

discipleship matters

WE ARE DISCIPLES.

WE ARE DISCIPLE-MAKERS.

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Toward A Life of Deeper Praise

BY PENELOPE J. STOKES

We sing the doxology at church each week, but since it is the final part of the service, it often seems like it gets the short end of the stick in terms of attention from the congregation. We stand to sing, "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow," and people begin shrugging on their coats or packing things away in bags. I often find myself thinking about what I'll make for lunch and who will drive the kids over to their friend's house. Those things I'm thinking about are good things, yet my wandering mind often misses the greatest chance to praise God as the giver of those blessings.

We do know how to praise: When our home team scores a touchdown, we jump and cheer. When we are asked about our children, we give glowing accounts of their merits. When a friend gets a promotion, we take them out to dinner. But sometimes we need to relearn how to praise God.

As we seek to enter into true praise and worship, we encounter pitfalls created both by society and by our own insecurities: fear of people, fear of silence, fear of intimacy with God, but we need to lay down the fears that hinder us from entering into the presence of God if we hope to live a life filled with true praise.

Fear of People

When I first came to faith, I could not get enough of the Word or of worship. But my college roommate was a lukewarm Christian with a hearty disdain for Bible-thumping campus witnesses. My first months as a

believer were spent, quite literally, "in the closet"—reading behind closed doors or praising in the shower: anywhere I could have four walls around me and me alone.

"Fear of man will prove to be a snare," Proverbs 29:25 warns, "but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe." Peer pressure is not confined to the teenage years, and the fear of others' reactions can become a significant deterrent to the life of praise. We wonder if those around us think we sing too loudly. We wonder how many people will look at us if we raise our hands in worship.



WE KNOW HOW TO PRAISE . . . BUT SOMETIMES WE NEED TO RELEARN HOW TO PRAISE GOD.

In Luke 10, Jesus laid out an important principle for all who want to free themselves from the fear of people in order to worship him freely. While Mary sat at Jesus' feet, Martha busied herself in the kitchen. When Martha complained about her sister's idleness, Jesus rebuked her, not for her busyness, but for her lack of focus: "'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried

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So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.

Colossians 3:12-17 (THE MESSAGE)

and upset about *many things*, but few things are needed—or indeed *only one*” (Luke 10:41-42, italics added).

That one thing—focus upon the Lord—is the key to overcoming the fear of people. Mary had no misgivings about sitting at the feet of the Lord; she chose “what is better.” With her focus and priorities in order, Mary knew that the “good”—making her sister happy and avoiding conflict—must give place to the “better”: giving undivided attention to her Lord.

Fear of Silence

The theologian Richard Foster says, “In contemporary society, our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds.” Many of us are afraid of silence, afraid to be alone, afraid of what we may find lurking in the dark places of our souls: unconfessed sin, bitterness, reluctance to obey the Lord’s direction. Most of us are inexperienced in dealing with silence. We live in the company of the TV, the podcasts, the playlists—any convenient noise to distract our minds from the really important issues of life.

Yet stillness is an essential factor in developing a life of praise and worship. “One thing I ask from the LORD,” David declared, “this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple” (Psalm 27:4). Most of us rarely think of meditating intentionally upon the Lord, but if we want to develop the habit of praise, we need to learn to create those “recreating silences.” Even in the middle of daily noise and distraction, we need to develop the sensitivity to turn inward, toward the Lord.

My friend Karen taught me the value of silence in the presence of God. A quiet spirit, she brought peace with her, and it settled over my home while she was there. Sometimes we talked or prayed, but most often we simply sat in silence, enjoying the presence of the Lord we both loved. And with her gift of stillness, Karen helped me come, very quietly, into the Inner Court.

“Be still,” the Lord commands, “and know that I am God . . . I will be exalted in the earth” (Psalm 46:10). We will begin to know

the exaltation of God in our own lives when we learn to “be still” and wait.

Fear of Intimacy

“I really want to praise God,” a young friend once told me. “I want to be free to worship him, but it’s so hard sometimes.”

“Why is it hard, when you love God?” I asked.

“I wish I knew,” he responded. “I think I’m really afraid of letting go.”

Inherent in praise and worship lies an intense—and sometimes frightening—intimacy with the Almighty. God dwells in us, and in worship and praise we experience his indwelling; we feel, sense, know that he lives in us, and we are brought alive in praise.

As Christians, we center our lives and worship around Emmanuel, God-with-us. Yet we are afraid to get too close, to reveal too much, to abandon ourselves too readily. As in any intimate relationship, we may struggle with low self-esteem, with feeling worthless, unlovable. Some may associate intimate relationships with abuse, brokenheartedness, abandonment, or neglect. Having been hurt, we vow not to be vulnerable again, and we shrink even from closeness with a loving heavenly Father.

But like falling in love on a human level, opening ourselves to an intimate relationship with the Lord does not happen all at once. As we let down the barriers a bit—however slight that initial opening may be—we begin to experience the warmth and security of his love for us. Intimacy progresses gradually: the more we see of the Lord’s glory and grace, the more we want to know him. The more we give ourselves to him, the more we want to give.

When we acknowledge and address the effect of these three fears on our spiritual lives, we can begin to experience greater intimacy with God. Through focus upon him, we can avoid the barriers to a life of worship and praise, leaving behind us the fears that hinder us from coming into God’s presence. We can lift our voices in a doxology of thankfulness, turn our faces toward his altar, and wait in quiet peace, filled with praise in his presence.

Learning to Praise

BY BARBARA HAYCRAFT

The Christian life is a long and winding road. Even the most sincere and devoted Christian will experience periods where it feels very difficult to praise God. I have experienced discontent in my own praise life but have also sought and found ways to experience God in deeper and fuller ways. Here are some “praise exercises” that can springboard you to new depths in your praise life.

Use Precise Language: Spend five minutes praising God through prayer. Challenge yourself to begin your prayer sentences with “you” rather than “I.” For example, you might say, “You are great and mighty” or “You are the God of compassion and mercy.” God wants us to tell him how we are feeling, but this challenge reminds us that God is the subject of praise.

Use the Names of God: In the Bible, God reveals himself through new names that allow his people to comprehend who he is. Read the story of Hagar in Genesis 16. Consider the name that God reveals to her and the significance of it. In your ongoing Bible reading, keep a list of names that you find in Scripture, such as Creator, Man of Sorrows, the Way, etc.



Use the Scriptures: Today, Bible memorization may seem silly when we can look up any verse on a smartphone. But memorizing Scriptures helps us internalize the truth within them. Learn to use portions of Scripture that are expressions of praise. Psalm 19, which starts by saying, “The heavens declare the glory of God,” is one of the most

well-known passages. Challenge yourself to memorize portions of Psalm 19 or even the entire chapter.

Praise Him with Music: When Paul and Silas were imprisoned in a Philippian jail, they sang praises to God (Acts 16:25). Great hymns of faith can be an important element of musical praise. At the next worship service you attend, don't mindlessly sing the familiar words of worship songs. Instead, focus on what exactly your voice is declaring to God. Perhaps the best place to begin is the doxology: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow!"

Psalm 8:3-4 and observe, "God is the creator of the universe, but he is also concerned with my life, which is so small in comparison." Keep a list (and let it grow into a notebook) developing big thoughts about God!

There is no end to things we might do to develop our capacities for praise. Praising God will endure throughout eternity. It will be part of the endless discovery of God himself. But even though it has no end, it needs to have a beginning. Let your intentional journey of praise begin today.

For a guide to leading small-group discussion and a list of other helpful resources, visit tyndale.life/discipleshipmatters.



THERE IS NO END TO THINGS WE MIGHT DO TO DEVELOP OUR CAPACITIES FOR PRAISE.

Develop Personal Meditations on God:

When reading the Bible, come up with one question or observation about who God is. It could be something that confuses, amazes, or encourages you. When you read Revelation 5, you may ask, "Lord, how can you be both lion and lamb at the same time?" You may read



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