

True worship does not happen automatically. In fact, while worship is instinctive and natural to the human heart, it is not only possible but *necessary* to learn *how to worship* and to learn how to make it more pleasing to God and more beneficial to us and to others, writes Bob Hostetler. For example, the opening verses of Psalm 95 say: “*Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.*” Then a few verses later the psalm writer says, “*Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.*”

Those are engaging sentiments, don’t you think? But here’s the thing. If you’ve never been to church before—or have rarely participated in a service of worship—you may not know the words or the melody of the songs. You may not feel comfortable bowing your head or standing to sing. And if you are a Presbyterian, you almost definitely are not going to lift your hands in the air.

After all, everyone has their own style. Some churches are more formal than others, some are more casual, some more traditional, some more expressive, and so on. Diversity is not necessarily disunity; because in the church as in Creation, God delights in differences. Worshiping regularly with others in church breaks down barriers and gives training, not only in worship styles but also in worship skills. As we gather with others in worship, we become more and more comfortable singing praises to God, as the Bible tells us to do, even if we can’t carry a tune in a bucket. Over time, we get better at consciously saying or praying the words of a song as we sing it or a Scripture as we hear it. I strongly suggest that any of you that aren’t singers, at the very least, *read* the text of a hymn while we sing them; *reflect* on the words; *pray* the hymn text if you aren’t singing. You may even become adept at personalizing the words, so they reflect what you are feeling at that particular moment.

You may never want to pray aloud in public, however, by gathering with others in worship, you will hear other people pray. You may be awed at the simplicity

and beauty of one person's prayers or irritated by the pompous sound of someone else's prayers (usually a clergyman 😊). But as you listen, and pray along, you will learn—little by little—a few things about prayer that can be applied to your own spiritual life.

Someday you may also notice the woman across the room who cups her hands sometimes while she prays, as if she's saying, "Lord, I'm ready to receive whatever you have to give me today." Or you may realize that the teenager who you thought was doodling during the sermon is actually taking notes. And you may sooner or later decide whether to try something like that yourself—or not. Either way, you've still learned something while you were here.

During the Scripture reading and sermon, if you pay attention and follow along, you may find yourself learning how to read and understand the Bible better and possibly study it for yourself. The "training ground" of public worship will not only help you develop skills to use in times of public worship, it will also train you to sing, pray, read, study, and connect to God at other times as well. The songs you learn will become a part of your worship language. You may find yourself singing one of them as you drive to work or in the shower. Prayer will become a more frequent part of your life. The Bible will be more accessible to you. Practices that once confused you will become skills that help you to worship God and draw near to God throughout your entire life.

Few people in history have worshiped like David, the second king of Israel. He danced in worship as the Ark of the Covenant returned to Jerusalem. He wrote worship songs. He trained and organized the worship leaders of ancient Israel. The Bible even describes him as "*a man after [God's] own heart*" (1 Samuel 13:14). If anyone knew how to worship, it was David!

According to Psalm 5:3 he worshipped in the morning: *In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.*

According to Psalm 63:6 he worshipped at night: *On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night.*

He worshipped in palaces and in caves. He worshipped when he felt good and when he felt awful. He worshiped in kingly robes and in his linen underwear. He may well have had the most fulfilling and intimate private worship life ever. Yet, for all his ability and enthusiasm for worshiping God personally and privately, he also joined in times of public worship:

In Psalm 116:4 David says, *I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.*

In Psalm 110:7 David says, *Praise the LORD. I will extol the LORD with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly.*

If anyone could have said, “I can worship God anywhere,” you would think it would be David. Right? If anyone could have claimed, “I don’t need church,” David could have. But he didn’t. Which prompts the question: Why? We won’t have to wonder for very long because he answers that question repeatedly in the book of Psalms, as in Psalm 26: *I love the house where you live, O LORD, the place where your glory dwells* (v. 8).

And from our Scripture today David passionately writes:

*One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek:  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life, to gaze on  
the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.  
For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling;  
he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent  
and set me high upon a rock. (Psalm 27:4-5).*

David found a power and energy in public worship that thrilled his soul and instilled in him a love for the house of God. He spoke and sang as though he encountered God’s glory in the temple in a special way. He experienced safety and shelter there that he didn’t find elsewhere. He found a heightened level of power and victory and encouragement and hope in sharing worship with others. It can be a wonderful blessing to sing a song like, “How Great Thou Art” or “Amazing Grace” in a private and personal time of worship. Such moments are

indispensable to our spiritual health and growth. But it is a different experience—and just as indispensable—to sing those words in unison with others. Whether you’re uniting your voice with fifty others or five thousand, something powerful happens when you join forces with others to worship “*The Lord God almighty, who was, and is, and is to come*” (Rev. 4:8).

Brian Tome is pastor of Crossroads Community Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. He describes one of his most memorable worship experiences: “Years ago, we challenged the notion that people didn’t want to be engaged so we pushed that idea in a weekend service. We gave everybody Sharpies and ornamental glass bulbs and told people to write what their idol was on them. Then as a sign of dying to yourself and dying to your idol, we asked people to come forward and smash them in wooden coffins. I’ll never forget people throwing their symbolic idols into coffins. Some of the bulbs didn’t break as the glass was piling up and yet, people would reach their hand into shards of glass to retrieve their bulb and smash it again. It was a defining moment for people as they walked away from their idols and died to self. It was also a defining moment for the church when we realized that the days were over when we wouldn’t push people and only cautiously engage them.” (*Why Church?* p. 71)

Another pastor, Steve Stroope, recalled a twenty-fifth anniversary service of Lake Pointe Church in Rockwall, Texas: “We invited everyone who had come to know Christ at Lake Pointe to come to the front and light a candle during a worship song. There were as many people at the front holding candles as there were standing at their seats.” What a moving worship moment that must have been, to see so many changed lives represented by those lights. Imagine, too, if you had not only attended but also supported that church over the years, how it would have blessed you to see such a moving depiction of your church’s ministry and its impact on others (*Why Church?* p. 72).

**There are many kinds of empowering and enriching experiences that come only to those who intentionally CONNECT with God in worship.** So, with one month of 2025 already in the books, let’s **connect and keep on connecting** through this entire year—to the praise and glory of our God! Amen.