

Title: Adoration (Bowing before the Beauty of God)
Text: Various
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This last Monday was Martin Luther King Day. It is a public holiday in the United States that commemorates the birth of the great civil rights movement leader who led the struggle for equality in the United States. Martin Luther King was preacher and pastor whose commitment to social justice was grounded in the gospel and scriptures. As a leader, Martin Luther King was a man of prayer. He said this:

To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.
(Martin Luther King Jr.)

Centuries before, the great pastor and evangelist Jonathon Edwards said something similar:

Prayer is as natural an expression of faith as breathing is of life.
(Jonathon Edwards)

But here's the thing. Often, for me at least, prayer doesn't feel natural. More than I would like, prayer can feel like hard work. And yet Paul says this in his letter to the Thessalonians:

Pray without ceasing.
(1 Thessalonians 5:16)

Pray without ceasing? Praying every day would be a massive improvement for many of us. And when I do pray, sometimes I listen to the words stumbling out of my mouth, or in my mind or on the pages of my journal. I sound like a spiritual toddler demanding God give me, give me - give me. For example, you may have been tempted to, or even prayed a prayer like this as we enter a new year.

Dear God, My prayer for the New Year is for a fat bank account and a thin body. Please don't mix these up like you did last year. AMEN!

Prayer is the amazing opportunity we have to enter into conversation with the Creator and Redeemer of the Universe. It should be a life-transforming privilege we all embrace. Our church has put a stake in the ground around the importance of prayer. Fervent prayer is one of our eight foundational, never to be changed values. This is what we say:

We will always and in all ways pray, knowing that only at God's direction, in God's time and in God's way can we be the people God has called us to be.

For the next four weeks we are going to explore what this means – what it means to pray fervently. We are going to explore four forms of prayer that the church has practiced down through the ages – adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. We are going to learn from the Bible and the lives of prayer warriors who have gone before us. Ultimately I hope that this month will be a season not just where we receive interesting information, but for all of us, me included, that this will be a journey of inward transformation.

PRAY

We start our journey with the prayer of adoration. The word adoration comes from Latin and simply means this:

Intense admiration culminating in reverence and worship, together with the outward acts and attitudes which accompany such reverence.

(International Standard Bible Encyclopedia)

An act of true adoration involves the whole of our being – our thoughts, our feelings, our body – is all directed towards God in reverence and awe in an act of worship.

The interesting thing is that the word ‘adoration’ does not appear anywhere in our English translations of the Bible. And yet the language of adoration is everywhere in the Bible, and especially in the psalms. Here is an example:

Ascribe to the LORD, all you families of nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts. Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.

(Psalm 96:7-9)

This is a psalm of intense admiration culminating in reverence and worship of God. This is a Psalm of Adoration.

In the King James Version, verse 9 is translated as ‘worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.’ The Message translation put it this way:

Bow before the beauty of God, Then to your knees—everyone worship!

(Psalm 96:9 – The Message)

I love this language because it points to the essence of adoration.

Adoration is bowing before the beauty of God.

The language of adoration is praise. The posture for adoration is on our knees, sometime physically, always spiritually and often times both.

Adoration begins when we are captivated by God

I can still remember the first time I held Sue’s hand. We were 13 years old and it was at the Naracoorte Soapbox Derby. I can still remember the first time we kissed. We were 14 years old and it was after youth group, behind a tree, behind the Naracoorte Uniting Church. As a teenager I was captivated by Sue’s beauty. Here was I, a pimple-ridden, weedy, squeaky voiced teenage boy with a goddess on my arm. I would like to say it was love, but in reality it was probably more another four letter word that starts with ‘l’.

Beauty captures our attention. Beauty captivates. Adoration is our response to the captivating beauty of God.

Psalm 8 is another of King David’s song of adoration:

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens...When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?

(Psalm 8:1, 3-4)

King David is captivated by the beauty of creation – the stars, the sun, the moon and the animals. But he sees beyond the surface beauty of our creation the deeper and more profound beauty of the Creator. Many people in our world fail to see the deeper beauty.

From time to time people will say to me, when I go for a walk on the beach – that’s my church. Or, ‘When I see a sunrise or a sunset – that’s when I feel close to God.’ That’s good, that’s great – but that’s not enough. That is not adoration, it is infatuation. It is like teenage infatuation with skin-deep, or surface-level beauty.

The Russian theologian Nicholas Berdyaev said this:

All beauty in the world is either a memory of Paradise or a prophecy of the transfigured world.
(Nicholas Berdyaev)

In other words, the beauty of creation testifies to the breathtaking beauty of the Creator. And it is the Creator, not his creation that should be the object of our adoration. We bow our knee when we are captivated by the beauty of God, not the beauty of nature. This leads me to my second point:

Adoration grows with our knowledge of God

Beauty is not just something we see; beauty is something we come to know. Over the years Sue and I dated, even in my teenage shallowness, I came to appreciate that her beauty was far more than skin deep. Slowly I was captivated by her inner beauty.

For a relationship to grow and flourish, we must become a life-long student of our partner’s inner beauty.

As it is in our earthly relationships, it is even more in our relationship with God.

As we grow in our knowledge of God and his character, so our adoration and love for him will grow as well. Let me put it another way; as long as our knowledge about God is stunted, so too will our worship and adoration of God be limited.

Let me put it this way: when we know the truth about God, it fills us with wonder. If we fail to understand his true character, we’ll never be amazed by him. We’ll never feel small as we stare up at him. We’ll never worship him as we ought. We’ll never run to him for refuge or realize the great love he’s shown in the measureless distance he bridged to rescue us.

Love grows with knowledge. Adoration increases with education.

Sometimes the dryness of our faith reflects the lack of time we are giving to being a student of God. In worship and adoration, God is the subject and we are the student. A good student will immerse themselves in the subject, learning all they can.

It’s a pretty simple equation: spend more time studying God and watch your love, worship and adoration of God grow.

There are times when I read a familiar passage in the bible and it will explode with new meaning and will just have to stop and pray and say thank you, thank you thank you. Other times I will be reading a book and the writer will share what is for me a new insight about God and I will get out the highlighter and I will write in the margins, wow, wow, wow! When was the last time you were amazed by the goodness, the greatness, the grace of God? For too many of us it was too long ago. Do you long for it? Do you yearn for a fresh experience of God? Then study him. Gaze on the beauty of his character. Meditate on his goodness. Grow in your knowledge of God. As you do, I promise you that more and more you deepen your appreciation of the mystery of God you will be lost in wonder, love and praise.

This leads me to my third point:

Adoration magnifies God to his rightful place

In another of the psalms of adoration we read this:

My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the humble hear and be glad. Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!
(Psalm 34:2-3 ESV)

In adoration we lift up, we exalt, we elevate, we proclaim, we magnify the name of God. Adoration magnifies God to his rightful place as Lord of Lords and King of Kings – the Great I Am.

I have shared before with you about some research by American author, Christian Smith. Based on hundreds of interviews with typical American kids, Smith asserts that fastest growing religion in the Western world is not Islam or Buddhism or biblical Christianity. It is a 'religion' Smith uncovered in his research and which he called **Moralistic Therapeutic Deism**. In Moralistic Therapeutic Deism:

1. There is a God who created and watches over the world.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in your life except to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Smith summarizes the picture of God that many, if not most, people in the western world have:

(God is) something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he's always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process.

In the end, many of us have a view and attitude towards God that is not too dissimilar to the view and attitude teenagers can have towards their parents. Teenagers see parents as handy to have around, but as a general rule they don't want them too involved in their life. I once heard John Ortberg reference a book on parenting teenagers, the title of which speaks eloquently about this:

Get out my Life!
(But first can you drive me and Cheryl to the mall?)

Too easily we 'create' God in our own image, and for our own purposes. As someone has said, 'In the beginning God created man. We've been returning the favour ever since.'

And so, the God who created the universe, who formed the galaxies and supernovas and stars has become our buddy.

The God who formed us from the dust, who knitted us together in our mother's womb, has become our servant, not the one whom we serve.

The God who through Jesus Christ will judge the living and the dead, the God to whom every person who has lived will one day give an account, the God from whom nothing in all creation is hidden, has become a cosmic butler and divine therapist who we too easily ignore, except when we need help.

No wonder we don't pray. Why pray to such a pathetic god, a god we have created in our own image?

Two years ago I traveled to Israel. We spent five days in and around Jerusalem. We visited the western wall of the Temple Mount. For orthodox Jews this is a sacred place as it is thought to be the last remnant of the temple destroyed by the Romans in the first century that is closest to where the holy of holies, the centre of the temple, once stood. It is

also called the Wailing Wall, as it is here that pilgrims come and weep over Jerusalem's destruction and pray for its restoration. Our group was able to wander amongst the orthodox men as they prayed. This is what we saw:

PLAY VIDEO

Do you notice something about the way in which they pray? The rocking backwards and forwards? At the time I didn't think to ask about its significance. Just this week I discovered this practice of rocking backwards and forwards during prayer is called shuckling. Schuckling is a Yiddish word which means shaking. Shuckling is a way of expressing that one's whole self, body and soul, is caught up with God, desires God and wants to honor God. The movement of body back and forwards mimics the flickering flame of a candle.

Standing before God, man is as small and fragile as a candle flickering in the wind.

Remember Psalm 96:9?

Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.
(Psalm 96:9)

Schuckling is a way of trembling before the majesty and power of God. It is a form of prayer by which many orthodox Jews seek to magnify, exalt and lift up the name of God.

King David magnified God when he sang, 'O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.' In the process of magnifying God he also discovered the dreadful reality that by comparison with God we are small and seemingly insignificant.

What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?
(Psalm 8:4)

Confronted with the majesty of the creation and the Creator, David felt deep in his bones his tininess, his finiteness and fragility. Adoration elevates God and rightly humbles us. And yet, and yet....in the process of adoration, as our soul communes with God, we are also reminded of the Universe defining truth that God is Love and we are the objects of that love. David answers his own question:

You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You have made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet.
(Psalm 8:5-6)

When we adore God, we magnify him. As we magnify him, we necessarily and rightly humble ourselves. And as we humble ourselves in adoration we are reminded that God is Love and we are the object of that love. This leads me to my final point.

Adoration fuels our transformation

Like me, you may have watched with stunned amazement as millions of North Koreans gathered in snowy streets to mourn the death of brutal dictator, Kim Jong Il. One writer called the funeral an exercise of synchronized sorrow. What made it all so grotesque is that for seventeen years Kim Jong Il, the so-called supreme leader, had brutalized North Koreans. Hundreds of thousands have died in labor camps. If you enter a North Korean labor camp, you have a 40% chance of coming out alive. In my life-time millions of North Koreans have died through famine and preventable malnutrition. And yet here we have men, women and even children sobbing over a tyrant. But of course they would, it was expected.

This last week news came out of North Korea that "authorities are handing down at least six months in a labor-training camp to anybody who didn't participate in the organized gatherings" to mourn the death of Supreme Leader Kim Jong Il, and to those "who did participate but didn't cry and didn't seem genuine." Six months in a labor camp if you didn't cry or didn't seem sincere when you did cry? Wow!

King Jong Il was a tyrant who demanded to be worshipped. This is a cruel, demonic caricature of what true, liberating, transformative worship.

We do not worship God because he demands it, but because he deserves it.

We bow down to the beauty of God. We bow down to the perfection of God's creative majesty, beautiful holiness and unfailing love.

In adoration God receives what he deserves – our love, our gratitude, our worship.

And in adoring God we receive what we need – life transforming power.

One of the greatest Christian minds, Thomas Aquinas, said this:

We pay God honor and reverence, not for his sake (because he is of himself full of glory to which no creature can add anything), but for our own sake.
(Thomas Aquinas)

This is so important to understand. God does not need our praise. God is not some desperate dictator with self-esteem issues looking for validation. God is holy, perfect, just. God does not need our adoration. God deserves it.

But the very act of adoring God we receive something far greater than what we give. In spending time in God's presence, we are transformed moment by moment into the image of the one we adore.

The principle is this: What we revere, we resemble.

In the book of Exodus we read that Moses went up on Mount Sinai where he received the Law of God. He spent time in the very Presence of God. When he came back down his face was radiant. It literally shone with the glory of God.

When we spend time in the presence of God in adoration, our lives will begin to shine with the very glory of God that we honor. Our adoration does not change God, it changes us.

In C. S. Lewis's children's series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, young heroine Lucy meets a majestic lion named Aslan in the enchanted land of Narnia. Making a return visit a year later, the children discover that everything has changed radically, and they quickly become lost. But after a series of dreadful events, Lucy finally spots Aslan in a forest clearing, rushes to him, throws her arms around his neck, and buries her face in his mane.

The great beast rolled over on his side so that Lucy fell, half sitting and half lying between his front paws. He bent forward and touched her nose with his tongue. His warm breath came all around her. She gazed up into the large wise face.

"Welcome child," he said. "Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger." "That's because you're older, little one," answered he. "Not because you are?" "I'm not. But each year you grow, you'll find me bigger."

And so my question is this: How big is your God?

Every year, does God seem bigger, more majestic and more beautiful?

A sign of true spiritual growth will be that as we adore God, God becomes even more beautiful to us.

Adoration is bowing before the beauty of God.

The language of adoration is praise. The posture for adoration is on our knees.

What is the most beautiful thing in God's Creation? The Grand Canyon? Mount Everest? The Great Barrier Reef? Victoria Falls? The beauty of God is all around us. Elizabeth Barrett Browning said it poetically:

Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God; But only he who sees, takes off his shoes
- The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

(Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

We can trip over the beauty of God and miss seeing it completely.

The most beautiful thing in the world is not one of the many natural wonders. It is a most unnatural, awful thing. It is the Cross. In the Cross of Christ the true beauty of God's holiness, love, grace and mercy is revealed. How can a symbol of torture be a thing of beauty? Speaking of the messiah who would die on the Cross, the prophet Isaiah said this:

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
(Isaiah 53:2)

Skin deep, the Cross is an ugly reminder of the cruelty of man. But under the surface, behind the Cross is the Holy Beauty of God. Behind the Cross is love, love, love. Paul says it this way:

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
(Romans 5:8)

Adoration is bowing before the beautiful love of God.