



The Worshipping Body

Psalm 95

Part 8 • 6.24.18

Summary: “You and I are made to worship,” a recent popular chorus intones, and believing hearts know it’s true. We experience wellness, body and soul, through worship. And a growing body of research explains why. Regions of the brain appear to be designed for transcendent spiritual experience. And as UPenn neurologist Andrew Newberg has found, “People who experience genuine mystical states enjoy much higher levels of psychological health than the public at large: better relationships, higher self-esteem, lower anxiety, clearer self-identity, increased concern for others, and a more positive overall outlook on life.” So it’s sheer grace that Psalm 95 beckons us to worship, to ascribe to God ultimate value.

1. What do we worship?

We are natural desirers, lovers and worshipers. The question isn’t if we’ll worship, but what we’ll worship. Our hearts cannot *not* ascribe ultimate value to something, even if it’s our own freedom or our own self. But like the Mirror of Erised in the first Harry Potter novel, if our greatest desire is revealed to be ourselves, we’ll either waste away or go mad being captivated by it. But as we see in the mirror of Scripture not only a true picture of ourselves, but of God—the one who formed the world by his hand, and, by that same hand, holds us in covenant love—we’ll be enlarged and ennobled. That’s why Psalm 95 calls us to worship, that we might know and grow in God.

2. How do we worship?

Two key themes emerge in Psalm 95 regarding how we worship. First, we worship with our whole bodies. Worship is not a mere mental exercise; it is an embodied practice. Likewise, the physical effects of worship are profound. Worship releases oxytocin, the “feel good” hormone; it dissolves old neurological patterns allowing newer, healthier ones can be formed; and it shapes our thinking through “embodied cognition.” That is, as our bodies engage in forms of God-centered worship, and we thus become joyful, peaceful, God-centered people. This is actually how all emotion works—the body acts, and then the brain interprets it as a feeling or emotion. So if we want to feel peace and joy in God, or hope in the midst of hardship, worship is key.

A second theme is not just engaging the “the whole body” but *engaging the Whole Body*—that is, the whole body of believers. The call in Psalm 95 is to corporate worship: Come let us sing, shout, kneel, bow. Through collective, congregational worship our hearts are united, a “social euphoria” emerges, and we are emboldened to do what is highest and best together. As one writer put it, “Worship allows us to experience our belief in union with fellow believers, making the content of our belief more meaningful and engaging. Through worship, belief becomes an experienced fact.”

3. Why do we worship?

There are two primary reasons: First, God deserves it: “For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods. And “he is our God, and we are the sheep of his pasture.” But secondly, we need worship. We need to be formed by it into faithful, mature people. Otherwise, like the warning at the end of Psalm 95, we fail to enter God’s rest. When trials and hardships come, we grumble against God and withhold our worship because *what have you done for me lately?* And as we so harden our hearts, and quench God’s Spirit, we stanch the flow of his blessing, grace, and rest into our lives. But we want as much of God as we can get, so we soften our hearts, open our hearts, *aim* our hearts toward God through embodied worship. As theologian James K.A. Smith writes, “We are a people whose orientation to God is shaped from the body up more than the head down.” The only way to know God’s superlative worth is to ascribe to him superlative worth—in other words, *to worship*.

Discussion:

1. Read Psalm 95.
2. The sermon opened with an illustration of a “call to worship,” a stadium announcer calling people to stand for the national anthem. When you’re present at a game and that call comes, what do you typically feel in your heart? How does that compare to your feelings about worship at church?
3. What motives for worship are we given in Psalm 95? Do these work for you? Explain.
4. We all probably struggle at times with our motivation to worship. Was there anything in the sermon that helped you in this regard?
5. What could you do to get yourself into a better frame for worship? What could our worship leaders do to help you enter into worship more fully?
6. Romans 12:1-2 says we should offer our **bodies** to God as living sacrifices, and then in turn be transformed by the renewing of our **minds**. The order is bodies then minds. How would you explain this progression to someone? What are the implications of this truth for our spiritual lives?
7. Psalm 95 ends with a warning to not harden our hearts and thus miss out on God’s rest. How is your heart toward God these days? Is there any repentance or change of heart that is called for?
8. Someone retell the story of the brooch, which concluded the sermon. What did you learn or take away from the story that is applicable to your life right now?