

# Worship: What It Is and Why We Do It

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Did you see or hear anything beautiful lately? If so, how did you respond? Maybe you heard a stunning violin solo that brought you to your feet as you applauded enthusiastically and shouted, “Bravo!” Maybe you saw a glorious sunset and it made you sigh audibly, even as tears of joy formed in the corners of your eyes. Maybe you had a particularly delicious meal that was so good you asked your server to please compliment the chef. When we experience beauty, responses of appreciation arise in us naturally. This is also where the worship of God comes from. By faith, we see the beauty of God and we respond in appreciation, wonder, and joy. Today on Groundwork, we think about worship and what it is and why we do it. Stay tuned.

## DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, for this brief, two-part series, we are happy to welcome once again Dr. Sue Rozeboom, Professor of Liturgical Studies at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. Welcome back, Sue.

## SUE ROZEBOOM

Thank you so much. It is such a joy to be here.

## DAVE BAST

We are really looking forward to this because, Sue, your whole area of theological study and research is the area of worship and it is what you teach to seminary students, and it is actually a question that was raised by a faithful Groundwork listener. Glen from Iowa contacted us a while back and said, “Could you talk a little bit about worship and why we do it and what the Bible means when it speaks of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs?” So, we are going to do two parts on the subject of worship, and today we want to talk about the theology of it. Why it is.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Big picture stuff today.

## DAVE BAST

Right, and then next week we will talk about the nuts and bolts of what happens in church and why do we do the things we do in a typical worship service. So, that is where we are headed.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and as we get started, we will loop back to that question that we opened the show with about seeing beauty. N. T. Wright wrote a nice little book – it is a very little book – a book a few years ago about worship called *For All God’s Worth*, and he begins with that question of beauty and seeing beauty and responding to beauty, and that is really what lies at the heart of all of our Christian acts of worship. We see who God is, we come to understand what God has done, and we are bowled over. We have to give some sort of response, and the response is worship, which again, as N. T. Wright points out is at its core from the idea of *worship*. God

is worthy of all our praise and that is what generates all of the church services and acts of praise and worship that we do.

### **SUE ROZEBOOM**

Yes, the definition of worship would be to ascribe worth to. So, we ascribe to God the worth that is due God; not only with regard to who God is, but with regard to what God has done. God deserves credit for all these things; for all the good that God has done with regard to creation, salvation. Not because God's ego is somehow stoked in ascribing that worth. It is as if we are put in proper relation, then, to God. We say, "God, you are God and I am not," and God knows what is good for us. It is about creating fellowship with us according to who we are.

### **DAVE BAST**

0:03:30.8] Yes, I like that idea of right relationships – of recognizing God vis-à-vis ourselves. Maybe in order to worship it takes an act of displacement first for many of us because we naturally tend to put ourselves at the center of things and bow down before the altar of self, and to worship God properly is to place Him there and us where we ought to be. It is not about God's ego needs.

### **SUE ROZEBOOM**

No.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

No, if we could see better, we would not have to be told to worship, we would just do it. It is like if you are really, really in love with somebody you never need to be ordered to give him or her a kiss, it just comes naturally. The Bible does need to tell us and order us to worship because of sin. We are blind; we just do not see well enough, and so we need to be ordered. We can hear that, as we dig into scripture here on Groundwork, so let's do that and hear the first few verses of Psalm 96:

<sup>1</sup>Sing to the Lord a new song. Sing to the Lord all the earth. <sup>2</sup>Sing to the Lord; praise His name; proclaim His salvation day after day. <sup>3</sup>Declare His glory among the nations, His marvelous deeds among all peoples. <sup>4</sup>For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise. He is to be feared above all gods. <sup>5</sup>For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. <sup>6</sup>Splendor and majesty are before Him; strength and glory are in His sanctuary. <sup>7</sup>Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations; ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. <sup>8</sup>Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name; bring an offering and come into His courts. <sup>9</sup>Worship the Lord in the splendor of His holiness. Tremble before Him, all the earth.

There you have it; the essence of why worship should naturally be summoned up from us, if only we can see God correctly.

### **SUE ROZEBOOM**

If you continue in the Psalm, though, what is so extraordinary about this psalm, and about other psalms and other glimpses that we have of worship in scripture, is that all creation is involved.

Continuing where you left off, Scott:

<sup>10</sup>Say among the nations the Lord is king; the world is firmly established, it shall never be moved; He will judge the peoples with equity. But now, here: <sup>11</sup>Let the heavens be glad and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar and all that fills it; <sup>12</sup>let the field exalt and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord. <sup>13</sup>For He is coming, for He is coming to judge the earth.

All creation is involved.

### **DAVE BAST**

Right. Not just people, but trees are supposed to clap their hands and sing for joy. That wonderful thing.

### **SUE ROZEBOOM**

Right.

## **DAVE BAST**

And that universal note; everyone everywhere is summoned to worship God, not just Christians, not just people in church, not just believers, even.

Scott, you mentioned a few minutes ago the fact that a lot of people are blind to the beauty of God. A couple of our kids live in D.C. and when we go visit them, we are often taking the Metro, the subway system, which is a marvelous thing. You remind me of a story that I think you read, too, Scott, about one day Joshua Bell, who is one of the world's greatest violinists, went down into the Metro in Washington with his Stradivarius, opened his violin case – you know, he is dressed like a kid, kind of scruffy – and he began playing a Bach solo partita; some of the most beautiful music...

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And technically the most challenging...

## **DAVE BAST**

And he is one of the world's greats, and people are walking by just ignoring... or somebody would throw a quarter in the case... and they literally did not know what they were hearing. They did not know what they were missing, because it was out of context.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes, a couple of people stopped for a minute, but, yeah; he ended up after about three hours he earned about \$43.00 in change, and two nights earlier, people paid \$100.00 per ticket to hear him play that same music in Carnegie Hall. In the train station, they just passed by because they did not know what it was, and that is the problem with a lot of people in the world today. They pass by the wonders of God every day and they do not recognize it as such, and so they are not led to say, "Thank you." They are not led to say, "Praise the Lord." They are not led to say, "I want to sing a new song." They just walk by God's goodness just like the folks walked by Joshua Bell.

## **SUE ROZEBOOM**

Do you suppose, though, that God's greatness and delight were made manifest in both occasions? That is to say, Joshua Bell was created to play the violin. He was created to produce extraordinary music for our delight, but I think for God's delight; so, there is a sense in which, if that which is created does what it is created to do, and does it extraordinarily well and beautifully so, somehow that is an ascription of God's worth. It is an expression of worship, even if the one who is engaging it might not ascribe it as such.

## **DAVE BAST**

Well, that is a great point, and that suggests a question to me that I would like to follow up with, Sue, and we will do that in just a moment.

*BREAK:*

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast and Sue Rozeboom, and you are listening to Groundwork, where we are doing a short, two-part series – this is the first of the two – on worship. We have been talking, Dave and Sue, about what is worship; where does worship come from; how people often miss the glories of God that lead to worship. Dave, you were going to ask Sue something about...

## **DAVE BAST**

Yes, I did want to ask a question because, Sue, your comment about Joshua Bell and the beautiful violin playing raised a question in my mind about the inner spirit or the inner heart or motivation of worship. So, you said an act of beauty is really an act of worship for God, even if it is not intentionally ascribed to Him; and I just wonder, where does motivation come in? Is a piece of music poorly done, but from a sincere heart, is that worship?

## **SUE ROZEBOOM**

I think where I was coming from is the notion that when God's creatures, when those whom – and that which God has created – behaves, plays, lives as God intended, that is ascribing glory to God's name; and in that sense is an act of worship. I am thinking of Psalm 148 and of Augustine's reflection on Psalm 148. We just talked about how all creation praises and this is one of the classic psalms where that is proclaimed: <sup>3</sup>Praise Him sun and moon, praise him all you shining stars. This is the psalm that Francis of Assisi paraphrased with *All Creatures of Our God and King*, right? Toward the end of it is this summons by the psalmist to kings of the earth and all peoples. All peoples; not necessarily those who recognize the God of the Hebrews as God, but all peoples. Princes and all rulers of the earth; young men and women alike; old and young together. So, when a king rules well, in order that the people who are under a king's rulership are blessed, in order that they might flourish, there is a sense in which just functioning that way for the well-being of all is bringing glory to God, because that is the way God created it to function.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

You do see that in the Psalms. We saw it a bit in Psalm 96 in the first part of this program, and now, Sue, you were just reading from Psalm 148... When we read about: Praise him sun and moon and hail and wind and snow and the trees of the field clap their hands, we tend to chalk that up as metaphor. "Oh, you can't take that literally; that is not really worship," but I think to God's ears, it is. When a tree is a tree, when a chicken behaves as a chicken is supposed to behave, there is something God glorifying because, if you really look at the Psalms, there are lots of reasons to praise God. There is a sense in which the two great themes of scripture, as Neal Plantinga used to tell me, are creation and salvation; creation and redemption. Those are the two big themes of the Bible. Both are the bedrock of praise. All through the Psalms we are told to praise God. Why? Daffodils, myrtle bushes, whales that frolic in the ocean. You praise God because of creation, but also, along with creation, you praise God.

## **DAVE BAST**

Redemption is the other big thing, as you say. Redemption by its very nature reminds us that the world is fallen. So, just to say everything doing its own thing and doing it well is worship; I agree. That is good as far as it goes. But, unless the Gospel enters in and is responded to, worship has not reached its deepest; because ultimately we are also praising the God who redeems His people; the God of Exodus who led His people out from bondage; the God of Good Friday and Easter who in Jesus Christ has defeated sin and death and has created a new people; a new Israel from every nation and tribe and race – that universal note – so, the deepest kind of worship has to be conscious, doesn't it, of the great acts of redemption and responding to them? It is the worship of the faithful; of the people of God.

## **SUE ROZEBOOM**

Yes, but redemption is also for all creation. So, in manifesting shalom, all creation will be put to rights.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes, we do not anticipate the daffodils and the whales disappearing from the new creation... what we often refer to as the new creation...

## **DAVE BAST**

No, right. I am not saying that at all, I am just saying...

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

It is the whole kit 'n' caboodle gets redeemed...

## **DAVE BAST**

Yes, but we have to sing the praises of the Redeemer. The first, maybe, worship song in the Bible is Exodus 15, isn't it? The Song of Moses in triumph on the shores of the Red Sea for the God who has destroyed the

enemy and set them free and liberated them. It is all a pre-figuring of what Christ will do when we have passed through the sea; the seas of baptism, we might say.

**SUE ROZEBOOM**

Amen.

**DAVE BAST**

As the New Testament indicates. These are all a pre-figuring of the great work of Christ; and ultimately the songs of Revelation, the worship of heaven, focuses on, not just God, but the Lamb.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And it is all part of one big package, isn't it? Because even the Red Sea crossing, Dave, that you just referred to – where were they on their way to? The Promised Land, right? So, land and creation and redemption – it is all bound up – so we praise God for both creation and redemption, but in so doing we get caught up in God's great program. It is all one; that Jesus died to redeem all creatures; all people; we now as humans give voice to that and to articulation for that, but worship draws us closer to God, and therefore, it gets us even more enthusiastic about God's program and His whole project of redeeming the whole cosmos; not just people, but also everything that God declared good in the beginning.

**SUE ROZEBOOM**

And isn't that, then, parsing out worship as a noun versus worship as a verb? We have been talking about worship as a verb. The action that we undertake in order to ascribe worth to God; but worship as a noun can be employed to refer to that which gathered Christians do say on a Sunday morning, when they say, "Hey, I'm going to church." What do you mean? Well, you are going to worship, and there is this sum total of activity that takes place in, say, an hour-and-a-half to two hours to three hours, but that would be worship as a noun. It is in that occasion of worship as a noun that we actually rehearse that whole story of creation, redemption, new creation.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes, that is a great point to raise, and I would really like to focus on this in our last segment in just a bit. What do we say to the person who says, "You know, you are right. Daffodils, sunsets, mountain grandeur; those things are all worshipping God and they are reasons for worshipping God, so I can do that at the beach by myself and that is where I am most feeling at home and in the presence of God; that is my church." Let's talk about that in just a moment.

*BREAK:*

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

**DAVE BAST**

I am Dave Bast.

**SUE ROZEBOOM**

And I am Sue Rozeboom.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Sue and Dave, we are wrapping up this program of taking a big picture look at worship. Just in the last segment, Dave, you were saying what do we say to somebody who says, "I can worship in the woods by myself on a Sunday morning, giving thanks to God for bluebirds, and I don't need a community." Sue, how we respond to someone who says, "I don't need to go to church to worship ever, I can just do it on my own."

## **SUE ROZEBOOM**

My first response would be, and I am quoting James B. Torrance, the great Reformed theologian who said in thinking deeply about the Trinity: God is in the business of creating community. God is community. God is triune: Father, Son, Holy Spirit; and it is out of that community that God created all things. It is as if hospitality overflowed and part of that creation was humankind. God is saying to God's self, "Let Us create... But God is immediately in communion with those whom God created. He walks in the cool of the garden with Adam and Eve. So, God calls and creates community. No one is in Christ by him or herself alone.

## **DAVE BAST**

John Wesley said: The New Testament knows nothing of solitary Christians; of individualistic Christians. The other thing I think we need to recognize: It is one thing to say, "I can worship by myself out in nature," as if worship were some sort of individualistic feeling of euphoria that you have at a pretty sight; but worship is also dialog. It is being addressed by God as much as it is us addressing God. There is a wonderful passage in the book of Isaiah that emphasizes that back and forth character of worship, and it is actually, in a sense, a pattern that we still follow today in many worship services.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes, it is in Isaiah 6. Let me just read it quickly. This is Isaiah's commission. He says:

<sup>1</sup>In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne high and exalted, and the train of His robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup>Above Him were seraphim, each with six wings; with two they covered their faces; with two they covered their feet; with two they were flying, <sup>3</sup>and they were calling to one another: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty. The whole earth is full of His glory. <sup>4</sup>And at the sound of their voices, the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup>"Woe to me," I cried. "I am ruined! I am a man of unclean lips. I live among people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King. The Lord almighty. <sup>6</sup>But then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. <sup>7</sup>With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for."

So, there is a big vision of the big God that we worship every time we gather.

## **DAVE BAST**

It is a solitary worshiper, Isaiah the prophet, but he understands he is part of a community. "I am part of a people of unclean lips." I have some needs here. So we often begin worship with confession of sin, but the worship is even bigger than the community on earth. There is worship going on in heaven, and in a sense, we are joining in on that, aren't we?

## **SUE ROZEBOOM**

Amen! God is the one, really, who gathers us on a Sunday morning. We perceive ourselves as gathering ourselves together, but it really is God who gathers us and invites us into communion with God, and it is a communal communion. We are together.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

The theologian, N. T. Wright, has reminded us – again from that same book that we quoted earlier in the program, *For All God's Worth*, we often need a sense of scale. It is so easy just to see just your little church or your little building, but he says: Sometimes you need a sense of scale. And by way of illustration for that, he said: If you live in England or even in Europe, things are very close together. You can drive two hours in any one direction and you might travel through two foreign countries. Well, for people from England who come to the United States or Canada, that can lead to confusion. N. T. Wright and his wife lived in Montreal for a while, and so they would have visitors come who would propose ridiculous trips. They would say, "Tomorrow we would like to drive to Nova Scotia, and then maybe the next day to Winnipeg or Vancouver." They did not realize that we are talking about thousands and thousands of miles. So, he bought a map of Canada with a little map of England on the same scale, and then people would say, "Oh, all of England is

smaller than Ontario. I didn't know how big Canada was." And N. T. Wright basically says: We need that in our worship once in a while. Once in a while, we need to see the God Isaiah saw. Let God lift the roof off our church, and realize no matter how big our church is, we are little. The God we worship is awesome! He fills the universe with glory! And sometimes we lose sight of that if we only just pay attention to our own surroundings.

### **SUE ROZEBOOM**

Right. God's glory fills the universe, and there is a sense in which that is proclaimed to us on a Sunday morning in worship; when we gather for worship as a noun. We are being reminded and refreshed in that reality. And proclaiming it communally one to another, to the world, in a sense; and it is being proclaimed to us through the word of God. So, if we were to take that occasion of our praise and worship, our ascribing of worth to God as the principal expression, might we then not think of all of the occasions of worship, of praise, of glory of God that we encounter and proclaim – Monday through Saturday, say – as echoes of and preludes to the communal ascription of worth to God on Sunday? I get this idea from Jean-Jacques von Allmen, another Reformed theologian, who thought deeply about worship, and he thought about this with regard to prayer in particular.

### **DAVE BAST**

So, worship through the week, not just on Sunday, not just for an hour.

### **SUE ROZEBOOM**

Absolutely! Worship through the week; which is another significant Reformed principle, right? We worship in all of life.

### **DAVE BAST**

Looping back to what we said in the first segment, any good thing done well is really an act of worship, if you doing what you are called to do; what you are meant to do. So, making a good chair or a good table or playing a good sonata, hitting a good homerun; these, in a sense, are acts of worship as well; as well as our hymns and songs and prayers.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And worship trains our eyes to see it all week long. That is one of the things we teach our students at Calvin Seminary. We often tell them the rule for writing: Show, don't tell. I always say to my students, "What you want to do in your sermons is talk about God and God's actions in such a vivid way that people will still see it on a Wednesday afternoon or a Friday morning." So, worship trains our eyes to see the glory of God all week long and it trains our habits to say, "Praise God. Glory be to God every time we see it. Worship continues on and on.

Maybe as we bring this in for a close, we can be reminded of something that the theologian, David Peterson once pointed out. He said: The day will come when we won't need preaching, we won't need missionaries; there are a whole lot of things that in the new creation are going to stop. Worship is the one thing we do now that will go on and on forever. So, we are tuning up for all eternity every time we go to worship.

### **DAVE BAST**

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and our guest this week, Sue Rozeboom. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit [groundworkonline.com](https://groundworkonline.com) to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

---

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/worship-what-it-is-and-why-we-do-it>

*Printed on July 26, 2025*

