

A LONG WALK TO WORSHIP
by Leslie Kazarian

CALL TO WORSHIP

Praise the Lord! Praise him, you servants of the Lord; praise the name of the Lord. The Lord's name should be praised now and forever. The Lord's name should be praised from where the sun rises to where it sets. The Lord is supreme over all the nations; his glory reaches to the skies. No one is like the Lord our God, who rules from heaven, who bends down to look at the skies and the earth. The Lord lifts the poor from the dirt and takes the helpless from the ashes. He seats them with princes, the princes of his people. Praise the Lord.
(Psalm 113:1-8, New Century Version)

INVOCATION

God of unfailing love, with confidence we gather to worship you, to praise your holy name, to express to you our trust and confidence in your promise of life anew, through your gift of grace. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Let us hear the Word of God.

God is rich in mercy, and because of his great love for us, he brought us to life with Christ when we were dead because of our sins; it is by grace you are saved. And he raised us up in union with Christ Jesus and enthroned us with him in the heavenly realms, so that he might display in the ages to come how immense are the resources of his grace, and how great his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you are saved through faith; it is not your own doing. It is God's gift, not a reward for work done.
(Ephesians 2:4-9, REB)

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Please pray with me. Lord, may the words of my lips and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Lord and our Redeemer. Amen.

It is really hard for me to write a sermon. I go through that exercise of “Oh my gosh, what Scripture am I going to pick?” After settling on a verse or two – something that *seems* to fit what I may be feeling like talking about – then I have to go and figure out what the scholars say about that Scripture. So I sit at my desk with the commentaries from the library open all around me and read little pieces of each. After a while, I hold my fingers over the keyboard and write what I think I understand about these commentaries.

Next I go to the Internet, that time-sucking machine, and do the horrible thing that you should not do: the Google search. I search on either the Scripture or what I think the theme of the Scripture is, because I’m curious what others have to say about it. Then I set out again to type my thoughts on the Scripture and theme, reworking what I think my understanding is – what I understand to be true. Many times I go off on crazy tangents, getting far off track from the theme or truth within the Scripture, and I end up having to just throw the whole thing into the wastebasket on my computer desktop.

Very quickly I become frustrated and end up taking long walks, thinking about what I should say, hoping I don’t stand up here and appear a total and complete idiot. After several miserable days of this, I do what I should have done from the beginning: I kneel down and I pray. Mostly I pray for help. God knows and I know that these are super-selfish prayers. They are “Please help me write something, God” prayers. Or “Come on, inspire me, Lord!” prayers. Then after a while, the prayers become what they should be: God, not my words, but yours. Lord, what would you have me say so that I might (as the Scripture we just read tells us) say words so people may hear how immense are the resources of your grace, and how great your kindness is to us in Christ?

I am not positive it’s the Spirit when the spark comes, but it sure feels like it’s not coming from this wee brain of mine when, at about the third day at the keyboard – while I am sitting there hearing

the hours tick away and watching the sun rise and set, too quickly drawing close to this day when I am going to stand at this podium – something hits me and stirs me. So here it is: Why are we here today? Why are we at church this morning? Are we here to hear this wonderful choir and this beautiful music? Are we here to escape the world around us for an hour or so this week? Are we here to see and visit with our friends who call this their church? Are we here so our friends can see *us* – that we came this morning?

Or are we here to worship God? Why was this sanctuary built? Was it built so a community of like-minded people could come together each week and hear a Scripture lesson and talk about it among themselves? Or maybe this place is here to provide a religious education to our children – to give our kids some kind of ammunition to fight against the world outside. Or is the sanctuary here to honor God? Are we here to give honor and thanks to God?

Why am I here on Sundays? Why are you?

Don't get me wrong. All the reasons I just mentioned are the reasons I have come to church for twenty-five years. Of course, for the first thirteen years of my life, the reason I went into the sanctuary each Sunday was because my parents told me I had to. And as the middle child and being ever-so-quick to please, I mostly obeyed them. Maybe each of *you* listened to your Sunday School teacher or, for those of you who grew up Catholic – and I know who you are by the guilty expression on your face – maybe you took your catechism very seriously, but I did not. I went through the motions and got all the degrees of Holy Communion and Confirmation, but never once did I ask myself: Why am I doing any of it? What does any of it mean?

After Confirmation, I promptly stopped going to church. For my parents, I am sure they felt they had accomplished what they had promised the church they would do – raise their child in the Catholic tradition – so they stopped requiring me to attend mass. I fell away from the discipline of attending on Sundays, as some of us do in our late teens and probably for most of our twenties. But I soon realized that I needed Jesus to be the friend I had heard about at CCD (I guess it was not all a waste of time, Mom), and for the last twenty-five years or so, I have been coming to church.

I say “coming to church” because I cannot say now that I was coming to *worship*. Until recently, I had not really taken the “worship” part of church seriously. I had not intentionally set out to worship God

on Sundays. In fact, I'm not even sure I knew what worship *meant*. I'm serious; I did not know what it really meant to worship God in my heart until about a couple of months ago.

I came to church for all the reasons I listed above, and you know what? Those reasons got me a long way on what I call this Long Walk to Worship. Most of you know that I only live a couple of blocks from here, but boy has it been a long walk to get here. It's been a fifty-three-year walk. I know some of you got to worship a whole lot quicker. Either your gratitude for God came sooner or you understood the Scripture deeper at an earlier age. But for me, it's taken a bit of living to come to the point of worshipping God with abandon, with my whole heart, and with pure gratitude.

Growing up, we never spoke about worship; we just had to go. No one ever explained to me why. And even after being here in this fabulous teaching church, I missed the messages that may have shaken me to my knees. Maybe I was not ready to hear. Maybe I have been on Easy Street for so long that I have not been able to receive the gifts. Who knows, and who cares? The point is – and this is part of the lesson I was not going to get from the commentaries or the Internet – I have never worshipped God. I never even knew what it was.

So what is it to worship? What IS worship? Some synonyms for “worship” are “honor” and “praise,” but for me, these words are vague also. So I asked myself: What does it mean to do honor to something or to give something praise? And I have come to think of it like this – and this is a really lame example, but consider the source: It's like when I get a new car. I love that car. I tell everyone about the car, how wonderful it is, how comfortable it is, how safe I feel in it. And when I drive the car, I park it in the best spots, to be sure that it does not get scratched or bumped. I think about the car *a lot*. I want to be sure it stays like new for as long as I am able.

This, I realize, is like honor and praise. I give the car its due by caring for it. I hold it in my thoughts every day. And sometimes it even becomes more important than my own comfort, especially on the days when I'm wearing heels and I need to go Target and have to park my car way at the back of the lot so it doesn't get bumped. I love the car deep in my heart. I am so happy to have this car, and I am grateful that it's reliable. And because I am so happy and grateful, I honor it.

You get what I'm trying to say, right? Maybe there are things in your life you worship in this way.

Now, I have not been totally clueless for twenty-five years. I know there are biblical examples and even some actual commandments from God that tell us we *should* worship. In Deuteronomy, it clearly states that those who follow the Lord must worship according to his ways. And of course, Psalm 113, which I read this morning as our Call to Worship. In Psalm 96, it says: “*Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!*” And we are clearly commanded to worship God in First Chronicles: “*Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering and come before him! Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness.*” (I Chronicles 16:29) And from the New Testament, John tells us the Father is seeking such people to worship him.

I have been trying to be obedient to these teachings. It’s just that for so long I did not really know what was being asked of me. What does worshipping God *look* like? What does it *feel* like? And why do I even *need* to worship him? Well, recently it was revealed to me. During a Thursday morning study group, after we read the Scripture I chose to highlight this morning, something broke open in me. Something new came from the words. They became vivid and alive. Reading Scripture does that. It helps us grow and change. And sometimes it provides answers to questions that we did not even know we had. This was one of those times.

I have to confess: It was not even the Scripture itself that smacked me in the face that morning. It was an off-handed comment that someone in the room made after we read the Scripture aloud. That comment made these verses come alive: “*God is rich in mercy, and because of his great love for us, he brought us to life with Christ when we were dead because of our sins; it is by grace you are saved. And he raised us up in union with Christ Jesus and enthroned us with him in the heavenly realms, so that he might display in the ages to come how immense are the resources of his grace, and how great his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you are saved through faith; it is not your own doing. It is God’s gift, not a reward for work done.*”

All of these things are great and true, and for many years I have intellectually understood that this is where we arrive at that *amazing* grace that everybody speaks about. But it was the comment someone made – “So now what are you going to do about it?” – that stopped my heart. I do not think the words were meant to be said aloud; it was almost like someone was talking to themselves. But the words were loud and clear to me.

So now what are you going to do about it, Leslie?

In as many times as I have read this letter to the Ephesians or someone has preached God's grace, I never "got it." I never got it enough to take it into worship.

Do *you* get it? Has it sunk into your soul? If not, maybe the following little visualization can help. It has helped me greatly.

Imagine ...

You climb the steps to the great oaken doors of the marble-floored hall. Tall men in spotless uniforms swing the soaring doors open and reveal a long, pillared room. The room is almost entirely empty except for the raised platform at the end, upon which sits a massive throne. The throne is not ornate, but it is made from stone and metal, and it sits immovable.

Yet you hardly notice the throne because of the imposing figure of the one who sits upon it. His face is steady and his eyes seem to see into every part of the room at the same time. He is robed with a splendid robe and crowned with a golden crown encrusted with jewels, yet even the clothing and the jewels do not distract from that all-seeing, all-knowing face.

Suddenly you notice that there are others with you – men and women who visibly tremble as they and you approach the throne. "Stop," says a voice deep and strong. You realize it is the first sound you have noticed since entering the chamber. "You all have broken the law – my law," the king and judge continues. "I know when and where and why. I know how and with whom. No offense has escaped my notice, and no violation ignored. What have you to say?"

There is a moment of absolute silence. Then the people around you begin speaking all at once. "Surely," one says, "when compared to all the other lawbreakers, I am far from the worst!" Some beg. Others, though their voices are cracking, are attempting to sound confident and call out, "I have not broken your law – not once! Or at least not in any particularly awful way. I am on your side!" Others say, "Are you not impressed with all I have done for you?" Some are even listing all the good things they have done and trying to show with symbols and gestures that those good things outnumber any bad.

It is a pointless effort, however. The moment anyone enters the judgment hall of the king, they instantly know that there is no escape. The best-rehearsed excuses sound flat and empty, even in the ears of the teller. Before this throne, one finds only justice.

The king turns his head and looks directly at you. His face changes noticeably. Your mind is full of the many times you have broken his laws. You know your own guilt and you know your guilt is known. There are no chances to escape, even if someone could ever muster up the courage to try.

The king is obviously waiting for you to speak. So you clear your throat, lift up your eyes to meet his, and speak the first word that had entered your mind the first moment you caught sight of him:

“Father ...”

This story is the best way I can describe what I finally understand. I do not know who the author is, but it sure hits home. Like that off-handed comment during my Thursday morning study, this brings me to my knees with gratitude and praise. This brings me to worship.

The comment brought this story that I had heard so many years ago into focus. I can imagine looking into the face of the king, knowing how poorly I have served him. Yet for some reason, I see a loving and wholly accepting Father. My heart has broken open, and I can accept this wonderful gift – this gift of mercy. I can trust God’s grace.

And I am freed from the slow and agonizing death of carrying around all the guilt of my inevitable sin. I am alive and unburdened.

So what am I going to do about it? The only answer I come up with is WORSHIP. The only answer I have is to honor and praise and give the Lord thanks. *That* is what I am going to do about it, now that I can see clearly what God has done for me – for us.

I am going to worship you, God.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we cannot give you enough gratitude, enough praise. We can only try to accept the amount of love that you are trying to help us understand and that you are showering upon us. Lord, open our hearts more and more to you, as we pray these words that Jesus taught us to pray: *“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”*