

Genuine worship does not happen automatically. Although worship is natural and instinctive to the human heart, it is not merely *possible* but *necessary* to learn what it means to worship God, to make it more pleasing to God—who is the object of our worship. It can also be very beneficial to us. For example, the opening verses of Psalm 95 say: “*O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!*” Then a few verses later the psalm writer says, “*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.*”

Those are engaging things to do, don’t you think? But if someone has never been to church before—or has rarely participated in a service of worship—they may not know the words to pray or the melody of the songs. They may not feel comfortable bowing their head or standing to sing. And most adult Presbyterians are unlikely to lift their hands in the air. How about you?

Everyone has their own style. Some churches are more formal, some are more casual, some more traditional, some more expressive, and so on. In the church, as in Creation, God delights in differences. Worshiping regularly with others in church breaks down barriers and teaches lessons, not only in worship skills, but more importantly about the OBJECT of worship.

Do you recognize the advertising slogan “Obey Your Thirst?” It comes from the folks at Coca-Cola to advertise the lemon-lime flavored soft drink Sprite. We humans need food and water to stay alive, but we also hunger and thirst for more than just food and water. Let me explain how that relates to worship. **Whatever we think will satisfy our deepest hunger and thirst eventually becomes the object of our worship.** That’s something I’d like to repeat: **Whatever we think will satisfy our deepest hunger and thirst eventually becomes the object of our worship.**

When it comes to worshiping God, there may be times we feel unsure of God's intentions, or even his presence, especially when life is difficult or the world around us becomes dangerous or chaotic. Jewish tradition maintains that David wrote Psalm 63 while fleeing Jerusalem because his son Absalom was conspiring against him to take over his throne. Do you notice in verses 3 and 7 what David knows about God that helps him to worship God even in such a threatening situation? In verse 3 David says, *“Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.”* Then in verse 7 David proclaims, *“For you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.”*

When we gather to worship, we should strive to recognize this same love “that is better than life,” to become more comfortable singing praises to God who is the SOURCE of love and the OBJECT of worship, even if we can’t carry a tune in a bucket. I suggest to any worshipers who aren’t singers to *read* the text of a hymn as we sing it, *reflect* on the words, and silently *pray* the hymn text. You may be able to personalize the words as they reflect your life 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 a clergyperson’s prayers. 😊 But as you listen, and pray along, you will learn, little by little, things about prayer that can be applied to your own spiritual life.

Someday you may 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 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 learned something while experiencing a service of worship.

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 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 one day. 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 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!

Psalm 5:3 says **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.* Psalm 63:6 says **he worshipped at night**: *On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night.* Apparently, when we worship, “place” is not as important as “posture,” that is, how we approach God in our heart and soul, in our strength or weakness. Worship is not really about “where” we feel most comfortable! It’s about WHO we worship!

David 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 might have said, “*I can worship God anywhere,*” you would think it would be David. Right? If anyone could claim, “*I don’t need church,*” David

could have. **But he didn't.** Which prompts the question: **Why?** We don't have to wonder about that because he answers the question repeatedly in the book of Psalms, such as in Psalm 26: "*I love the house where you live, O LORD, the place where your glory dwells* (v. 8). Like us, David had a place like this building is to many of us. He had the temple. But his worship wasn't restricted by place, because WHO he worshiped mattered much more to king David!

David passionately writes in today's Psalm:

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips. (Psalm 63:1-5).

David found a power and energy in public worship—in the sanctuary—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 "Amazing Grace" in a private and personal time of worship. Such moments are indispensable to our spiritual health and growth. But it's a different experience, and just as indispensable, to sing those words in unison with other worshipers. Whether we're uniting your voice with fifty people or five thousand, something powerful happens when we join forces with others to worship.

Remember that whatever we think will satisfy our hunger and thirst eventually becomes the object of our worship. Like David, we can know, experience, and remember God's love that is "*better than life,*" **when God is the object of our worship.** *To God be the glory and power forever and ever!*
Amen.