

# The Inward Reality of Worship

## Rightly Responding to God

Series: Thoughts on Worship  
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Open your Bibles this evening to the book of Isaiah. We will start briefly in chapter 1, and then spend the bulk of our time in chapter 6. We return tonight to a **study of worship**. In the past we have looked at the outward elements of worship—the external events or activities that give shape our worship, elements that are affirmed and regulated by God’s Word.

These include:

Giving time to the **reading of Scripture**

Faithful expository **preaching** and **teaching of God’s Word**

**Prayer**

**Confessing our faith** together

**Singing** psalms and hymns and spiritual songs

**Baptism** and the **Lord’s Supper**

Giving **tithes** and **offerings** for the work of God’s Kingdom

**Fellowship** of the saints

These are outward elements affirmed by Scripture as necessary parts of worship. If we are to worship corporately, as a gathered people before God, we must use these elements to form and give order to our services. Form unifies our worship and helps us to embody or make concrete our inner thoughts and desires. We could not have corporate worship without these elements serving as the means to help us express our worship to God.

There are, of course other external matters of worship that Scripture does not specifically address. Things like where we should meet, what time of day we should meet, how long our services should be. These are **circumstances** of worship that we are to determine by prudence in light of God’s providence and what the Puritans called “the light of nature.”

We will come back and discuss the circumstances of worship at another time, but tonight I want to go beyond the externals, beyond the outward elements, and look at the **inward reality of worship**.

We can never assume that the presence of these elements assures that we are worshipping God rightly—that by simply arranging them well and doing them in a meaningful order we have truly worshipped God. We need to give attention to what is taking place on the inside. The externals of worship are important, but they are designed by God to facilitate something much deeper.

**God is more concerned with our hearts than with the outward form.** Worship is much more than just doing the right things or even doing them in a good and well-planned order. We can have all the **elements** of worship in place, and outwardly be doing all the right things and **still not be worshipping God.**

This was happening in Isaiah’s day. Turn for a moment to Isaiah chapter 1. Isaiah begins the book by lamenting the sins of Judah. In verse 9 he speaks of a small remnant who are still faithful to God and who are the reason that God had not consumed the nation in His wrath. In verse 10 he presses home the evil that has overtaken the nation by referring to the leaders of Judah as “rulers of Sodom” and the people as inhabitants “of Gomorrah.” And in verse 11 he speaks God’s indictment of their worship.

Isaiah 1:11–17            “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?” says the LORD; “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. “When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.”

And in verse 18, we see God’s mercy calling His people to repent from this vain worship.

Isaiah 1:18            “Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD:  
                                 “though your sins are like scarlet,  
                                 they shall be as white as snow;  
                                 though they are red like crimson,  
                                 they shall become like wool.”

Israel was going through the motions of worship. Though they were worshipping the One true God and doing things God had commanded in His Word, yet God was not pleased. There is much more to worship than the outward things in which we participate and see and hear. **There are matters of greater importance that concern our hearts.**

What goes on **in the heart** when we truly worship God in spirit and in truth? How do we know if we are truly worshipping?

It is not sufficient just to do acts of worship or say or sing the words of worship.

God told Isaiah in Isaiah 29:13—

Isaiah 29:13            And the Lord said:  
                              "Because this people draw near with their mouth  
  and honor me with their lips,  
  while their hearts are far from me,  
  and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men..."

God is not pleased with worship that does not spring from the **heart**.

We must be concerned with the **heart** when we consider our worship.

What then takes place **inside** when our spirit communes with the Spirit of God in worship? What goes on **in the heart** when we seek God in worship?

Now, these questions touch upon a very sacred part of our experience and cannot be fully searched out or explained. I don't want you to think that we can take something so wonderful as the meeting between the Lord God and His people and simplify it into easy steps. You cannot distill such a profound experience as true worship into a formula.

But there are, I believe, some matters of the heart that you should experience, at least to some degree or another, if you are truly engaged in pursuing and worshipping God.

One of the clearest passages in the Bible where the experience of true worship is evident and displayed for us is in **Isaiah 6**. One of the most helpful and historically useful patterns of true worship for the church is based on Isaiah's experience with God recorded here in chapter 6. I want to read this chapter, and as I read, I want you to focus on the responses and reactions of Isaiah and the angelic beings as they are in the presence of God. I want you to especially notice Isaiah and his heart-felt responses as he worshipped God.

Isaiah 6:1–2            In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

Isaiah 6:3            And one called to another and said:  
                              "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;  
  the whole earth is full of his glory!"

Isaiah 6:4–5            And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

Isaiah 6:6–7            Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

Isaiah 6:8–10      And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.” And he said, “Go, and say to this people: ‘“Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

Isaiah 6:11–13      Then I said, “How long, O Lord?”  
And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant,  
and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste,  
and the LORD removes people far away,  
and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.  
And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again,  
like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.”  
The holy seed is its stump.

This was Isaiah’s experience as he received God’s Word. Now I realize that Isaiah was a prophet. He received God’s Word as a prophet in this chapter in a vision. We are not prophets. We do not receive God’s Word as prophets. God has spoken finally to us in this day through His Son, Jesus. We have the complete Word of God written down for us by the apostles and prophets and preserved unto this day. Yet we must also hear and respond to God’s Word as it is read and taught to us. Isaiah’s experience is helpful here as we see how he responded to the Word of God.

I want to point out eight (8) matters of the heart from Isaiah 6 that we should experience at least to some degree as we worship God.

## 1.      **The Word of God fills your soul with truth revealed.**

Isaiah 6:1–2

Isaiah 6 begins with God revealing Himself—giving His Word to His prophet. Isaiah sees the Lord high and lifted up. Worship begins with **revelation**. If we are to worship God, then we must know Him and understand Him as He has revealed Himself.

We can’t come up with this knowledge by ourselves. It’s not even within our fallen nature to search for it. God must take the initiative if we are to know Him and worship Him. And God has done this by giving us His Word. **Worship begins with God revealing Himself to us in His Word.**

God has revealed Himself to His apostles and prophets. By the inspiring work of the Holy Spirit, they wrote down the Word of God. We know and understand who God is by His Word. When God calls us to be worshippers, He gives us a desire to know Him, a hunger and thirst for His Word.

You’ll notice in our worship here at Grace, that we intentionally aim to saturate our services with Scripture. We read it; we sing it; we pray it. And we give ample time to preach it. We need this if we are to worship God, as He designs, in Spirit and in Truth.

As we read and sing and pray the Word of God, truth resonates within us. It rings true in our hearts. It dawns on our understanding and captures our attention. We respond to the Word of God by receiving its meaning and meditating upon truth. As we begin to understand and grasp and apply the truth (by the power and illumination of the Spirit of God teaching our spirits), **truth feeds our soul**. God meets with us and speaks to us through His Word—in truth.

We see an example of this in Psalm 73. Asaph here is perplexed and trying to understand why the wicked seem to prosper in this life while the righteous suffer. He says in verse 16: “But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task.” But then he went to the Temple and the truth of God’s Word began to dawn in his soul. He tells us in—

Psalm 73:17–19      until I went into the sanctuary of God;  
   then I discerned their end.  
Truly you set them in slippery places;  
   you make them fall to ruin.  
How they are destroyed in a moment,  
   swept away utterly by terrors!

His perception of the world around him was corrected when he understood the truth and implications of God’s Word.

We know we are worshipping when God’s Word fills our soul with truth revealed.

## 2. **We receive the Word of God with reverence and praise.**

Isaiah 6:3

As truth draws our attention and our affections to God, our hearts are lifted to praise Him.

We see this in Isaiah 6 in verse 3 in the response of the angels who are in God’s presence. As they revel in who God is, they are ever praising and exalting Him.

Isaiah 6:3                      And one called to another and said:  
   “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;  
   the whole earth is full of his glory!”

We see this echoed in many of the psalms as we are called to sing and praise and rejoice in God. Looking to God stirs us in wonder and awe. This is what captured Asaph’s heart in worship in Psalm 73. After he understood the end of the wicked listen to how he continues in verse 23.

Psalms 73:23–28              Nevertheless, I am continually with you;  
   you hold my right hand.  
You guide me with your counsel,  
   and afterward you will receive me to glory.  
Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.  
My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.  
For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;  
you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.  
But for me it is good to be near God;  
I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,  
that I may tell of all your works.

His heart is lifted up with truth about God. He is enraptured with praise and filled with joy in being in the presence of God.

When we worship, we not only understand and receive truth, we rejoice in it.

### **3. We are broken over our sins against the Holy One.**

Isaiah 6:5

As truth causes us to see ourselves in light of God's holiness and perfection, we are broken and humbled. This is what happened to Isaiah in Isaiah 6. God revealed Himself to the prophet. Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up. He saw the angels around the throne in ceaseless praise and worship, singing "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is filled with His glory."

And at the sight of God's holiness and majesty, Isaiah knew who he was, and knew what was in his heart. Do you remember his response? He cried out: "Woe is me for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." He was broken over his sin and confessed his sin to God.

This is what happens in worship. The closer we get to God, the more we understand and grasp His truth, the more we will be undone because of our sinfulness. We have all sinned against God; we are all breakers of His law. We are sinners by experience and by nature. And when our darkness is exposed in God's light we are brought to sorrow and repentance.

This happened with David in Psalm 51. He cried out "I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against You and You only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." Now, this sorrow is not a sorrow of despair. We can grieve in our brokenness, but if our grief reaches the point of despair, then we have ceased to worship God. Notice that David's grief is not a sorrow of despair. He prays with hope. He began his prayer, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love." He says in verse 7: "Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow."

The reason we do not despair is that we look to God's mercy and provision.

#### 4. **We rejoice in God's provision for our salvation in Christ.**

Isaiah 6:6–7

God has provided a means of reconciliation and forgiveness. He teaches this to Isaiah by sending His angel in verse 6—

Isaiah 6:6–7                      Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

We are called to confess our sins, and God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The forgiveness of Christ, His atonement that covers our sins and cleanses us, His righteousness that clothes us and makes us acceptable before God — these rejoice our hearts.

#### **At the heart of true worship is the proclamation and celebration of the gospel.**

You will notice here at Grace that we speak much of the gospel. We keep the message of salvation and hope in Jesus ringing in our ears. We tell the story often and sing the story often so we don't lose sight of all we have by God's grace in Him. This is how we grow in faith and repentance—even when life is difficult and we struggle and fight against sin day by day.

Too often, I think, we get imbalanced when we try to deal with our sin. Sin begins to rage in us and around us—we see what a mess we are—and what happens? Our tendency is to resort to one of two things:

1. We discount our sin and pretend that it is not that serious. We look for good things in our life to emphasize so we can ignore or belittle our sin, so it doesn't look quite so menacing and bewildering.
2. Or sin overwhelms us and we begin to despair. We look at our sin and we consider our profession of faith and we wonder, "Am I really a Christian?" "How can I be a Christian and struggle this badly?"

But both responses are wrong—and they are wrong because both responses demonstrate that we are looking at the wrong thing. In both, we are looking at ourselves—with one we are filled with pride, imaging ourselves to look better than we are, and with the other we are filled with pride masquerading as self-pity, imagining ourselves in the worse possible way. We are filled with thoughts of us, when we need to think of Jesus and be filled with thoughts of Him. All we can see is ourselves, when where we need to look is to Christ.

God did not leave Isaiah lamenting over his sin. He came to Him with forgiveness and cleansing. As we are reminded of the forgiveness and cleansing we have in Jesus and are refreshed in the hearing and singing and praying of the gospel—joy fills our hearts as our confidence rests in Him.

Now that being said, I must caution you:

Jesus will not ultimately rejoice our hearts if our brokenness and sadness, when we come to worship, is not over sin. If we are just upset that things didn't go our way—if our desire is simply to be rid of earthly troubles and frustrations—if our sorrow of heart when we come to worship is due to worldly disappointments, and the hardships and pain of life, and we are convinced that the only way we can be happy is for the them to be taken away, we are not going find lasting joy in looking to Christ.

Why? Jesus never promises to solve all our difficulties in this life or bring worldly success or give us a life of ease free from trials and suffering. The gospel, in fact, often brings with it more trials and suffering and persecution in this life.

God does not always take away our sorrow over these things, but He does give us a new perspective and a promise that He will work all things for our good. We are not to look upon our difficulties as if they were bad, or expect God, if He loves us, to always take them away. God has a purpose in everything He allows to come into our lives, even things that appear to us as bad. God often uses trials to sanctify us and draw us closer to Himself. He uses trials to keeps us near Him and on our knees in humility.

Our deepest sorrow should be our sorrow over the sin that displeases God and makes us deserving of death. When the truth of God's Word breaks upon our hearts and we are broken over sin, then—as we look on God's provision— there is comfort and hope in the gospel. Jesus died to take away our guilt and condemnation, not our inconveniences, that we might be forgiven and made righteous in Him.

## 5. **We submit to God's Word by Faith.**

Isaiah 6:8a

As we receive the Word of God we receive it eagerly, knowing it is God's Word and desiring to walk in its light and obey God's will for our lives. This was Paul's joy as he remembered the church at Thessalonica in prayer. He prayed:

1 Thessalonians 2:13 For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.

Worship not only draws out **repentance** as we are broken over sin that is uncovered in our hearts, it deepens and strengths our **faith** as we root our hope in Jesus and believe in His Word. When we humbly bring our lives before God in worship, He increases our faith. We receive His Word and submit our hearts and our lives to His Word by faith, knowing that it is God's Word and that His Word holds authority over us.



## 6. **We desire to go out from worship and live in obedience to Him.**

Isaiah 6:8b

Simply understanding the Word is not enough. Simply praising God for His Word is not enough. God never seeks just to give us information; He demands a response to His Word. He wants our understanding to be lived out in obedience. We must desire in our hearts to live according to the light with which He has blessed us. Our obedience is manifest in daily repentance and faith as we continually flee from sin and turn to Christ.

This was Isaiah's response in Isaiah 6. Isaiah confessed his sinfulness in verse 5 and then verses 6–7 God had an angel bring a coal and touch his lips. He told Isaiah in verse 7: "Behold this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away and your sin is purged." Isaiah heard these wonderful words of forgiveness.

Then God brought His Word again in verse 8, saying: "Who shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Do you remember Isaiah's response? It was a response that should echo in our hearts when we hear the voice of God from His Word. Isaiah said; "Here am I! Send me."

Isaiah was ready to "do" not just to "hear."

You will notice here at Grace that when God's Word is taught and preached, we try always to include application. I encourage you to listen for it in the messages. Ask the "so what" questions. If this is true, what difference should this make in my life? How can I honor God and bring Him glory by walking in faith and repentance in light of what He is teaching me in His Word?

These are questions that resound in a heart moved in true worship. A heart that is humbled before the presence of God, lifted up in the forgiveness of God and ready to obey in power of God.

## 7. **We are filled with hope because of His promises.**

Isaiah 6:11-13

Even if we are experiencing difficulty, we can hold to the sure **promises** that God gives us in His Word. We have the promises of everlasting life, the promise of God's abiding presence, and numerous other precious promises that fill our hearts with steadfast hope.

Do you remember in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian was on his way to the Celestial City? He had the hope of eternal life with his King. And all along the journey, especially in times that were difficult, he yearned for glimpses of the city. Bunyan was highlighting the longing in the heart of God's people to rest in the hope of His promise.

God has given us this hope in His Word. He has promised us eternal life and every spiritual blessing in Christ. And God will accomplish all He has said He will do. In worship we receive and cherish and cling to these precious promises.

## 8. We long to see others come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Isaiah 6:11a "How long, O Lord?"

Worship propels us to **mission**. And our mission is to go and to make disciples (Matthew 28:19). We want others to find and know the same joy and peace that we experience in Christ. We want others to come and add their voices to the prayers and praise of God's people. We are zealous of God's glory and desire to see the glory of God fill the earth. And so we go and we tell.

When Isaiah worshipped God, he saw the Lord high and lifted up; he saw his own sinfulness in the face of God's glory and holiness; he experienced the wonder and joy of God's forgiveness for his sins; and he responded to God's call to go and preach God's Word.

But Isaiah was given the difficult task of preaching to a people whose hearts were hard against truth. They were stubborn and would not listen. Isaiah was willing to be God's messenger. We hear him say, "Here am I, send me." But he longed to see the stirrings of faith and the fruits of repentance. When God told Isaiah that the people would turn away and not listen, the cry of his heart in verse 11 was "How long, O Lord?" He wanted the darkness and coldness of men's hearts to end.

God did not leave Isaiah without hope. In response to his cry, God gives a promise at the end of chapter 6 of a remnant that would remain. Though it looks like the tree is cut down and the promise that God had made since the fall of Adam in the garden of a holy seed is in doubt; God declares at the end of verse 13: "The holy seed is its stump." The rest of the book of Isaiah goes on to shed more light on God's purposes in the preservation of Israel and the coming Messiah.

As you continue reading in Isaiah, it is as if God pulls back the curtain, providing more and more light, revealing what the Messiah will be and what He will accomplish. For example, we read later in Isaiah of the day when God's praise will fill the earth:

Isaiah 24:16            From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise,  
                                of glory to the Righteous One.

Isaiah celebrated the day when God would shine the light of the gospel of Jesus.

Isaiah 60:1–3            Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
                                and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.  
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,  
                                and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
                                and his glory will be seen upon you.  
And nations shall come to your light,  
                                and kings to the brightness of your rising.

He looked forward to the day when the darkness would fall away and people from every nation, tongue and tribe would see the light of Christ. He longed for the day when the glory of God would cover the earth.

This is another inner stirring of true worship. Worship cannot be contained in the sanctuary. Its desire is to fill the earth! You will know you have worshipped, when you leave this place and worship stays with you—you can't leave it here! It continues to burn in your heart and engage your soul—so much so that you not only remember it—you must share it—you cannot contain it.

If you have ever experienced the glory of God and the joy of communing with Him in worship, you know that nothing else will ever satisfy your soul like God. We can never be satisfied with anything else. And we want this joy, not just for ourselves, but for others.

So pray tonight that God would help us worship Him this way:

That He would open our hearts to embrace and delight in truth.

That He would enliven our affections and praise.

That He would work in us repentance and faith and make our hearts teachable and obedient to His will.

That He would keep the gospel ringing in our ears and steady our lives upon His sure Word and precious promises.

And that He would give us a heart for the lost and broken, that we would be His servants and messengers in spread His praise over the earth.

Let us pray.

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