

It therefore makes no sense for a Christian to say to their friend who is in a situation of pain or difficulty 'I'll be thinking of you'. Thought alone has no power. Song alone may feed our emotion or lift our mood, but it does not, of itself, connect us with God.

My friend Matt is a student who has the lovely gift of a reflective spirit and a heart for worship. When he worships, it makes it easy for others to join him in discovering God. He says of prayer,

*Prayer is a relationship and therefore you don't have to use fancy words and that kind of stuff. Obviously, sometimes it helps me to kind of come closer to God when I'm just talking to him one on one, there's just me and him. Prayer, for me sometimes becomes quite conversational, asking for God's help or whatever and then waiting for him to respond. Usually when I'm quiet, just listening for God through images in my head or words, I'll often hear him saying stuff to me through that in answer.<sup>23</sup>*

Prayer is an actual process, and one which is more than our human inclination to merely *think!* There is a time of waiting involved as we continue in the awareness of God's presence to discern or hear his response to us. Worship too is beyond the ordinary, it involves expectations in a way that humming along to a favourite tune or mindlessly joining in with the crowd can't offer. We worship in response to God and to his love and grace.

Two pictures that help us to see this better begin with a group of three or four silly twenty-something young men at a Christian Holiday Camp. They put themselves together as a so-called 'boy band' to raise money for the charity which the camp was supporting and wrote and rehearsed some songs for a gig which they advertised around the site. I was cringing with embarrassment to hear many excited teenagers talking of the Aka-Jesus concert they were going to later on. My brothers were part of this band and indeed played to a full house that evening. They sang 'Jesus on a Jet-ski' (*You're looking at me through the window of your jet ski. Then suddenly everything is ..... groovy!*) and other such silliness. A friend was witness to this and reported back that the high point of the event for her had been when they sang the theme song from the Australian teen-soap drama 'Home & Away' during which she had seen several people in the tent worshipping with closed eyes and their hands in the air. This was not worship. You might spend time arguing that if it placed them into God's presence then it was - but I had seen the costumes, heard their voices and the quality of the event was definitely comedy rather than to profess and witness to their love of Jesus.

The second picture involves some of the students from my youth group. We had spent five days at a Christian youth camp, Harvest, in the North East of England, during which time most of them had encountered God in a way they had found challenging through the worship, the seminars and through the opportunity to respond to God in prayer and commitment. Several of these students had tickets at home for the Leeds Music Festival the following weekend and were excited about the bands that they were going to hear and about being away from home with their friends during this time.

During Harvest, much worship was done by jumping and shouting with arms in the air as a sign of adoration and commitment, even openness to the work of God's spirit in them. After the Leeds Festival, one of the students arrived to talk to me, perplexed and a little angry with himself about his response to the bands. He'd been so caught up in the music

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<sup>23</sup> Matt Williams

and atmosphere that he had been there with his hands in the air, joining in with the rest of the crowd and behaving to a great extent as he had at the Harvest Camp the previous week. It caused him to question the way he had felt and the truth of his response during the worship if he could so easily express his appreciation of the Festival bands in the same way.

Worship and prayer involve the deep point of our being wherein our passion lies. Our passion for God is the point from which is grown our resolve to serve him in the things to which he calls us. Our passion can be great and motivate us to greater depth of prayer and more connected times of worship, but it can also be misdirected. Both of these pictures involve worship that is not real. The boy band (who should have known better) were not expressing a desire to lead God's people in worship, but rather were seeking to entertain and amuse. They were successful in this and most people saw it for what it was. There were those who were unwilling to participate at this level and who missed the point. Sometimes, things simply are not worship.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Chapter 4, Paul talks about Christian maturity and our need to pursue this as being vital to our safety as Christians. Until we reach a level of maturity which equips us to resist false teachings or false revelations, or pseudo-spiritual experiences. The building-up of the people of God comes through learning from church leaders and elders who are both sensible and wise in their faith and understanding of God's love for us through Christ and indeed of what true worship looks like. The student who had unwittingly shown 'worship' of the bands and their music was able to unravel the process for himself. Was he engaging with them at the level of his spirit? No he wasn't. Was he inspired to seek out more of that band and their ethos and to follow them to their next venue? No he wasn't. Did he find the experience transforming of his heart and mind, or was he on a feel-good high brought about by the music, company and a little alcohol? A long pause .... ye-es, he had been drinking and stupidity had followed and now he felt ashamed and embarrassed. He had not been worshipping the band or their music, but he had displayed some responses that had been close to worship. True worship requires the assent and intention of our will and our heart in order for us to be with God in that intimate expression of love and adoration of him. The place of worship is within our hearts and minds as God takes our offering and responds to us through the movement of his Spirit within our lives. We do need to be careful with our bodies and how we use them, as they are part of our worship-offering to God. Paul writes to the Romans (12:1 & 2)

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will. (NIV 2011)*

If our bodies are used in ways which are dishonouring of ourselves or other people, then our worship of God is corrupted through our activity. If we see ourselves responding to a situation that makes us uncomfortable in our spirit, then we should pay attention to that feeling and examine it before persisting in things that could lead to serious damage of our spirit.

This may begin with the raising of our hands in response to the music at a festival, or our use of food, alcohol or drugs to make ourselves feel better. It may be in our seeking of sexual gratification to fill a void in our lives or through dangerous friendships which place

us in moral or physical danger. The whole of our being belongs to God and our fulfilment, of a true and lasting nature, comes when we discover how to engage with him on speed dial and keep him in constant connection with us at a conscious level.

Prayer begins when we choose to open up a connection with God and allow his responses to refashion the shape and content of your life. Worship is a stream of prayer which ascribes position to God, placing him over our lives in surrender to his majesty and power. Worship blesses the Living God and also moves us beyond the understanding of our relationship with God being simply one whereby we open a conversation by asking him for things and he responds, in his own time, by giving them to us!

Worship should transform us because we spend time in the presence of Holy God, who makes us holy. We cannot be in his presence and remain sinful, and so the closer we come to him in worship, the purer our lives become. Knowing our Bible, hearing the stories and adventures of faith from other Christians and, of course, our own praying are all part of our path towards the Christian maturity that Paul points out to the Ephesian Church. Worship too, takes the whole of our practises and understandings, our descriptions of what Christianity means to us and our desire to be better at faith and offers them to God. Fanny Crosby rolled it all together in the final verse of her hymn, To God be the Glory (1875)

*Great things he hath taught us, great things he hath done,  
And great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son;  
But purer and higher and greater will be  
Our wonder, our transport, when Jesus we see.*

Seeing Jesus is part of the deal when we come to worship. In this verse, Crosby is describing the extent of the relationship that God has entered into with us through Jesus. As Matt described, it is a relationship which was the capacity to bring about genuine closeness and understanding. There is an excitement born of closeness as we begin to see how this intimacy with God brings about a life-changing response within our own lives. The lines from Crosby end with phrases which point at the eternal perspective of worship. We begin to worship God on earth and it is wonderful, but we are moved so much further into the reality of worship and our place in God's presence once we are with him in Glory. It is good to know that the very best of our human experiences of worship are never the final understanding of how we will relate to God. There is always more intimacy to be found through prayer and worship, as we constantly, imperfectly seek God.

Prayer and Worship ought to be a pair in our minds like fish and chips or bacon and eggs. Without the other, each is not as good and doesn't meet the potential of its greatness! Matt also told me that;

*I find they go hand in hand. When I'm worshipping, there'll be things God will be telling me that I need to pray about; quite often it will be for the strength to do something.<sup>24</sup>*

Chance who is worship pastor at Calvary Chapel, Colorado Springs reflected on worship and his response to God during the activity of worship leading that;

*Worship has helped me to pray. More times than not in worship I'm either praying that God would strengthen me in my weaknesses that are showing up during said*

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<sup>24</sup> Matt Williams

*worship, or if a song lyric is challenging me like in the sense that; ‘Man, Lord, I really want to mean this lyric right now but I feel like, innately in my life, this lyric isn’t true and I wish it could be ...’*

*When I feel weakest in worship, I pray a lot for God to strengthen me in those weaknesses. Also I pray for others.<sup>25</sup>*

As leaders of worship, albeit in different cultures, God speaks into the praying will of each of these men through the vehicle and inspiration of worship. We approach God through our worship and adoration of him in expressions of love, gratitude, surrender and commitment. This again opens that opportunity to listen and respond to God’s will and hope for you, as well as to notice and pray blessing over or release for the ones to whom God directs your notice.

Chance focuses firstly on God and on his expression of worship through the words of love which he brings. In this moment, no matter how good the music, the worship itself is taking place within Chance’s spirit. In God’s presence, he has the grace and humility to challenge himself to deeper holiness and awareness of himself as Christ’s ambassador. Matt recognises that before almighty God, his weakness requires God’s strength in order for him to fulfil God’s purposes. These decisions or realisations begin in worship and are made in prayer.

We often draw a line of distinction between times to pray and times to worship God. This is often marked by music and that vague feeling that worship is the singing of our love for God whereas prayer is when we ask God for things.

It is a distinction which makes me uncomfortable. We stand to worship God and in worship, we offer the whole of our selves to God as a ‘living sacrifice’.

It is in the giving of ourselves to God with our full intention of focussing entirely on him and his love for us that the business of God coming and taking his place in our midst occurs.

Worship is the honouring of God with the full focus of our life. In true worship, we invite him to fill the space within and around us with more of his holiness in order that we might examine our hearts under this spotlight of his purity and find ourselves giving greater portions of our hidden self to him as he scrapes us clean of long-forgotten sin.

The old hymn-writers would have described this as a stain, and indeed through worship, the image of being washed whiter than snow is often used as we understand more about the radiance of God’s holiness that comes from being in his presence. We are assured that it is the blood of Jesus that removes these stains from our soul and spirit.

The chemical industry is forever finding the perfect stain remover, colour restorer, spill-soaking product but Psalm 51 contains them all! King David begins with adoration of the God who loves him and reconciles himself to the unalterable fact that God’s holiness shows up more obviously the sin and murkiness of his own imperfections.

*Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
blot out my transgressions.*

*<sup>2</sup>Wash away all my iniquity  
and cleanse me from my sin.*

*<sup>3</sup>For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is always before me.*

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<sup>25</sup> Chance Riehl

*<sup>4</sup>Against you, you only, have I sinned  
and done what is evil in your sight;  
so you are right in your verdict  
and justified when you judge. Psalm 51 (NIV)*

David is known for his response to God as a worshipper. Today, some Christian traditions chant the psalms of David using a simple melody. Some Christians will read the words from the page without any attempt to add music to them. Others have reworked the psalms to new tunes which are then sung, often with instrumental accompaniment. If these are worship, then they are also prayer, with verses 1-4 forming a traditional prayer of confession.

*<sup>7</sup>Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*

*<sup>8</sup>Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.*

*<sup>9</sup>Hide your face from my sins  
and blot out all my iniquity.*

*<sup>10</sup>Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

*<sup>11</sup>Do not cast me from your presence  
or take your Holy Spirit from me.*

*<sup>12</sup>Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*

Psalm 51:7-12 (NIV)

It doesn't surprise me that it is often when Christians are together in prayer and worship over a sustained period of time that they begin to make the progress in dealing with dormant sins and issues in their lives which are normally glossed over and covered up in the short space of Sunday Service or even during fellowship meetings. Matt shared his perspective on this as;

*It's easiest to pray around Christians... If there's a sense of the Holy Spirit in the room, I definitely find that easier.<sup>26</sup>*

Acts 2:42-27(NIV) is where this dream is truly lived by the early Christians in Jerusalem.

*<sup>42</sup>They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.<sup>43</sup>Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. <sup>44</sup>All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup>They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. <sup>46</sup>Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

Here we see full immersion in the life of faith, as the people are constantly in God's presence and deliberately seeking together to grow in faith and in discipleship. This is a concentrated time of living as God instructs, with each day punctuated by worship and fellowship as the people learn that knowing more of God's love for them has its benefits.

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<sup>26</sup> Matt Williams

They become holy.

Their worldliness is eroded by the constancy of allowing God's intense light to burn away that which is not of Him through persisting in being in His presence. We may approximate this by spending time at the various Christian Conferences which are on offer throughout the year, or by going to retreat houses and spending time living in community with people whose lives are devoted to God in this way. The young people at camps such as Soul Survivor or Harvest are given time out in a Godly way and are able to use it as a springboard back into regular life as they have time and space in worship, prayer and fellowship to deal with some of the issues which inhibit their fullness of life in Christ.

The Acts 2:42 picture does not remove the Christians from contact with the rest of the world and neither should a long period of devoted worship remove anyone from their responsibility to service within a local community. Every day, new people came to faith and joined them. The holiness and devotion of their whole person was such that their impact was to reveal Christ to the local community and not become separated away from it.

Worship and prayer have practical value for the individual and for the community at large. God may well reveal his heart of love for the town or city in which you live.

I live in a village on the edge of the North Yorkshire Moors. After a summer's month during which I had been pretty much constantly with other Christians in worship, teaching, fellowship and service, I found myself on my knees in a not altogether clean barn as my Young People surrounded and blessed me with their prayers. All that week, I had been holding others up to God for their healing and their protection, I had been teaching them to pray for each other and standing guard as they put their faith into practice. I was tired and vulnerable as they gathered around me and reluctant to have this amount of attention. I was also overwhelmed by the love in their prayers and began to sink down under the weight of the blessing they gave me. Then God gave me a picture, like a photograph which appeared in my mind: Into my hand, he placed the village and the land around it as you would place a small, precious and fragile animal. 'You can't do that!' was my initial and verbal response which meant that I had to explain to the others what I'd seen. I was duly frowned at in rebuke and the prayer resumed and I could almost feel the patience of God as he gently took me through the picture again. This time, I said thank you and went away to read Joshua.

I have a great love for my village, and this Christmas was excited to be able to pray for everyone who attended the open air village carol service. It was a good thing to do, to pray for the streets on which the people live, many of whom are as yet strangers to the Gospel of Grace.

Worship and prayer need to occupy the same place in our intentions, if we are to truly know the will and heart of God.

It can be tough to see ourselves as a people of worship when, in our everyday, we do not have a worship leader who can provide the music and the sensitive choice of worship song to fit our individual needs, or when we are unable to get together with other like-minded Christians for their help and support. Should worship only take place where the people of God are gathered in greater number or is there more that we can do?

Many Christian traditions would talk about worship as a form of Liturgy during which they would use scripture and poetic styles of written prayer which have been specially designed

and authorised by the church for people to use (often) daily in order to come into God's presence and seek his blessing. In these times, especially the Catholic and Eastern traditions would describe The Liturgy as a time when Christ offers himself to you. This is daily worship: focussing on and honouring God. Some see these patterns of liturgy as a vehicle, others see them as a discipline through which we place ourselves in a position whereby God can meet us and work in us. Once the decision is made to enter into the Liturgy for the day, even only partially engaged, there is a strong argument in Eastern and Catholic traditions that this is a time of worship and connections are made with God. Daniel from Madonna House sees it this way;

*The Liturgy is The Liturgy, but it brings me to God.*

*It's almost like creating the environment where you can meet God (But it isn't God!)*

*It is very important - The Liturgy - but that's not where we want to get stuck. We want to be with this personal relationship with God and also in The Liturgy we can receive a lot of Grace, if you open your heart to and pay attention to what's going on - not just going through the motions.<sup>27</sup>*

The worship songs we may sing, the spoken expressions of love and adoration of God that we might speak out, the periods of contemplation before the cross of Jesus or reflecting on passages of Scripture are all examples of worship.

Some serve as vehicles on which we travel into God's presence and some are our heart's inner response to our Loving God.

Not all worship is singing and not all Liturgy is vain repetition! God blesses the intentions of our hearts and the inspiration of our will which seeks to honour him. Sometimes our worship looks like prayer, as Matt said, 'I find that worship and prayer go hand in hand!'

Many who have worshipped with me have learnt that the worship experience is not enhanced if I lead unaccompanied singing! Many of the notes we try to sing become inaccessibly low in pitch and the worship has usually degenerated into chaotic mumbling before we get to the chorus.

Largely due to this, I have needed to branch out and to discover a way of leading group worship that doesn't rely on my having to pitch a tune.

We may offer sentences which begin, 'God you are good because ...' or 'God you are ...' and everyone will make their statement of worship.

We might listen to a pre-recorded worship track and join in.

We might read a psalm or other sections of scripture and talk of how great God is. Sharing sentences of personal testimony about what God has done in our lives during the week lend an immediacy to the time of worship. We always say 'Amen' to each other's declarations and always spend some time in silence, waiting on God.

Is this prayer, or is this worship? Yes! But I'm not prepared to carve a distinction between them where there ought to be wholeness.

Prayer and worship should place us into God's presence for the blessing of his heart and the delight of ours. The focus is lifted from our own wants and needs and is now on his face.

He directs our prayers from this point to be in tune with his heart. Learning to worship God in Spirit and in Truth is an important part of a fully functioning prayer life. Being in

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<sup>27</sup> Madonna House: Daniel

God's presence transforms our perspective from earth to heaven so that we may truly live for his glory.

## Chapter 8 Beginning to Pray, Really Pray

Often, I wish that the deep prayers of our spirit came readily in every situation and to all believers. For many of us, it is so much effort to stretch beyond our knowledge to investigate the many mysteries that are within God. There is so much more than we can know from the giving of a simple hour on Sunday and say, 10 minutes of prayer each day throughout the week, maybe taking Saturday off.

We may have an idea of things that God needs to know about: worries, illness, big events in our lives. Our bank of prayer-phrases and information is stored up within us waiting to be used:

We have a variety of titles by which we can address God.

We have a list of requests for him to deal with.

We have a variety of questions on which we would dearly love to have some clarity.

This looks like prayer and may follow a recognisable shape for prayer, as we insert phrases into the blanks of our ready to use generic prayer-outline:

*Lord God,*

*Please sort out my issues at work.*

*And why does every relationship I get into only last for a couple of months?*

*Thank you. Amen*

*Or*

*Loving Lord,*

*Please look after John on his school trip.*

*I know he is nervous, and now I am too. It makes me wonder how you cope with all your children doing things, letting us go off and deal with the world without you.*

*It's really got me thinking. Anyway, look after John. Please. Amen.*

So far, so good.

The question which hovers over all this process concerns relationship.

How can relationship with God develop if our structures are this tight, our time-frame for praying is this short and the framework is never deviated from? Even in the parent's prayer, where a little more detail has been added, there is no pause for considering the true nature of God's fatherhood towards either John or the praying parent. There are hints of a bigger question but no willingness to wrestle with God and free will, salvation history, the problems of the exile and his own giving up of his only Son to save us. The prayer is not about seeking after intimacy with God, but about splurging anxiety onto his broad and strong shoulders.

Address, petition, query. Job done.

When we spend too many prayer-times following this pattern, we behave less like a disciple seeking relationship with the Lord they love and more like a person phoning a store help-line;

*"for a short prayer press 1. For prayers to do with natural disaster, press 2. For relationship prayers press 3. For world peace, press 7. For a personal consultation with one of our operators, please hold the line..."*

And we never do hold the line - because the time we have is too short and it is simply annoying to have to wait for someone to deal with us. If this is becoming or has become our pattern for prayer, the time is come to move it on to a more transforming level.

Developing or getting deeper into our relationship God comes through our effort to let God be God in our lives and to allow him to shape our prayers. As God reveals himself to us, we are able to more confidently pray the prayers that challenge us, upset our natural viewpoint on an issue or reveal something of God's mystery. Doing this really well and naturally takes time - years even, but it doesn't mean that it cannot be satisfactory at the outset. What satisfies our soul today and tomorrow will be insufficient for the needs of next weekend.

As we learn to invite the reality of God to bring his living presence to bear on our heads, our lives, our anxieties and our hopes, we discover that he alone is the answer and so, in all our praying, we learn to require more depth from our prayer times, more time spent with God and a closer connection with God. The way we prayed a year ago should not 'do'