

The Heart of Worship

I will never forget walking into a church service for the first time after I had received Christ. It was like hearing the music through a brand-new set of ears. It seemed so different to how I'd heard it before!

The church that day was singing the old song, "I Hear the Sound of the Army of the Lord." People from all walks of life—all ages, different denominational backgrounds and differing musical preferences—sang together, and here it was: the sound of one voice, one heart, one song, a sound more spiritual than musical but so beautiful. It's still etched on my heart today.

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It was the sound of the church at worship. A song of the heart, not just the mouth. A song that had a measure of eternity woven throughout it. A sound that included us all and valued us all. A sound we were born to recognize and contribute to. The sound of grateful hearts.

I've given my life to this heavenly song.

A Sound Like No Other

Music is created to give voice to the human condition. It's a powerful vehicle of expression for the human heart. It communicates the cries, elation, anguish, joys, highs and lows. When mere language is insufficient, music speaks on.

In Psalm 71, David says, "When I open up in song to You, I let out lungsful of praise, my rescued life a song" (v. 23, MSG). This is where the praise of God is unlike any other music

you'll ever hear. It's not about style, volume or methods. It's about genuine thanksgiving being released from grateful hearts.

Matthew 7:6 in The Message says, "Don't be flip with the sacred." Yale professor Nicholas Wolterstorff once said, "Each people group, each generation, needs to be able to express its sense of worship in its own voice, in a way that resonates deep in the soul." Just because a sound is not our style, that doesn't mean that it isn't sacred.

If worship isn't dependent on a particular style or sound, then what *is* worship?

The simplest explanation is that it is the giving of due worth to God. The word *worship* would be an appropriate way to describe the act of worship, for God alone is worthy of all worship, honor, glory and praise. Worship is the inevitable result of the created—you and me—catching a glimpse of the reality of Christ and then responding.

Unfortunately, the word *worship* gets flattened out all the time and reduced to a set of neat songs that make us feel good. But this isn't even the starting point for truthful worship. Truthful lives of worship involve our entire existence (Rom. 12:1-2). Music, melody, art, dance, creativity—all these things give voice to the mystery and hiddenness of the human heart. Our cries, prayers and journeys, formed into songs, allow the heart to be expressed in a tangible way.

In our natural bodies, when our hearts shut down, our lives shut down. The same applies to the power of praise and worship in song. When our praise shuts down, our hearts become small and stifled, and it affects our whole lives. Our lives are the substance of the song we sing, living in tune with the great Orchestrator Himself.

Lamentations 5 describes a people who feel forgotten by God

and a moment when they had no worship: “The elders have ceased from the gate, the young men from their music. The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning” (vv. 14-15, ASV).

Even in the most challenging times, the art and discipline of lifting our voices to the truth of the Word of God is part of the miracle of praise, remembering that we cannot even utter the words “Jesus is Lord” and mean it but by the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 12:3). And so we lean into His breath and His power every single time we praise, bringing forth life through gratitude.

A Choice Rooted in Humility

Worship has always required choice and change. It identifies which kingdom you belong to, and it has always been about the glory of God.

Isaiah 43:7 says we were all created for His glory. The entirety of humanity was designed to adore and connect with the fullness of God. This means our need to worship is built into us—it’s part of our DNA. It is the ultimate expression that our existence craves.

Furthermore, if we *don’t* worship our Lord, we will end up in idolatry, which is the act of placing our affections on anything higher than God. Usually we do this because we want to control the outcome. Yet as Eugene Peterson writes, “God cannot be fit into our plans, we must fit into his.”

We can’t use God—He is not a tool or an appliance or a credit card. *Holy* is the word that sets God apart and sets Him above our attempts to enlist Him in our wish-fulfillment fantasies or our utopian schemes for making our mark in the world. *Holy* means that God is alive on God’s terms, alive in a way that exceeds our experience and imagination. *Holy* refers to life that burns with an intense purity and transforms everything it touches into itself.

There are countless millions who cannot play a note of music but are incredible worshippers. Conversely, there are many others, extremely gifted in music and song, who are poor worshippers.

Worship is not about operating in our gifts and feeling fulfilled, but it has always been and will always be an anthem of the heart.

Jesus Himself said that true worship must be in spirit and in truth, and the only way this is possible is through grace. Not one of us could ever claim we don't rely on His grace to stand before His throne. Only by the cross—only by the blood—can we freely enter this glorious place of worship and adoration, thanksgiving and praise.

The Father seeks for us to worship Him (John 4:24), and He will continually teach us to worship Him. This is said beautifully in Geoffrey Bingham's book, *The Way and Wonder of Worship*: "Something of our fallen humanity—our human flesh—mingles with the worship that the Spirit inspires. Yet this does not mean that such worship is unacceptable to God. Worship is commanded and, as we have said, is offered through grace, and so is accepted by grace. Therefore, we can be at peace concerning the worship we offer to God."

A Step Up to the Truest Life

Psalm 100 tells us to "enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise" (v. 4, NRSV). We are meant to sing a new song. Sing, sing, sing!

Yet because strength and joy are found in God's presence, it's no surprise the enemy works so hard to try to silence our song. In Matthew 4, Satan tries to lure Jesus by his cunning words and empty promises. "Kneel down and worship me," he says.

You see, Satan has always craved our worship. In Isaiah 14:13,

we learn the deceiver said in his heart, “I will ascend to the heavens, higher than God.” Satan is always trying to exalt himself first in our life, followed by any other idol he possibly can get us to worship—the kingdoms of this world, the culture, the values, the seductions.

Yet to love God and worship Him with our lives is our ultimate satisfaction. When you have positioned yourself in His presence, it doesn’t take long for the reality of the world and its heaviness to fade in the glory of God and His promise over our lives.

So how do you begin to live this way? For starters, always remember that God is not looking for an outside-in, performance-based or talent-based offering. He has always been looking for an offering of the heart.

When it comes to our personal journey of worship and praise, you have to remember this is a journey of faith. Without faith, we rely on our own ability and understanding, our own skill level and our own favor—and living like this makes it impossible to please God. Coming to Him in worship takes faith. Leading others in worship takes faith.

Revelation 4:1 says, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things” (NASB). This is one of the great worship passages in Revelation. And it surprises me that even as this great prophecy is being revealed to John, as he’s gazing at an open door in heaven, still he is required to take a step up—to “come up here.”

In Exodus 24, the Lord says the same thing to Moses: “Come up” (v. 1). He asks Moses to step out of his limitations and come up the mountain to worship.

Always, faith is required.

We take a step from the temporal to the eternal. We take the song of the soul and join it with the great anthem of the

Spirit. We take a step from the emotional realm to the truth realm. We put on a garment of praise for our spirit of heaviness. Yes, we need to *come up*.

Taking a step up takes energy, a yielding of the will and a willingness to step out of the boat. And even though this first step forward makes you feel vulnerable, it's the safest place in the world to be.

As we come up, we take others with us and teach their hearts to trust. I've heard many times from onlookers that they've learned trust in worship through watching our lives—by watching us continually grow through trials and fall into the arms of an ever-loving God. It's part of the beauty of His body. As I observe people in developing nations and watch them connect with God, they really take on this command to come up—it is literally life to them.

So come up, come up, come up!

A Gift of the Greatest Presence

One thing I know is that the earth is desperate for the presence of God—as am I! The raw dynamic of His Being and Person stepping into our existence is something you never want to be without.

The tender presence we become aware of in worship is God's abiding presence—a nearness that is often evident to the redeemed. Even today, as I spoke to a friend who is critically ill, she shared with me her lack of fear. She explained, "It's not that I'm brave. It's just that I am so aware of God's love and kindness toward me. I sense His constant presence."

So, dear friends, I pray you catch my heart for you today. I encourage you to lean in to all that God Himself is offering you today through His Son Jesus Christ and to allow the breath and power of the Holy Spirit to fill you afresh as you simply and wholeheartedly worship Jesus.

His love for you is immeasurable. His glory is rising across the earth as the water covers the seas. I pray that we, His sons and daughters, will continue to see our lives poured out in response to His great love—for this is our spiritual act of worship.

Darlene Zschech was the worship pastor of Hillsong Church in Sydney from 1996 to 2007. In addition to “Shout to the Lord,” Zschech has written more than 80 songs published by Hillsong Music Australia, including those on her latest album, *Revealing Jesus*. She and her husband, Mark, are now senior pastors of Hope Unlimited Church in New South Wales.