himself back from fully engaging with us, because it would destroy us if He were to do so. Satan's rebellion will be destroyed – it never had any hope of success! God is God and Satan is not and we are not – that is just reality! It's a good reality for all who will accept it! God wants to rescue us from our rebellion and bring us back to reality, and He did that in His Son, Jesus Christ.

The good news is that Jesus has come into our world to restore us to a position of right relationship to God. He has come to make us God's children instead of would-be usurpers of His creation. He's come to crush the leader of the rebellion and take away his power over us.

Satan attempted to prevent this from happening, using the same tactics that worked so well with Adam and Eve.

In **Matthew 4:1-11** we read of how Satan attempted to sabotage Jesus' mission just as it was getting started. In the final part of their confrontation we read...

⁸ *Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.* ⁹ *"All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."*

¹⁰ *Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'*

Jesus is going to restore humanity to right relationship with God, and not all of us would accept it. Satan says "I'll give you all of them – it's all yours! You will be on top again. You will be over humanity once more – just come down from your lofty position and bow down to me!" (the words "bow down" in the NIV are better translated as "fall down" or "descend", and "worship" as "pay homage" or "prostrate yourself before" – the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew "shachah".)

Satan is still chasing the same thing – he wants to be exalted above God Himself. And now God the Son appears in human flesh and Satan sees a chance to get what he wants. So Jesus wants to redeem mankind? He can have us – just bow down! It's so much easier than going to the cross!

This illustrates one of the key differences between Satan and God. One of the things that makes God, God and Satan so much less.

For Satan it is all about him – he wants to be number one and he has tried everything to get there. Humans are just pawns in his game. He does not love us, he just wants to be over us. He wants to use us in his war against God. He would trade us all just to get God to bow down to him.

God however is the complete opposite. He is under no threat from Satan. Reality is not going to change. He will judge Satan when the time is right. However God loved us even knowing we would rebel against Him. God had decided that He would give Himself for us even before the first people walked the Earth. He chose to forgive us for the horrible things we have thought, said and

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done in the past and in the future. He chose to bring us into His family even knowing the many times that we would go back to living selfishly, doing the things that have caused Him so much pain. He is preparing an eternal home for us even while we get preoccupied with our temporary one. He truly is good. He truly is worthy of our worship!

The grace of God in worship begins with an attitude of shachah – of humbly acknowledging the reality of who God is and who we are, and ordering our whole lives accordingly.

It is why in our times of worship together we like to sing songs and read Scriptures and share stories that remind us of the character and majesty of God, His grace toward us and His promises to us. It restores our sense of wonder and humility. It prevents our worship from becoming selfish.

Selfishness is a major problem in holding churches back from true worship. How many times have you seen fights break out in churches about the way they worship together? How often have you heard people and churches criticised for the way they worship?

Whenever that happens you have a problem. Worship has left the building and been replaced by selfishness and pride. Worship has fallen off a cliff! An attitude of shachah does not produce quarrels about trivial things like structure and style – only selfishness does that. An attitude of shachah does not judge others' worship based on those trivial things, because that is something for God alone – only pride and ignorance provoke a person to think they can step into God's place. That's the error of Satan, not the behaviour of the Christian.

So often I've heard people say things like: "they're just being entertained", or "they're spiritually dead", or "they have no reverence for God", or "they have no passion", or "they're stuck in their traditions", or even "they don't know how to worship". I've seen people from different worship traditions criticise each other when they should be learning from each other and blessing each other. An attitude of shachah says (among other things) "I would love to learn from others so that I may more fully worship God."

Now we all know that it is important to apply biblical truth to God's church, and if there are errors in teaching and practice to be able to point them out. But if we're honest, the vast majority of disputes and criticisms arise from personal preferences, traditions and ways of looking at things.

Doing anything thoughtlessly can be dangerous – even thoughtless "worship" is dangerous. It is very easy for "worship" to be about music I like, styles of preaching I like, types of experiences I like and what I get out of it when I turn up to it.

If worship becomes about us, we will have fallen for Satan's rebellious deception to make God less and ourselves greater in our own minds. It won't be that obvious. We will seem perhaps very pious, or very sensible, or very excited, or very relevant, or very sophisticated or whatever, but if we lose that sense of wonder at the greatness of God and the smallness of ourselves we will have lost God and lost touch with who we really are. We will not be able to worship, and we will miss the grace of God that comes with true worship.

I want to close by telling you the story of the very first mention of the word "shachah" in the Bible. The story is found in Genesis 22 and it tells of Abraham who is going to sacrifice his son Isaac to God in obedience to what God has told him to do. He tells a servant that he and Isaac are going off to worship. He is giving up his beloved son and all his hopes for the future because God has told him to. As it turns out God has provided another sacrifice, and Abraham instead of giving up a son is going to receive an incredible blessing and promise, as is Isaac. And they are going to experience God in a new way which moves them to love and revere Him even more than they did before.

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We are always blessed when we worship God. Yet our sinful nature is so deceptive that if we focus on that blessing too much we will find ourselves chasing the blessings from God instead of worshipping God. We try to get from God what we want from Him instead of receiving from Him what He wants to give us. It's like churches that market themselves according to how good they are going to make people feel and how much better your life will be with God in it. That's not worship, that's turning God into a service provider! That brings Him down and puffs us up!

Our job is to focus on giving Him everything, of laying down our lives before Him, completely prostrated – nothing held back. The grace of God in worship is that God by His very nature always blesses those who worship Him. Abraham became a great nation, and thousands of years later on that same mountain (according to tradition), God provided through that nation the ultimate sacrifice – Jesus Christ, Saviour of the World and King of Kings.

So when you come together with other Christians to worship God, don't come to get but to give. Don't evaluate worship by how it made you feel or whether you approved of it or whatever else, rather evaluate your own worship according to what you gave and the attitude in which you gave it.

As you grow as a worshipper of God, you will have a greater awareness, appreciation and experience of the grace of God at work in your life. You will live in the blessed abundance of a child of God, instead of following Satan's example in trying to live as though you are God.