

Proper Worship and the singing of the Psalms

by: Zin Yi

“Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.” Psalm 2:11

“I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things.” Isaiah 45:7

“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.” John 4:23

Our worship of the Most High God is a matter which deserves the attention of the entirety of our beings; for indeed when we deal with God, we deal with *the* Sovereign One Who declares, “Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Eze. 18:4). Man must never forget the admonition, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).

Contrary to what the sinful heart, the “desperately wicked” heart (Jer. 17:9) of “natural man” (1 Co. 2:14) believes, God does *not* leave the matter of how He is to be worshipped to the discretion of “fools [who] die for want of wisdom” (Pro. 10:21b). That is, it is not up to the creature to creatively invent ways by which the Creator of the universe, the Supreme Potter, is to be extolled on high. The utterly apostate churches of our day promotes The Thrice-Holy God as a Santa Clause-like being, complete with white gloves and rosy cheeks, the extent of whose chastisement upon the one who has been “bad” is limited to the mere withholding of worldly goods - and that once a year. Satan could not be happier with such a perverted, unholy view of our “King of Kings, and Lord of lords...dwelling in the light *which no man can approach unto*” (1 Tim. 6:15), before Whose awesome presence we all, without exception, must cry out, “Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips...” (Is. 6:5).

Submitting before God’s assessment of fallen man - as a miserable, rebellious creature who may even mistakenly think that he has eternal life for some filthy work that he himself has done - must make us reexamine the way we approach the “high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy”; Who thunderously declares, “I dwell in the high and holy place...” (Is. 57:15). How do we *think* of Him Who is “a Spirit” (Jn. 4:24)? How are we to *pray* unto the “consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29)? Indeed, How are we to *praise* His irrepressible might, so splendidly manifest in the wondrous works which He alone hath wrought? In fact, can we take it for granted that God gladly accepts any and all worship of man? Is He pleased with every “Praise the Lord,” every “Hallelujah,” and every “Amen,” so readily, so easily, so habitually uttered out of the mouths of those who identify with the name of Christ? How about the sharp clap of hands, the electric twang of the guitar, the seismic reverberation of the bass? The rhythmic, head-nod inducing thud, thud, boom, boom of the drum?

The most fundamental of all truths, before any of the above is answered, is the crucial, terrible reality that **God hates sinners**. Yes. The sinner cannot stand in God’s sight (Ps. 5:5, 76:7): “O LORD God of Israel, thou art righteous...behold, we are before thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before thee because of this” (Ezr. 9:15). The Psalmist declares, “thou hatest all workers of iniquity” (Ps. 5:5), and, “the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth” (Ps. 11:5). Lest any think himself exempt from this most unpleasant of stigma of being “him that loveth violence,” let us note that Pro. 1:11 applies the damnable traits of thirst and eagerness for “blood” (vs. 11, 16) to *sinners in general* (“...if sinners entice thee,” Pro. 1:10). Indeed, we learn that “sinners” are those who wait to “swallow” up “whole” the “innocent” - “without cause” no less - “as the grave” (see vs. 10-19). That God hates sinners also means that His Majesty detests all that which sinners think, intend, and do: “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags...” (Is. 64:6). Both in the flesh and the mind (see Eph. 2:3), the natural man, God states, is less than a worm:

“How then can man be justified with God? or how can he be clean that is born of a woman? Behold even to the moon, and it shineth not; yea, the stars are not pure in his sight. How much less man, that is a worm? and the son of man, which is a worm?” (Job 25:4-6)

The Bible is crystal clear - man is born unclean and in desperate need of salvation, of which God is the sole author (Is. 43:11). Truly, “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one” (Job 14:4) - except, that is, the Almighty God that delivers and rescues (Dan 6:27), Who “justifieth the ungodly” (Rom. 4:5), Who “died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). Let us confess with the Psalmist, “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:5).

Can a “corrupt tree bring forth good fruit” (Mt. 7:18b)? Can he who is evil “speak good things” (Mt. 12:34)? The answer is an emphatic, absolute, *No* (Mt. 7:17, 12:35). If so, then how can we expect God to be pleased even in the slightest with any so-called worship, prayer, and/or praise, the heart of whose source is thoroughly putrid? Do we dare say that God is pleased with “*evil fruit*,” with “*evil things*”? If indeed “the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment” (Is. 1:5c, 6), then what is the prescription – certainly not more filthy worship after the flesh! That is, the kind of hypocritical worship of which the Lord declares,

“Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men.” (Is. 29:13 - see also Mt. 15:8, 9; Mk. 7:6, 7)

Thus He commands,

“Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination to me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.” (Is. 1:13-15)

And Ps. 51:16 echoes the above:

“For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering.”

The Lord is very plain to make known His utter hatred for worship born out of the “fleshly mind” “vainly puffed up,” that which He calls “will-worship” (Col. 2:18, 23). Thus He declares again, “I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats” (Is. 1:11c). In the strongest expression of disdain in the face of worship offered by unsaved sinners, The Lord says,

“I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols.” (Am. 5:21-23)

The blood of sacrificial animals, oblations, incense, the new moons and sabbaths (comp. Col. 2:16, 17) and solemn assemblies, as the varied facets of the ceremonial system, pointed directly to those of spiritual worship. See, for example, how Ps. 141:2 relates prayer to incense, and the lifting up of hands to sacrifice: “Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting

up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.” Further, Rev. 5:8 identifies “odours” as the “prayer of saints”: “And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints.” (See also Rev. 8:3, 4)

Having understood this, let us see two of the clearest examples of incorrect, foul worship, being met with the swiftest of God’s judgments. Aaron and his sons, his “seed,” were to minister in the “priest’s office” (Ex. 28:1). One of the duties of the priest’s office was to “offer incense” (Ex. 30:1-9; Num. 16:40), and only “the priests the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense” (2 Ch. 26:18) could do so. Nadab and Abihu, two of Aaron’s sons, were thus by birth qualified to serve in the priest’s office. Yet we read this of them:

“And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.” (Lev. 10:1, 2)

The second example is that of Uzziah, the king of Judah. Having made the kingdom “strong” by God’s help (2 Ch. 26:5, 7, 15), we read that “his heart was lifted up to his destruction,” and he “went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense” – an act of direct transgression against God (2 Ch. 26:16). Against the king who was not qualified for this act of worship, we read,

“And Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him fourscore priests of the LORD, that were valiant men: And they withstood Uzziah the king, and said unto him, It appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto the LORD, but to the priests the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense: go out of the sanctuary; for thou hast trespassed; neither shall it be for thine honour from the LORD God” (vs. 17, 18).

God wastes no time in smiting the angered king with leprosy (vs. 19, 20), a figure of being spiritually unclean, and under the wrath of God (Lev. 13:45; Num. 5:2; Jo. 3:18, 36; Eph. 2:3; Col. 3:6). Thus Uzziah was “a leper unto the day of his death,” and “was cut off from the house of the Lord” (vs. 21).

In the case of Nadab and Abihu, their sin was in offering “strange fire,” which the Lord Himself had *not commanded*. The word “strange” points clearly to that which is sinful, that which is not of God. It is the word “estranged” in Ps. 58:3’s, “The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies.” (See also Eze. 14:5) That the “strange fire” was “commanded...not” of God, in the practical sense, instead of emphasizing that the offering of such a “strange fire” was clearly prohibited by God, indicates rather that it was *more* than what God had specified – that is, it was outside of the boundary of the rules of proper worship. They, Nadab and Abihu, had become *creative* in their roles as priests. Without getting into a lengthy discussion on that which theologically is referred to as the “Regulative Principle of Worship,” let us note this clear lesson from Nadab and Abihu: Simply because God has not explicitly forbidden something, it most definitely does not license us to go beyond that which He *has* explicitly commanded - especially in our worship of Him. During the New Testament church age, the children of God witnessed the progressive perversion of worship, with the most inventive, most spectacular, most sensual, most eye-pleasing, most men-pleasing abominations becoming normalized, and to concerns raised by those whose desire was to worship God the way God wanted to be worshipped, the usual defense offered was that the bible does not specifically forbid microphones, bodily gyrations, screaming, and the like.

In the case of Uzziah, the matter is that of one usurping authority that was not his to usurp. In other words, as spoken by Azariah the chief priest, God had consecrated “the priests the sons of Aaron” for the task of burning incense, and so it was *only* they the sons of Aaron who could

perform the task. Uzziah became proud - "his heart was lifted up to his destruction" - and was not satisfied to remain in the role that God had assigned to him as king, rather than as a priest. How could such an attitude of arrogant discontent with the "calling wherein he was called" (1 Co. 7:20) accompany God-pleasing worship?

But spiritually, God is teaching here that it is the sinner - the natural man in "enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7) - with "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart...only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5), who, due to his own soul that is "estranged" from God, will, *always, without fail*, offer idolatrous, strange fire which God commanded not, and will, in his ugly pride (See Pro. 30:12, 13), show that he is a spiritual leper, as he dares to approach the Most Holy God acting as one of His eternally consecrated children - the type of which was the Levitical priesthood.

Can we emphasize enough the fact that God finds absolutely nothing pleasing in the unsaved sinner? Both the "way" and the "thoughts" of the wicked are "an abomination to the Lord" (Pro. 15: 9, 26). It is thus not surprising that the "prayer," the "sacrifice of the wicked," indeed, their rebellious attempt at worship, are abominable to the Lord (Pr. 15:8, 28:9). In the contrast of Pro. 15:29 (as already seen in Is. 1:15), we are forced to infer that God does not hear the prayer of the wicked: "*The LORD is far from the wicked: but he heareth the prayer of the righteous.*" He will not hear, that is, because of the utter sinfulness of the sinner, for the "ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed," walking "after their own ungodly lusts" (Jude 1:15b, 18b):

"But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue hath muttered perverseness" (Is. 59:2, 3).

Such a declaration by the Creator and Judge of the universe should make us tremble, yea, to "exceedingly fear and quake" (Heb. 12:21b), yet God's divine assessment of sinners is that "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18).

It is true that even the unbeliever, and the whole creation *ought* to praise God, *ought* to worship Him. But as we have thus far witnessed the indisputable testimony of the Scriptures, God will not accept the sinner's praise, for it is born *not* out of the right motive, right desire. It is altogether sin. The sinner is not qualified to worship, to praise God. Let us look at the following passage where the relationship between the action of worshipping God and the declaration of the Gospel is found. In Ps. 50 we find the following verses:

14 Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High:

16 But unto the wicked God saith, What hast thou to do to declare my statutes, or that thou shouldest take my covenant in thy mouth?

17 Seeing thou hatest instruction, and castest my words behind thee.

Verse 8 of the above Psalm set the context of worship ("sacrifices," "burnt offerings"), and within this context we find vs. 14, in which *offering unto God thanksgiving* and *paying one's vows*, the two actions identifying with true worship, are found. Vs. 15 continuing God's focus on the believer, we now see in vs. 16 that God makes plain that there is another facet to the worship of God, and that is to proclaim His Word. Notice verse 16 again: "*But unto the wicked God saith, What hast thou to do to declare my statutes, or that thou shouldest take my covenant in thy mouth?*" The unsaved man - the "wicked" - is utterly unfit to worship, to praise God, and this, God teaches, also means that the unsaved does not have the mandate of God, nor His blessing, to participate in His work of saving His elect from all nations.

Before any worship, any praise, any thanksgiving is attempted, then, one must "give diligence to make [his] calling and election sure" (2 Pt. 1:10) - in other words, we all must examine ourselves to determine whether or not we have indeed become saved (2 Co. 13:5), that we indeed have been covered by the robe of Christ's righteousness (Is. 61:10), have been qualified of God to

properly approach His Majesty (Num. 16:5; Ps. 65:4), to properly worship Him. Let us reiterate: The unsaved man – and this may very well be you - and all that he thinks and does, is an abomination to God.

We “must worship Him in spirit and truth” (Jo. 4:24), not in vain external displays of piety. Thus God solemnly commands, “...rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God” (Joel 2:13a). Perhaps that which we may even refer to as God’s very summation on worship may be this:

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Ps. 51:17).

What is true worship? It is the declaration of the name of God, His glorious character, His perfect judgments, His salvation - the Gospel - to the world, and in thanksgiving to the Savior Himself (Ps. 105:1-3). Let us read Ps. 116:12-14, 17-19:

What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me? I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the LORD. I will pay my vows unto the LORD now in the presence of all his people...I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of the LORD. I will pay my vows unto the LORD now in the presence of all his people, In the courts of the LORD’S house, in the midst of thee, O Jerusalem. Praise ye the Lord.

Notice the response of the Psalmist to all the “benefits,” that is, the “cup of salvation,” of which the Lord was the sole provider. He, the Psalmist, will “call upon the name of the Lord,” “pay [his] vows unto the Lord,” and offer “the sacrifice of thanksgiving.” The last phrase of vs. 19 puts it this way: “Praise ye the Lord.” God teaches again that to praise Him is to “offer...the sacrifice of thanksgiving.” Ps. 107: 21, 22 make the same connection:

“Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! And let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare his works with rejoicing.”

Man’s proper responses to God’s “goodness” and “wonderful works” are, as taught in Ps. 116, to “sacrifice the sacrifice of thanksgiving,” and to “declare his works with rejoicing.” Heb. 13:15 ties the concepts of “sacrifice,” “praise,” and “giving thanks” together:

“By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.”

The exhortation of I Th. 5:16-18 comes to mind:

“Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.”

Who is/are the “you”? Why, the believer, of course. The one who has been delivered from the “power of darkness,” and has been “translated...into the kingdom of his dear Son” (Col. 1:13).

It is thus the true believer, the one with “a broken and a contrite heart” whose worship God “wilt not despise.” It is the true believer, therefore, who, as a direct result of having been made a new creature, who praises the Lord, rejoices evermore, prays without ceasing, in everything gives thanks – yea, offers unto the Lord the “sacrifice of praise” (Jer. 33:11), of joy, of thanksgiving. In fact, when the 70 disciples return from the first mission trip, the Lord Jesus teaches that the basis of their joy must be the foundational fact of their own salvation: “Notwithstanding in this rejoice

not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven” (Lk. 10:20). It is only the child of God who has a real cause for rejoicing, constantly praying, and giving thanks in all things. The very life of the child of God, as it displays the miracle of having been made a new creature, manifesting “the savor of his knowledge...in every place” (2 Co. 2:14b), then, becomes identified with worship, true, spiritual, God-pleasing worship.

The child of God must worship Him, must praise Him, is commanded that he abound with thanksgiving for the salvation that God has amazingly granted him. It is indeed the child of God who has every reason imaginable to praise His God, His Savior. Note the following exhortation:

“Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him: talk ye of all his wondrous works.”
(Psalms 105:2; 1 Chronicles 16:9)

The bible nowhere allows for man-centered praising, man-centered singing. Just as the Gospel is to be declared in such a way that God is glorified, and in order that God is pleased (Gal. 1:10; 1 Th. 2:1-13), we do not sing to please men, to satisfy our own “itching ears.” The direction, the focus of our singing, our praise, must always be God-ward. Is there any being more deserving of exaltation? Truly, “...Worthy is **the Lamb** that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing” (Rev. 5:12). Such praise is a joyous praise, unto which the child of God is called:

“But let all those that put their trust in thee rejoice: let them ever shout for joy, because thou defendest them: let them also that love thy name be joyful in thee.”

“Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.”

*“The king shall joy in thy strength, O LORD; and in thy salvation how greatly shall he rejoice!
And now shall mine head be lifted up above mine enemies round about me: therefore will I offer in his tabernacle sacrifices of joy; I will sing, yea, I will sing praises unto the LORD.”*

“Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, ye righteous: and shout for joy, all ye that are upright in heart.”

“Let all those that seek thee rejoice and be glad in thee: and let such as love thy salvation say continually, Let God be magnified.”

“My lips shall greatly rejoice when I sing unto thee; and my soul, which thou hast redeemed.”
(Ps. 5:11, 16:11, 21:1, 27:6, 32:11, 70:4, 71:23)

And,

“Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms.” (James 5:13)

The children of God are to sing unto Him, sing psalms unto Him, with joy, with thanksgiving. God has given us 150 Psalms, or songs, to read, to memorize, and with which to praise Him. Since they are an integral part of His word, we can be certain that when we sing the Psalms, we are singing that which is perfect, that which is without error, that which is not tainted with the “precept of men” (Is. 29:13), with *sin*. Would we ever want to attempt praising Him, singing unto Him with words according to man’s “tradition,” man’s “philosophy and vain deceit” (Col. 2:8)? One of the greatest benefits in singing God’s words back to Him is that we know that *we can do no better*. There is no poetry, no prose, which surpasses the infinite riches of the inspired Scriptures.

The Bible does allow for songs outside the realm of the 150 Psalms - the two clear examples both involving Moses. The song recorded in Exodus 15 memorializes the Lord’s great deliverance of Israel from their bondage to Egypt (vs. 1-19); then there is the song recorded in

Deuteronomy 32:1-43, which was to serve as a “witness for [God] against the children of Israel” (Deut. 31:19, 21) who would eventually “turn unto other gods, and serve them...” Revelation 15:3 & 4 make reference to the “song of Moses,” and another called “the song of the Lamb.” We also read that the Lord and His disciples sang a “hymn” (Mt. 26:30; Mk. 14:26) at the close of the Last Supper. Finally, Paul and Silas prayed and “sang praises” (the same Greek word as “had sung an hymn” of Mt. 26:30 & Mk. 14:26) “unto God” (Acts 16:25). The biblical evidence seems to be, that when songs were sung unto God, they were comprised of the words of God Himself. After all, can we imagine the Lord Jesus, the Word Incarnate, singing *man’s words* unto His Father in heaven?

Let us study His word. Let us memorize His word. Let us meditate upon His word. With joy overflowing, let us sing His words, so “very pure” (Ps. 119:140), and finer than “gold; yea, above fine gold” (Ps. 119:127).

“Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Eph. 5:19, 20)

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.” (Col. 3:16, 17)

To God alone be the glory.