

## What is worship?

In my reading I've occasionally come across statements like "he worshiped the Lord there" (1 Samuel 1:28). I've often wondered "what did they do while they were worshiping the Lord?" Did they stand up, run, sit down, jump up and down, lie down on their belly, dance, or walk? Did they sing, pray, listen in silence, moan, shout, groan or cheer? Did they sleep, eat, work, play, laugh, or cry. Did they make things or break things, give or get things? What did they **do** that was said to be "worship"?

What is "worship" anyway? The English word has at its root the idea of ascribing or attributing worth or value or honor to some person or object; to treat them or it with respect and honor. That helps some, we'll keep that in mind. But what does it mean, in the context of the Bible, to worship? What Hebrew and Greek words get translated into English as "worship" and what meanings did those words convey in their languages?

In the Old Testament there are three groups of words that are translated into English as "worship". The first appears very early: at the end of Genesis chapter four – "to call on the name of the LORD." This phrase appears most often in Genesis and usually indicates a time of prayer and actively seeking God's attention. The second, and most common, is a group of words denoting the act of kneeling, bowing, or lying prostrate on the ground. This action is performed as a sign of submission, recognizing the authority of one who is greater. It says "I respect you and honor you and submit myself to your authority, do with me as you please." The third group of words is associated with the concept of service: to serve the Lord. This word speaks of working at the direction of and for the benefit of another, as a servant or slave rather than working for one's own benefit.

The New Testament words offer a similar perspective. The most common word translated as "worship" is *proskuneo* and means to kneel or bow down. Another word that appears often is *latreuo*, which speaks of service to or work for another. The third Greek word that

gets translated as “worship” is *sebomai* and its meaning is much closer to the English “worship”: to revere or adore.

Now we can summarize: worship seems to include an element of seeking for God and praying to Him, an element of submission expressed by kneeling or bowing, a willingness to work to carry out the instructions given to us by God, and an acknowledgment of and respect for His greatness and majesty. We should also now ask: is this what we are actually doing?

When you talk about worship among those in attendance at most Christian churches in America, probably the first thing (and often the primary thing) that comes to mind is music. For many, worship is that special kind of music that is played during “worship services” that makes you feel blessed, comforted, contemplative, or worshipful – it’s music that makes you feel good. The leaders of the church will likely also be able to list other “elements of worship” that contribute to making a complete worship experience; these might include greetings, blessings, prayers, scripture readings, offerings, recitation of creeds, performance of rituals like communion and baptism, and a message, homily, or soliloquy. Are all of these things actually worship?

It is apparent that modern formalized worship involves more than the praying, kneeling, and serving that we saw in our word studies. What about worship in the Bible, did it also include more than bow down, pray, and work? It doesn’t require a great deal of thought nor an intensive search of scripture to discover a larger scope to worship than the few activities we’ve already discussed.

The earliest mention of worship is found in Genesis 22:5 when Abraham said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." Isaac understood what worship meant on this occasion: it meant building an altar and offering a sacrifice to God. This is not the first

time someone worshiped God by bringing Him offerings (remember Cain and Abel in chapter four), but it is the first use of the Hebrew word *shachah* (to bow down) as worship. Hundreds of years later, when Moses revealed to the people of Israel the law of God, offerings and sacrifices were a major component of their worship. You might easily begin to see here a part of what the “service” (Hebrew *abad*) aspect of worship included: the specific detailed instructions for various kinds of offerings and sacrifices, including what kinds, how often, how they must be prepared and presented, and who is allowed to or required to make them.

What other features were included in worship? Look at Psalm 96: singing, proclamation and preaching, lavish praise and adoration, wearing of holy robes, rejoicing, shouting, celebration! And in Psalm 150: dancing and the playing of various musical instruments. Hannah prayed in the tabernacle with weeping, agony, and suffering. Worship in the synagogues of Jesus’ day included common recitation of the “Shema” creed, scripture reading by a worship leader, prayers, and possibly singing.

Given the frequency with which worship was spoken of using some form of the phrase “serve the Lord” it seems wise to think a bit more about what kinds of service, what tasks, we are enjoined to perform.

We’ve already noted that the law of God required a series of offerings and sacrifices from the people of Israel as part of their worship. That same law extended to affairs beyond the walls of the tabernacle or temple. When Israel was called to serve the Lord their submission did not apply only to offerings and prayers once a week in the house of worship, it included loving their neighbors and their enemies, ensuring justice for the poor, orphaned, widowed, and disadvantaged, and it demanded they honor their parents. Serving the Lord, doing His work for His benefit, required complete submission to His will and authority, continuously, all day every day. This was not token observance, the perfunctory performance of a few rituals on special occasions – worship was a constant,

continuous, sun-up to sun-down commitment to obey. Nor is this only the demand of Old Testament law, Jesus said “A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.” He looked at the law and expanded it and intensified it: “do not murder” became “anyone who is angry with a brother will be subjected to judgment.” In short: to serve and worship God is to obey God.

Jewish worship today still requires prayer at the synagogue two or three times a day, with an additional meeting on the Sabbath. Worship is a constant ever-present part of their daily lives. There is a classic story of grace written by and about a poor peasant French man who joined the army when he was young in order to ensure that he got regular meals to eat and a place to sleep. He was injured during his service in the Thirty Years War and subsequently worked for a few years as a footman or valet for a French nobleman. His war injuries left him partially crippled and apparently he was somewhat clumsy and not well suited for domestic service. He described himself as a great awkward fellow who deserved to be punished, so he joined a Carmelite monastery where he was admitted as a lay brother because he was uneducated and could not serve as a monk. The small book “The Practice Of The Presence Of God” by Brother Lawrence describes his life in the monastery: the first fifteen years working in the kitchen, then 25 years as a cobbler repairing the sandals for all the residents of the monastery. But the story is not about cooking and scrubbing and fixing sandals, it describes how, in all of these tasks, he filled every day with a constant sense of the presence of God with him – he spent the whole day, every day in worship, praising and praying through pains and troubles as well as times of pleasure and rest.

Worship, then, is the ascription of worth to God. It is praising and praying, singing and dancing, eating and drinking, working and playing, loving others, and yes, even moaning and groaning in agony to our great God in full confidence of His love and care.

SONGS: “Here I Am To Worship”; “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”; “Come Let Us Worship And Bow Down”

## BULLETIN INSERT

### WORSHIP WORDS

Hebrew: shachah - to bow down, prostrate oneself [172 times]

Hebrew: barak - to kneel; by implication to bless God  
(as an act of adoration) [330 times]

Hebrew: qadad - to bow down [15 times]

Hebrew: cagad - to prostrate oneself (in worship) [4 times]

Hebrew: kara - to bend, kneel, bow, bow down [36 times]

Greek: proskuneo - in the NT by kneeling or prostration to do  
homage (to one) or make obeisance,  
whether in order to express respect or to  
make supplication [60 times]

Hebrew: abad - to work for another, serve another by  
labour [290 times]

Greek: latreuo - to serve, minister to, either to the gods or men  
and used alike of slaves and freemen [21 times]

Greek: sebomai - to revere, to worship [10 times]

Call on the name of the Lord:

Genesis 4:26

Genesis 13:14

Genesis 21:33

Genesis 26:25

1 Kings 18:24

Joel 2:32

Psalms 116:13,17