

Worship: Celebrating Life And The One Who Gave It

We saw in our previous message that worship consists of five elements: offering, prayer, service, submission, and celebration. We also focused on the constant awareness of the presence of God as a prayer practice that enriches our worship. As we've worked our way through the books of the Old Testament in our weekly Bible Study, we've noticed how often there are feasts, celebrations, or festivals. Those Jews were partying people! Do you know why? Because God told them to. Today we'll look at the "celebration" element of worship.

When we become constantly aware of God's presence, and make many aspects of our daily routines a part of our constant ongoing prayer dialog with God, there is a danger of becoming too familiar. Our relationship may fade from fresh excitement and eager anticipation to being settled in a comfortable, and comforting, routine. Worse, there is the possibility that *comforting routine* becomes *mindless repetition* – empty and meaningless. This is the problem expressed by Nina Amir Lacey in her essay "*If God Were Sitting at Your Sabbath Table, Would You Notice?*", where in the busy-ness of her life she says "I feel so harried I wouldn't feel the Divine Presence if It came right up and hugged me upon entering my home." and "I might not even notice if God were in my chair when I sat down to eat my Sabbath meal. I might just sit there oblivious to the fact that I was resting on the Divine lap."

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Fortunately, God has a solution for this problem: holy time. You've never heard of "holy time"? Where does the Bible talk about that? Look at Exodus 20:8-11. "Remember the Sabbath day to set it apart as holy. For six days you may labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; on it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, or your male servant, or your female servant, or your cattle, or the resident foreigner who is in your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them, and he rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy." Oh, and it doesn't stop there, every seventh year was declared a sabbatical year, and every fiftieth year was a year of Jubilee. See? Holy time!

And like they say on TV: but wait, there's more! Deuteronomy 16:13-16 says "You must celebrate the Festival of Temporary Shelters for seven days, at the time of the grain and grape harvest. You are to rejoice in your festival, you, your son, your daughter, your male and female slaves, the Levites, the resident foreigners, the orphans, and the widows who are in your villages. You are to celebrate the festival seven days before the Lord your God in the place he chooses, for he will bless you in all your productivity and in whatever you do; so you will indeed rejoice! Three times a year all your males must appear before the Lord your God in the place he chooses for the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks, and the Festival of Temporary Shelters." So, three times a year make a pilgrimage to the temple to rejoice in worship before the Lord; and God provided other minor festivals that are celebrated at home.

God didn't intend for our worship to become stale, He filled it with two things to break up the monotony of our daily lives: rest time, and party time. And they are holy – time devoted only to God.

Here is Nina Lacey again: "If something sacred is that which is set apart as special, different, hallowed, extra-ordinary - the opposite of profane or ordinary, then the Sabbath certainly qualifies as sacred. But what about the rest of the week, I questioned? I do not think of the rest of the week as not sacred - not part of God, but the other six days are not set apart as special, not dedicated to remembering God.

"So, why 'if God is in everything is God in nothing'? Why 'if God is everywhere is God nowhere'? Because if we see everything as the same and nothing as set apart or different, then we cannot tell the difference between that which is sacred and that which is profane. We go along, day to day, and nothing seems special, nothing seems set apart and, therefore, nothing is different. We cannot distinguish between ordinary and extraordinary not because nothing is sacred but because we forget that anything is sacred. We don't see the special-ness in all things only the ordinary-ness. By setting aside one day – or any increment of time in

our day or our week – as holy, we make a distinction we can then use as a measure or as a base point for comparison.”

This holy time helps us keep our relationship with God fresh and vivid. It helps us avoid the downward spiral into comfortable routine and mindless repetition. Besides that, who doesn't enjoy a nice nap or a good party?

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Apparently God does really want us to enjoy ourselves. Remember those three pilgrim festivals? They are not a three-hour party with a few friends and home again to your drab life – two of them last a week or more! And look again at Deuteronomy 16:11: “You are to **rejoice** in your festival, you, your son, your daughter, your male and female slaves, the Levites, the resident foreigners, the orphans, and the widows who are in your villages.” Ezra 6:22 tells us: “They observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days **with joy**, for the Lord had given them joy”

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This is also evident in God's instruction for bringing their tithes to the Temple, in Deuteronomy 14:24-26: “When he blesses you, if the place where he chooses to locate his name is distant, you may convert the tithe into money, secure the money, and travel to the place the Lord your God chooses for himself. Then you may spend the money however you wish for cattle, sheep, wine, beer, or *whatever you desire*. You and your household may eat there in the presence of the Lord your God *and enjoy it*.” He didn't say “give your money to the priest”, He said “have a party with God and enjoy yourselves”.

Lest you object that these are all Old Testament references to the practices of the Jews, let's remember that Jesus regularly observed the Sabbath, worshiping and praying in the synagogue, though not in the slavish, lifeless, legalistic way that the Pharisees did. He taught his disciples that the Law was still important but helped them see that it wasn't about narrow restrictive interpretations, but about the spirit and intent of the law – His teaching intensified and corrected the law rather than replacing it. “Jesus said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.’” (Mark 2:27) The disciples continued to observe the

sabbath after Christ's resurrection. This holy time of rest was, and is, an important part of God's plan for mankind's well-being.

We need to add one warning here. It would be easy to think that God wants us to enjoy ourselves as we worship him – and He does. But we are also warned repeatedly that He is not impressed by all our sacrifices and offerings, nor by all our festivals. Those only count if we have done justice to, and provided for the needs of, widows and orphans and the disadvantaged (including the homeless). You can't love God without caring for His people. Jesus said that when you give a party be sure to invite all those people as well as your friends – so they can share in the blessings God has given you. He blesses them through you.

So, we learned worship consists of five elements: offering, prayer, service, submission, and celebration. We talked about living in constant prayer and fellowship last week, and this week we've learned about the importance of celebration, setting aside time devoted just to fellowship with Him. A good description of worship might be: "Celebrating life and honoring the One who gave it." Or perhaps we should say: "Celebrating life *by* honoring the One who gave it."

Let's not let our lives become like the man who eats just a bowl of plain oatmeal every morning for breakfast, and on Sunday morning tosses in a few raisins to celebrate. Let's let our worship include holy time: a genuine time of rest each week, and scheduled (or even spontaneous) joyful and enthusiastic celebrations of God's goodness to us – both here in the church and in our homes. Oatmeal is good, but give me an occasional breakfast buffet filled with all the delights God has provided.

Let's have a party!

SONGS: 987 "Life Is Great" (1987 songbook); 509 "O Boundless Salvation"; 255 "I'm Set Apart For Jesus"

BULLETIN INSERT

They will come and shout for joy on Mount Zion. They will be radiant with joy over the good things the Lord provides, the grain, the fresh wine, the olive oil, the young sheep and calves he has given to them. They will be like a well-watered garden and will not grow faint or weary any more. The Lord says, "At that time young women will dance and be glad. Young men and old men will rejoice. I will turn their grief into gladness. I will give them comfort and joy in place of their sorrow. I will provide the priests with abundant provisions. My people will be filled to the full with the good things I provide."

Jeremiah 31:12-14

The Israelites who were in Jerusalem observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days with great joy. ... They feasted for the seven days of the festival ... The entire assembly then decided to celebrate for seven more days; so they joyfully celebrated for seven more days.

2 Chronicles 30:21-27

But the father said to his slaves, 'Hurry! Bring the best robe, and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Bring the fattened calf and kill it! Let us eat and celebrate, because this son of mine was dead, and is alive again – he was lost and is found!' So they began to celebrate.

Luke :15:22-24

[Jesus] said also to the man who had invited him, "When you host a dinner or a banquet, don't invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors so you can be invited by them in return and get repaid. But when you host an elaborate meal, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Luke 14:12-14

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

How to keep a sense of the divine presence in every-day life.

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