

# The Supreme Importance of Worship

1 Chronicles 23, 1 Peter 2:9

We are taking a short break from our series on Revelation to look at a chapter that Norma and I read this past week as we followed the Bible reading schedule on our church website. For several years now we have been reading the Bible aloud together. This is a practice I highly recommend. For one thing, God has said, “The word that I speak to you today is to be in your heart and in your mouth.” It pleases God when his inspired word is in his saints’ mouths. But another good reason to read the Bible aloud is that it forces us to slow down and focus on the words; this facilitates the practice of meditation. Psalm 1 teaches that the man or woman who meditates on God’s word day and night is blessed; he or she receives the blessing of God. Furthermore, as we meditate upon the Word, it encourages us to make application to our own life, bringing our lives into greater conformity with Holy Scripture.

Of course, if you’ve ever tried to read 1 Chronicles aloud, you know that it contains hundreds and hundreds of names. Some of those names are familiar, but lots and lots of names are unfamiliar; some of them are real tongue-twisters to pronounce. For most people, the long lists of names in 1 Chronicles make reading aloud daunting. Even some highly-motivated Christians wonder why those tedious lists are in there. With our Western mindset we might even be tempted to think something like, “Come on God, get to the point.” Yet in our heart of hearts we know that every word of God is pure. We know that there is a reason why every name is there—though we may not have figured it out yet.

So if you’re reading 1 Chronicles, let me remind you that this book is part of God’s inspired word; it is “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”<sup>1</sup> This applies to every book in the Bible—the exciting ones and the tedious ones.

For some reason I was really gripped by 1 Chronicles 23 when I read it this past week. This chapter has a lot to teach us about worship. I have three points this afternoon: (1) One whole tribe devoted to the worship of God; (2) Ordered worship, not haphazard; (3) Application: Our purpose too. First,

## **1. One whole tribe devoted to the worship of God**

Here is David the king of Israel, the inspired author of many of the Psalms. This incident takes place, we are told, “when David was old and full of days.” It is significant that David the king is intensely interested in the worship of God. Ordinarily kings are interested in civic matters—keeping the peace, administering

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Tim. 3:16

justice, punishing evildoers, going to war, and so forth. But at the end of his life David turns his attention to the public worship of God.

When considering the whole scheme of things, this is not surprising, for a people who know and appreciate God's law tend to live in peace and harmony with one another. To quote the book in which David's words predominate: "Blessed is the man [whose] delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night" (Ps. 1). "The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple" (Ps. 19). "Give ear, O my people, to my law: incline your ears to the words of my mouth" (Ps. 78). "*Great peace* have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them" (Ps. 119). "It is time for thee, LORD, to work: for they have made void thy law" (Ps. 119).

John Adams, one of our founding fathers, and the second president of the United States, said, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." This observation is true. David would have understood.

Yet here is David, at the end of his life, with an extraordinary interest in God's *worship*. He has a special concern for the priests and Levites. You will remember that the patriarch Jacob had twelve sons, fathers of the tribes of Israel. Eleven of the tribes were given allotments in the Promised Land. Their descendants were to work the land, build a culture and feed their families. One tribe—the Levites—was not given an inheritance. Rather, the Levites were to devote themselves to the worship of God. The sons of Aaron were to serve as priests, offering up sacrifices, doing the difficult work of slaughtering animals, collecting their blood, sprinkling it on the altar, doing everything precisely as God had specified. The non-Aaronic Levites were to help carry the tabernacle and its furniture and utensils from place to place through the desert, and set it up in each new location. They were also to assist the priests in their priestly work. As we learn from the incident with Nadab and Abihu,<sup>2</sup> deviating even a little from God's precise instructions would bring God's displeasure, and even death. The Israelites were not to innovate, but follow the Lord's instructions exactly.

So here is one whole tribe out of the twelve, with the responsibility to execute and oversee the regular worship of God in the tabernacle, and now in the temple. Here was one tribe which didn't labor to grow food or produce the goods and services needed by a growing society, but devoted their entire labors to the worship of God. Skeptics might say that the labor of the tribe of Levi was wasted: "What a pity to devote time and treasure and labor to something with no immediate return, just think of how prosperous Israel could have been if the economy had been firing on all pistons, without the loss of almost 8½ percent on something so non-essential

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<sup>2</sup> Lev. 10

as religion.” As Karl Marx opined, religion is the “opium of the people,” that while religion can offer solace, it distracts people from addressing the real problems that must be solved in society.

How different the Christian worldview! In the words of our Shorter Catechism, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” If a people devote themselves to the Lord, he promises to bless them. As the LORD promises in Leviticus 26, “If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them, then I will give you rain in its season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall last till the time of vintage, and the vintage shall last till the time of sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely. I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none will make you afraid.” “Happy is that people, whose God is the LORD” (Ps. 144:15).

Are these promises real? Yes, certainly. Israel as a “body politic” passed away with the state of Israel in AD 70, but the Word of the LORD endures forever, and God’s promises are forever sure. The apostle Paul refers to the spiritual principle in Ephesians 6: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honor thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.”

As a society we waste insane amounts of money waging war—hear the news last night?—building prisons, committing people to psychiatric hospitals, and treating sexually-transmitted diseases. All these could be alleviated if people were taught the law of God. “Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people” (Prov. 14:34). “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6). When society turns its back on God, social problems are the result.

Look at our text in 1 Chronicles 23: David “gathered together all the leaders of Israel, with the priests and the Levites. Now the Levites were numbered from the age of thirty years and above; and the number of individual males was thirty-eight thousand. Of these, twenty-four thousand were to look after the work of the house of the LORD, six thousand were officers and judges, four thousand were gatekeepers, and four thousand praised the Lord with musical instruments, ‘which I made,’ said David, ‘for giving praise.’”

Here we see a vision of a society devoting itself to what is most important: the worship of our holy God. Our Lord said, “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matt. 6:31–33). Our Lord promises that if we seek him first, he will take care of the rest. The things that we need—the things that people work to

supply (food, drink clothing, housing)—will be supplied. Our God will supply all our needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:19).

In our text the Levites were to oversee the work of the house of the LORD. They were to serve as gatekeepers, admitting those who professed the true faith and barring idolators, who had no share in the promised blessings. They were to praise the LORD with instruments of music. The priests were to sanctify (maintain the sanctity of and properly care for) the most holy things. They were to burn incense before the LORD and bless the people in the name of the LORD. While some of these things are fulfilled in Christ, the blessing of the people in the name of the LORD was to continue “forever” (עַד-עוֹלָם, two times). This is akin to the minister’s pronouncing the benediction in Christian worship today. It is not the minister’s blessing *per se*; it is the *LORD’s* blessing on his people.

Here, then, is *one whole tribe devoted to the worship of God*. Now while the Levites and levitical priests are now superseded by Christ, at his coming, the worship of God continues in the new dispensation. Christ is the high priest forever. God’s people glorify him by supporting the church and its worship. As God said through the prophet Haggai, “‘Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?’ Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Consider your ways!’” (Haggai 1:4). A beautifully running economy is not as important as the worship of the true God. Christian worship is of *supreme* importance. If we devote ourselves to that, it pleases God.

Second, observe:

## **2. Ordered worship, not haphazard**

Notice the lists of names in this chapter. Again, this makes for tedious, difficult reading, but God put this in here for a reason.

One thing to notice particularly is the ordering of the names. Did you notice? “Of the sons of Izhar, Shelomith was the first. Of the sons of Hebron, Jeriah was the *first*, Amariah the *second*, Jahaziel the *third*, and Jekameam the *fourth*. Of the sons of Uzziel, Michah was the *first* and Jesshiah the *second*” (1 Chron. 23:18–20).

Of particular note is that, with the building of the temple, the Levites would no longer be responsible for carrying around all the furnishings and utensils of the tabernacle. Now, their work would focus on helping the priests as they carried out their priestly work. And as we see in the second part of the book (2 Chronicles 19), the Levites would also do the important work of instructing God’s people out of the law of God, as well as serving as judges, judging controversies between parties. Easton explains:

“As being wholly consecrated to the service of the Lord, they had no territorial possessions. Jehovah was their inheritance (Num. 18:20; 26:62; Deut. 10:9; 18:1, 2), and for their support it was ordained that they should receive from the other tribes the tithes of the produce of the land. Forty-eight cities also were assigned to

them, thirteen of which were for the priests ‘to dwell in’, i.e., along with their other inhabitants. Along with their dwellings they had ‘suburbs’, i.e., ‘commons’, for their herds and flocks, and also fields and vineyards (Num. 35:2–5). Nine of these cities were in Judah, three in Naphtali, and four in each of the other tribes (Josh. 21). Six of the Levitical cities were set apart as ‘cities of refuge’ . . . *Thus the Levites were scattered among the tribes to keep alive among them the knowledge and service of God.*”

Remember that the primary duty of the Levites was to assist the priests with the worship of God. Notice then that the worship of God was *ordered*, not *haphazard*. It is not an “open mic,” where everyone gets an opportunity to share his thoughts. Only ordained *men*—ministers and ruling elders—lead the formal worship of God, and only after passing exams in Christian experience, Bible and theology, as well as taking vows to commit themselves to the word of God, “sincerely receive and adopt” the doctrinal standards of the church, and “promise, in reliance on the grace of God, faithfully to perform all the duties” of their office. Church is not a free-for-all where everybody gives his opinion. The whole worship service is an expression of the word of Christ<sup>3</sup>: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him” (Col. 3:16–17).

The worship of the church is ordered—not by the “felt needs” of man but by the Word of God. People coming together to hear their favorite music and listen to a speaker is not a worship service. Rather, the elements of worship (God’s greeting, call to worship, invocation, congregational singing of Psalms and hymns, the reading from the law, assurance of pardon, Scripture readings, sermon, congregational profession of faith, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, prayer of supplication, benediction, and congregational response) all focus on the Word written and incarnate.

Everything is orderly, as Paul writes to the Corinthians, “Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40).

God’s worship is not haphazard, unplanned and disorganized; rather, it reflects the orderliness of the God who put the heavenly bodies in space, each in its own place and orbit.

Christian, are you content with the orderliness of Christian worship as God has appointed it? “Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your

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<sup>3</sup> That is, the whole Bible

souls” (Jer. 6:16). If you long for novelty in worship, then your heart is not in the right place. Thirdly,

### **3. Application: Our purpose too**

Listen to our text: “For David said, ‘The Lord God of Israel has given rest to His people, that they may dwell in Jerusalem forever’; and also to the Levites, ‘They shall no longer carry the tabernacle, or any of the articles for its service.’ For by the last words of David the Levites were numbered from twenty years old and above; because *their duty was to help the sons of Aaron in the service of the house of the LORD, in the courts and in the chambers, in the purifying of all holy things and the work of the service of the house of God*, both with the showbread and the fine flour for the grain offering, with the unleavened cakes and what is baked in the pan, with what is mixed and with all kinds of measures and sizes; *to stand every morning to thank and praise the LORD*, and likewise at evening; and at every presentation of a burnt offering to the LORD on the Sabbaths and on the New Moons and on the set feasts, by number according to the *ordinance* governing them, regularly before the LORD; and that they should attend to the needs of the tabernacle of meeting, the needs of the holy place, and the needs of the sons of Aaron their brethren in the work of the house of the LORD.”

As mentioned a few moments ago, now that a permanent temple was to be built, the Levites would no longer have to transport the tabernacle, or any of its articles. Rather, the Levites would help the priests in purifying the holy things, serving in the house of God, standing every morning to thank and praise the LORD, and helping the priests with the burnt offerings, particularly with the larger animals that had to be offered. They would also assist at the set feasts, such the Passover, Firstfruits, Pentecost, Tabernacles, Day of Atonement, Trumpets, etc. Notice the word “ordinance” (v. 31); *ordinance* comes from the Latin *ordinare*, meaning *put in order*. Notice the references to the Sabbaths, New Moons and set feasts; each of these has a reference to *time*—*God’s* time, not man’s. Again, the worship of God was very orderly. All throughout this chapter the emphasis is on orderliness.

As we think of *Application: Our purpose too*, think of the many irregularities in the modern church: worship led by professional musicians rather than ministers of the Gospel and ruling elders, churches that don’t even *have* elders. Women on “worship teams” exercising spiritual leadership in the regular Lord’s-day services of the church. Churches that make no attempt to sing biblical hymns and Psalms, preferring the catchy rhythms of performance music over congregational singing. Musical selections that have unbiblical, man-centered lyrics, such as “Sometimes you gotta dance through the darkness, sing through the fire, praise when it don’t make sense.” Where does the Bible tell us to dance through the darkness, and where does it tell us to sing such a notion in worship? When we encounter darkness, we are to shine the light of *Christ*—the gospel. And the praising of God

makes perfect sense, because God is on the throne, and we know that whatever he has planned for us is ultimately for his glory and our good. When things don't make sense, we should pray for the light of Christ. Often there are prayers that come out of the human brain rather than the application of Scripture.

So there you have it: (1) One whole tribe devoted to the worship of God; (2) Ordered worship, not haphazard; (3) Application: *Our* purpose too.

Church of Jesus Christ, "you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." The worship of God makes perfect sense because *God* is on the throne. Through the work of Christ he has delivered us from the kingdom of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of his dear Son—the place of light, understanding and joy unspeakable. Amen.