

“Old Testament Paradigms for New Testament Worship”
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One’s first reaction to the topic of this paper might be, “How much can the Old Testament really guide us today in our worship of God?” After all, key aspects of Old Testament worship were part of the ceremonial law, and that law has been made obsolete by the coming of the Messiah and the completion of His redeeming work. No longer necessary for us are the levitical priesthood, a central sanctuary (whether a tabernacle or temple), sacrifices of animals and grain, pilgrimage festivals, etc.

Despite these facts, the New Testament Church can learn, and has learned, much about worship of God from the Old Testament. Reading the books Genesis through Malachi we observe timeless, enduring truths regarding this subject. These truths still pertain to us because we worship the same God as did the believers in the era before Christ. This God is changeless, and the way of salvation is no different – by God’s grace, through faith in the Messiah. Further, the essential way of glorifying Him in worship has not varied from the earlier period to our modern era.

A consideration and discussion of all the Old Testament passages which teach New Testament believers about worship - which serve as paradigms - is beyond the scope of this short presentation. While a number will be cited, one psalm has been principally chosen as representative of these passages. This psalm contains many of the aforementioned timeless, enduring worship truths. The psalm is Ps. 96. (The translation used for this psalm and most of the other scriptural references is the ESV.)

I. The Holy God, the Holy Place

Our analysis of Ps. 96 begins with verse 9a, “Worship the LORD in the splendor [or “glory”] of holiness.” Some versions and commentators translate this portion of the verse, “Worship the Lord in attire of holiness,” that is, “in holy attire.”¹ The Hebrew word in question, *hrdh*, occurs, in addition to Ps. 96:9, in four other passages of the Old Testament. The phraseology in 1 Chron. 16:29 and Ps. 29:2 is exactly parallel to Ps. 96:9a. In Prov. 14:28 *hrdh* means “glory.” Solomon states: “in a multitude of people is a king’s glory.” In 2 Chron. 20:21 *hrdh* is best translated as “glory”: the phrase “He appointed singers to the LORD” is paralleled by “and those giving praise for the glory of holiness.” These two verses tip the balance in favor of a “glory/splendor,” rather than an “attire,” translation in Ps. 96:9. So also does the LXX, which in the three parallel verses 1 Chron. 16:29, Ps. 29:2, and Ps. 96:9 read the word “holiness” with the suffix “his”: “His holiness,” that is, God’s.²

Indeed, the phrase “splendor” or “glory of holiness” in verse 9a is most naturally understood, in its immediate Ps. 96 context, as referring to God’s holiness. The preceding verse 8 has two parts, both of which end with a reference to the LORD: a) “give to the LORD the glory of His name”; and b) “bring an offering and come to His courts.” Verse 9b reads, “Tremble before Him, all the earth.”

Verse 9a ought be understood, then, as making mention of God’s holiness. That attribute of the deity is splendid or glorious; God’s total lack of sin far surpasses what we

¹ E.g., the New American Standard Bible, and Herbert C. Leupold, Exposition of Psalms (Baker, 1959), pp. 684-685.

² Cf. Derek Kidner, Psalms 1-72 (TOTC; Inter-Varsity, 1973), pp. 125-126; also Marvin E. Tate, Psalms 51-100 (WBC 20; Word Books, 1990), p. 511.

sinful mortals have experienced in this sin-ruined, corrupt world. Charles Spurgeon cites Joseph Le Coute, who says with regard to the concept of the splendor of God's holiness, that this is "the intense whiteness, purity, clearness, the infinite luster and splendor of His perfect nature – like a gem without flaw, without stain, and without color."³

The Old Testament instructs the New Testament Church by emphasizing repeatedly, and in various ways, the truth, the spiritual reality, that worshippers of the true God are coming into the presence of the holy God. Several psalms present this theme. Besides those previously discussed, Ps. 99 serves as another example. Notice that "holy" occurs three times.

- 3 Let them praise your [that is, God's] great and awesome name!
Holy is he!
- 5 Exalt the LORD our God; worship at his footstool!
Holy is he!
- 9 Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain;
for the LORD our God is holy!

We recall the hymn of the angels in Is. 6, with its threefold repetition: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts."

The arrangement of the tabernacle (which was reflected also in Solomon's temple complex with some variation) likewise impressed upon the people the reality of the absolute holiness of God. Varying degrees of holiness, or a "graduated sanctity," as Milton Terry calls it,⁴ can be seen in this arrangement. In front was the courtyard, into which any Israelite who was ceremonially, or ritually, clean might enter. Next was the first part of the tabernacle itself, the holy place, into which only the consecrated priests could go to perform the work of their office. The next part of the tabernacle, the most

³ Spurgeon, Treasury of David, Vol. II (condensed; Zondervan, 1940), p. 53.

⁴ Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments (1885; reprint, Zondervan, 1964), p. 368.

holy place or holy of holies, was separated from the holy place by a veil. In the most holy place was placed the ark of the covenant, above which was the special, invisible presence of God. Into this place only the high priest could enter, and only once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Hebrew yom kippur).⁵

Since the holy of holies in Solomon's temple was a perfect cube (1 Kings 6:20), it probably was that also in the tabernacle. The length and width and height of it being equal (cf. Rev. 21:16), its form was a symbol of perfection. In this way, too, the holiness of God was stressed.⁶

As implied by the comments concerning the tabernacle, the place associated with the worship of the holy God was regarded as holy – that is, as set aside for a sacred purpose. It was a sacred place. Ps 96:6 reads: “Splendor and majesty are before him [the LORD]; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.” This refers at least in part to the earthly place of worship, which was, as Heb. 8:5 indicates, “a copy and shadow” of the heavenly.⁷

The Hebrew word translated “sanctuary” can also be rendered as “holy place.” Many passages throughout the Old Testament highlight the sacredness of the worship center. In the Psalter alone appear the phrases “holy temple” (5:7E); “holy hill,” on which the sanctuary was located (15:1); “holy place,” different wording than in Ps. 96:6 (24:3); and “sanctuary,” different word than in Ps. 96:6 (63:2E).

II. The Fear of God, Reverence, and Humility

⁵ Walter A. Maier III, Biblical Hermeneutics (CTS Printshop, 1998), pp. 7.2, 7.4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.2.

⁷ Cf. Derek Kidner, Psalms 73-150 (TOTC; Inter-Varsity, 1975), p. 348; Franz Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Psalms, trans. Francis Bolton, Vol. III (2nd ed. 1867; reprint, Eerdmans, 1952), p. 91.

Ps. 96 presents one proper reaction on the part of the believer who enters the sacred place to worship in the presence of the holy God. Verse 4 reads: “For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods.” This fear is a fruit of faith; the reaction of the believer, aware of his sinfulness, and knowing that he is standing before the sinless, almighty Deity. Martin Luther refers to the fear of God as one motivation for godly living, in his explanations to the Ten Commandments. Such godly fear leads the worshipping believer to confess his trespasses and the holiness of God, and to treat as sacred God’s holy place. Such fear then leads the believer, after leaving the sanctuary, to avoid sin, since he understands that the heavenly Father in His love will give His children necessary, corrective discipline when they go astray.

Looking simply in the Book of Psalms one finds other passages connecting worship with the fear of God. The following are representative.

Ps. 5:7E But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you.

Ps. 96:9 Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!”

Ps. 99:1, 3 The LORD reigns; let the peoples quake. He is sitting above the cherubim; let the earth shake.
Let them praise your great and fearful name. Holy is He!

Luther writes, concerning Ps. 51:

In Ps. 51:19 Scripture calls fear a sacrifice to God and worship. But since these accounts were written through the Holy Spirit for the purpose of impelling hearts to fear God, to shun sins, and to do justice and righteousness, it is proper to present them in the church ...⁸

⁸ Luther’s Works, Vol. 3, p. 242.

In the “call chapter” of his book, the sixth, the reaction of the sinner Isaiah, as he stands before the holy God, is one of fear: “Woe is me!”⁹

Related to the fear of God are reverence, which is a combination of fear and love, and humility. Both can be shown in the worshipper’s posture. He may kneel or bow down. Ps.95:6 reads: “Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!” For his prayer at the dedication of the newly-built temple, Solomon knelt before the altar of Yahweh (2 Chron. 6:13). When Solomon finished his prayer, the glory of the LORD filled the temple, and the Israelites, as 2 Chron. 7:3 reports, “bowed down with their faces to the ground on the pavement and worshipped ...” In fact, Edwin Yamauchi, writing in Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, explains that the Hebrew verb which is regularly translated as “worship” - *hᵛj* in the Eshtaphal stem – meant in its original sense “to prostrate oneself.”¹⁰ He notes that the Greek verb proskuneo, which is used to render *hᵛj* in the Eshtaphal 148 times in the LXX, had a semantic development similar to the Hebrew word. That is, proskuneo can mean either “prostration” or “worship.”¹¹

III. Forgiveness and Salvation

The reality of worship implies a togetherness, a fellowship, between God and those worshipping Him. Yet how can there be such fellowship between the holy, sinless Deity and sinful human beings? Ps. 96:2 indicates the answer to this question: “Sing to the

⁹ Gen. 28:16-17 relates the reaction of Jacob after his vision of the ladder to heaven: “Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.’ And he was afraid and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’”

¹⁰ Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, Vol. I, pp. 267-268.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 268.

LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.” Because of God’s saving activity people of the Old Testament era could, and in the New Testament era can, meet with God and truly worship Him. God’s salvation consists in His bringing people to faith in the Messiah; through faith they have forgiveness, they are reckoned as righteous by God. As those who are accounted righteous in His sight they can have fellowship with the holy God; as those who have been made spiritually alive they can carry out true worship.

Ps. 48:9E reads: “We have thought, O God, of your *dsj* in the midst of your temple.” The Hebrew word *dsj* conveys the concepts of God’s grace and steadfast love. Because of these attributes of God, plus His faithfulness, the Messiah came, and people have been, are, and will be saved. God’s salvation, on the basis of the Messiah’s substitutionary atonement, results in worship.

In the courtyard of the tabernacle (Ex. 27:9-19), in front of the tent (and later the temple), were located the altar of burnt offering (Ex. 27:1-8) and the bronze basin (Ex. 30:17-18). The altar symbolized that there could be no approach to the holy God on the part of sinful men, no possible meeting or dwelling with Him, except by the offerings made at this altar. All that belonged to the symbolism of sacrificial blood (an innocent life being offered up in the place of the guilty, symbolizing the atoning blood of Christ) centered in this altar, where the daily animal offerings of Israel were made. The priests were consecrated with blood from this altar (Ex. 29:21, 44). Thus the altar of burnt offering symbolized that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Heb. 9:22). Or, to put it another way, access to God was possible only on the basis of

substitutionary sacrifice – that of the Messiah, which the animal sacrifices foreshadowed.¹²

The bronze basin contained water with which the priests had to wash before they could minister at the altar of burnt offering or enter the tabernacle (Ex. 30:19-21). Therefore the basin symbolized that a person needed to be clean in God's sight (namely, through faith in the Messiah) before he could have fellowship with God (cf. Ps. 24:3-4; 51:7). As the offering up of a lamb (the lamb being a symbol of Christ) was a type foreshadowing the sacrifice of Christ, so the priestly washings were a type pointing ahead to baptism, the washing of regeneration, through which a person receives the forgiveness of sins and enters the kingdom of God (John 3:5; Heb. 10:10-14, 22) and the life of worship.¹³

The Old Testament emphasizes, therefore, that true worship presupposes genuine, saving faith. For worship to be acceptable to God there had to be sincere remorse for sin on the part of the worshipper, and sincere belief in Yahweh alone, and His Messiah. God looked first and foremost at the heart, at its contrition, and trust in, and love of, the LORD. A person could say the proper words, and go through all the required actions and rituals, but if his heart was not right with the Lord, God rejected that which was said and done. Worship was never a matter simply of outer, mechanical obedience.

This is a key message of the Old Testament, from start to end, a message which remains relevant today. Both Cain and Abel presented offerings to God. Cain offered merely some of his harvest, because he had to; Abel brought a choice offering, out of the willingness of a believing, loving heart. Gen. 4 reports that God looked first on each man

¹² Maier III, Biblical Hermeneutics, pp. 7.3-7.4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.4.

(namely, on his heart), and then on each man's offering, and as a result had opposite reactions. The author of Hebrews (11:4) states that "by faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did."

In his great penitential hymn, Ps. 51, David proclaims what God requires first from those coming to worship Him with offerings: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, God, you will not despise [v. 17E]." Actual penitence and humble faith will find ready acceptance from God.

In the context of calling together a sacred assembly for worshipping and praying to the LORD, the Prophet Joel tells his fellow Israelites, "rend your heart and not your garments" (2:13). Joel urges real, inner repentance and not just the external sign of contrition over sin. At the beginning of his book Isaiah announces God's negative, angry reaction to the sacrifices and other ritual observances of the majority of Isaiah's countrymen, because of their lack both of sincere sorrow over sin, and faith. God will not even listen to their prayers. Why? As Isaiah writes, their "hands are full of blood [1:15]." They left the temple precinct and lived unamended, wicked lives, committing all manner of violations of God's commandments, including violent crimes. Their lives given over to sin were evidence that their hearts really were far from the LORD.

IV. Practical Applications

Having dealt briefly with the concept of worship and the heart, as well as worship and God's holiness, the fear of God, and God's salvation, a few practical applications are in order at this point.

Worshippers today need to recognize that when they come to church for worship they are not entering some club house or entertainment center. Rather, they are going into a sanctuary, a holy place, an area set aside for sacred purposes. They, sinners all, are coming into the special presence of the holy God, who, as the author of Hebrews notes, “is a consuming fire [12:29].” A proper attitude includes godly fear of the LORD, and reverence, and humility. Behavior, dress, and demeanor at worship can reflect this attitude.

In addition, believers must always remember what an awesome privilege it is to worship God. With regard to worship, any thought a) that we are doing God a favor, or b) that this is just a matter of our having to do our duty, is wrong, and completely misses the spiritual reality. It is the holy, almighty God who deigns to have fellowship with us corrupt mortals. True worship is possible for us only because of God’s gracious, saving activity, because of what God has done for us in His love: God’s sending of His Son in atoning self-sacrifice, and God’s bringing us into the Kingdom of His dear Son. In worship, God comes to us undeserving ones through His Word and Sacrament, the means by which He preserves and strengthens our faith. Through faith in Christ we have the unearned gifts of salvation: forgiveness, everlasting life, peace with God, motivation and power for godly living, God’s comfort, and other blessings.

Further, the Old Testament reminds us that true worship is never just a matter of saying the words, and going through the motions. God wants the heart in worship – a right heart, sincerely contrite, and a heart of faith. A person with such a heart believes what the eyes see in, and what the ears hear from, the Bible or the hymnbook, and what the mouth confesses, and receives sacramentally, during the service. God wanting the

heart therefore means, then, that the heart is involved in worship; that the believer is thinking about what he or she is singing, speaking, or confessing; that the believer is not merely sitting in the pew but actually listening to, and learning from, the reading and preaching of God's Word.

Luther, in his explanation of the Third Commandment in the Large Catechism, writes:

Therefore this commandment is violated ... also by that multitude ... who only from force of habit go to hear preaching and depart again with as little knowledge of the Word at the end of the year as at the beginning ... Now that we have God's Word, we still fail to remove the abuse of the holy day, for we permit ourselves to be preached to and admonished but we listen without serious concern.¹⁴

Regarding one aspect of worship – prayer – Luther comments, “It is of great importance that the heart be made ready and eager for prayer ... What else is it but tempting God when your mouth babbles and the mind wanders to other thoughts?”¹⁵

Also:

The church is called a house of prayer ... But this [praying] must be done from the heart and with sincerity ... Where such prayer does not take place in the mass, it would be better to omit the mass ... it is not prayer nor calling upon God when just the mouth is mumbling.¹⁶

What Luther says concerning the heart applies not only to prayer but, as well, to singing hymns and the liturgy, confessing the creeds, showing reverence, indeed, to any other aspect of worship in the house of God.

The right heart, then, is both a heart of faith, and one actively involved in worship – taking in the Word, and sincerely confessing it. In worshipping, the believer has to be on guard against the flesh, the remnant of his original sinful nature which still clings to him

¹⁴ Theodore G. Tappert, trans. and ed., The Book of Concord (Fortress, 1959), p. 378.

¹⁵ Luther's Works, Vol. 43, p. 198.

¹⁶ Ibid., Vol. 44, pp. 65, 67.

this side of the grave, and which wants to have its evil way. With the right heart prevailing, the believer not only goes through the various aspects of worship in the right way but also for the right reasons. Wrong reasons for worship, as indicated by the prophets Amos, Isaiah, and other Old Testament prophets, include the hope of earning God's favor, merely to appear righteous before others, and to have bragging rights because of one's outstanding worship. An upcoming section of this paper deals with right reasons for worship.

V. Joy

The worshipper with the right heart has the godly fear and genuine humility, and shows the proper reverence, already discussed. Further, he or she has joy in coming to, and worshipping in, God's house. Ps. 96 presents this, the joy of faith, in an indirect, yet vivid, manner.

11 Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
12 let the field exult, and everything in it!
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
13 before the LORD ...

In exhorting these various parts of creation to rejoice, Ps. 96 implicitly and simultaneously encourages believers to do the same.

The Old Testament repeatedly links together true worship and joy.¹⁷ Several psalms make this connection; the following are examples.

Ps. 9:1 I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart;
I will recount all of your wonderful deeds.
2 I will be glad and exult in you;

¹⁷ God apparently loved celebration – there are over 90 days of festivals in the Jewish religious calendar. Cf. Lev. 23:40: "... you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days [Festival of Booths]."

I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.

Ps. 27:6b I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

Ps. 33:1 Shout for joy in the LORD, O you righteous!
Praise befits the upright.
2 Give thanks to the LORD with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings!

Ps. 42:4b ...I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God
with glad shouts and songs of praise ...

Ps. 48:11 Let Mount Zion be glad!
Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments!

Ps. 95:1 Oh come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

Ps. 122:1 I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”

2 Chronicles reports that when Hezekiah restored worship in the Jerusalem temple, the Levites sang praises to the LORD “with gladness, and they bowed down and worshiped [v. 30].” Later, when Hezekiah arranges for the celebration of the Passover, “the people of Israel who were present at Jerusalem kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with great gladness [2 Chron. 30:21].” The Book of Nehemiah notes that when, under the leadership of Ezra, the people in post-exilic Judah celebrated the Feast of Booths, they did so with “very great rejoicing [Neh. 8:17].”

VI. The Human Response, and Reasons for This Response

The passages thus far cited, then, show that there is a human, as well as a divine, side in a worship service. With regard to the latter side, the holy, yet gracious and loving, God condescends to have fellowship with sinful mortals, and bestows on them, through

His Word, the gifts of salvation. Concerning the human side, the true worshipper, out of faith, has various responses, such as godly fear, humility, and joy. There are other responses, as Ps. 96 and the entire Old Testament teach, whereby the worshipper actively renders service to the LORD.

Showing reverence to the Deity has already been mentioned. Ps. 96 points to additional aspects of the worshipper's response to God.

- 1 Oh sing to the LORD a new song ...
- 2 Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
- 7 Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!
- 8 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts!

God's people are to "sing," "ascribe," and "bring an offering," to Him. The psalms use other words and phrases in instructing worshippers what they are to do. Consider these excerpts.

Ps. 26:12b ... in the great assembly I will bless the Lord.¹⁸

Ps. 33:2 Give thanks to the LORD with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings!

Ps. 40:10 I have not hidden your deliverance within my heart;
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;
I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.

Ps. 50:14 Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and perform your vows to the Most High ..."

Ps. 100:2 Serve the LORD with gladness!

¹⁸ If one person blessing another means for the first to ask for God's gifts on the second, and if blessing oneself means asking God's gifts for oneself, the phrase "to bless God" conveys the idea of acknowledging God for His gifts, declaring what they are, and the attributes from which they flow. John Oswalt holds that this expression became "a formalized means of expressing thanks and praise" (Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, Vol. I, p. 132). Willem VanGemeren is of the same opinion, commenting, with regard to this phrase in Ps. 26:12, that the psalmist "will praise the Lord for the evidences of his goodness. Thus he will reassure other believers of what God can do in the lives of his children" ("Psalms," in Vol. 5 of The Expositor's Bible Commentary [Zondervan, 1991], p. 242).

Come into his presence with singing.

Of course, the psalms also direct worshippers to praise the LORD. The Hebrew term hallelujah, “praise Yahweh,” or “praise the LORD,” found throughout the Psalter, has entered the liturgy of the Christian Church. The Word “praise” in good measure summarizes and encapsulates that which the worshipper offers to God. The author of Hebrews writes, “Through him [Jesus] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name [13:15].”

In the Old Testament, however, one sees a strong connection between praising the LORD and the reasons for that praise. Again, Ps. 96 beautifully illustrates this reality.

- 2 Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
- 3 Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples!
- 4 For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised ...
- 5 For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.
- 6 Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
- 10 Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns!
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity.”
- 13 ... for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness,
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

These verses from Ps. 96 represent the reasons put forward by the Old Testament for praising the LORD. “Bless his name” (v. 2) – “name,” according to the Old and New Testaments, is that which reveals the name-holder’s character and work. Hans-Joachim Kraus explains, concerning the concept “name of God” in the Old Testament:

The name is not some designation that is added on, but the self-manifestation and the self-expression of God among his people. The name is what he himself is ... in this name everything is contained – justice and salvation, deliverance and life, knowledge

and wisdom.¹⁹

In blessing God's name, a person acknowledges God's self-revelation in nature, in His mighty deeds, and in Scripture. This results in praising the LORD for who He is and what He has done and will do, as he has revealed these truths to us. He is the one, true, only God, who possesses splendid attributes. God's "glory," mentioned in verse 3 of Ps. 96 and throughout the Bible, may be defined as the sum total of God's attributes as they shine forth for men to behold, or any one of these attributes. His actions, too, whether past, present, or future, are marvelous.

Ps. 96 indicates that the true Israelites, in worshipping God, recounted His mighty, divine acts. They praised Him for His salvation: first and foremost, for spiritual deliverance, through faith in the Messiah. They expressed gratitude, too, for other ways in which God rescued both individuals and the nation Israel as a whole.

Moreover, believing worshippers recognized that God acted in righteous judgment with Israel, as demonstrated by the nation's history. He bestowed blessing, out of His grace, for covenant faithfulness, and meted out discipline to erring faithful ones, and punishment to those abandoning the LORD for idolatry. Indeed, He righteously judged all nations, and would carry on this activity for the duration of this world's history, with the culmination coming on Judgment Day.

With regard to God's wonderful works, another strong worship theme which Ps. 96 and the rest of the Old Testament make evident is the praise of the LORD as Creator and as He who continues to rule and sustain the creation. One other passage from the Psalter will suffice as a parallel to the expressions "the LORD made the heavens" (verse 5) and "The LORD reigns ... the world is established" (verse 10) of Ps. 96.

¹⁹ Kraus, Theology of the Psalms, trans. Keith Crim (Fortress, 1986), p. 21.

Ps. 95:4 In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.²⁰

Toward the end of recorded Old Testament history, during a covenant renewal ceremony in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, certain Israelites offered praises to the LORD, which included these words, "You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them ... [Neh. 9:6]."

VII. More Practical Application

Having reviewed these aspects of worship displayed by the Old Testament, some contemporary application again is appropriate. We see that true worship involves joy. This joy, however, is a by-product. The Old Testament does not focus on the joy per se, but on the reasons why worshippers rejoice. Gladness comes from, is based on, contemplating God's gracious activity on our behalf, as revealed in Scripture. Praise of God, too, characterizes true worship. Yet this praise ought not be simply a repetition such as "I praise, praise, praise," but a praising accompanied by the reasons for the praise – God's attributes and acts.

With regard to the divine works, worship ought regularly acknowledge all of God's activity, not only the most important element – His granting us spiritual salvation. According to Old Testament paradigms, we ought to keep on using in our services that which holds before us the manifold, marvelous deeds of the LORD: namely, the Psalms; liturgy; pericopes from the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the rest of the New

Testament; and the Creeds. Major benefit would be afforded by the recitation of Luther's explanation to the Apostles' Creed, and the preaching of texts from all portions of Scripture, not just the Gospels (as has become customary in some of our congregations). Worshipers today will see the entire Old Testament history as edifying, as something to learn, not ignore. This history, a record of God's acting in love, grace, righteousness, and faithfulness, still instructs, warns, and comforts us, just as it did the Old Testament believers.

In particular, our worship, after emphasizing God as Savior and Justifier, the Grantor of everlasting life, ought regularly to affirm Him as Creator, and the Bestower and Sustainer of physical life and blessing. As Kraus notes, "Yahweh is the living God. As the creator of all living beings he is the content and source of life."²¹ Fundamental for proper and adequate praise of God, this sort of affirmation additionally gives a witness against certain evils in our society: abortion, euthanasia, and the teaching of evolution. These destructive practices can have a subtle, negative influence on church members.

VIII. Balance

In conclusion, we learn from the Old Testament that balance characterizes true worship.

- 1) There is a balance between knowledge and emotion. Emotion lifts worship from being only a recitation of facts, a sterile, cold, academic exercise. Knowledge of biblical truths gives necessary stability to the worship and faith life, provides the right foundation for emotions, and prevents emotions from going to extravagant extremes.

²⁰ When Melchizedek blessed Abraham after the patriarch's victory over the invading kings, he said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator [or "Possessor"] of heaven and earth ... [Gen. 14:19]."

- 2) In worship, God bestows His gifts, and worshippers give Him thanks and praise. They render to Him worship. All credit and honor for this go to God, who saves people, and motivates and empowers them for lives of service.
- 3) Worship does involve activity on the part of the worshipper; but God accepts this activity when it flows from a “right” heart. Such a heart has sincere contrition, genuine faith, and a correct attitude toward, and understanding of, worship practices.
- 4) Worshipping the holy God in His holy place, believers have both godly fear and godly joy. Ps. 130:4 says, “But with you [God] there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.” Ps. 2 urges worship of Yahweh and His Messiah, proclaiming, “serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling [verse 11].”
- 5) Worship deals with the changeless God who has acted in the past, who continues to act in the present, and who will act in the future, as His Word makes clear.
- 6) True worshippers delight in being in God’s sanctuary, but they are also eager to leave the holy place and go out into the world. They depart, strengthened by God through His means of grace, assured of His continual help, and confident of, and in, the message they carry. Ps. 96 instructs worshippers of all times, “Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!” Sent forth from our worship with God’s blessing, let us do so!

²¹ Kraus, Theology of the Psalms, p. 104.

