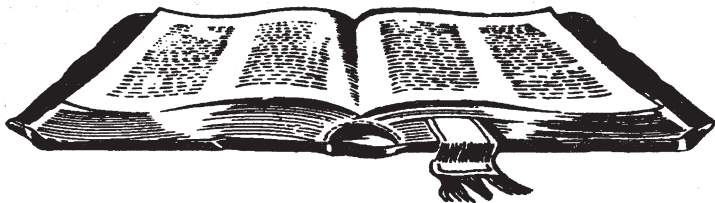


What Is the Meaning of John 4:24?



WE BELIEVE that the so-called “Christian world” today desperately needs to make a serious study of the subject of worship. A lot of strange, unusual and irregular things are “going on” in the name of worship. And, tragically, so much of it seems to be carnal, man-centered and in the category of entertainment (thus, contrary to the Scriptures). A generation brought up on television is more disposed toward entertainment. Somewhere along the way dignity and respect have given way to the ways of the world.

A good place to begin such a study would be in John chapter 4. In anticipation of the coming New Testament, which was imminent, Jesus profoundly said to the Samaritan woman at the well, “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24, NKJV). What does this mean, in the light of the immediate context, and what are more extended thoughts from the New Testament that need to be considered on this subject?

I. THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

Going Through Samaria

In his early ministry, Jesus and his recently selected disciples were returning from Judea to Galilee. They chose not to go the route of the blue-blooded Jews, up the Jordan Valley to avoid contact with the scorned Samaritans, but they went directly through Samaria.

The Woman at the Well and Her Question

While they had arrived in the midst of the land at Sychar, and his disciples had gone to get food, Jesus became engaged in conversation with a Samaritan woman who had come to Jacob’s well to draw water. When Jesus asked her for a drink, she was somewhat startled and set aback. He, a Jew, was talking to her, a Samaritan and a woman (and asking for water). Wasn’t he stretching the social mores a little far? “For the

Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.” Whereupon the Lord channels their thoughts in the reverse direction, offering her “living water.” As the intriguing dialogue continued, guided by Jesus, it became apparent that she had been married five times and was then living with a man who was not her husband. Because of the Lord’s penetrating insight into her situation, she concluded that he must be a prophet. Whether in earnest, or simply trying to take the flak off of herself, we know not, she now brought up a popular religious question for Jesus to answer. Where was the proper place to worship God, on Mount Gerizim (in Samaria) or in Jerusalem?

Disdain for the Samaritans

The disdain for the Samaritans had its beginning back in Old Testament times. When the people of the northern kingdom were carried away into Assyrian Captivity, misplaced people from other lands were brought in to populate Israel and especially Samaria (2 Kings 17:6-41). They were heathen in their religion, but adapted a modified, mixed and corrupted version of the Jewish religion. Then years later when Jews were returning from Babylonian Captivity, and were rebuilding their temple in Jerusalem, these people wanted to be involved with them (Ezra 4:1-6). The Jews would not allow this, and bad blood continued between these people up into New Testament times. Sometime before the Christian age, these mixed people in Samaria had built their own temple on Mount Gerizim. However, it was no longer standing when the Lord was here, but they still revered the mountain as a place of worship.

The Full Exchange of Words

With that said, here is the full exchange of words between the Samaritan woman and Jesus about worship.

The woman said to Him, “Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:19-24, NKJV).

II. THE MEANING AND APPLICATION

Heart of What Jesus Said About Worship

At the very heart of what Jesus said here, these words stand out: ***“God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”*** What does he mean by “in spirit and truth”? This must be understood in the light of the rest of the conversation.

“The Hour Is Coming, and Now Is...”

By saying, “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth,” he is implying the situation spoken of by the woman and worship up to that time had not been “in spirit and truth.” The Patriarchal age and the Old Testament age following the fall of man were imperfect periods of time as far as man’s relationship to God was concerned. They were simply preparatory, getting man ready and looking forward to the coming of the Savior and the New Testament age. They were merely shadows of the spiritual reality that was yet to come (Hebrews 10:1). Paul said the law was a tutor or “schoolmaster” to bring us to Christ (Galatians 3:24). John wrote, “For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). With the death of Christ upon the cross the Old Testament ended (Colossians 2:14; Ephesians 2:15; Galatians 3:24-25), and the New Testament began (Hebrews 9:15-17). Therefore, our appeal is not to the imperfect Old Testament, in matters of worship or Christian doctrine, but to the New Testament (this side of the cross). Having said that the temporary Old Testament requirements were removed (Colossians 2:14), Paul stated, “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ” (Colossians 2:16-17). The hour that was coming when men would worship “in spirit and truth” was ushered in with the death and resurrection of Christ.

Worship “in Spirit...”

“God is Spirit”—that is the key to understanding the first part of worshipping God “in *spirit* and truth.” Our worship should correspond to the likeness of God. Being spirit, God is not physical. His presence is everywhere. However, the Old Testament put the emphasis upon the physical, being a shadow and antitype of the New Testament. In the Law of Moses God told the children of Israel that when they got established in the Promised Land, He would choose a place where He would “put his name” (Read Deuteronomy 12:5-11). That place was later embodied in the temple in Jerusalem. In 1 Kings 8:13-53ff in the dedication of this temple by Solomon, he continually makes reference to this. God’s name was there and God’s presence was there. This impressive building was central in their worship of God. Even when they were not there, they would pray toward that place.

In the New Testament God is not assigned to one place and to a temple “made by hands.” Read what Stephen said to the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:47-50) and what Paul declared on Mar’s Hill (Acts 17:24-25). The Samaritan woman and the Jews had a hang-up about a place, in “this mountain” or “in Jerusalem.” The Lord said, “Neither on this mountain, nor in

Jerusalem”—*this was not the issue*. Yes, as Christians we assemble and worship (Hebrews 10:25), but the place is inconsequential. God is spirit. God’s presence is everywhere. Paul asserted, “I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting” (1 Timothy 2:8). And if we worship only when we assemble, we miss the point. God’s presence is everywhere. Worship is a way of life every day (Romans 12:1-2; James 1:27; 1 Thessalonians 5:17). And the excessive and embellished emphasis upon church buildings, how obscene!

Worship “in Spirit and Truth”

What is meant by the second part of the Lord’s statement, saying that worship must be in “spirit and *truth*”? What is truth? Truth simply means truth, as that word is commonly understood. Jesus pointedly said to the Samaritan woman, having reference to her mixed up and perverted religion, “You worship what you do not know...” And salvation was “of the Jews,” not as a people, but because of their religion. They were God’s tool in the unfolding of His plan of salvation for all of mankind. He had personally revealed Himself and the Scriptures to them, whereas the Samaritans didn’t even know who they were supposedly worshipping. God is a God of truth and our worship must be in keeping with the truth. Even in the Jews’ deviation from their Old Testament revelation, Jesus said that in vain they were worshipping God, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men (Mark 7:7-9). How much more is this true today in God’s completed and final revelation to man! The hour “now is.” We must worship God “in *spirit* and *truth*.”

“True Worshipers”

(And, as an added observation, Jesus spoke of “*true* worshipers.” Likewise, the worshiper must be right before the worship can be right—before it can be “in spirit and truth.” This eliminates the non-Christian entertainers.)

III. EXTENDED THOUGHTS

The Greek Word for Worship

The primary Greek word translated worship in the New Testament is both interesting and strange in its origin. The word is *proskuneo*. Breaking down the root syllables of this word, we have *pros* (toward) + *kuon* (dog). The picture in the word is that of a dog licking its master. Then its practical and extended application to humans is to show homage, honor and respect. This may be done physically, as in bowing, and spiritually, by having the feeling of homage in our hearts. It is an external and an internal thing. These combined ways of expressing homage (i.e., worship) are found throughout the New Testament (Acts 10:25-26; 1 Corinthians 14:25; Revelation 19:10; 22:8-9).

The English Word "Worship"

Our English word "worship" really is the part of another word that has been merged with the suffix "-ship." That other word is worth. The combination is worth + ship, or worthship (worship). When we worship the Father, or Christ, we declare their worthiness. We glorify their name. What John saw in the heavenly vision in the book of Revelation illustrates this.

The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying:

***"Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,
Who was and is and is to come!"***

Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying:

You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power;

For You created all things,

And by Your will they exist and were created."

(Revelation 4:8-11, NKJV)

Blessed, Bless, Blessing

Our English word "eulogize" actually comes from the basic part of one of the Greek words that many times is translated "blessed," "bless," and "blessing" in the New Testament. We are told in the lexicons that this word means to adore and praise. In English when we eulogize someone we praise and say good things about them. From what James writes in James 3:9-12, we see bless is just the opposite of curse. The apostle Peter wonderfully uses this term in 1 Peter 1:3 when he says, "Blessed [eulogized, praised] be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Paul likewise says about the same thing in Ephesians 1:3. Then he repeatedly says many great and wonderful things about God and what He has done. Peter likewise extols God. The following quotation from Revelation vividly illustrates this as being a part of worship.

All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:

***"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom,
Thanksgiving and honor and power and might,
Be to our God forever and ever. Amen."***

Worship That Is Dignified and Distinct

When that which some may call worship is all “souped up” as a lot of loud, indistinguishable noise and commotion, is God being “blessed”? Is He being eulogized? Is He being glorified? Really, is He being worshipped? Where is the dignity and respect that should be manifested before the most Holy and High God of Heaven? Having reference to the public assembly and worship, Paul admonished the Corinthians, “Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40). Likewise, in this same chapter he makes it plain about singing and blessing in a “tongue” (language) that can be understood and not understood. He said, “I will also sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding. Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say ‘Amen’ at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say?” (14:15b-16) Paul went on to say, “Let all things be done for edification” (14:26). Whether in worship or edification, the words must be intelligently and distinctly presented. God is not glorified when that which is spoken or sung cannot be understood. He is not glorified by crude, indistinctive noise.

The Twofold Nature of Singing

Colossians 3:16 shows the twofold nature of what should be taking place in our singing as Christians. Paul admonishes, “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.” The twofold aspect: (1) We are “teaching and admonishing one another,” and (2) we are singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord. (Ephesians 5:19 words it, “Singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord”). So this implies that the songs we sing must be Scriptural, audible and understood if we actually are to be teaching and admonishing one another. And singing is not a stilted and empty formality that we are engaged in, for we are wholeheartedly involved in warm and spirited worship of the Lord. God is real and very much alive. Let us praise Him with all of our hearts.

IV. FURTHER EXTENDED THOUGHTS

Back to John 4:24

Now let us return to the original conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well. In response to her question, Jesus said in essence that worship, which is in spirit and truth, must correspond to the likeness and attributes of God. We touched more exactly upon what this meant in connection with “in spirit and truth.”

Worship Corresponding to the Likeness of God


Although we have not specifically pointed it out, we have implied that worship corresponding to the likeness of God goes far beyond what is stated in John 4:24. The likeness of God can be seen in many ways. God is omnipotent (almighty). God is omniscient. God is holy, and the list of such statements goes on and on (God is love; God is a God of order, etc.). Before the Almighty God we humbly bow in awe and submission. Before the all-knowing, omniscient God, we humbly and knowingly submit to truth; we intelligently praise His name and magnify His attributes. Before the God who said, “Be holy, for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:15-16), we are made aware of our sins. We submit, cleanse ourselves, and humbly draw near in holiness. We love the God who loves us.

Corresponding to the Likeness of Holiness

Yes, if we would worship God “in spirit and truth,” in this matter of holiness, we must respond in a way that corresponds to His likeness in this respect. The worshiper must be right before his worship can be right. Jesus talked about the “true worshiper” in the words he exchanged with the Samaritan woman. Writing about prayer and worship, Paul said to Timothy, “I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up *holy hands*, without wrath and doubting” (1 Timothy 2:8). Even in the imperfect and incomplete Old Testament sense, Psalms 29:2 reads, “Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name; *Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.*” Psalms 24:3 and 4 asks and answers, “Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in his holy place? He who has *clean hands* and a *pure heart*, Who has not lifted up his soul to an idol [vanity], Nor sworn deceitfully.” James 4:8 reads, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. *Cleanse your hands*, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” The lesson Jesus taught in the parable about the Pharisee and the publican praying illustrates what James has said (James 4:8; Luke 18:9-14). Consider Isaiah chapter 6. God is holy and we must respond in kind.

Worshipping God Acceptably

Lessons from all the different periods of Bible history (Patriarchal, Old Testament and New Testament ages) can be gleaned, showing principles of true worship and the necessity of being a “true worshiper” of God. Remember the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:2-12; Hebrews 11:4). Recall what happened to Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-3). Look at what happened to Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-14). The worship of the Almighty and Holy God of Heaven is a most holy and awesome experience, and not something to be tampered with, nor carelessly

entered into. It is not worldly entertainment, as the world is mimicked. Then when the worshiper is not right, the worship cannot be right. God even hates such “worship” (Read Isaiah 1:10-15 and Amos 5:21-24). Considering these great truths, Hebrews 12:28b admonishes, “Let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably [render religious homage] with reverence and godly fear.” And at the same time, thankfully, let us remember Hebrews 4:15 and 16, “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in the time of need.” Amen.—*James E. Gibbons* 

(Scripture used in this article was from the New King James Version of the Bible)



The SWORD and STAFF
Post Office Box 147
Mt. Airy, NC 27030 USA