

seeking



WORSHIP

LOOKING FOR GOD IN EVERY AREA OF OUR LIVES

by Brian McCann

A Discipleship Resource of the Brethren in Christ Church

BRIAN MCCANN is a freelance writer. He lives with his wife and daughter in Kansas City, Mo.

BIC CORE VALUE: WORSHIPING GOD

WE VALUE HEARTFELT WORSHIP THAT IS GOD-HONORING, SPIRIT-DIRECTED,
AND LIFE-CHANGING.



Session 1: What does worship mean?

There's a story by George MacDonald called *The Princess and the Goblin* about a young princess who lives in a countryside manor house. The house has many stairways and upper floors, and on one particular journey through these passages Princess Irene discovers a room in a high tower where her great-great-grandmother lives. Later in the story, Irene tries a number of times to return to see her great-great-grandmother again but she succeeds only occasionally. No matter how she tries to remember to the pathway or make a map, it's as if the corridors are always changing. She tries and tries to find her ancient relative, but trying isn't the only factor in actually getting to her.

We have a similar experience with finding God. Sometimes we encounter Him while singing a particular song, but when we sing the song next time—it's not the same. Sometimes we experience God at a particular church, so we start attending there because He seems to really be present, but eventually we realize that it's not like it used to be, so we set off to find another church where God may be.

But there is no one reliable way to encounter God. Worship is about us trying to encounter God. At times He allows our attempts to find their way to His tower room, but at other times our attempts are just attempts. This is not failure. Worship is not about us getting what we want (an encounter with God). It's about God. God is worthy to be worshiped, and our songs and other forms of worship honor Him even if we don't always get what we want. And if we did always get what we want, worship would become nothing more than a way to manipulate God.

1. What do you do to seek God?

2. What do you definitely not do to seek God?

Learning from Scripture

- ➔ “But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 4:29).
- ➔ “Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice. Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always. Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced” (1 Chr. 16:10–12).
- ➔ “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near” (Isa. 55:6).
- ➔ “And the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, ‘Let us go at once to entreat the Lord and seek the Lord Almighty. I myself am going’” (Zech. 8:21).
- ➔ “After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name” (Acts 15:16–17).
- ➔ “God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:27).

3. What do these Scriptures suggest about God’s presence with and nearness to believers?

4. How do these verses compare or contrast with the idea that God is fully present with believers at all times, end of story?

Every person is created with an innate need to worship, and worship practices can be found in every culture in every corner of the globe, but the Bible makes very clear that the Lord God is the only actually suitable One to be worshipped. If it's not about God, then it's not really worship. That's idolatry.

If worship is foremost about God, then it is only secondly (and a remote second at that) about us. The nature of worship is not defined by which kinds of songs we like or if we raise our hands in the air or if we dance or if our church looks a certain way. Worship is about God. It is about encountering God on His own territory and on His own terms.

5. What images, sights, or smells come to mind when you think about worship?

6. Are these elements more communal or individual in nature? Are they in a setting with a crowd of people, just one other person, or no one at all? Why do you think that is?

When I was in grad school, it took my wife and I about a year to realize that we were playing hide-and-seek. We lived on campus, and I would tell her in case she needed me that I was going to class, taking a break, going to the library, then coming home. After a while we realized that she never needed me for anything immediate during those times. The real reason I told her my plans was so that she could come find me. I wanted to be found. I wanted to be sought out, tracked down. More than that, I wanted to be worth the time and energy it took to do the seeking.

In worship we try to find God. Right from the beginning we worship Him in the very realization that He is worth finding, worth seeking. We use various

forms and settings to find God—in public worship at church, in private worship at home, through prayer, through Bible-reading. And sometimes we do find Him. And sometimes we don't. Regardless of whether we have that end encounter with God, we have worshiped Him the entire time we were trying to find Him. Seeking Him is worship.

Praise to the Lord the Almighty

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King
of creation!

O my soul, praise Him, for He is thy
health and salvation!

All ye who hear, now to His temple
draw near;

Praise Him in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, Who over all things so
wondrously reigneth,

Shelters thee under His wings, yea, so
gently sustaineth!

Hast thou not seen how thy desires ever
have been

Granted in what He ordaineth?

Praise to the Lord, Who doth prosper thy
work and defend thee;

Surely His goodness and mercy here daily
attend thee.

Ponder anew what the Almighty can do,
If with His love He befriend thee.



Session 2: Encountering God in public

Worship is about encountering God, coming face-to-face with the Lord Almighty. Often this experience is terrifying. People in the Bible usually thought they would die from being in His presence. In worship we encounter true reality, that is, true God. As Richard Foster says, “To worship is to experience Reality, to touch Life. It is to know, to feel, to experience the resurrected Christ.” Moreover, worship is a true connection between the real God and our real selves. There are no facades or masks or holding back in true worship.

Learning from Scripture

➡ “When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the Lord, he exclaimed, ‘Ah, Sovereign Lord! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!’ But the Lord said to him, ‘Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die.’” (Judg. 6:22–23).

1. Have you ever felt fear at being in God’s presence? If so, what was it like? If not, why not?

It was in public that ancient Israel used to gather together at the Tabernacle to worship God, who was surrounded by dark cloud and thunder. It was in larger family gatherings that the Israelites gathered for the Passover feast before they were freed to leave Egypt. It was in public in the Temple courts that Jesus and His disciples met to worship God, and the disciples continued to gather in groups after Jesus had ascended to Heaven.

Throughout the Bible, the normal setting for worship is in public. We, in our individualized culture today, prefer more private settings where no one can see us. Sometimes we call it an attempt at humility. However, the Bible makes clear that anything worth doing is worth doing in public. It was when people began worshipping in private—at secluded altars among the hills with pagan gods—that signaled a nation was going astray.

2. What emotions do you feel when you imagine yourself worshipping?

3. How do you feel about coming face-to-face with God while surrounded by people?

Encountering God touches us at many levels of our selves—our thoughts, our feelings, our senses, our bodies. In order to have heartfelt, genuine worship, we’ve got to be willing to lay it all out and let God reach us however He wants to. Some of us don’t feel right about crying in church or going to the front to make a special prayer request. It could be humiliating to do that in front of so many people, we think. However, we should remember two things:

- ➔ It is not humiliating to be yourself with your family. At church you don’t cry among strangers; you cry among your brothers and sisters, people who themselves have been raw before God and others. They give you strength and comfort, not humiliation.

- ➔ If God is worth seeking—worth even going to church for—then He is worth crying for. If you’ve done so much to find God, why would you turn back at this last step?

Now, clearly, the Bible also has a place for private worship (more on that later), but the standard setting for worshiping God is to be in public with others who also worship Him. The Old Testament reminds us not to forsake public worship gatherings (Ex. 12:16), and the New Testament encourages believers to keep meeting together even if they are facing open persecution (Heb. 10:25). We don’t need to choose between public and private worship. They are both helpful and meaningful, and we are set free to experience them both. They are simply different forms of worship, just as singing is different than listening to a sermon. When we worship together we gain a spiritual fire that we otherwise would not experience. Isaac Pennington says that when people gather to worship, “they are like a heap of fresh and burning coals warming one another as a great strength and freshness and vigor of life flows into all.”

4. Read Romans 6:17–21. What does this passage say about how “free” people really are?

5. What role do other people play in your worship?

6. How do you help others to worship?

We Gather Together

*We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing;
He chastens and hastens His will to make known;
The wicked oppressing now cease from distressing,
Sing praises to His name: He forgets not His own.*

*Beside us to guide us, our God with us joining,
Ordaining, maintaining His Kingdom divine;
So from the beginning the fight we were winning:
Thou, Lord, wast at our side, All glory be Thine!*

*We all do extol Thee, Thou Leader triumphant,
And pray that Thou still our Defender wilt be.
Let Thy congregation escape tribulation:
Thy Name be ever praised! O Lord, make us free!*

Since worship is a real encounter between believers and God—a “heart-to-heart,” you might say—there’s nothing to prove. We don’t enter worship to convince God of our loyalty or love for Him. He knows our love and loyalty and everything else already. We don’t enter worship to build up a body of evidence that will give us sway with Him later (“Lord, I’ve come to church every week for 32 years, so please give me ____.”) God already wants to give you everything you need and ask for (2 Pet. 1:3, Jn. 14:14). You have nothing to prove in worship; you have only to open yourself to a true encounter with God.



Session 3: Focusing on God in Private

We explored in the previous session the value of seeking God together and how that is to be a heartfelt experience involving our entire selves. But we don’t need to seek God only while we’re gathered in the same place—in fact, we do ourselves a disservice if we look at it that way. We can also worship the Lord in private. Jesus sought the Father while by Himself in the countryside or in the wilderness, and He encouraged His followers to seek God while no one was looking (Mt. 6:5–6)

1. Have you ever worshiped by yourself? How?

Prayer is probably the best example of a private worship activity. In prayer you seek to encounter God and to listen to Him or speak to Him or simply enjoy His presence.

Of course, prayer is also practiced in group settings but with a different form or goal. Group prayer is usually about petitioning God on behalf of those in need both in the congregation and in the world. This form of prayer is certainly a valuable activity, but it focuses more on speaking to God, making requests known to Him. Private prayer is more personal, allowing the individual opportunity to hear as well as to speak.

Private prayer also has broader forms than public prayer. In church, either one person prays on behalf of the group or various members speak out short prayers to voice their concerns or needs. These prayers are limited by time (there's a whole service to enjoy, after all), method (speaking), and form (petition).

When we are alone with God, He sets us free to pray however and about whatever and for however long we want. We can:

- ➔ think our prayers
- ➔ speak our prayers
- ➔ write our prayers in a journal
- ➔ draw a picture of our prayer
- ➔ sing our prayers

2. What different forms of prayer could you practice this week?

Some other ways to worship in private:

- ➔ Sing. You don't have to be a great singer to worship God in this way. Do you remember when the Bible said that God sees the heart of people, not just their outsides? That goes for singing too.
- ➔ Read the Bible. In church we often get only a few verses per week, but at home, reading a few chapters a day, you could read all of Isaiah in two weeks.
- ➔ Experience nature. You can't really know a musician without listening to their music, and you can't really know God without looking at His creation.
- ➔ Create something. Write a poem, paint a picture, make a collage.
- ➔ Have a spiritual conversation with someone else. I know this may not look like private worship if you're not absolutely alone, but you're not in a group either. The practice of having "spiritual friendships" is a long and honored one in the Christian tradition.

- ➔ Fast. Perhaps from food, maybe TV, whatever. The point is that you are putting something aside in order to seek God.
- ➔ Be silent. We hardly ever see this in public for more than 60 seconds. Make a silent time so you can practice listening for God and hearing Him when He speaks.
- ➔ Transcribe. Copy out a psalm or a chapter from Proverbs or a Gospel. Often the writing out of words we have heard many times helps us to slow down to hear them more clearly.
- ➔ Have fun. Jesus hung out at weddings and week-long feasts

3. What are some other creative ways to worship God?

The thing to remember with private worship is that you are set free to fully encounter God in whatever ways are most helpful to you or most relate to your relationship with God. Remember that when the apostle Paul tells a certain church how to use the gift of tongues, he says that in public the person speaking in tongues needs an interpreter because this worship is for the group, but when alone, that person with the gift of tongues can speak as much as he or she wants because it's just for him or her.

As for the worship activities that are more artistic, please remember that you don't have to be a professional artist to glorify God. If you were making art to hang in a church sanctuary or if you were going to sing in front of the church every week, quality would become an issue. But you're not. The point here is that you are offering God everything you possibly can. You're saying to Him that you will seek Him in whatever ways you have to to find Him—He's that worth it. It doesn't matter if you can't match pitch; God likes to hear the devotion in your voice.

4. What do you feel is the most valuable worship gift you can give to God? Why is it this one?

5. What do you feel is the least valuable worship gift you can give to God? Why is it this one?

Even when you worship alone, you worship in community. When you hum a hymn tune in the car, read quietly, or take a walk by yourself, you are not alone. You are contributing your voice to the chorus of voices arising around the world from all believers who are praising God. Worship is not limited to a physical reality. Jesus himself says that this place or that place makes no difference in true worship (Jn. 4:21). Your heart is an instrument that can be played whenever and wherever you are, and all of that spiritual music ascends to God who smiles when He hears it.

Take my Life and Let it Be

Take my life, and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands, and let them move
At the impulse of Thy love;
Take my feet, and let them be
Swift and beautiful for Thee,
Swift and beautiful for Thee.

Take my voice and let me sing
Always only for my King;
Take my lips, and let them be
Filled with messages from Thee,
Filled with messages from Thee.

Take my silver and my gold,
Not a mite would I withhold:
Take my intellect, and use
Ev'ry pow'r as Thou shalt choose,
Ev'ry pow'r as Thou shalt choose.

Take my will, and make it Thine;
It shall be no longer mine:
Take my heart, it is Thine own;
It shall be Thy royal throne,
It shall be Thy royal throne.

Take my love, my Lord, I pour
At Thy feet its treasure store:
Take myself, and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee,
Ever, only, all for Thee.



Session 4: Lifestyle worship

In previous sessions we've explored a variety of activities that people can engage in—whether together or alone—in order to seek God. In addition to these particular methods, there are also some overarching choices or patterns that can make worship a part of your lifestyle and not merely a thing you do at certain times in your life. Author Richard Foster recommends preparing our hearts so that they're always ready to hear from God. Foster himself spent a year exploring “how to live with a perpetual openness to Jesus as my present Teacher. I determined to learn his vocabulary: is he addressing me through those singing birds or that sad face? I sought to allow him to move through every action: my fingers while writing, my voice while speaking.” A worshipful lifestyle is one that honors the various ways that God speaks to us. (know when/if it pleases God to buy a quality piano or painting, or have a feast?)

Honoring God's time

Just as we learn about God by experiencing nature as His creation, we can also worship Him by honoring the time He made, especially the seasonal and liturgical calendars. There is a reason that Easter is celebrated in springtime. We are to look at the risen Christ and at the rest of the world (at least in the northern hemisphere) rising from its wintry slumber. In the fall it is worshipful to watch the geese fly south for the winter and think of the transitory nature of our lives, that we might be uprooted at any time. It is worship to watch rain while meditating on the ways that Jesus washes away our sins and the Holy Spirit brings life. We can watch flowers bloom throughout the year, realizing anew that God loves beauty and shares it extravagantly. The passage of time provides many ways for us to worship God.

The liturgical calendar—the schedule of holidays and church seasons, such as Christmas and Lent—also provides a useful way of living life worshipfully. Lent (the weeks preceding Easter) and Advent (the weeks preceding Christmas) are meant to be preparatory times, times when we get ready for experiencing God. Many people get frustrated because they

sit down to pray once and hear nothing from God, so they decide that prayer doesn't work or that God doesn't want to speak to them. But no one learns to read in one sitting. No one rides a bike the first time they sit on one. Spiritual activities also require training, and we have seasons built into our church year specifically to train us to more fully encounter God.

1. What is your favorite time of year? Why do think God likes that time, too?

2. What is your favorite church holiday or season?

Honoring other people

An often-neglected avenue of discerning God's voice is to hear from your community. Jesus was very clear that He lives within His believers, so we should not be surprised to find God trying to speak to us through our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

Listen to the people around you. Ask other believers for their input when you have a difficult decision to make or when you have a burning spiritual question. When something burdensome happens in your life, tell someone! Fight back against the stoic individualism of our age, and embrace Jesus' prayer that His followers would all be united.

But it's not just about listening to other believers. Bringing food to the homebound is one of the most worshipful acts a person can perform. If you don't have an answer to a particular question that someone asks you, share your own struggle to get to an answer and where you are with it now. You may feel unqualified to give an opinion to someone who asks for it, but you are not forcing them to whatever action you suggest. You are opening your mind and your life experiences to their view, and God often uses that as a way to reach people.

Learning from Scripture

- ➔ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me’” (Mt. 25:37–40).

Of course, to be able to hear from your fellow believers, you’ll probably need to make some time for them. Remember that worship is about creating a place and time where you can meet God. If there is no time in your schedule for a surprise visit from a friend, then there is no time in your schedule for a surprise visit from your friend Jesus. And if you’re too booked to help another member of your community, then you are blocking one of the ways that God could meet with that person.

Honoring yourself

I’ve learned to interrupt right away when my wife starts talking badly about herself. “Hey,” I say, “that’s my wife you’re talking about. You are worth honoring.”

If we say in church that you should forgive people and love people and be kind to people, then you should also forgive and love and be kind to yourself. I’ve known a number of people who treat themselves so badly that if their treatment were directed at someone else, they would be charged with abuse. There is no double standard about inward and outward kindness. If you hold back saying mean things to others, please hold back from saying mean things to yourself. As much as you can say that God loves those other people, He loves you too.

3. What have you had to forgive yourself for?

4. List some things that you like about yourself

Learning from Scripture

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:1–2).

Besides taking care of your soul, remember to take of your body too. Your body is God’s creation—a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19–20)—and it is an act of worship to maintain that temple. I could list things that sound like an exercise brochure, but I’m not going to do that here. I’m just going to mention two things about taking care of your body.

- ➔ Rest. Do it. It’s almost impossible to experience God while you’re struggling to stay awake in church or in your private prayer time.
- ➔ Listen to your body. If you’re constantly stressed about work, how will you worship God as your provider? If you don’t learn to listen to your own body (to discern when you are tired, hungry, sick, angry, etc.) and you’re with your body 24 hours a day, how will you learn to listen for God through other people?

5. List several things you currently do to care for your body. If it’s a short list (fewer than five items), list some things you could do to care for your body.

Simple Gifts

‘Tis the gift to be simple,
‘tis the gift to be free.
‘Tis the gift to come down
where we ought to be.
And when we find ourselves
in the place just right,
‘Twill be in the valley
of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend
we shall not be ashamed.
To turn, turn
will be our delight,
‘Till by turning, turning
we come round right.



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Office of Communications

431 Grantham Road

PO Box A

Grantham, PA 17027

www.bic-church.org

biccomm@messiah.edu

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