

Worship: Awareness Of The Presence Of God

We saw in our previous message that worship consists of five elements: offering (or sacrifice), prayer, service, submission, and celebration. We also discussed one man's experience of worship as expressed in his book "The Practice of the Presence of God", in which he describes a constant awareness of God's presence with him. It might be said that he learned to sanctify the profane, turning the commonplace and everyday into reminders of God's goodness to him.

I'd like to focus on this aspect of worship for today: the awareness of the presence of God. We often hear people leaving Christian music concerts, revival meetings, or even Sunday morning worship meetings saying things like "I was so blessed, I really sensed the work of the Holy Spirit" or "I certainly felt the presence of God among us". Here I must take a moment to remind you that *feeling* that God is present is totally independent of the *fact* that He is omnipresent. Our feelings do not determine reality, they are merely the result of our perception of it. When we remember that God is *always* present in *every* place it becomes obvious that our awareness of His presence is not so much dependent upon His actions as upon ours.

Yet, even though we know that God is always present with us wherever we may be, we also recognize that there are times when His presence commands all of our attention. Abraham and Isaac bowed before God as they sacrificed the ram that He had provided. Moses took off his shoes as God spoke to him from the burning bush. Jonah was intensely aware of the presence of God as the sailors threw him off the ship. The disciples exclaimed "even the winds and the waves obey him!" Even Job was overwhelmed by the presence of the Lord after pleading with him for answers.

These intense encounters with the holy, almighty, omnipresent God of the universe certainly inspire our awe and respect – our worship. Yet why do we limit our awareness

of his holy presence to two hours on Sunday morning and the occasional special event? Why should we not be constantly in worship just like He is constantly with us?

As I thought about this idea of being aware – or mindful – of His presence, I also thought of the mindfulness training and practice that health care professionals have recently begun recommending. Many Christians have hesitated to use it because it was initially associated with Eastern religions and their cultic practices. Western scientists have developed a version of meditative practice stripped of all the religious content (unless, perhaps, you consider their version of mindfulness to be a form of self-worship). There are even groups now promoting “Christian mindfulness”, adding a Christian focus to the practice that has shown positive health benefits for so many.

I have not established for myself a “mindfulness routine” of daily half-hour sessions, but I have tried occasional brief sessions of relaxed focus as the mindfulness practitioners recommend. They recommend that you put everything else out of your mind and just be aware of your current environment, or alternatively just be aware of your breathing. When your mind wanders, just return your focus to your breathing. But I haven’t yet developed the discipline of regular daily mindful meditation.

But, aha! I thought about Psalm 143:5: “I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done.” We are called to put God at the center of our meditation. And then I remembered Genesis 2:7: “the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and *breathed* into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” When my meditation requires a relaxed awareness of my breathing I am now thinking that with each breath I am receiving the very breath of life from the giver of life, the same God who interrupted Moses with a fiery call to worship and service!

Brother Lawrence learned to practice the presence of God, using techniques described in his book. Now I’ve learned a method to make me aware of the presence of God on a

regular basis: I don't wait for a scheduled time of mindful awareness, every time throughout the day when I become aware of my breathing I remember that I am breathing in the breath of life. Now, the thing about breathing is that we do it automatically, without thinking about it and without planning it. But ever since I noticed this connection I began to notice my breathing much more often. Not just when I'm huffing and puffing from mowing the lawn, not just when I sigh or gasp in response to something; over and over, throughout the day, I become aware of my breathing and I become aware of the presence of God with me right here, right now. I find myself deliberately taking a deep breath and luxuriating in the life that He has given me.

You can do it too! Let's try it right now: take a deep breath, and remember God breathed into us the breath of life. Another deep breath, and remember He is right here with us in this moment. Now you're worshiping!

The blessings didn't stop there. I began to think about the Hebrew and Greek words for "breath" or "breathe". Hebrew has a word that appears often in the Old Testament: *ruach*. It can mean breath, or wind, or spirit. When we read that the spirit of God came upon a person it is usually this word. While it is not the word used in Genesis 2:7, when I think of the breath of life, I am also reminded of God's mighty winds and gentle breezes, and of His Holy Spirit. Similarly, when I notice my breathing I may be reminded of the New Testament Greek word *pneuma*, which has much the same range of meaning as the Hebrew *ruach*: spirit, wind, or breath; it appears most often as "Holy Spirit". Breathe in: I remember the breath of life. Breathe in: I notice the wind blowing the trees, the work of God. Breathe in: I'm aware of the presence of the Spirit of God right here with me in this moment. Over and over, in various moments throughout the day, I am worshiping.

But wait, there's more! After a few weeks of being aware of my breathing and turning immediately to an awareness of God's presence with me, I began to notice that I was worshiping in other ways. Opening the window blinds in the morning and seeing the

birds busy grooming my lawn I thought how nice it was to have my birds there – and immediately I realized they were God’s birds, not mine, and was thankful for His many gifts to me. When I sit down to a meal with friends or family I’m reminded of Christ’s last supper. When I get in the shower I’m reminded of baptism and God’s forgiveness. Like Brother Lawrence, in these and in many other ways I began to be aware of God’s presence with, and care for, me – and these were not prompted by noticing my breathing. Worship is becoming a natural part of the give and take, even the very fabric of, the everyday events of my life.

This is the kind of life that God planned for Israel when He told Joshua “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night”. They were to fill their lives with the word of God, being aware of His presence with with them in all the ins and outs of their daily lives. We too can share the blessing of being aware of God’s presence with us in each of our moments and circumstances. 

We identified five elements of worship previously: offering, prayer, service, submission, and celebration. This constant awareness of the presence of God, as it becomes a constant companionship and dialog with God, is a form of prayer. I no longer think that Paul was over-reaching when he told the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing”. 

Next week: “If God is everywhere, God is nowhere. If God is in everything, God is in nothing.” What about the danger of losing the sense of the sacred; if we’ve made our everyday everything part of our worship, where is the holy, what is sacred and set apart?

<<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5657>>

<<http://www.themindfulchristian.net/>>

<<https://yearningheartsjourney.blogspot.com/2011/09/living-in-constant-awareness-of-gods.html>>

<<http://jewishmag.com/45mag/shabbatable/shabbatable.htm>>

SONGS: 56 Praise To The Lord, The Almighty; 777 Mid All The Traffic; 774 Make Me Aware Of Thee, O Lord

BULLETIN INSERT

Abraham and Isaac bow before God - Genesis 22

Moses' fiery encounter with God - Exodus 3

Jonah overwhelmed by God's presence - Jonah 1

The disciples recognize that God Himself is with them - Matthew 8; Mark 4; Luke 8

Job finally realizes that God has been present and listening - Job 42

The Practice Of The Presence Of God by Brother Lawrence

A free source of this classic Christian book.

<<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5657>>

Living in Constant Awareness of God's Immediate Presence

This page is a nice summary regarding God's omnipresence.

<<https://yearningheartsjourney.blogspot.com/2011/09/living-in-constant-awareness-of-gods.html>>

The Mindful Christian

I am not necessarily endorsing or recommending this site; it was useful to me as I explored the topic.

<<http://www.themindfulchristian.net/>>

If God Were Sitting at Your Sabbath Table, Would You Notice?

While also appropriate to next week's topic, it discusses our experience of the blessings of daily life.

<<http://jewishmag.com/45mag/shabbatable/shabbatable.htm>>