

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S. LAMPEL

Ruminations

There can be days—if not *every* day—when even believers justified in Christ can feel too soiled by their ever-present flesh and surroundings to approach a holy God. We dwell in a fallen world, and, over time, we can permit it to get too close.

Our God is longsuffering, but He hates hypocrisy and bad manners. There are times when a thorough cleansing is required, inside and out, to shed whatever filth we have picked up from this world. There are times when it is necessary for us to reorient our perspective, our vision, our mind to get us back to true North, and reestablish communion with our God and Savior.

Then we will be ready to truly worship Him in spirit and truth.

A Good Hosing Off

Dear God,

It has been a long, dry winter down here, but word has it that we are to get our first, substantial spring rains this week and perhaps the next.

It's a good thing, because we all could use a bath.

I realize that, being all-powerful and all-knowing, You certainly *can* keep up with the latest goings-on down here, but do You bother? Have You been reading the news lately? Have You been keeping up with things?

Sunday night they held the 78th Annual Academy Awards in Los Angeles. Some of us were hoping that one of the five films up for Best Picture would be *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*—say “Hey” to Mr. Lewis for me, will You?—but it didn't make the cut. Even though the movie was well made, very popular, and is still raking in the big bucks, I guess the Academy didn't deem it worthy. Instead, they nominated a movie about two homosexual sheep-boys, another about a homosexual writer, one about how Jews are as bad as Arab terrorists, one about how communists *aren't* bad at all, and one about rampant racism in the bowels of urban despair. The one about rampant racism in the bowels of urban despair won. Tell Mr. Lewis that we're really sorry, but we didn't have a vote.

And, oh yes, did You hear which *song* won this year? This is good—well, really not. Even in my brief span of years I can remem-

ber Best Song Oscars for “Three Coins in the Fountain,” “Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing,” “Moon River,” and “Born Free.” Well, this year's winner was “It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp,” which contains lyrics so profane that they had to be changed for the television broadcast—and even the ones they left in I wouldn't repeat to You. They may not be up there with You, but just in case they are, pass along our apologies to Jule Styne and Sammy Cahn.

Without a doubt You surely must have the best television reception of anyone (talk about your High Definition!), but I wouldn't blame You if You never watched the news. Though I prefer to stay informed about my world, it has become a painful occupation weeding out the stray needles of truth buried in the vast haystacks of lies. And on those rare occasions when the reportage does *not* consist of bald-faced falsehoods, the weight of that which is purposely omitted is sufficient to tip the television set onto its side. Usually the left side.

As You are one who stands outside of Time as we know it, God, I'm not sure how You regard history. But for us it is mostly linear, following a systematic progression with one event following another. It is, for the most part, well-documented, and (in most places) freely available to all. The historical facts are out there about nations, conflict, political intrigue, geography, wars and their aftermath. With that record in the public domain, it is hard not to conclude that those who report today's news come to

The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God,”

They are corrupt, and have committed abominable injustice;

There is no one who does good.

God has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men

To see if there is anyone who understands,

Who seeks after God.

Every one of them has turned aside; together they have become corrupt;

There is no one who does good, not even one.

Psalms 53:1-3

their job with a clear and obvious agenda—and, oddly, an agenda not shared by most in their audience. Like the purveyors of Hollywood’s “entertainment,” the news establishment seems bent on convincing the rest of us that we are little more than blithering idiots. They happily ignore the fact that, like them, we all have access to the historical information that easily proves *them* to be the idiots! It is enough to leave one scratching one’s head.

You’ve left us in a funny world, God. We read Your word, we listen to Your Spirit, then we look around our temporal habitation and wonder out loud, paraphrasing the reawakened ballplayer in *Field of Dreams* who had just emerged from the mysterious corn field, “Is this the Twilight Zone?”

When I was in grade school, I learned how to read and write. I learned how to add, subtract, multiply and divide numbers. I learned the history of my state, my country, and the world. And at recess I played tag and dodge ball, shot marbles, and played

on the merry-go-round.

Today’s little children learn how to read and write leftist tracts. They learn how two plus two may equal nine, if that is what they feel in their heart. They learn that history has little to do with facts, but everything to do with perception. They learn that white people and capitalism are bad, that black and brown people are oppressed, and that socialism is good. They learn that sex at any age, with anybody, is okay, and that pregnancy is little more than a temporary inconvenience—and that girls who find themselves with that curable malady should never, ever tell their parents.

Twilight Zone indeed.

As the world emerges from winter it is dirty. City streets are littered with the gritty remnants of sand and salt used in the icy months for traction. Houses and buildings have not been rinsed off for months, and windows have not been scrubbed. Out here in the country, gravel roads are rutted and muddy, and the gravel of the driveway has

been plowed off into the grass along with the snow. Tree limbs that have snapped and plummeted during the rigors of blizzard and wind litter the yard. And we are surrounded by the naked skeletons of dead-looking trees.

It all leaves us feeling like we need a good hosing off.



photo by Lola Guti on Unsplash

God, there are times when Your spring showers seem a manifestation of that grand old Sunday evening hymn.

*“There shall be showers of blessing”—
This is the promise of love;
There shall be seasons refreshing,
Sent from the Saviour above.*

*“There shall be showers of blessing”—
Precious reviving again;
Over the hills and the valleys,
Sound of abundance of rain.*

*Showers of blessing,
Showers of blessing we need;
Mercy-drops 'round us are falling,
But for the showers we plead.*

Daniel W. Whittle

Your heavenly showers remind us of Your copious blessings spilled out on our behalf, Your refreshing presence, Your kind attention.

But sometimes we just need a good hosing off. No matter how hard we try to remain close to You and Your ways, no matter how vigilant we are to avoid the worst of our environment, the clinging filth of this world coats us like mud splattered from a tractor's back tires. It gets on our clothing, in our hair. The stench of it fills our nostrils and clings to everything on us. Like the futility of trying to wash away the smell of skunk with soap and water, our own efforts to clean away the lies and filth of this place are never effective.

God, only You can wash away this world's grime. So please do. Send Your cleansing rains to wash us once again. Bathe us thoroughly in the waters from Your pure, crystalline spring. And, while You're at it, don't forget the scrubbing we need on the inside. You know better than we that not all of our grime comes from without. We also need a good dousing within. ☩

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from Your presence
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation
And sustain me with a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,
And sinners will be converted to You.

Psalm 51:10-13



We all have our deserts.

Some are brief, but excruciatingly painful; some are of longer duration, but relatively painless; and some remain for a lifetime.

Everyone passes through the desert, and fame or wealth or lineage is not sufficient to keep one out: Roosevelt, Churchill, Gandhi, Moses, John the Baptist, the apostle Paul, Jesus—each had to endure time in the desert. Like Paul’s mysterious “thorn in the flesh,” deserts can be defined anew for each person—the only commonality being that the desert is an experience that changes a life: for better or for worse. The desert is a crucible that burns away impurities, a knife that slices off excess, a scorching wind that blows off accumulated dust, a teacher that gives wisdom.

The unbeliever searches for a god who will rescue him *from* the desert, but the Christian knows a God who dwells there. The Christian’s hope is not that God will somehow rescue him from his personal desert; his hope is found in a God who is in his desert.

The Desert of Preparation

Those who rebel against time spent in the desert are invariably those who think themselves perfect without God. It is the wise Christian that acknowledges his lack of wisdom; it is the understanding believer that confesses his lack of patience; it is the true child of God that recognizes the failings of the flesh, and cries out for the painful and comforting correction of a holy Father.

But the desert need not always be a place of discomfort. There is no better place for communion with the Father than the barren wilderness.

For what purpose did Christ go up into the mountain? To teach us that loneliness and retirement is good when we are to pray to God... For the wilderness is the mother of quiet; it is a calm and a harbor, delivering us from all turmoils.

John Chrysostom

In the desert God strips away the many encumbrances we’ve piled upon ourselves. There He happily removes our burdens of self-importance, ego and conceit. There He reduces us to our essential self, bereft of all our comforting insulation—until, finally, we are left with no artificial barrier to stand between us and the Father, and we can at last find utter peace, contentment and joy in His arms.

The Desert of Testing

No matter what some evangelists will tell you, God the Father does not subscribe to the gospel of Success Through Easy Living. Quite to the contrary, His word is replete with stories of people He used mightily only after putting them through some very hard times.

As a child, I would sometimes accompany my dad—an electrician—on the job as he would wire houses. Over time, I learned to be more than a spectator; by observing what he did and the rhythm of his work, I could anticipate his needs and fetch the right tool from his toolbox. Meanwhile, I carefully observed his handiwork, noting how he drilled through the studs to run the heavy wire, how he quickly and efficiently stripped the insulation from the tips of each

wire, how he masterfully bent and shaped the conduit that would house the wires.

Once in awhile, in the middle of his work, my dad would pause and hand me the tool. “You try it,” he would say. With youthful bravado I would perform the task, sloppily, a bit slower than Dad, but it would be accomplished. If he was feeling especially patient, he’d point out how I could have done the job better. But each time I completed the assigned task, he would entrust me with a little more until, eventually, he could trust me to do the job without his supervision. Each test was necessary for each greater level of responsibility.

God’s testing and trials are more easily experienced—even welcomed—when we see them as coming from a loving Father wishing to draw us closer to Him. His ultimate purpose is not pain or discomfort, but a life brought more closely into the pattern of His Son.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying

about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

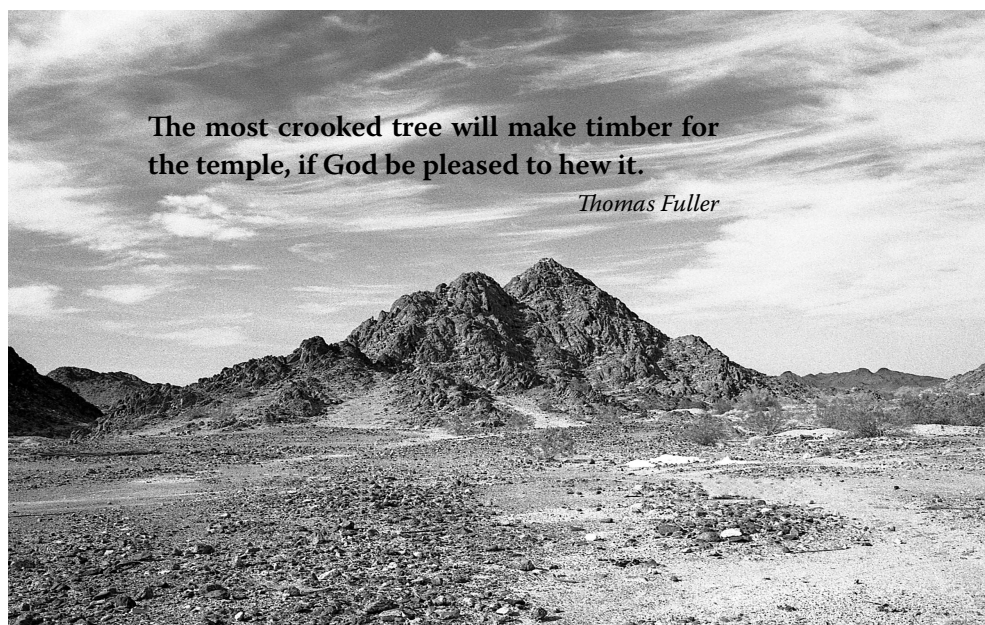
2 Corinthians 4:7-10

The Desert of Correction

The loving parent disciplines the child for the child’s good; even harsh, unflinching discipline is sometimes necessary. But the loving parent is also grieved over the corrective steps, and can’t wait to draw the child back into his arms. Correction is never the goal; correction is only the means to the goal of repentance and change.

There is no more loving parent than our heavenly Father. He never does anything that is not for our own good. While earthly parents may expel their child out of anger or spite or contempt; while earthly parents may punish their child for the sheer delight it brings to their selfish little lives; while earthly parents may brutalize and pummel their child into whimpering submission, even death—while earthly parents may do all this and more, our heavenly parent never treats His child in this manner.

God the Father corrects us out of love—a love superior even to that which we have for ourselves. He disciplines us out of the high standard of His love for us. ❧





A passing phrase

in a book I am currently reading caught my attention and prompted deeper ruminations.

In both human and historical terms [Julius] Caesar stands at the point where the great contrasts of existence meet and combine. Caesar was a man of immense creativity, yet gifted with a penetrating intellect... supreme in will and achievement, imbued with republican ideals, yet born to be a king, a Roman to the core, yet with a vocation to reconcile and unite Roman and Greek traditions within himself and communicate them to a wider world. In all this Caesar is the whole and complete man.

*Theodor Mommsen quoted in
Caesar: A Biography, by Christian Meier*

“...the whole and complete man.”

It reminded me of something the Newsweek writer, Evan Thomas, said in an interview, in June of 2009, about the current resident of the White House:

And he—he has a very different job from—Reagan was all about America, and you talked about it. Obama is “we are above that now.” We’re not just parochial, we’re not just chauvinistic, we’re not just provincial. We stand for something—I mean in a way Obama’s standing above the country, above—above the world, he’s sort of God... He’s going to bring all different sides together... He’s the teacher. He is going to say, “now, children, stop fighting and quarreling with each other.” And he has a kind of a moral authority that he—he can—he can do that.

“He’s sort of God.”

“Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Matthew 5:48

What is it that makes a man or woman what Scripture calls “perfect”—that is, complete or whole? Is it, as with Julius Caesar, creativity, intellect, great achievement on the battle field? Is it being someone, like the journalist’s idealized impression of President Obama, who is not provincial but universal in scope? Is it, as with the descriptions of both men, being someone who can reconcile and unite, bring all sides together under a supposed moral authority?

Just what is it that completes a man?

Jesus, in His sermon on the mount, was updating what Jehovah said to Moses, and recorded in the Torah:

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: “Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.’”

Leviticus 19:1-2

The Lord God then continued itemizing the specifics of His commandments for human behavior under His law. Under that covenant, to be a complete man, one had to meet all the requirements of the Mosaic Law, as specified in the Torah. In other words—impossible.

Under the new covenant, however, the definition of “complete” or “perfect” was

changed. In Christ, believers are made perfect by His blood. And the writer to the Hebrews explains the difference between the two covenants, beginning with the old:

For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near.

Hebrews 10:1

Then the writer shows how things have changed under the new covenant:

By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

Hebrews 10:10-14

*Now I have found the ground wherein
Sure my soul's anchor may remain,
The wounds of Jesus, for my sin
Before the world's foundation slain;
Whose mercy shall unshaken stay,
When heaven and earth are fled away.*

*O Love, Thou bottomless abyss,
My sins are swallowed up in Thee!
Covered is my unrighteousness,
Nor spot of guilt remains on me,
While Jesus' blood, through earth and skies,
Mercy, free, boundless mercy, cries.*

Johann Andreas Rothe

I can't speak for Julius Caesar or President Obama, but *I* am perfect. I am whole and complete. No matter what my wife and friends may tell you, I am absolutely perfect.

This wasn't accomplished because of my superlative creativity or intellect, nor by my victorious campaigns on the battlefield. Frankly, I *am* rather provincial: I think America has it all over Europe, thank you very much. Neither would I say I am any great shakes when it comes to unifying disparate parties, and I make no claim to any vaulted moral authority.

So how is it I can so confidently claim the mantle of perfection?

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

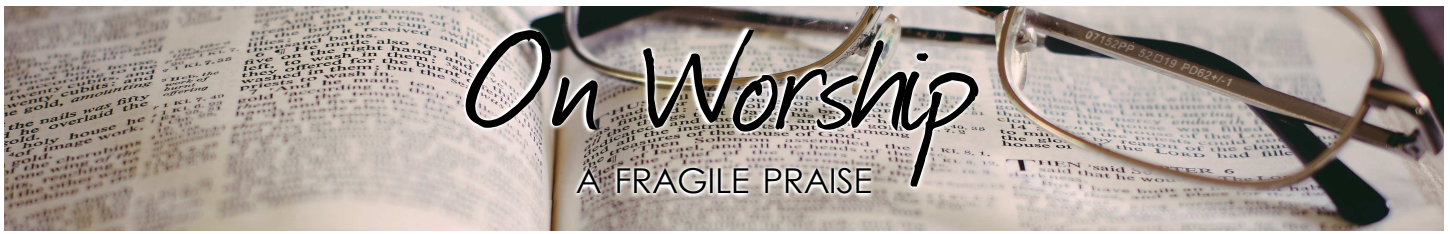
Romans 8:1

Because I am in Christ, when the ultimate Authority looks at me, He sees not my failings, my weaknesses, my bent toward straying from His path. He sees not those times I was unfair or judgmental toward a brother.

No, when God looks at me He sees not my gross imperfections, but the singular perfection of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Because I am in Him. ☘





Sunday last

we visited a church in which the morning service was given over to a concert by two singers. Pretty standard fare for these times: young, grating, over-amplified voices arm-twisting us “into the Spirit”; forcing the congregants’ approval by use of the ubiquitous “Amen?”; their set populated with repetitive choruses of doctrine lighter than air. All right, so far we can agree to disagree. We can chalk it all up to different worship styles, different musical tastes, different ways for earnest believers to connect with their God.

More troublesome, however, was the fact that during a Sunday morning worship hour, in what was billed as a “conservative” Baptist church, we were not once invited to open our Bibles. My copy of God’s word remained in my hand but unopened for the entire time we were in attendance. Neither did the resident pastor or either of the performers make any reference to God’s word.

Is it possible to worship God without even an oblique reference to His written revelation? Or is it enough that the choruses we sing lift a three-word phrase from the Psalms and repeat it twenty times?

Here. Right here in my hands. Right here on the thin pages between the black leather covers. This is substance, the reality and foundation of our faith. This is the one, tangible piece of God upon which we can establish and practice our faith—the only part of God we poor earthbound souls can hold in our hands. Is it possible to worship without it?

The woman said to Him, “Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fa-

thers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

John 4:19-2

Driving home from that Sunday morning “service,” I pondered the whys and wherefores of my response to the previous hour. Was the Spirit actually present, but His ministry to me squelched by my predilection for and anticipation of a different worship style? Was everyone else truly worshipping, and only I the odd one out? Was I correct that a critical component of worship had been omitted—or was it just my latent traditionalism rearing its unsightly visage?

My conclusion was that in those times when I have truly and deeply worshiped “in spirit and truth” it has been worship based on and fed by the powerful, moving truth of God’s word. Some times it was God’s word spoken or silently read—when, for example, a speaker so movingly explained the word that my spirit was powerfully joined to God’s, or when in my own private moments

God's word had supernaturally lifted off the printed page to sear my heart. At other times it was God's word put to music. Music can be a strong and substantial vehicle for communion with God; heaven itself surely must be filled with its strains. But simplistic, repetitive music meant only to force us into a prefabricated swoon is not that substantial vehicle. It is plastic. It is insincere. It is immodest.

Jesus instructed the woman at the well that God-honoring worship is that which is based on truth. For the Christian there is only one truth. It is absolute. It is settled. It is God's truth revealed in His word.

The two components of Christ's authentic worship form a synergetic whole. Because it is authored, energized, and revealed by the Holy Spirit, God's word itself is "Spirit filled." Without the ministry of the Spirit in the individual believer, the Bible is little more than black ink on white paper. The work of the Holy Spirit is essential. Thus it is possible for that same Spirit to reveal God's truth to the believer without the person actually cracking open the pages of his or her leather-bound tome. It is true that the Spirit can so inculcate God's words that they need not be reread each time from the printed page.

But the believer's life—and, more specifically, the believer's worship—is colored by the hard reality that he is yet an imperfect being who dwells in an imperfect land. Truth—God's truth—must continually be referenced and ingested for it to take hold in a believer's life to the extent that God intended. And worship that fails to reference God's word, relying, instead, on simple-minded catch phrases and emotion, is fragile and insipid.

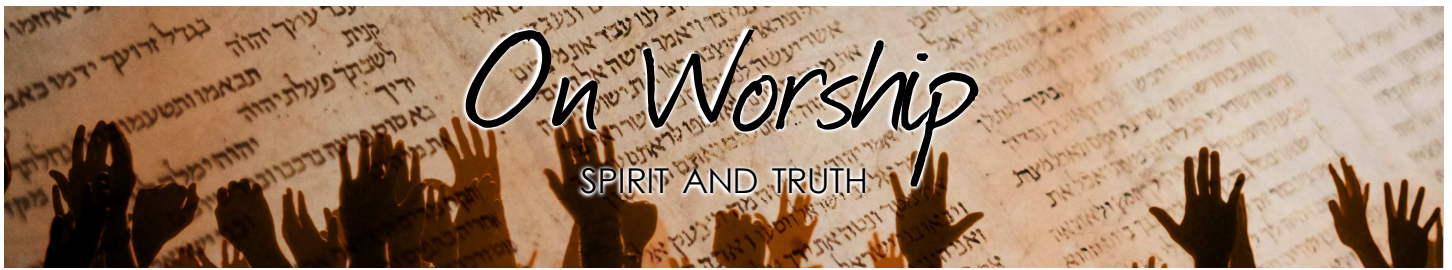
It is too easy for even the most dedicated Christian to be lulled into complacency, thinking the truth he ingested several

weeks earlier remains full-bodied and accurate in his memory. But then he joins in the singing of a chorus projected on the wall, and fails to notice that the lyrics are not faithful to Scripture. Without realizing the inaccuracy, he finds himself unwittingly singing to God an untruth—words or a concept not found in His word.

Years ago there was a parishioner who would quite often challenge the music minister on the words of one or more of the hymns used in a worship service. A friend, he would sidle up to the music minister after the service, crack open his hymnal, and request a ruling on a questionable phrase. And the leader would have to explain to the parishioner's satisfaction, or admit that the hymn text was in error.

To the best of my knowledge, this music minister (with whom I worked closely) never resented this third degree, but, for two reasons, welcomed such interrogations. First, this told him that, unlike so many in the congregation, his friend was actually paying attention to the words that had been selected for that Sunday's worship. He was being an active participant in the process. Second, the music minister welcomed the goad to remain authentic and truthful in his selection of hymns. Every week, as he put together the various components of that week's worship service, he knew there would be someone sitting on a front pew, checking everything for accuracy. He realized that his responsibility to God and His people was well worth a few moments of discomfort on those few occasions when something accidentally slipped through.

The Bible is our friend sitting on the front pew. It keeps us honest in our worship. And any service conducted without it runs the risk of sowing error, even lies, within the body of Christ. ❧



O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord,
 Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation.
 Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving,
 Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms.
 For the Lord is a great God
 And a great King above all gods,
 In whose hand are the depths of the earth,
 The peaks of the mountains are His also.

The sea is His, for it was He who made it,
 And His hands formed the dry land.
 Come, let us worship and bow down,
 Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.
 For He is our God,
 And we are the people of His pasture
 and the sheep of His hand.

Psalms 95:1-7a

Much of

our contemporary worship tries too hard. It tries too hard to be casual and cozy at a time when it should, instead, be reverent and humble. It tries too hard to lever the Spirit into still-slumbering hearts and brains. It tries too hard to force everyone to worship according to the same acceptable template.

In my possession is a sizable stack of popular “Praise & Worship” tapes. The group that publishes these uses a standard template on virtually every one: The first side of the tape contains loud, upbeat songs intended to get the listener (as well as those in attendance at the actual recording) energized and motivated. Then the second side is usually given over to more thoughtful, reverent, even contrite songs. Physically, the first half is all grins and clapping, while the second half is prayerful and bowed down. And this is a common template used in churches today. Pry the congregants away from the coffee pot and their chit-chat with the loud, upbeat songs of praise, then, once everyone has settled down and is participating, follow up with the more reverent songs of worship (if at all).

As Psalm 95 implies, this pattern is not inauthentic, but in this self-centered society

in which we now live it is possible for such an order to lead to an immodest—even man-centered—form of worship. It can inadvertently express an attitude of barging into God’s throne room based on our merit, rather than His: “I am here to worship You! Aren’t You *glad?*” Too often the joy expressed in this moment is an inauthentic, physical joy leveraged by the worship leader(s) from the platform.

The Master said:

“These people make a big show of
 saying the right thing,
 but their hearts aren’t in it.
 Because they act like they’re wor-
 shipping me
 but don’t mean it,
 I’m going to step in and shock them
 awake,
 astonish them, stand them on their
 ears.
 The wise ones who had it all figured
 out will be exposed as fools.
 The smart people who thought they
 knew everything
 will turn out to know nothing.”

Isaiah 29:13-14 The Message

By contrast, when we begin our worship focusing on God, rather than on our contribution to His praise, we are driven, appropriately, to our knees in humble, reverent awe. When we begin by acknowledging our position in Him—worthy, but only because of the sacrificial blood of Christ—we can approach the throne only with empty hands and a full heart. And the joy expressed in this moment is sincere, Spirit-generated, and a true “sacrifice of praise.” It is a joy expressed from the inside out, rather than in mimic of an outside influence.

Then the energetic praise that follows—our grinning and clapping—will be the authentic outward expression of the gratitude and adoration we have experienced on our knees before the throne. It will be God-, rather than man-centered.

The modern paradigm for worship can badly manhandle the Holy Spirit. It is presumptuous, even arrogant. It says, “We *will* be in the Spirit.” It preempts supernatural prerogative: Rather than carefully preparing fertile soil from which He might reveal Himself by *His* timing and manner, worship leaders today often haul out the Spirit by the scruff of the neck. And if He chooses not to sanction the moment, they simply behave as if He actually has.

Instead of graciously inviting the Spirit in, then waiting expectantly to see what He will do, today’s worship often erects a plastic stand-in for His presence, something safe, dependable, and utilitarian, but uninspired.

The modern form of worship (based, for the most part, on attracting those unaccustomed to worship of any kind, and especially of a holy God) makes much of the Holy Spirit. He is talked about and sometimes spoken to, artistically imagined in

banners, and, on occasion, invoked. He is addressed with the familiarity of a close, personal friend. Yet rarely is He patiently “waited upon.”

But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the Lord;
I will wait for the God of my salvation.
My God will hear me.

Micah 7:7

Jesus’ counsel to the woman at the well was both succinct and profound:

“But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

John 4:23-24

The “truth” to which Jesus refers is the *one* truth. It is not subjective, malleable, negotiable or fleeting. It is God’s eternal revelation: the Bible. The believer’s worship—for it to be authentic, and accepted by its intended Audience—must be based on the truth found in God’s holy word.

Then our truth-grounded worship must be informed by, energized by, indwelt by the Holy Spirit. It cannot be just a quick reference to His name; not just an acknowledgment that He exists; not just a recitation of His familiar wisdom, but it must include His singular *presence*. It must be a worship *infused* by the Spirit. Not a pale, insipid substitute, but the real thing.

Only then will our worship, praise, and thanksgiving be a fragrant aroma in the nostrils of our God. ☸

