

Worship Basics – Respond to God
(Exodus 15, Psalm 100, Revelation 19:6-8)

Turn in your Bibles to Exodus 15, please. I am beginning a series of teaching on “worship,” and the first three or four will be “worship basics.”

In the first three or four we’ll cover basics, what it seems to me are the main ideas in the Bible about worship, and after that we’ll look at different Scriptures about worship.

The goal here is not to change what worship leaders do. I am not concerned to change what we do. This is more for congregation than worship leaders. What does it mean for the whole church body to worship? That’s the real topic.

How God’s people worship God always acts out our relationship to God, or at least some part of our relationship with God.

So looking at what the Bible says about worship is just another way of looking at who God is, and who we are, and how it actually works to be his children.

What I mean is that teaching about worship is teaching about our lives before God, not just 30 minutes on Sunday.

(I had thought there were two Sundays before Advent, today and next Sunday, but I realized yesterday evening that next Sunday is Advent. So we are starting this series on worship today, and just for now we’ll let next Sunday take care of itself.)

Today’s teaching makes a single basic observation: *worship always responds to God.*

God’s people don’t start the conversation. God starts the conversation, and his people respond. God’s people do not begin by doing something for God. God begins by doing something for people. Everything we do responds to God.

But for today we’ll just look at worship. We’ll look at the first song in the Bible, and the last song in the Bible, and a short song in the middle.

Look for one thing about these three examples of worship: it starts with God. These songs describe what God is like, and what God has done, usually in plain direct speech, and the song is what God’s people do *because of* God and what he’s done.

The Bible’s First Song: Exodus 15:1-6 - *Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD: “I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.*

Stop right here, and notice the response. “I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted, he is great, he is wonderful, here’s what he did – he threw both horse and driver into the sea.” God did something, he acted, and the people celebrate because God did that.

I’ll read just until verse 6, and notice that the worship repeatedly either lists truths about God, or things God did. Verses 2 and 3 about God himself, what God is like.

² *“The LORD is my strength and my defence; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him.*

³ *The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name.*

These lines describe what God is like. Verses 2-3 describe the Giver of the gift. Verses 4-6 describe the gift. But whether it is about God himself, or what God did, which is the gift, worship happens because God acted first. Verses 4-6 describe the gift.

⁴ *Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea. The best of Pharaoh’s officers are drowned in the Red Sea. ⁵ The deep waters have covered them; they sank to the depths like a stone. ⁶ Your right hand, LORD, was majestic in power. Your right hand, LORD, shattered the enemy.*

Worship is not simply to celebrate God, or to tell God we love him, or even to tell him that he is wonderful and great. These are good, but worship always *responds to something that God has done, or is doing, or has promised to do in the future.*

God speaks, and we answer, and that’s what worship is. God acts first, and then we act. God does something, and we act in return.

The Bible’s Last Song: Revelation 19:6-8

That’s the first song. Turn to the last song in the Bible, Revelation 19. The closest thing the NT has to the book of Psalms is Revelation. There are more songs in Revelation, and more singing, than in the rest of the NT put together.

One of the ways Revelation motivates us to stay faithful to Christ is to show us what God’s people will sing to God in the future. Revelation shows us future worship. “Stay faithful to God,” says Revelation, “because he will yet be praised for these things.”

Revelation 19:6-8 - *Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. ⁷ Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. ⁸ Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.”*

First of all, do you all understand that you will be in that group? John hears all these voices shouting, and your voice is one of the voices he hears, and mine is one of the voices he hears? It would be a shame for us to read this and not recognize ourselves.

The people begin by shouting “Hallelujah!” Then they rejoice and are glad and give God glory. But that’s not complete worship. What makes it worship is that they have reasons.

The celebration responds to things God had done, and the worship includes the reasons. The reasons are: the Lord God Almighty reigns, and the wedding of the Lamb has come.

This song happens after God judged the great prostitute, who slaughtered many, many of God’s holy people. That’s what Revelation 18 is about. That is why God’s people worship God because he reigns. He has *shown* that he reigns by judging Babylon.

The wedding of the Lamb to his bride was promised for a long time, and now it is actually happening. They have reasons to worship.

In both Exodus and Revelation, the reasons for the worship are not just in the song. They are in the story before the song as well. Worship responds to who God is and what he does. Who he is and what he does is *not* just mentioned in the song. There’s also a *story*.

When we sing to God, for the most part we get the story only in the song. We worship God because he did something first and we are doing something back. When we worship, we learn what God did first only in the song. That is the minimum.

Some of our worship leaders have Scripture read between the songs. This is good, because it tells us what God did first. Let’s never tune out when someone reads the Scripture, or treat the Scripture reading like an interlude, a commercial break.

That Scripture may be the whole reason why we’re doing the rest of this. Also, you Scripture readers, do all that you can so that everyone can hear. Read slowly, read loudly, and aim your voice at the people.

If worship is our response to who God is and what he has done, then the teaching time is also a part of this. That’s where we learn about who God is and what he’s done.

In this way it would work better to have the teaching time before the singing, so we would have clearly in our mind the God we praise. In other ways that does not work as well; I am not lobbying here for a change of order.

A Song in the Middle: Psalm 100

[Begins with response, vv1-2] *Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.* ² *Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.*

[Then gives five reasons for the response in v3] (1) ³ *Know that the LORD is God.* (2) *It is he who made us,* (3) *and we are his;* (4) *we are his people,* (5) *the sheep of his pasture.*

[Then second stage of response in v4] ⁴ *Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.*

[Then three reasons for the response in v5] (1) ⁵ *For the LORD is good (2) and his love endures forever; (3) his faithfulness continues through all generations.*

All Biblical worship makes sense. It has good reasons, good enough that *not* worshipping is foolish. This does not mean worship is *just* rational, not at all. Picture Moses and the Israelites singing after the Egyptian army drowned.

Their worship made sense, and it was rational, but surely not *just* rational. They could not have been more delighted and relieved and ecstatic! Moses typically was not a bundle of joy, but even Moses sang that long and happy song.

Another thing to notice from Psalm 100 is that when we worship we come into God's presence, we are in front of God when we worship: v1 *come before him with joyful songs*. V4 *Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.*

The second worship basic will be about the presence of God, that when we worship we move into God's presence. But that's for a different teaching.

What if I don't feel any response to God?

Imagine this happening: you give three different people the same gift. There are three people that mean a lot to you, they are important to you, and you give each of them the same gift. It is a big gift, not a trinket, a valuable gift. You give this to each of the three because you care about them. It's easy for you to be generous with these three.

The first person loves the gift from the start, they know they will enjoy it, and they can tell that you gave this because you love them and value them.

So the first person thanks you from the heart, they thank you for the gift and they thank you for your generosity and kindness to them.

That's the first person. The second person has a completely different response inside. The second person is distracted by hard things and troubles in their life, and they don't feel anything at all when they get the gift.

They had never thought about that gift, did not know they needed it or wanted it, and it does not change how they feel about life, or about their day.

But this second person understands that this is a valuable gift, they understand that it cost you something to give this, and they understand that you gave the gift because they are important to you. So the second person honours you with their words.

The second person speaks about the gift you gave, that it is a good and important gift, and speaks also about your kindness to them, and your generosity. The second person knows that you are being good to them and honouring them, and says so clearly.

When the third person gets the gift, they feel just like the second person. The third person also is distracted by hard things and troubles in their life, and they don't feel anything at all when they get the gift.

The third person also had never thought about that gift, did not know they needed it or wanted it, and it does not change how they feel about their life or their day.

So the third person looks at the gift in their hands, grunts, and walks away with the gift.

What is your response to these three people? What you wanted was what happened with the first person, that they felt grateful and glad and said so clearly. That's perfect.

What happened with the second person is not as good, but it would be okay. We all know what it is like to get a gift and not be excited about the gift, so you would be okay with the second person's response. After all, they did recognize that the gift was valuable, and that you had acted kindly and warmly toward them.

The third person: well, the third person was just plain rude. You might even be sorry that you went to the bother of giving them the gift.

The second person and the third person were both honest, in a sense. The third person acted out their feelings. They did not feel anything about the gift or toward you, so they did not express anything about the gift, or toward you the giver.

The second person responded to the event, to the situation, and not to their feelings. The event is that you have just given them an valuable gift because they are important to you. There you are, standing in front of them.

So the second person responds to the event. Their heart is dry, but they also have a mind, which tells them that the event is important, and so in their words they describe what you have done, with their words they honour the gift, and with words they honour the giver.

Every Sunday that we gather here, each of us is one of these three people. God has given the gift, and we are one of these three people back to God.

The Gift

Here's the gift we respond to, here is the event. The event is that very early on the human race rebelled against God. God made us good, and was good to us, and we thought we could do better without him.

This turns out to be a long slide into doom, into catastrophe. By turning away from God, we turned away from the source of everything that's good, including life itself. Our rebellion can only end in death and destruction, because we turned away from the source of all life and all good.

But God did not leave it at that. God made a rescue boat, and the rescue boat is above all the person of Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish Christ, the Son of God.

AND, God got us into that rescue boat. We find ourselves in this rescue boat that is Jesus the Lord – how on earth did *that* happen? Here we are in the rescue boat, and it is travelling to a very good place, better than anything we've seen or imagined.

That's the Gift, that's the Event, that's reality. That is the world we live in and that's our place in the big story, the real story. God has spoken, and that is what he spoke, and we gather together to answer. God acted, and we gather to act in return.

Our whole lives are our answer, not just Sunday morning. (That's another one of worship basics, for another Sunday.) But on Sunday morning, the Event is that God has done this for us, and the Event includes that today God's people have gotten together to respond.

Worship Imperative

Have you ever noticed that many psalms begin by telling people what to do? Listen again to Psalm 100:1-2 *Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.*

Who is talking to who there? *Shout for joy. Worship the LORD. Come before him.* Someone is telling us what to do. The person who composed the psalm has been led by God's Spirit to tell the rest of God's people what to do.

Apparently not many of God's people will respond to God like the first person who got your gift. Not many will pour out thanks to God because they recognize the value of the gift and the goodness of the Giver. And God does not seem troubled by that.

But the psalms often tell us what to do about the gifts and the Giver. We need to be told to respond to God, and we need to be told how to respond: *Shout for joy. Worship the LORD. Come before him.* Many psalms do this.

The song in Revelation 19 included this: v7 begins, *Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!* Even then we need a call: *Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!*

I'm actually relieved about this. The Scriptures are not alarmed that God's people have to be told the right way to respond. They are only alarmed if even then we don't respond.

God has acted, God has spoken, God has given a huge gift. Just coming into this place on the Lord's day is itself answering back to God, the beginning of honouring gift and Giver.

We praise you, God, and thank you; to you, God, who saved us through Jesus, you who are able to keep us from stumbling, and to bring us into your glorious presence without fault and with great joy— to you, the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.