

# Let us Worship

© John Hooper  
2006

*O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.*

*Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms.*

*For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.*

*In his hand are the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills is his also.*

*The sea is his, and he made it: and his hands formed the dry land.*

*O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker.*

*For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. To day if ye will hear his voice,*

*Harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness:*

*When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my work.*

*Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that do er in their heart, and they have not known my ways:*

*Unto whom I sware in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest.*

(Psalm 95)

If there is one word that describes perfectly the psalmist's state of mind as he penned Psalms 95 through to 100, then surely *enthusiastic* is that word. His heart is charged with a holy excitement, thrilled by the pleasure and delight to be found in the worship of God: 'O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation' (Ps. 95:1).

Immediately this throws down a challenge to our own hearts as to how

enthusiastic we are for worship. How excited are we by its prospect when we wake up each Lord's Day? How much are we like the psalmist, not going to worship under a burden of compulsion or slavish sense of duty, but because it is the earnest desire of our soul? David *wants* to worship and what is more he wants us to go with him. He says elsewhere, 'O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together' (Ps. 34:3). He calls on us to accompany him so that together we might sing the praises of our God and Saviour, coming before His presence with thanksgiving and making a joyful noise.

Psalm 84 opens with words that should come easily to our lips, just as they did to the psalmist's. In metrical translation we can sing:

*How lovely is thy dwelling-place  
O Lord of Hosts, to me!  
The tabernacles of thy grace  
How pleasant, Lord, they be!  
My thirsty soul longs veh'mently,  
Yea faints, thy courts to see:  
My very heart and flesh cry out,  
O living God, for thee.*

It is sad but true that for many believers this thirst must go unquenched, and that through no fault of their own. They wake up on the Lord's Day with their hearts heavy and their spirits saddened by the unbiblical nature, even the sheer carnality, of what passes for worship in their local churches. Such is the state of things today that some of God's choicest people have little alternative but to stay at home or meet informally with the few others of like precious faith in their neighbourhood. They are left stranded with nowhere to go. We will be considering the character of true worship later, but point out for now that the infectious enthusiasm and anticipation, which one cannot fail to sense in these psalms as the writer prompts and encourages us to worship the Lord with him, is for the pure worship of God that He has revealed in His word and requires of His people. For such worship there is a holy thrill in David's heart and there ought to be in ours too. A local church that orders its worship in a biblical, God-honouring manner should have our enthusiastic support and we should make every effort to search out or establish such a church.

### **Corporate worship**

Of course we may, indeed we should, worship God in the privacy of our own homes, in the quiet place of solitude where we are alone with the Lord and His Word. Also we may, and should, worship Him as families, such as around the meal

table. But as much as all this is good and to be encouraged it is not the kind of worship portrayed in Psalm 95. The idea there is of the Lord's people worshipping *together*. It is not individual or even family worship that is being encouraged, but *corporate* worship. This is what the psalmist means when he tells us, 'The LORD loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob' (Ps. 87:2). David is calling on us to leave our homes, to come out of our private places, to get up from the family table and worship the Lord together: 'O come, let *us* sing... let *us* make a joyful noise... Let *us* come before his presence... let *us* worship and bow down'. This was the regular practice of the Lord Jesus Christ, setting us the perfect example: '*as his custom was*, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day' (Luke 4:16).

Church attendance has been in steady decline for many years now, reflecting the increasing spiritual apathy and Godlessness of recent generations. Even some who profess to be Christians will tell us that they do not understand the need to go to church. They will say, 'I am able to worship God anywhere; I can take a walk in the countryside or along the seashore, and "come before His presence" in creation.' But such an argument misses the point. God *commands* His people to worship Him together. It is true that God is everywhere present and we can raise a prayer of adoration and gratitude to Him at any time in response to the wonders of creation and providence, but that does not mean worship is only and always to be individualistic. The clear message of all Scripture, as in Psalm 95, is that God calls us to collective worship and that it is not an option. It is a matter of obedience..

Those whom God brought up out of Egypt and led through the wilderness were not a rag-tag band of unrelated individuals but a nation, a people united and related to one another. What is more, they were a nation in covenant with God. Set apart from all the nations of the world the children of Israel were a people whom God had brought into a bond of love and fellowship with Himself. They were His people and He was their God. This sacred bond was expressed supremely in worship. The tabernacle, and later the temple, represented the dwelling place of God amongst His people, His 'congregation' (Ps. 74:1). It was the place where He met with them and they with Him in holy worship.

This is still true today except that now God's people, His 'holy nation', are gathered from every tribe and tongue on the face of the earth. From every nation, by a sovereign and effectual call, God is calling out a people into covenant with Himself. Together they are one nation, a people united in Christ and with a corporate identity that on earth comes to its fullest expression when they come together for worship. He is their God and they are His people, His friends in everlasting fellowship and communion with Him.

Another difference from the days of the children of Israel is that today the temple of God is the *church* and local congregations of believers are its outward manifestation (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:21,22; 1 Peter 2:5). The local church is where God

is. He is present where His people congregate together, a priesthood of believers, 'For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matt. 18:20). We do not need to meet in a specially designed building, although that is most often the case today. A believer's home, as was common during the early church (cf. Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16: 19; Philm. 2), or a field, a wood or a cave, as has so often been the case during times of persecution, can be a house of the Lord and a sanctuary for the people of God every bit as much as some architecturally elaborate building, probably more so. Wherever the people meet there is the church and God in the midst saying as of old, 'Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, and bless the LORD' (Ps. 134:2). 'Ye that stand in the house of the LORD, in the courts of the house of our God, Praise the LORD' (Ps. 135:2,3). The poet William Cowper expressed it well in two of his most famous lines, taking us to the heart of corporate worship:

*Jesus, where'er Thy people meet,  
There they behold Thy mercy seat.*

In corporate worship we no longer worship as individuals but collectively, as a single organic unit. Our praise becomes the united praise of one body; our thanksgiving the collective thanks-giving of one organism. And although it is the minister who leads the worship and whose voice is heard in prayer it is the whole assembly that is being led as a unified body to the throne of grace. It is not one man's prayer, it is the prayer of the entire congregation ascending to the Lord as the united petition and thanksgiving of the people, sealed, hopefully, with a hearty 'Amen' from all present: 'and let all the people say, Amen' (Ps. 106:48).

How much importance do you place on corporate worship? What is your attendance record like? What are the attendance records like even in our conservative evangelical and Reformed congregations? Are they as good as the membership roles suggest they ought to be, or do the people need some words of encouragement? It is as a consequence of our fallen natures that we *need* encouragement from time to time. We must be honest with ourselves about this. The allurements of the world still tempt us, the unwillingness of the flesh still keeps us in our beds, and it is because we know the nature of our hearts and our own proneness to wonder from the God we love that we are concerned when we look around us at the time of worship and see so many empty pews. Where are our fellow believers? Where is their enthusiasm for worship? This is an issue that should cause us grave and loving concern.

**Empty pews**

It should also cause concern to pastors, those men whom the Lord has raised up to be under-shepherds to lead His flock in the rich, green pastures of the Word. They feed and care for our souls; they are concerned for our spiritual welfare. When we encourage one another to worship they are gladdened in their hearts, as was David: 'I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go up into the house of the LORD' (Ps. 122:1). It put joy into his heart to hear the mutual enthusiasm of the people for the Lord's house and for the worship of His holy name.

When the appointed time for worship arrives and many seats in our churches and chapels are empty, many faces missing, the hearts of faithful shepherds are grieved and concerned. Where are the sheep? Are they spiritually sick? Have they lost their appetite for the Word? Are they in spiritual danger, perhaps wandering into the 'By-path Meadows' of this world?

We are the people of God's pasture, the sheep of His hand (Ps. 95:7), and He is grieved when we absent ourselves from His house. He is concerned when we put other things above worship on our list of priorities for the Lord's Day, but His heart is filled with joy when He hears us encouraging one another to come before His presence to worship.

In the new testament the writer to the Hebrews uses language that reflects very closely that of the psalmist. He says, 'And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much more, as ye see the day approaching.' (Heb.10:24,25). The apostle knew the importance and effectiveness of mutual encouragement.

Some Christians may find that the nature of their occupation makes it difficult for them to attend the place of worship regularly. Employment laws, while providing one rest day in seven, do not guarantee that that day is the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, the day when, following new testament practice, God's people come together to worship (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). This is a factor that should bear heavily on us as we look for work.

Of course there are legitimate reasons that may keep us from the Lord's house occasionally. While the desire of our heart may be strong and we want very much to take our seat at the place of worship, sickness, old age, infirmity, or the care of a loved one may dictate otherwise for us. Perhaps the nature of our work, such as farming, caring for the sick, maintaining law, order, and national security, means there are essential tasks to perform. Even so, when these things keep us away from the place of corporate worship, our hearts are very much there with the Lord and our fellow saints. How much we would love to be with them in body.

But in addition to these legitimate reasons there are many other pursuits that today seem all too often to keep professing Christians away from their place of worship. While hours of the Lord's Day are desecrated by unnecessary work,

recreational travelling, entertaining and pleasure seeking, the churches are empty when the time for worship arrives.

It is most noticeable in many churches that the second service on the Lord's Day has become the least well attended of the two, even to the point of it becoming impracticable. Where are the people? No longer are they offering their morning and evening sacrifice of praise.

Some respond to this problem by saying that we should take the church to the people. If the people are at the fair or the car boot sale, then the church should follow them. But that is not the bible's answer. David issues a call to the people to 'come'. He says, 'Come, let us sing unto the LORD'. He encourages us, stirs us up to go to the place of worship. When we prefer to be at the beach, visiting friends, a car boot sale, or sitting in an armchair watching the television, there is something radically wrong with our souls.

### **Let us sing**

One cannot help noticing in Psalm 95 that it is especially *singing* together that the psalmist is encouraging, and specifically the singing of the psalms (v. 2). This raises a number of important issues relating to the place that music and praise occupies in worship, and we should not overlook them however unpopular they may be.

The psalms were written as the Book of Praises for use in worship by the congregation of Israel. They were not just for the special singers, the choirs and musicians provided by the Levites, but for the whole congregation of the people. In this they pointed ahead to the new dispensation when temple worship would be forever done away and all believers would be priests unto God. It also underlines the enduring relevance and suitability of the psalms for worship by all the saints of God for all time. Their absence from worship for many generations now has been an incalculable loss to the church, while their recovery would be a mighty blessing.

A striking characteristic of the church in medieval times, that is pre-Reformation, was that the ordinary people played very little part in worship, even in praise. Singing was left to a musical elite of choirs and professional musicians who performed elaborate musical items, ostensibly to the glory of God. The worshippers were little more than spectators. This kind of 'worship' was a harking back to the ways of old covenant temple worship and the Reformers were right to sweep it all away. They returned praise to its rightful place: the congregation of the people.

The twentieth century saw a resurgence in modern 'evangelical' garb of those old Roman ways. Choirs, soloists, groups, instrumentalists, drum kits, orchestras and even rock bands now play an increasingly prominent role in church services. Special items are performed, reducing the congregation once again to the level of spectators being entertained rather than participants engaging in the simple,

unadorned praise of Almighty God. Once again there is an urgent need to sweep these things away.

Praise is not a special gift reserved for those with a talent for music but is the right and privilege of all God's people, issuing from redeemed and thankful hearts, no matter how untrained their voices may be or how unskilled they are in the art of music. We do not go to church to hear or see a performance, much less to give one. We go there to worship God from the heart.

Of late an unbiblical professionalism has crept into worship. Widely used expressions like 'ministry of music' or 'ministry of song' wrongly suggest not only that such use of music has divine sanction but that God has given to the church a special office or order of musicians, equating them even with the 'minister of the Word'. In fact, the effect of the modern emphasis on music is usually to reduce the time spent in preaching the Word and remove it from its rightful place at the centre of worship. How abhorrent all this is to God! We should do all in our might to seek a return to the biblical simplicity of congregational praise, encouraging one another to 'Sing unto the LORD a new song, and his praise in the congregation of saints' (Ps. 149:1). 'Praise ye the LORD: for it is good to sing praises unto our God; for it is pleasant; and praise is comely' (Ps. 147:1).

### **A great God**

It is true that error in the church of whatever kind, whether doctrinal or practical, invariably springs from an erroneous understanding of God. This is most certainly true of worship and the many aberrations associated with it. We should not be surprised, therefore, to find that the means David uses to encourage us in corporate worship is by directing us to the God before whom we come. David tells us about God! He tells us that God is our Creator, our King and our Saviour.

#### ***a. The Lord our Maker***

In the first place we are to worship God because He is the Creator of heaven and earth and all that is in them. 'The sea is his, and he made it: and his hands formed the dry land. O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker' (Ps. 95:4-6).

Of course this is something that is widely denied today, while those who believe it are subjected to scoffing and ridicule. The theory of evolution has taken the great work of creation away from a sovereign and personal God and given it to blind, meaningless and impersonal 'chance'. Even some professing Christians, if not all-out evolutionists, attempt to water down God's creating work in one way or another to accommodate the vast time scales necessary for the Darwinian theory.

This has many consequences, not least for worship. If God did not create then we

do not worship Him as Creator and such biblical passages as Psalm 95:5,6 become meaningless, reduced to mere poetry along with the early chapters of Genesis.

Even the brute creation knows better for in its own way it rejoices in God its Creator. The fields of corn 'shout for joy, they also sing' (Ps. 65:13); the trees of the wood 'rejoice before the LORD' (Ps. 96:12,13); 'Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together before the LORD' (Ps. 98:8,9).

And God created man. 'Know ye that the LORD he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves' (Ps. 100:3). One cannot avoid being struck by the personal vein in which David writes. He says that God is not simply *the* Creator but He is *our* Creator, He is the Lord *our* Maker (Ps. 95:6). He made *us*. Here then is the first great reason for us to come together and worship Him corporately.

*All people that on earth do dwell,  
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;  
Him serve with mirth, His praise forth tell,  
Come ye before Him and rejoice.  
The Lord, ye know, is God indeed;  
**Without our aid He did us make**  
We are His flock, He doth us feed,  
And for His sheep He doth us take.*

There is yet another reason to worship God together.

### ***b. The Lord our King***

Do not think for a moment that this world is under the control of men. It is not the British Prime Minister and the United States President, or the European Commission, the World Bank and the United Nations that govern and control this world. Neither is it the scientists, whose role as advisors to governments is becoming increasingly prominent and who try to 'play God' with the very stuff of life. Nor is it the prince of the power of the air and arch-enemy of our souls, Satan. No, it is God, for not only is He Creator but He is also the sovereign Ruler over all that He has made. He is King. 'The LORD reigneth' (Ps. 97:1).

God reigns supreme over all the nations, rulers and governments of this world, removing one and setting up another in its place according to His own sovereign will and design (Dan. 2:21). He is 'a great King above all gods' (Ps. 95:3) and we are to tell the world the good news: 'Say among the heathen that the LORD reigneth: the world also shall be established that it shall not be moved' (Ps. 96:10).

The natural world too, the blowing of the wind, the falling of the rain, the quaking of the earth and the changing of the seasons, together with all the intricate affairs of men, are under His sovereign control. None can thwart His purposes.

'Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places. He causeth the vapours to ascend from the ends of the earth; he maketh lightnings for the rain; he bringeth the wind out of his treasures' (Ps. 135:6,7). With absolute precision God exercises His power and authority in this world, fulfilling His eternal decrees according to the sovereign purposes of His own immutable will. Satan may resist God with all his might but never is God deflected by the slightest degree in the execution of His eternal counsels.

How the ungodly hate this doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of our God! How they bridle against it as it destroys all their cherished notions of human rights and ability! But how thankful the believer can be that it is true. What comfort it brings to his soul. His heart should be filled with gratitude and overflowing with praise because the Lord is a great King and reigns over all the earth. It should stir us up to worship and make us say to one another with David, 'Make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. For the LORD is a great God, and a great King...' (Ps. 95: 2,3).

But there is a third reason David gives to encourage us to collective worship.

### *c. The Lord our Saviour*

We are a people whose hearts are naturally rebellious and full of sin, for which we deserve only the Lord's condemnation and eternal punishment, yet He is the 'rock of our salvation' (Ps. 95:1).

Undoubtedly the reference in this verse is to the rock that followed the children of Israel during their wilderness wanderings. They too were a rebellious people and they complained bitterly of the conditions into which Moses and Aaron had brought them. Had they been led out from the cruel bondage of Egypt only to die of thirst in the wilderness? God provided for their needs with water out of a rock (see Exod. 17). He provided for their *spiritual* needs for Paul tells us that 'they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ' (1 Cor. 10:4). From Him flows water of life and he who drinks of it shall never thirst. Is not this good reason to make a joyful noise? Has not God delivered us from the house of bondage, and does He not keep us, and guide us by His counsel all the way to glory?

We are in debt to God for everything. Our life, every breath we breathe, the food on our table and the roof over our heads, all these and many more such gifts we receive from His bountiful hand. But above all He has given us deliverance us from the bondage of sin and blesses us daily from the fountain of living waters. What selfish ingratitude for His saving grace we betray when, at the time of worship, we absent ourselves, giving more thought to the passing concerns and fleeting pleasures of this temporal life.

**The call of His voice**

The children of Israel were called to the place of worship, and that same call comes to us today. Do we hear it? Do we obey it? This is important because the one who is calling us is God, no less. He whose word the bible is calls us to worship Him together, praising Him in the congregation of saints. Do we hear God and take heed to His call, or do we harden our hearts and tempt Him? A whole generation of Israelites did the latter, grieving God with the errors of their hearts and ignorance of His ways, and God came to them in judgment and holy anger. The issue could hardly be more serious. 'O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. For the LORD is a great God, and a great king above all gods...'

### **The Character of Worship**

#### ***a. Thankful***

We mentioned earlier that God's people worship Him as those whom He has brought into *covenant* with Himself. God has sovereignly established a bond, an everlasting relationship of love and friendship with His people so that not only are they bound to one another as a 'holy nation', the temple and body of Christ, but they are distinctively a people in fellowship with God. We return to this theme now because it opens up for us one of the most fundamental and also beautiful characteristics of true Christian worship. In worship the covenant relationship becomes the living experience of the gathered church as a holy dialogue taking place between God and His people.

In the first place God speaks to *us*. He speaks to us in the reading of the scriptures and in the preaching of the gospel. He tells us the most intimate secrets of His love, even to the giving of His only begotten Son for our salvation. 'The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant' (Ps. 25:14).

In the second place we make response to the Word of God in praise and in prayer. Central to this response of the believing heart is thankfulness. 'Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving', says the psalmist (v. 2). This draws a stark contrast with the churlish ingratitude shown in the wilderness by the children of Israel. So much did they provoke God that He would not allow them to enter the land of promise (vs. 8-11). They hardened their hearts against Him so that even though He had supplied them with every temporal and spiritual need they were filled only with bitterness and pride. May the Lord give us grateful hearts to render to Him the thanks and praise that are due to His name. Then we will sing with David, 'I will give thee thanks in the great congregation: I will praise thee among much people' (Ps. 35:18). We have so much for which to be thankful!

This highlights the fact that true worship does not centre on man but on God. It is theocentric. It is the response of the soul to God for all that He has revealed of Himself and accomplished for our salvation. It is the response of the creature to his Creator, not only for giving him breath but for making him a new creature in Christ Jesus; it is the response of the subject to his King, not only for the rule of His power, which is common to all men, but also for the rule of His grace by which He reigns in the hearts of His people; and it is the response of the sinner to his Saviour, singing the song of the redeemed, giving all the honour and glory to God alone for His free and sovereign grace. He cries, 'Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift' (2 Cor. 9:15).

Worship primarily is not a matter of receiving but of giving. The psalmist tells us to 'Give unto the LORD, O ye kindreds of the people, give unto the LORD glory and strength. Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name: bring an offering, and come into his courts. O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth' (Ps. 96:7-9). As one writer has expressed it, 'We come before God not so much to be blessed by him as to bless his holy and matchless Name. We come to exalt him as our sovereign Lord by pouring out before him noblest expressions of heart-felt praise.' (M Watts; *The Worship of God*, p. 9)

The modern emphasis on entertainment-style worship turns this on its head. Instead of centring on God it focuses on man, his pleasure, his happiness and the fulfilment of his needs. Worse still, in an age of apathy, cynicism and outright resistance to spiritual things, its purpose often is to pander to the rebellious heart of the unbeliever so that now it is the ungodly who determine the character and content of Christian worship.

There is nothing more destructive of worship than the popular notion that it must be made attractive to man and adapted to the passing fads and fashions of an ungodly world. As churches lean over backwards to make their services appealing to outsiders they succeed only in bringing the world into the sanctuary. Does the world like drama? Then let us have drama. Is the world attracted to dance? Then let us have dance. Does the world want rock bands? Then let us have rock bands and 'sanctified' rock music. Does the world encourage self-expression? Then let us by all means express ourselves freely. Then the churches will be filled.

Yes, these things may well fill churches. The churches may appear ever so 'successful' in turning the tide of dwindling congregations. Undoubtedly they will bring in the young people and they will bring noise and excitement, but where is God in it all? And is it really worship?

True worship is the humble offering up to God of a spiritual sacrifice, 'the sacrifice of praise' (Heb. 13:15). 'Whoso offereth praise', says God, 'glorifieth me' (Ps. 50:23). That is the true essence of worship.

Unfortunately much of the modern debate concerning worship revolves around

the worshippers and what pleases them. Many Christians do not seem to realise that it is not they who are to determine how God is to be worshipped but God Himself. It is not left for us to decide the thank-offering that will bring God pleasure, but God Himself. When we buy a gift for a friend we usually make an effort first of all to find out what they like. We take care to buy something suitable, something we know they will enjoy. On a far higher level this should also be true of God and the worship we give Him. When we bring our thank offering of praise and worship to our sovereign covenant God it should be our heart's desire to bring that which we know *He* takes delight in, not us, much less the unbelieving world.

But how are we to know what pleases Him? How are we to know what He is looking for? The answer we will find only in His Word, the bible. Every aspect of our worship should be brought to the bar of Scripture. Does God require it of us? If so, then it is pleasing to Him. If not, then without hesitation we must purge it from our worship, however strongly other professing Christians may protest. When we worship God according to the manner stipulated in His Word we may be sure that He will hear us, be pleased and accept our praise.

### ***b. Joyous***

The psalmist opens Psalm 95 with the words, 'let us make a *joyful* noise... make a *joyful* noise unto him with psalms' (vs. 1,2). He tells us that our worship is to be marked by joy, both in our hearts and upon our lips. The noise that we make in congregational worship ought to be joyful, with our singing sounding as though it really is a song of praise to our God.

Of course joy, being part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), ought to radiate the whole of a believer's life but it is especially in worship that it should find expression.

Surely we can think of many reasons for our souls to be joyful, for 'The LORD hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad' (Ps. 126:3), but the emphasis throughout the psalms is on one particular truth, namely of God Himself. It is the divine character and attributes, the sheer *greatness* of God, that puts a song of joy on the lips of the psalmist: 'Make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. For the LORD is a great God, and a great king above all gods. In his hand are the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills is his also. The sea is his, and he made it: and his hands formed the dry land' (vs. 2-5). Our God is a great God before whom the gods of this world are obligated to bow down and worship (Ps. 97:7,9). This indicates to us the kind of joy the psalmist is looking for.

Negatively, it is not a cheap, smiley-face cheerfulness. It is not a feeling based on human emotion, for we all know how quickly our emotions change, how much our feelings vary from day to day, even hour to hour. Like the hand of a barometer they fluctuate between the highs and lows of exhilaration and deep sadness. Neither is it based on experience, for events and circumstances disappoint us, and sin and its

effects grieve us. When based on these things joy can only be superficial and fickle. No, David is looking for true, lasting joy and he knows that it can be found in God alone for He never changes, He never disappoints. When we are afflicted with pain and sorrow we still have reason to worship Him with joy. When men grieve us with their hurtful words and harmful deeds there remains this one unchangeable truth that God is greater than all. He is the sovereign Lord of all who works all things according to the purpose of His own will, and for the one who loves Him those 'all things' work together for good.

We are not to think that as Christians we should be immune from the sorrows of this life and somehow 'happy all the day'. That is just not the case and to live in the expectation of it leads only to despair. Even in the anguish of suffering and adversity we can still make a joyful noise unto Him because our joy is not in the things of this mortal life but in the Lord. The prophet Habakkuk testified to this truth in a well loved and beautiful passage: 'Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation' (Hab. 3:17,18).

That God is great means that He is far above all those who would seek to harm us or cause us pain, even the arch-enemy of our souls, Satan himself. Thus the testimony of the believer should be that of Paul, 'as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing' (2 Cor. 6:10). 'I am filled with comfort', he wrote, 'I am exceeding joyful in all our tribulation' (2 Cor. 7:4). What heaven sent joy is this!

Spiritual joy is joy in the Lord. It is joy in the God of our salvation. Thus it rises above the grief and calamities of this present evil world and puts a song on the lips of martyrs. Paul wrote famously in his letter to the Philippians, 'Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice' (4:4). It is with this joy that we are to go into the sanctuary of the Lord. With our hearts fixed on God and not on the vicissitudes of this fleeting earthly life, we are able always to sing to Him and make a joyful noise.

The theme of rejoicing in the greatness of the Lord is one that recurs throughout the book of Psalms. Psalm 96 opens: 'O sing unto the LORD a new song... For the LORD is great' (vs. 1-4).

In Psalm 97 the truth that Jehovah reigns as King over all the earth is to set the whole earth itself rejoicing (v. 1). How often is the sovereign rule and majesty of God at the centre of our praise? Think about it. How often do we praise God for the truth that even our sorrows and tears are under His sovereign control?

Verse 8 of the same Psalm speaks again of Zion being glad and the daughters of Judah rejoicing, but see what is the cause of their joy. They rejoice in the righteousness, the judgments and the glory of God! Again we must ask ourselves how often our praise is prompted by such lofty thoughts as these.

Psalm 98 is filled to overflowing with joy as all creation is invited to join in a paean of praise to Jehovah: 'let the hills be joyful together Before the LORD'. And why? Because 'he cometh to judge the earth: with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity' (vs 8-9). There is a pointer here to the return of the Lord in judgment at the end of time, the thought of which can fill the heart of the unbeliever only with terror. But creation rejoices because that moment will be the moment of her own deliverance from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God (cf. Rom. 8:18-23). So too should we rejoice because that 'day of God' will herald the coming of 'new heavens and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness' (2 Peter 3:7-13).

In Psalm 99 it is the holiness of God that is to set the people praising: 'Let them praise thy great and terrible name; for it is holy' (v. 3). 'Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at his holy hill; for the LORD our God is holy' (v. 9).

To praise God for His love and mercy comes easily to us, but what about His holiness? How often do the judgments of God fill us with joy? How much does the sovereignty of God thrill our hearts and set us singing His praises at our times of corporate worship? While it is right that we should think often of God's love and praise Him much for His grace and kindness, we must not neglect to rejoice in these other aspects of the Godhead too. God's holiness, His judgments and His immutable sovereignty are perfections that should set our hearts racing with joy.

God's judgments are terrible and awesome but Scripture makes it clear that there is something about them that should inspire in us true spiritual joy. 'Let mount Zion rejoice, let the daughters of Judah be glad, because of thy judgments' (Ps. 48:11). These judgments are, after all, directed toward sin and all that is opposed to the holy and righteous God whom we love and adore. They are directed toward His enemies, who are also *our* enemies.

There are a number of psalms that are taken up very largely with this kind of thing. They have been called the *imprecatory* psalms, of which Psalm 35 is a good example. In that psalm David calls on the Lord to take up the fight against those who seek after his soul: 'Let them be confounded... Let them be as chaff before the wind... Let their way be dark and slippery... Let destruction come upon him at unawares' (vs. 4-8). Then immediately he exclaims, 'And my soul shall be joyful in the LORD: it shall rejoice in his salvation' (v. 9).

What are we to make of this? David is expressing joy at the downfall of his enemies! In response, first of all, it must be said that David is not motivated by any personal vindictiveness toward them, or thoughts of malice and revenge. His thoughts are pure thoughts desiring only to see the justice and the glory of his God upheld. He is joyful 'in the LORD' and it is from his desire to see *Him* praised and exalted that these thoughts issue forth. He says, 'Let the LORD be magnified, which hath pleasure in the prosperity of his servant. And my tongue shall speak of *thy*

righteousness and of *thy* praise all the day long' (vs. 27,28).

In the second place, God's destruction of David's enemies was David's *salvation* and it is in this that his heart rejoices (v. 9). The greatness of God is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in His work of salvation, a work of judgment and power as much as a work of grace and love.

It is a principle found throughout the Scriptures that the Lord accomplishes the redemption and deliverance of His people through judgment and the destruction of their foes. It is plainly put in Isaiah 1:27, 'Zion shall be redeemed with judgment'. Such is the Lord's love for His people that He will give up whole nations and peoples for her sake: 'I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee. Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life' (Isa. 43:3,4). In the time of Noah he gave up an entire world for the sake of one family, and at the end of the age He will destroy the whole earth by fire to effect our final deliverance.

This principle comes to its highest expression in the death of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He announced, 'Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out' (John 12: 31). There on Calvary the righteousness and holiness of God are most clearly exhibited as the iniquitous world is judged, all our enemies confounded, dispersed as chaff is blown in the wind, and destroyed for evermore. 'O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation'!

But just as God's greatness should inspire us to rejoice, so it should also engender in us the deepest reverence.

### *c. Reverent*

A lively, brash, happy-clappy style of worship, although outwardly bright and cheerful, is not to be confused with the psalmist's 'joyful noise'. Outward exuberance of the kind witnessed in charismatic worship, for example - the raised hands, waving arms, swaying bodies, ecstatic facial expressions and 'holy laughter' - is not at all what the psalmist has in view.

Spiritual joy is always accompanied by the deepest reverence of spirit. David calls on us to 'worship and *bow down*'; we are to '*kneel* before the LORD our maker' (Ps. 95:6). At the rededication of the temple in the reign of Hezekiah we find the same juxtaposition of joy and reverence, for the Levites not only 'sang praises with gladness' but also 'bowed their heads and worshipped' (2 Chron. 29:30).

C H Spurgeon observes,

'The adoration is to be humble. The "joyful noise" is to be accompanied with lowliest reverence. We are to worship in such a style that the bowing down shall indicate that we count ourselves to be as nothing in the presence of the

all-glorious Lord.... As suppliants we must come; joyful but not presumptuous; familiar as children before a father, yet reverential as creatures before their Maker.'

If there is one element of true worship that is markedly absent from the church today it is this one of reverence. Surely we are justified in asking why it is the case? And surely too the answer is clear: the church has lost sight of the One before whom she comes.

It is the psalmist's knowledge of God and his consciousness of the divine presence that determines for him the character of his worship and demands reverence on his part. He knows Jehovah to be the great sovereign and holy God, the creator, the sustainer of life and all that He has made, and the rock of his salvation. In addition to putting a song of joy into his heart this inspires within him a sense of the most profound awe and reverence. He knows that in coming into the presence of Almighty God he must render obeisance. Acknowledging his own total unworthiness he must bow down, recognising that the proper posture to adopt before his Maker and Lord, at least spiritually if not physically too, is to *kneel*.

'God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him' (Ps. 89:7). The fear of God! There was once a time when believers would be identified as a people who feared God. 'He is a God fearing man', people would say of a faithful Christian, but it is an expression we do not hear much these days. Perhaps it is because the whole idea of 'fearing God' has dropped out of our consciousness, even to the point where we hardly know what it means any more. What is the fear of God? Well, quite obviously it is not the abject terror with which the unbelieving sinner will behold the Judge of all the earth on the great day, but it is the reverence, wonder and adoration that flows from a believer's knowledge of the greatness of God. God is GOD, and he knows it. 'Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy' (Rev. 15:4).

Even the holy angels, who have never known sin, veil their faces in the presence of God and cry out, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory' (Isa. 6:3). How much more should we, then, in whom sin has totally corrupted every fibre of our being, come before Him with reverence, awe, Godly fear and true humility of heart and soul? What right do we have to approach Him at all except through the Lord Jesus Christ in whom the Father by His free and sovereign grace has saved us. In His precious name we are bidden, nay, commanded to come.

There has been a trend over recent decades towards informality and casualness in worship. Familiarity in approach to God, lively forms of worship and casual dress are common not only in charismatic churches but increasingly so in more conservative evangelical and Reformed churches. They are but the symptoms of an

underlying malady that is endemic throughout church life today: a shallow spirituality arising from a superficial knowledge of God. How dare we approach the presence of Almighty God with anything less than the deepest reverence and holy awe, clothed in the garments of sobriety and quietness. God requires of us nothing less.

Much that goes by the name of worship today is an insult to God of the highest order. Men know not whom they worship. They have forgotten that 'honour and majesty are before him: strength and beauty are in his sanctuary', and that therefore they are to 'give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name' (Ps. 96: 6-8).

As the character of our worship is moulded by our perception and knowledge of God, so that knowledge is determined in turn by our familiarity with God's holy Word for it is within its inspired pages that He has revealed Himself to us. Yet if there is one word that describes well the character of modern Christianity it is the word *ignorance*: ignorance of God and of His Word. It is little wonder that twentieth century worship descended to such levels of irreverence as we see today. A W Pink noted with his usual candour and incisiveness, 'The God of the twentieth century is a helpless, effeminate being who commands the respect of no really thoughtful man.' Moreover, perceptive as ever, Pink sees a vital connection between worship and the gospel, between the character of worship and our understanding of what the gospel is:

'The God of the popular mind is the creation of a maudlin sentimentality. The God of many a present-day pulpit is an object of pity rather than of awe-inspiring reverence. To say that God the Father has purposed the salvation of all mankind, that God the Son died with the express intention of saving the whole human race, and that God the Holy Spirit is now seeking to win the world to Christ; when, as a matter of common observation, it is apparent that the great majority of our fellow-men are dying in sin and passing into a hopeless eternity: is to say that God the Father is *disappointed*, that God the Son is *dis-satisfied*, and that God the Holy Spirit is *defeated*. We have stated the issue baldly, but there is no escaping the conclusion.'

*(The Sovereignty of God, Baker edition, p. 20).*

If Pink is correct, which can hardly be denied, and such a God really was the God of the twentieth century, a weak God dependent upon even the will of man for the accomplishment of His purposes of salvation, then it should be no surprise to us to find that the *worship* of the twentieth century sank to such levels of profanity and affrontery to God as have been commonplace in recent years. And in these early of the twenty-first century we have to confess that the situation shows no sign of improving but only of growing worse.

When we think we *are* something before God, or *have* something, or can *do* something simply by the exercise of our own will, mind and heart to bring us favour with God, then there will be no bowing down and there will be no kneeling before His face in solemnity and reverence. In contrast, as we go to the place of worship there will be a flippancy of heart and skipping of feet as though entering a place of entertainment. Tragically that is what all too many places of worship have become. There are bands and singing groups, there are dance troupes, there is drama and puppetry, but there is no true worship. When and where has God required *these* things of us?

Where is the 'awe-inspiring reverence' for which Pink yearned? Where is the honour that the God of heaven requires of us? Where is the consciousness of the *Godhood* of God that should reign in our hearts and be evident in our worship, as indeed in all of our lives? Yes, there is to be joy in our hearts but let us never forget that we come into the presence of the one true and living God, the holy, omnipotent, sovereign creator of heaven and earth, and Saviour of sinners. Do we believe it? If this thought has any impact upon us at all it should drive us to our knees in fear and trembling before Him, as it did David of old.

If our knowledge of God is superficial, then our worship will be superficial. If our God is small, then our worship, for all its outward excitement and exuberance, will be empty, earthbound, man-centred and sensual. Only as we come to understand the greatness of our God and our total dependence upon Him for all things, most of all for His so great salvation, will our worship exhibit the reverence and solemnity of which He is truly worthy.

Let us then come together before the face of our great God and our Saviour with enthusiasm, joy and thanksgiving in our hearts; let us worship Him, and worship Him aright, for He is worthy. *O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker. For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.* (Ps. 95:6,7)