Distilling worship

I ended a recent post with these words: “[It is best] to begin with *worship* and actively work from there, by his grace alone, all the way to the end.” Which is all well, and good, but what is *worship*? Where *do* I begin?

, or

?

What I’m going to do here is a bit of an exercise in biblical distillation. Using the ESV bible, and with the help of a Bible Dictionary or two, and google, let’s shake around the word “worship” in Scripture and see what concepts condense before us. This is not precise, but it useful.

The word “worship” itself is so ethereal and intangible. Broad definitions like the ubiquitous “giving worth to – *worth*ship” are not particularly helpful. So the first step is to see what **practices** are attached to or associated with worship.

In the earliest place where “worship” is mentioned in the (ESV) Bible, Genesis 22, Abraham intends to worship by killing something and burning it. In the last book of the Bible worship is expressed by falling down at someone’s feet

(albeit, before an angel- Rev 22:8) before the last mention (Rev 22:9) which is simply a command – "Worship God." What else is involved or associated with worship?

In between this first and last account a quick word search across the ESV gives us a list of practices where worship is associated with:

1. **Posture** [1-hide]
   – bowing of head. [hide]Gen 24:26, 48; Exod 4:31, 12:21, 34:8; 2 Kgs 5:18; 2 Chr 7:3, 29:29-30; Neh 8:6; Ps 95:6*; Heb 11:21[/hide]*
   – standing (rising up). [hide]Exod 33:10[/hide]
   – falling down / prostration. [hide]Jos 5:14, 2 Chr 20:18; Job 1:20; Is 44:15, 17, 46:6; Dan 3:5-7, 10-11, 14; *Mt 2:11, 4:9, 28:9; Acts 10:25; 1 Cor 14:25; Rev 4:10, 5:14, 7:11, 11:16, 19:10, 22:8[/hide]*
   – kneeling [hide]Ps 95:6.[/hide]
   – direction of face. [hide]Ezek 8:16[/hide][/1-hide]
2. Some form of **proclamation** that… [1-hide]
   – "blesses" God [hide]Gen 24:48[/hide]
   – "ascribes glory" to God [hide]1 Chr 16:29*, Phil 3:3[/hide]*
   – "gives thanks" to God [hide]2 Chr 7:3[/hide]
   – "glorifies" or "declares God's name" [hide]Ps 86:9, Ps 102:22[/hide]
   – declares God's characteristics [hide]2 Chr 7:3; *Rev 4:10, 13:4[/hide]*
   – "exalts" [hide]Ps 99:5, 9[/hide]
   – is prayer and petition [hide]Is 44:17; *Lk 2:37[/hide]*
   – acknowledges God's status [hide]*Mt 14:33; Jn 9:38[/hide]*
   – "praises" God [hide]*Rev 19:4[/hide][/1-hide]*
3. **Sacrifice** [1-hide]
   – of an animal. [hide]Exod 32:8; 1 Sam 1:3; 2 Chr 29:28, 29, 32:12; Ezra 4:2; Is 19:21; *Acts 7:42[/hide]*
   – of a gift, firstfruit or other general offering.

[hide]Dt 26:10; 1 Chr 16:29; 2 Chr 25:14; Is 19:21; Jer 1:6; Ezek 46:2; *Mt 2:11[/hide]*
– of worship itself as “offering” [hide]2 Sam 15:8[/hide]
– of ourselves as “living sacrifice” – [hide]*Rom 12:1 [/hide][/1-hide]*

4. **Service** (often negatively, serving other gods). [1-hide][hide]Dt 8:19, 11:16, 17:3, 29:26, 30:17; 1 Kgs 9:6, 9, 16:31, 22:53; 2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3, 21; 2 Chr 7:19, 22; 2 Chr 33:3; Jer 8:2, 13:10, 16:11, 22:9, 25:6; Dan 3:12, 14, 18, 28; 4:10; *Lk 4:8, Rom 1:25[/hide]*
– vow-making [hide]Is 19:21[/hide]
– obedience [hide]1 Kgs 11:33[/hide][/1-hide]
5. Temple or **location**. [1-hide][hide]1 Sam 1:3; 2 Sam 15:32; 2 Kgs 18:22, 19:37; 2 Chr 32:12; Ps 99:9; Ps 132:7; Is 27:13, 36:7; Jer 26:2; Ezek46:2; Zech 14:16-17; *Jn 4:20; Acts 7:7, 8:27, 24:11; Heb 9:1; Rev 11:1[/hide]*
-location superseded – *[hide]Jn 4:21[/hide][/1-hide]*
6. Some form of **transcendance** [1-hide]
– in the “splendour of holiness” [hide]1 Chr 16:29; Ps 29:2, 96:9[/hide]
– in the “glory of the Lord” [hide]2 Chr 7:3[/hide]
-“before” God / in his presence. [hide]Ps 22:27; Is 66:23[/hide]
– with “reverence and awe” [hide]Heb 12:28[/hide][/1-hide]
7. **Singing & music** [hide]2 Chr 29:28; Ps 66:4; 86:9[/hide]
8. **Seasons & times** [1-hide]
– Passover [hide]Ezra 6:21[/hide]
– Feast of Booths [hide]Zech 14:16[/hide]
– Feasts in general [hide]Ezek 46:9; Jn 12:20[/hide][/1-hide]
9. **Fasting** [hide]Lk 2:37; Acts 13:2[/hide]
10. **Self-reflection** [1-hide]
– confession. [hide]Neh 9:3[/hide]
– seeking. [hide]Jer 8:2[/hide][/1-hide]

11. **God-given** identity or ability [1-hide]
    – “in spirit and in truth” [hide]*Jn 4:23-24[/hide]*
    – Israel’s identity [hide]*Rom 9:4[/hide][/1-hide]*
12. **Prohibition** of certain acts [1-hide]
    – unatoned sin or uncleaness [hide]1 Sam 15:25, Ezra 6:21; *Jn 9:31[/hide]*
    – idols. [hide]Dt 12:4; Ps 97:7; Ps 106:19; Is 2:20; Is 44:15; Ezek 20:32; *Acts 7:43; Rev 9:20[/hide]*
    – human sacrifice. [hide]Dt 12:31[/hide][/1-hide]
13. A **general reference** to “worship” [hide]Exod 24:1, 34:14; Jos 22:25; Jdg 7:15; 1 Sam 1:19, 28; 2 Sam 12:20, Ps 22:29, Is 19:23, *Mt 2:2, 8, 15:9, 28:17; Mk 7:7; Lk 4:7, 24:52; Jn 4:22; Acts 17:23, 18:13, 19:27, 24:14, 26:7, 27:23; Col 2:18; 2 Thess 2:4; Heb 1:6, 9:21; Rev 13:8, 12, 15, 14:7, 9, 15:4, 16:2, 19:20, 20:4, 22:3, 22:9[/hide]*

That’s quite a diversity, but it gives us access to the next step – a **lexical** distillation. What are the underlying words for worship that attach to these practices? For instance, the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* doesn’t have “Worship” as a standalone entry but subsumes it into “Prayer, Ask, Kneel, Beg, Worship, Knock” and “Serve, Deacon, Worship” – which are aspects clearly evident in the word search above.

It gives us access to some ancient Greek words. We have worship as…

- ***gonypeteō*** – means to “kneel down before.” The word alludes to the submission of subjects or vassals to their High King. It expresses a sense of awe in the recognition of might and sovereignty. It’s about paying homage, giving *undivided* loyalty. It also has the sense of throwing oneself on the mercy of the court – it is an acknowledgement of grace and so can reflect repentance, reliance and absolute trust or faith. It can be both deliberate, or impassioned – falling to one’s needs in a

sense of desperation.

- ***proskyneō*** – means, literally, "to kiss" but has a broader meaning now. Like *gonypeteo* it also reflects posture – kneeling or prostration, and attitude – reverence and humility. It often translates the widely found OT Hebrew *šāḥăh* which means much the same but perhaps even more amplified – "cowering" perhaps, certainly "bowing to the will" of the one so adored. It's used a lot in Revelation where it is strongly associated with the voice of God's people singing adoration. So much so that the singing of these songs, which are "constantly finding new title of dignity with which to praise God, and ascribing to him the most exalted merits and attributes… [such that]… human petitions and thanksgivings merely fade away into silence" ("Proskyneō" in *New International Dictionary of Theology, Vol. 2*)) is *proskyneō,* worship, in it's own right.
- ***latreuō*** – picks up the sense of worshiping God through service. It has simple connotations of employed labour. It often translates the widely found OT Hebrew *'ābad* which can mean "work" in general, of the good sort as found in Eden. It is about liturgical service, in temple or tabernacle, but is not about the specific tasks of priests but the underlying obedience to God by all the people because of his grace. It extends so far as to refer to the inner worship of the heart by faith. This is especially so in the light of the gospel where the work (*latreia*) of salvation done by Christ fulfills the strictly religious obligations that foreshadowed the atonement in Christ.

Our distillate of worship is this. Worship is…

Submission, Surrendered

Adoration, and **Service**

And so to begin with worship is to begin with these things. These are things we can *do*.

Submission is a choice. It is the attitude of "Let not my will, but yours be done" not in some fatalistic sense, but in the determination to override the inclinations of our own selfishness. In this way submission is freedom from the tyranny of other's expectations – free to serve as a God-given gift rather then obligation. It is a choice to *follow* and to learn God's ways. It involves learning, reading, devotion, study. It involves obedience to the Word of God. So the inward devotion is directed towards outward action. This necessitates prayer and petition, sacrifice and discipline. All this is worship that begins with submission.

Surrendered Adoration is also a choice. It's an allowing of God to have his way in with and through us. It's a response to God's movement with voice and words – acknowledgement and declaration. Here we lift voices in praise, both privately and corporately. We set aside times and places to devote attention to hear him and proclaim him. We sing, we dance, we delight, we catch, and express, a glimpse of what heaven will be like. All this is worship.

Service is a choice. It's a choice to expend energy, sacrificing time, effort and inclination for the sake of God and his people. Service is God-ordained work and can be of the most "secular" kind. All people can worship God in their work, glorifying God in their human industry. Service sets the aims of God in front and seeks to further them. It is often outward focussed and so notices the things God notices – many of the gifts of the Spirit are for the furthering of this form of worship.

If we distil this yet further we get the basic condensate of

worship – **Jesus himself.**

Jesus worships.

It is in the essence of who he is and what he does. Indeed "the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing." ((Jn 5:19)) One could argue that mutual worship is at the heart of the trinitarian relationship, it's certainly there in the economic trinity as the incarnate Son of God relates to his Father. And it is Paul who tells us that it is by the same Spirit of Christ by which we, too, can have a life that cries out "Abba, Father." ((Romans 8:15))

In the end, God helps us worship. As he must – or else our wandering eyes and selfish inclinations cause us to worship easier things, or turn our adoration into striven religion.

Lord Christ, help us worship you, in spirit and in truth. And so manifest your glory in our lives.

Amen.