

The Posture of Worship

Part 1

Series: Thoughts on Worship
Sermon by Ken Puls
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Call to Worship: Nehemiah 8:1–12

Tonight we are continuing our study “Thoughts on Worship.” Thus far we have considered both the outward elements and the inward reality of worship—the external forms that shape corporate worship and matters of the heart that are the life and vitality of true worship.

We spent time examining the outward elements: the reading of Scripture, preaching and teaching of God’s Word, prayer, public confession of faith, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, self-examination and silent meditation, giving of tithes and offerings, fellowship, and times of corporate thanksgiving and corporate repentance.

In these activities that God has affirmed and appointed in His Word for our worship, we are called upon to engage the heart. With our mind and will and emotions, we are to pursue God in the truth of His Word and by the power of His Spirit.

Our desire when we worship is not just to do right things and say right things; our desire is to meet with God—to commune with Him in His Word and to see His Spirit stirring in our hearts and lives.

We see God at work by the power of His Spirit as He illumines His Word and gives us understanding of truth—as He shows us Himself and His glory, drawing out our praise and reverence, as He shows us our sin, bringing conviction and drawing out repentance and brokenness—as He shows us Christ, filling us with joy and hope in the forgiveness of sin and salvation—and as He teaches us His will, leading us into submission and obedience and service.

We are certainly to be worshipping God in our hearts, but the question I want to ask tonight is:

What about the body?

Does it matter at all what we do with our bodies in worship?

Clearly if we are to read Scripture, we must use our eyes. If we are to hear the sermon, songs and prayers, we must use our ears. If we are to join in singing, praying and confessing our faith, we must use our voices. But beyond these basic uses, does the Bible have anything to say about physical expression—gesture and posture in worship?

Is true worship strictly an issue of the heart? Or does worshipping God in spirit and in truth involve the body as well? Does God have anything to say about our posture?

I plan to address these questions in two parts:

First: **What does the Bible say about posture and worship?**

And second: **Why is posture important in worship?**

Tonight we will focus on Part 1—the Bible’s teaching on posture. In an upcoming message we will cover Part 2—the importance of posture.

Let me begin by saying:

The Bible has much to say about our posture in worship.

This can be seen in two specific points:

I. The meanings of the two words, translated most often in Scripture as “worship” in both the Old and New Testament, refer to posture.

The Hebrew verb *shacah* [שָׁחָה] in the Old Testament means *to become low or to bow down as an act of reverence*. It depicts a physical act that symbolizes what we do when we worship—showing reverence to God, acknowledging Him as the Most High, humbling ourselves, making ourselves low—in His presence. The term describes the worship of Israel at the dedication of Solomon’s Temple:

2 Chronicles 7:1-3 When Solomon had finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. And the priests could not enter the house of the Lord, because the glory of the Lord had filled the Lord's house. When all the children of Israel saw how the fire came down, and the glory of the Lord on the temple, they bowed their faces to the ground on the pavement, and **worshiped** and praised the Lord, saying:
 “For He is good,
 For His mercy endures forever.”

And in the psalms:

Psalms 95:6 Oh come, let us **worship** and bow down;
 Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.

In the New Testament *proskuneo* [προσκυνέω] is the Greek term most often translated “worship.” It has a similar meaning: *to bow down, become low or kiss toward*.

It is the verb used when the wisemen came to Bethlehem to see Jesus after seeing His star in the East.

Matthew 2:11 And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and **worshiped** Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

This is the term used in Matthew 4 when Satan tempted Jesus:

Matthew 4:9–10 And he said to Him, “All these things I will give You if You will fall down and **worship** me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall **worship** the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.’”

It is the verb used after the resurrection when Jesus greets the women near the empty tomb:

Matthew 28:9 And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, “Rejoice!” So they came and held Him by the feet and **worshiped** Him.

And before His ascension into heaven when His disciples worshipped Him:

Matthew 28:16–17 Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they **worshiped** Him; but some doubted.

It describes the worship of the church on earth. Paul speaks of an unbeliever coming into a worship service and being convinced that God is truly present. He says of the unbeliever:

1 Corinthians 14:25 And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will **worship** God and report that God is truly among you.

This is a physical expression of worship—not just bowing down to God in the heart, but bowing down with the body.

Proskuneo describes the worship in heaven as well:

Revelation 4:10 The twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and **worship** Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne. . .

It is the word (both noun and verb) used five times in John 4:20–24 where Jesus teaches:

But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true **worshippers** will **worship** the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to **worship** Him. God is Spirit, and those who **worship** Him must **worship** in spirit and truth.”

Some have interpreted Jesus’ words here to mean that God is only concerned about our spirit in worship—only interested in what is happening on the inside—the externals are of no importance or consequence.

I submit to you that this is a misinterpretation of these verses. Jesus was not teaching here that the body no longer mattered. He was teaching that our worship must be alive in the power of the Spirit and informed and in submission to the authority of His Word.

Truth must first be received and understood and grasped by the heart, but when truth grips us—**when it really matters to us—when it really affects us**—it will be borne out—visibly displayed—made apparent and lived out in our bodies.

What does it look like when we worship God? What should it look like? What affect should truth have on our physical expression—on our countenance—if we really get it? When we look into God’s Word, we see that He has much to say concerning our posture and expression in worship. He is concerned not only with what we are communicating directly to Him on the inside in our hearts—but also what we are communicating on the outside to those around us.

God alone is worthy of our worship. He alone is Most High. And we are to express our worship to Him in both body and heart. So how then can we know what is appropriate and fitting as we physically express our devotion to God in worship? Here the Scripture gives us a wealth of information.

II. There are a variety of postures mentioned in Scripture in the context of worship.

I will mention 10 specifically:

1. Standing

This was the posture of the priests and servants of God in the Old Testament.

Psalms 134:1 Behold, bless the LORD,
All you servants of the LORD,
Who by night **stand** in the house of the LORD!

Psalms 135:1–2 Praise the LORD! Praise the name of the LORD;
Praise Him, O you servants of the LORD!
You who **stand** in the house of the LORD,
In the courts of the house of our God,

Psalms 24:3 Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD?
Or who may **stand** in His holy place?

It was also the posture of the people during the praise of God.

2 Chronicles 7:6 And the priests attended to their services; the Levites also with instruments of the music of the LORD, which King David had made to praise the LORD, saying, “For His mercy endures forever,” whenever David offered praise by their ministry. The priests sounded trumpets opposite them, while all Israel **stood**.

In the worship service recorded in Nehemiah 8, the chapter we read a few moments ago for our call to worship, we see an example of Israel standing to hear the reading of God’s Word.

Nehemiah 8:5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was **standing** above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people **stood** up.

And even during the teaching of God's Word, verse 7 of Nehemiah 8 tells us that "the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law; and the people **stood** in their place."

In Nehemiah 9:5 the Levites exhort the people to stand and sing praise to God:

"Stand up and bless the LORD your God forever and ever!
'Blessed be Your glorious name,
Which is exalted above all blessing and praise!

In the New Testament, we see standing as a posture of prayer.

Mark 11:25 "And whenever you **stand praying**, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.

2. Sitting

Jesus had the people sit down when He taught them.

John 6:10 Then Jesus said, "Make the people **sit down**." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men **sat down**, in number about five thousand.

He sat with His disciples at that first Lord's Supper.

Matthew 26:20 When evening had come, He **sat down** with the twelve.

Sitting down was common in the synagogue.

Acts 13:14 But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and **sat down**.

And we see it at the place of prayer outside the city of Philippi.

Acts 16:13 And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we **sat down** and spoke to the women who met there.

3. Being Still

As Israel worshipped, preparing to cross the Red Sea:

Exodus 14:13 And Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. **Stand still**, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever.

God exhorted Job as well to be still:

Job 37:14 "Listen to this, O Job;
Stand still and consider the wondrous works of God.

And in Psalm 46:10 we are told:

Psalms 46:10 **Be still**, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!

There are times in worship, when the most fitting response is to be still and quietly meditate on the wonder of God—to cease from our doing and reflect on what God has done.

4. Kneeling

Psalms 95:6 Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
Let us **kneel** before the LORD our Maker.

We see Solomon kneeling (in prayer) at the dedication of the Temple.

1 Kings 8:54 And so it was, when Solomon had finished praying all this prayer and supplication to the LORD, that he arose from before the altar of the LORD, from **kneeling on his knees** with his hands spread up to heaven.

And in the New Testament, when Jesus prays in the Garden.

Luke 22:41 And He was withdrawn from them about a stone's throw, and He **knelt down** and prayed,

This was a common posture of prayer in the New Testament. Stephen, for example:

Acts 7:60 Then he **knelt down** and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

And Peter (in prayer):

Acts 9:40 But Peter put them all out, and **knelt down** and prayed. And turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up.

It was common in private prayer as well as prayer with others. Paul prayed with the Ephesian Elders:

Acts 20:36 And when he had said these things, he **knelt down** and prayed with them all.

And again Paul with the Ephesian elders at Tyre:

Acts 21:5 When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us, with wives and children, till we were out of the city. And we **knelt down** on the shore and prayed.

Paul in His Epistles, when he speaks of prayer and worship, refers to kneeling:

Ephesians 3:14 For this reason I **bow my knees** to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This was how Paul prayed. And it will be a posture we will all inevitably assume. Listen to Paul's words in Philippians 2:

Philippians 2:10–11 That at the name of Jesus **every knee should bow**, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Paul is not speaking metaphorically here (of just bowing in the heart). There will be a day when reality of Christ and His glory will be so manifest—the spirits of men will be so overwhelmed and brought low at the splendor of truth dawning in their souls—their bodies will be utterly compelled to follow their hearts and every knee will bow in worship.

5. Bowing Down (Falling Down)

Psalms 95:6 Oh come, let us worship and **bow down**;
Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.

Job 1:20 Then Job arose, tore his robe, and shaved his head;
and he **fell to the ground** and worshiped.

This was John's response when Jesus appeared to him on the island of Patmos:

Revelation 1:17 And when I saw Him, I **fell at His feet** as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last.

And see this posture in heaven before the throne of God as John records:

Revelation 4:10 The twenty-four elders **fall down** before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne. . .

Revelation 5:8 Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders **fell down** before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

Revelation 5:14 Then the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the twenty-four elders **fell down** and worshiped Him who lives forever and ever.

Revelation 19:4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures **fell down** and worshiped God who sat on the throne, saying, "Amen! Alleluia!"

6. Falling on Your Face

This was Ezekiel's posture when he saw the glory of God.

Ezekiel 1:28 Like the appearance of a rainbow in a cloud on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the brightness all around it. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. So when I saw it, I **fell on my face**, and I heard a voice of One speaking.

Ezekiel 3:23 So I arose and went out into the plain, and behold, the glory of the LORD stood there, like the glory which I saw by the River Chebar; and I **fell on my face**.

And it was Jesus' posture in the garden in the hours before His crucifixion:

Matthew 26:39 He went a little farther and **fell on His face**, and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will."

Here we see Jesus falling on His face in worship as He prayed and poured out His heart to His Father. He wasn't in heaven, physically present before the throne of His Father. He was worshipping the Father in spirit and in truth, expressing the deep moving of His heart. He was God and He was Man. And as a man he was compelled to express the deep emotion of His heart through the physical posture of falling down on His face.

We see also the leper in Luke 5:12 expressing his need to Jesus:

Luke 5:12 And it happened when He [Jesus] was in a certain city, that behold, a man who was full of leprosy saw Jesus; and he **fell on his face** and implored Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean."

7. Looking Up (lifting up the head or face)

We see this in Scripture as a posture of hope and delight in prayer.

Psalms 123:1 Unto You I **lift up my eyes**, O You who dwell in the heavens.

Psalms 5:3 My voice You shall hear in the morning, O LORD;
In the morning I will direct it to You,
And I will **look up**.

Job 22:26–27 For then you will have your delight in the Almighty,
And **lift up your face** to God. You will make your prayer to Him,
He will hear you, And you will pay your vows.

8. Looking Down (bowing the head)

We see this in private prayer in the Old Testament, for example in Genesis 24:26. When Isaac's servant finds Rebekah and God makes it clear that she is the one to be Isaac's bride, we read:

Genesis 24:26 Then the man **bowed down his head** and worshiped the LORD.

We see this in Israel's public worship at the Passover in Exodus 12:

Exodus 12:26–27 And it shall be, when your children say to you, "What do you mean by this service?" that you shall say, "It is the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households." So the people **bowed their heads** and worshiped.

Psalms 119:48 My **hands** also I **will lift up** to Your commandments,
Which I love, And I will meditate on Your statutes.

We see hands lifted up in public prayer:

1 Kings 8:54 And so it was, when Solomon had finished praying all this prayer and supplication to the LORD, that he arose from before the altar of the LORD, from kneeling on his knees **with his hands spread up to heaven**.

Nehemiah 8:6 And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. Then all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" **while lifting up their hands**. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

Psalms 141:2 Let my prayer be set before You as incense,
The lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.

Psalms 28:2 Hear the voice of my supplications when I cry to You,
When I **lift up my hands** toward Your holy sanctuary.

Calvin had this to say in his comments on Psalm 28:2

"It has been common practice in all ages for men to lift up their hands in prayer. Nature has extorted this gesture even from heathen idolaters, to show by a visible sign that their minds were directed to God alone. The greater part, it is true, contented with this ceremony, busy themselves to no effect with their own inventions; but the very lifting up of the hands, when there is no hypocrisy and deceit, is a help to devout and zealous prayer." [Calvin, *Commentary on Psalm 28:2*]

The practice of lifting the hands in prayer continued in the New Testament in the church. Paul tells Timothy—

1 Timothy 2:8 I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, **lifting up holy hands**, without wrath and doubting.

10. Clapping the Hands

We see this in worship in Psalm 47:1

Psalms 47:1 Oh, **clap your hands**, all you peoples!
Shout to God with the voice of triumph!

This is clearly commanded for God's people in the Old Testament. But is it appropriate as well for the church today?

In recent days we have heard applause here in our congregation in times of worship. Does God want us to applaud? This is perhaps the most difficult to discern in our day. Unlike bowing down, and lifting the hands and kneeling, we can't find a specific example or command mentioned in the

New Testament. Applause is used in our culture to be polite, to show our approval or appreciation for someone or something. There are so many common uses of clapping, that we can easily recoil from it when we hear it in worship. We want people to understand that what we are doing here is special—we are not trying to give accolades to one another. **This is worship**—it is not a concert, it is not a political rally—it is holy, set apart, a meeting between God and His people.

But that being said, we must recognize, God has wired us to physically express our emotions. That is why we fall down on our faces in prayer when we are humbled and at the end of ourselves—that is why we lift our hands in joy and praise—and that is why we sometimes clap our hands.

We see this in nature. **God has created us to express openly what moves us inwardly.**

One of the ways we can display joy is clapping. Scripture recognizes this.

We see it in Psalm 98 when the psalmist mentions clapping as a visible display of joy.

Psalm 98:4–8 Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth;
Break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises.
Sing to the Lord with the harp,
With the harp and the sound of a psalm,
With trumpets and the sound of a horn;
Shout joyfully before the Lord, the King.
Let the sea roar, and all its fullness,
The world and those who dwell in it;
Let the rivers **clap their hands**;
Let the hills be joyful together before the Lord

And in Isaiah 55:

Isaiah 55:12 “For you shall go out with joy, and be led out with peace;
The mountains and the hills
Shall break forth into singing before you,
And all the trees of the field shall **clap their hands**.

Clapping is a natural way to make known our joy and sometimes our joy gets the best of us. Applause breaks out as a spontaneous expression in worship—and in those times, while we would never script them or coerce them or even expect them, we must realize that God is much less offended by joyful clapping than many of us—He, in fact, can be praised and exalted by it.

The Bible has much to say about our posture in worship.

We have looked tonight at several gestures and postures that the Bible affirms as appropriate for worship as physical expressions of our hearts to God and to one another.

God created us to serve and worship Him. He created us soul and body. We must obey His Word and live before Him to His glory in both soul and body. And this includes *openly* and *unashamedly* expressing our worship to Him in the public assembly.

In the worship service recorded in Nehemiah 8 we saw how the people of God responded physically in worship as they were gripped and challenged and changed by the truth: listening—being attentive, standing up, voicing a congregational “AMEN”, lifting up their hands in prayer, bowing their heads in prayer.

I would hope that as we worship here, we would *have* and *feel* freedom to respond in appropriate ways—whether that be saying AMEN, lifting up hands in praise or petition, bowing the head during a prayer, or listening attentively to the sermon.

Next time we will continue our study of posture with Part 2 and focus on why posture is important in worship. As you prepare to hear the next message, I encourage you to spent time in God’s Word. Look again at the verses and passages we have considered this evening. This is not an issue where the Scriptures are silent. Consider what the Bible says about **demonstrating in our bodies what is true in our hearts.**

If we are to worship God in spirit and in truth and *do it corporately*—so our very presence here in the worship service not only honors God—who sees not only our bodies, but into the depths of our hearts—but is also edifying and encouraging to brothers and sisters in Christ, our children and others who come into our gathering—who can only see what we physically express on the outside—we must give attention and thought to what we are communicating with our bodies in worship.

Let us pray.

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