

Raise the Level of Worship

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Biblical Essentials for Bridging Heaven and Earth

CHAPTER 1 FREE DOWNLOAD PDF

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Raise the Level of Worship

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Defining Biblical Worship

Leading worship for so long, and in so many different places, I've experienced music ministry's profound capacity to facilitate significant encounters with God. For this reason, I will be focusing a lot of attention on that specific application of worship – *singing* to the Lord, both in our personal lives and the church. That said, I also recognize there are many ways that people understand the term “worship,” and these tend to vary wildly regarding how central a role music may or may not play.

For example, during the season when my oldest daughter was born, I was helping a friend's band record their demo at a local studio. The studio owner was a good Christian man who led the worship team at a nearby mainline denominational church. One day, when we were saying our goodbyes, I mentioned to the group that we had a special meeting at our church that night featuring a travelling ministry group. When he heard me call the church service a “meeting,” the studio owner promptly, yet gently, corrected my phraseology, mentioning, “You mean you have ‘worship’ tonight.”

For him, the assembly of the saints to pray, praise, and preach was one thing you called “worship.” From my perspective, the gathering could be called a “service,” “meeting,” or just “church,” and I would tend to call the singing part “worship.” This simple example highlights how Christians can often use the same word in different ways. This can often lead to struggles in communication and even hinder our work together as siblings in Christ.

So, before we dive headlong into the biblical framework for New Testament worship, we will use the next chapters to define what worship is and then reveal how music uniquely facilitates it. First, we will examine the terms the Bible uses, exploring the various facets and implications of their meaning. Then, in the following chapter, we will examine the spiritual significance and natural attributes of music, so we can see how it excels at elevating our ministry to God.

Defining Worship

To best define biblical worship, we must dive into the world of the Scriptures themselves. We want to understand the terms the Bible uses and see how people in that era used them. That will help us move beyond just the text on the page to arrive at what the Bible actually means.

The Hebrew word most often used for “worship” in the Old Testament is the word *shachah*. It means to “bow down” before a superior – whether God, a human ruler, an angel, or other gods. The

Greek word for “worship” in the New Testament is the word *proskynéō*, which literally means “to kiss the ground when prostrating before a superior.” Thankfully, both languages paint the same picture, revealing worship as a physical act of bowing in reverent devotion.

To give us some historical context, Thayer’s Lexicon points out that, among ancient Israel’s neighbors, “especially the Persians, [to worship meant] to fall upon the knees and touch the ground with the forehead as an expression of profound reverence.” The mention of “profound reverence” here reveals that worship concerns much more than a simple posture-change. It’s rooted in the attitude toward the one being worshiped.

True worship doesn’t begin and end with an action. Rather, it flows from the heart. David emphasized this same idea, as he sang:

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
(Psalm 51:15-17)

The Psalmist emphasizes here that God concerns himself far more with our heart attitude than the mere physical ritual. God looks deeper than the surface. He explained this to the prophet Samuel when selecting David as king, saying, “...man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7).

God sees the motive behind our sacrifice, and He indicates that our motive is the most important aspect of our worship. In other words: the sacrifice is only as good as the motivation behind it.

So, although the biblical terms for worship describe a specific outward act, further examination reveals that the true *essence* of worship lies within. This explains why there are many expressions, or sacrifices, we can use to glorify God. Scripture mentions various other physical forms our worship can take, including:

- Praising with our lips (Hebrews 13:15)
- Doing good to others (Hebrews 13:16)
- Offering our bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1)

These examples demonstrate that worship cannot be exclusively equated with one physical posture. Bowing is not automatically worship. If it were, then everyone kneeling to tie their shoe or work in the garden would be worshiping, which is clearly not the case. Worship must begin in the heart and then find outward expression in some appropriate way.

That said, since Scripture plainly associates bowing with worship, we do ourselves a disservice if we eliminate kneeling from our practice altogether. Research indicates that physical posture can have a direct impact on our emotional and mental state. So, if kneeling is the posture Scripture consistently presents, then it's important to reflect that in our own worship. Reverence is never outdated, and we never outgrow the need to express it physically. I think a worshiper who is physically able should, at least occasionally, find themselves on their knees before God. After all,

there's a profound difference between someone who *cannot* bow or *will not* bow.

The Heart of Worship

A closer examination of the historical roots of worship reveals three key facets of its inner attitude: honor, submission, and love. By requiring someone to bow before them, those being worshiped expected the worshiper to honor their person, submit to their authority, and confess their personal devotion. And these elements remain central to biblical worship for us today.

Honor

The biblical concept of honor is rooted in the idea of assigning someone weight or value in our lives. In Hebrew, the picture is treating someone like they are heavy, almost as if they were a burden to carry. Think of the contrast between carrying an empty suitcase and one loaded with gold. That extra weight would make you pause before picking it up – to consider how you will carry it and just how far you have to go. In the same way, honoring someone requires us to consider how we will intentionally show them reverence and respect.

In Greek, the concept of honor is more closely tied to assigning someone a high value and treating them with appropriate esteem. For example, we are much more thoughtful about how we treat our wedding rings than those plastic ones we get from vending

machines. That's because the value – both financial and emotional – is much higher with one than the other. This difference in value results in a massive difference in consideration and care. In this case, honor means treating a person with the same measure of attention and respect we assign to our most valuable possessions.

Considering both the Hebrew and Greek together, we see that honoring someone requires us to recognize and demonstrate their significance in our lives. It's about much more than just attempting to flatter them by saying the right words. It involves giving them a measure of influence in our hearts and allowing their importance to shape our attitude and actions.

Consider what Jesus meant by “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” in Matthew 6:33. He didn't just mean, read the Bible first thing in the morning, then the rest of the day is yours. He indicated we should consider God first in every area of our lives. Every decision should be made with Him in mind, allowing the weight of His presence and the knowledge of His will to tip the scales.

We understand this concept in human relationships as well. As a husband, I realize that Kirsten and I are partners in everything related to our marriage and family. Since this is true, she can feel disregarded if I make decisions like a single guy would. The issue is not just that I decided something for myself, but the fact that I excluded my partner from my thought process. That's why she may chafe at some relatively small purchase – like some fishing lures or sports equipment – not because it's exorbitantly expensive, but because it reveals I wasn't thinking of her as I made that decision.

By not considering her in the process, I have dishonored her as my spouse.

Likewise, honoring God as God means considering Him first in everything and giving Him the highest influence in our thoughts, choices, and actions. It's about so much more than just including His name in our prayers and song lyrics or slapping on a fish-shaped bumper sticker. That's why Jesus warned against empty worship, saying:

You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

“This people honors me with their lips,

but their heart is far from me;

in vain do they worship me,

teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”

(Matt. 15:7-9)

True honor flows from a heart that has been *moved* by the one being honored. It's more than just outward behavior. It's the expression of something that begins deep within.

Scripture describes various levels of honor. At the most basic level, every person deserves some degree of honor because they are made in the image of God. By honoring them, we are honoring Him. Then, building upon that foundation, the Bible identifies others who deserve specific, elevated levels of consideration: God, parents, civil authorities, church leaders, and so on.

While we should diligently honor everyone appropriately, we must recognize that God alone deserves ultimate honor. He deserves a uniquely unbounded reverence in our lives that recognizes His incomparable divine nature and character.

As Creator, He stands uniquely apart from everything He created. That's why the four living creatures pictured in Revelation 4:8 never cease to cry out, "Holy, holy, holy." Holy means separated or set apart. There is nothing and no one like our God, so He alone deserves ultimate, infinite, and eternal honor.

Scripture often employs a special term to describe the unique and supreme honor that God deserves, the immense influence that He should have in our lives: the "fear of God." People often confuse this fear with the sense of terror we equate with horror movies. However, the fear of God should be more accurately understood as a sense of overwhelming awe that springs from our recognition of His incomparable person, wisdom, and acts. Jeremiah even describes the fear of God spreading among the nations, arising from His astounding ability to *bless*:

And this city [Jerusalem] shall be to me [God] a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them. **They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide** for it. (Jer. 33:9)

When we experience the genuine presence and power of God, it should cause our inner person to resonate with a sense of intense gravity, as we recognize we have encountered a being who is holy,

mighty, wise, and good beyond our comprehension. It should stop us in our tracks as His light exposes any shadows lurking in our motives. It should lead us to give Him the attention, reception, and response that He alone deserves. That's how the fear of God becomes the beginning of wisdom – anchoring our perspectives and teaching our hearts how to choose what is morally right. Worship then becomes the natural overflow of a heart consumed with Him.

Submission

Where honor relates to the value of the individual, submission relates to their position or authority in our lives. We submit to God because He is God, and we are not. He is the Creator, and we are the created. He is Lord, and we are His servants. He is our Father, and we are His children. Even as Jesus calls us His friends, we recognize that He remains our superior. This being true, we bow our entire lives before Him in dutiful obedience and grateful surrender because He always deserves the first, and final, say.

Jesus Himself modeled submission during His time on Earth. The Bible reveals His act of going to the cross as the greatest act of submission *ever* (see Phil. 2:5-11). Though God, He not only became a human being, but He took our sin, enduring the full measure of the wrath of God, to purchase our eternal redemption. So, if the Master modeled “obedience to the point of death” (Phil. 2:8), then that same commitment to obedience remains a critical component of our life as His followers.

Submission is so essential that we enter into union with Christ by acknowledging His Lordship:

[B]ecause, if you confess with **your mouth that Jesus is Lord** and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rom. 10:9)

While faith plays a critical role in our salvation, it is not enough to just believe there is a God or that Jesus rose from the grave. James made it abundantly clear that faith must be accompanied by submission to Christ, revealed in obedience:

You believe that God is one; you do well. **Even the demons believe** – and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that **faith** apart from **works** is useless? (James 2:19-20)

To be saved, we must both believe *and* take action. We must personally and practically submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ. True faith *in* Him implies an intention of faithfulness *to* Him.

After that initial surrender to Jesus, submission continues to play a central role in our life of worship. Thankfully, this means bowing before the Lord is not a foreign posture that a believer must learn. It's the place where our relationship with Him began. Living a life of worship involves remembering Christ's supremacy and living out that original surrender.

Honor and submission often come to mind first when we think about worship. This could stem from the literal definition of worship as physically bowing before someone. Usually, you

wouldn't bow before someone who is unworthy, and you wouldn't bow unless they had the authority to *make* you. That is, unless there was another factor in the equation that made you *want* to lower yourself in their presence. This is where love comes into play.

Love

As we discussed earlier, examining the historical background of worship reveals that bowing was also meant to express devotion. When bowing before the king, for example, the worshiper was not just saying, "you are king;" they were saying, "you are *my* king." They were expressing more than honor in recognition of his royalty and submission in recognition of his authority. They were also professing their personal attachment to him. They belonged to him as loyal subjects, and he belonged to them as their faithful sovereign. This implied a measure of devotion and affection between the two parties.

Now, we don't usually grant this kind of devotion to political figures in the West, so this probably feels foreign to most of us today. However, in some other parts of the world – especially in the global East – dignitaries and royalty are still revered this way, including total prostration. Although it originated outside our native culture, the biblical concept of worship remains rooted in this very idea. By going as low as we can go physically, we are demonstrating the ultimate posture of our hearts – indicating that we hold nothing back from the one who deserves our all. We give all honor, submission, *and love* to Him.

Though we are discussing it last, the Bible often puts love at the forefront of our motivations when it comes to worship. For example, love is the primary focus of the Law:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall **love** the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deut. 6:4-5)

Jesus doubles down on this in the New Testament. (See Matthew 22, Mark 12, and Luke 10.) He emphasizes that, when it comes to loving God and neighbor, “There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31).

Interestingly, the Great Commandment doesn’t direct us to honor God or submit to God (which are obviously both very necessary, in the big picture). The Great Commandment requires that we *love* Him. Why? You can honor and obey from a distance, but love ultimately draws you near. And we see again and again throughout Scripture that God wants us to draw near to Him.

And without faith it is impossible **to please him**, for whoever would **draw near to God** must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. (Heb. 11:6)

Draw near to God, and he will **draw near** to you. (James 4:8a)

Loving God plays a crucial role in maintaining a balanced and vibrant relationship with Him. Without love, our worship quickly veers into dead, legalistic practices like those of the Pharisees. Their problem was that (they thought) they knew the Law, but they

didn't *love* the *Lawgiver*. The main difference between Jesus and them was that He knew and loved His Father. That's why He did not just live out the letter of the commandments but fully embodied the spirit of them.

Biblical love – God's kind of love – makes itself known in actions that seek the good of the other. It springs from a place of other-consciousness. It constantly communicates "I choose you."

Loving God means we don't lead a transactional relationship with Him, where we give to get, where we honor and obey so He will deliver rewards and benefits. That kind of behavior flows from a self-serving motivation. It's nothing more than an attempt to manipulate through flattery. True worship requires that we maintain a selfless focus where it's all about Him.

The heart of worship does not say "Gimme, gimme!" Instead of seeking blessing, it sets itself to bless the Lord. It focuses on Him. It's why certain songs, like "I exalt Thee," have such staying power; they mirror the biblical pattern of giving glory to the Lord.

Through this kind of worship, as David writes, the Lord Himself becomes our portion:

The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.
The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance. (Ps. 16:5)

Loving God means choosing Him above everything else that this world has to offer. It's like a man proposing to his future bride, saying, "I reject every other woman in this world, and I choose you." In the same way, worshiping God calls for loving Him as the one and only God in your life. He isn't just one of many loves – He is the supreme love of your heart, and the only One worthy of your highest devotion.

The Role of Desire

Why does a man get on one knee and propose to the woman he loves? As the common proverb says, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." He chooses her because he sees something in her that he finds supremely valuable. That inevitably includes her looks, but it goes much deeper than that. Her character, compassion, capabilities, and quirks both intrigue and delight him, to the point that he desires to spend the rest of his life getting to know and enjoying her.

The same idea applies to God. God does not only want us to worship Him out of duty, but with desire. As Jesus taught in Matthew 5:6, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

In the marriage picture, the man proposes with the intent of their relationship going to greater levels of intimacy and fruitfulness. The proposal leads to marriage, sexual intimacy, and a common home life, as the couple grows in their enjoyment and experience of each other.

The sad state of our culture often sees this fire die out all too quickly. With the onslaught of challenges related to daily life, couples can easily become distracted. They lose sight of the glory in their spouse that initially attracted them to one another, and their desire fades away. As the enjoyment of their spouse declines, other temptations quickly begin to grow in their allure – opening the door to compromise and unfaithfulness. Even if it never manifests in physical acts, the heart has wandered far away. That’s why dating and alone time are so critical to maintaining a healthy marriage – we must constantly refresh our vision of wonder and pleasure toward our significant other.

In the same way, we must strive not to allow our relationship with God to become mere commitment and routine. Just as a marriage needs a strong flame of desire to persist, our relationship with God and our worship require that we don’t just respect and obey Him, but that we *always want more* of Him. If we are going to love God – which means choosing Him over all other possibilities – then we need to maintain a burning desire for God.

Remember, God called David “the man after my own heart.” It was not just that David stuck to the schedule of rituals; David hungered to be with the Lord, because he had experienced the wonderful goodness of God!

Oh, **taste and see** that the Lord is good!

Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! (Ps. 34:8)

Trust in the Lord, and do good;
dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.
Delight yourself in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
(Ps. 37:3-4)

Though David speaks of cultivating faithfulness, he ties it together with delighting himself in the Lord. He *enjoyed* God. Spending time with Him was like sitting down to dinner with his best friend.

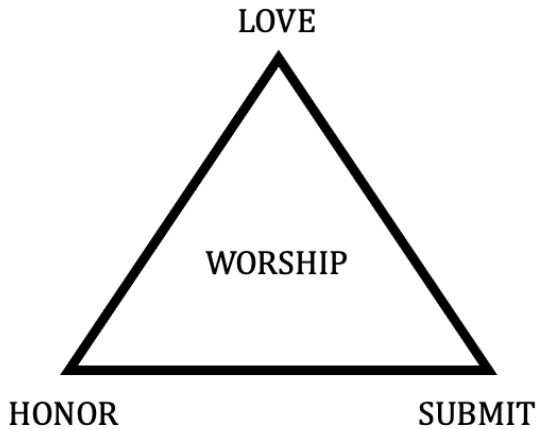
That helps us see that worship is about so much more than recognizing biblical principles and designing rituals according to a particular pattern. Biblical worship is about drawing ever closer to God and experiencing more and more of Him. And since God designed us *for Himself*, there's nothing in the world – visible or invisible – that thrills our hearts more. He alone satisfies.

That's why, when David had missed God's presence for a while, he sang:

As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God? (Ps. 42:1-2)

In David's Psalms, we hear so much more than distant honor and dry obedience. We hear the heart cry of a man who knew God as his God, as his King, *and* as his ultimate desire. Similarly, as worshipers today, we honor God, we submit to God, and we love

God. These three dynamics work together to form the biblical heart of worship.



Worship is a Response

Now, although we've been discussing motives and actions up to this point, we must recognize that worship, like the rest of our relationship with God, is a *response*. We did not create God. He created us. This whole relationship was His idea, and He's the one who prepared the way for it to exist and flourish. He initiated this process by honoring us (Ps. 8:5), giving us authority (Gen. 1:28), and loving us before we could ever love Him (1 Jn. 4:19). That means, anything we give to God is only returning to Him something He gave to us first. We can't produce something for God; we can only give back out of what we've received. So, though we often

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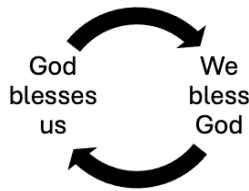
think of worship as an action, it would be more correct to think of it as a *reaction* – our response to God and God’s initiative.

Worship is not something we manufacture; it’s what rises in our hearts whenever we encounter God. Since we were created to glorify Him, being touched by His person, word, and acts causes praise to well up within us. Worship is not so much about producing something as allowing a natural process to flow unimpeded. It’s allowing our worshiping nature to offer its instinctual response to the God who made it.

We don’t worship from a motivation to get; we worship out of gratitude for what we’ve *already* received. Scripture recommends bringing thanksgiving as our first step to approaching God because our first action is always preceded by His.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!
Give thanks to him; bless his name! (Psalm 110:4)

However, since God is a rewarder of those who seek Him (Heb. 11:6), whenever we come to Him in worship, He blesses us again (see references from Ps. 34 & 37, above). The whole cycle keeps repeating itself. While our worship is not transactional, it *is* reciprocal.



God intended for us to live in a relationship where we continually and eternally experience His blessing and pour forth His praise. He receives an unbroken stream of glory, and we receive an unbroken stream of blessing.

We inevitably experience problems when we disrupt this cycle – when we stop receiving what He pours out or stop giving Him glory for what we’ve received. Either way, the root of the breakdown is pride. Instead of letting our hearts revolve around Him, we shift everything to revolve around ourselves. And since we aren’t the source, that cuts us off from the flow of God’s grace.

In the Kingdom, receiving always comes before giving. That’s why God only gives grace to the humble. We must recognize our utter dependence on Him and position ourselves to receive from Him. As God emphasized to Job:

Who has **first** given to me, that I should repay him?

Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine. (Job 41:11)

God always gives *first*. Our life of love powerfully reflects this. We can only pour out love to God and others because God first pours love into us.

...God's love **has been** poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who **has been** given to us. (Rom. 5:5)

Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:8)

He is the faucet; you are the cup. The cup only gets filled up when taken down from the shelf and positioned under the faucet. So come to Him in humility and eagerly receive all that He is pouring out. Let Him fill you again and again with love so you can return love to Him and be an agent of His love in your world. Don't let a prideful attitude break your participation in the life-giving cycle of blessing.

The Worship Progression

Since worship works as a response to Him, it takes us through a progression of attention, attitude, and action. To respond to God, we must first focus on Him. This means removing other people or things from the spotlight and giving Him the place that He alone deserves. Then, as we behold His glory, we must choose our attitude. This is more than simply determining a mood. An attitude is an orientation from which we will respond. It's about assuming a position and perspective. That attitude then shapes our actions – our practical expression toward Him.

Attention —→ Attitude —→ Action

Considering this, we realize that if any of these three elements are missing, then we are not engaging in biblical worship. If we are not focused on the Lord, then we are not worshipping *Him*. In that case, our worship has the wrong object. If we are not taking the proper heart attitude toward Him, we have an improper position and motivation. That will skew our actions, making them unfit and displeasing before Him, either because they're off target or missing altogether.

Music and singing possess unique properties that facilitate this progression. This allows them to shine as ideal partners for worship. So, as we continue in the next chapter, we'll explore music's spiritual significance and the natural realities that make it so instrumental in effective worship.

Make it Practical: Download the free companion workbook at raisethelevelofworship.com for targeted questions that apply this chapter to your personal life, ministry team, congregation, and witness in the world.