

Worshipping Together

A STUDY OF PSALM 96

by C.J. Harris

HOT

SHOTS

Worshiping Together: A Study of Psalm 96
Written by C.J. Harris, PhD

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Introduction

When you hear the word *worship*, what do you think about?

For some, the word evokes images of lofty cathedrals echoing with the whispered prayers of believers. Others may imagine an earnest pastor pleading with his congregation to behold their God. And still others may think of a band on stage, leading the congregation in a praise chorus.

Across time and place, the form of worship has varied as much as the content of worship. What ties these forms together? And are some forms closer to true worship than others? How can we know when we have *truly* gathered to worship God?

Historically, the Christian church has outlined worship according to an acceptable standard of practice. It has produced resources such as liturgies, books of written prayers, and scheduled Bible readings to guide believers. Some Christians, fearing that formalism might rob worship of its true meaning, shied away from those practices in favor of their own standard of corporate worship.

Others have overreacted, rejecting every element of formalized worship while encouraging various forms of unconventional worship. While every human approach to worship has shortcomings, a philosophy of anything-goes worship ignores Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 14:26–33. God is not a God of confusion; therefore, corporate worship services should reflect His orderliness.

In this 5-lesson study, we will study Psalm 96 verse-by-verse to learn about true corporate worship. After defining worship, we will explore the elements that constitute corporate worship, the right reasons for worship, and the attitude that enables true worship. In the final lesson, we'll consider our place in creation's symphony of worship to the Creator.

Lesson Format

God’s Word is the primary catalyst for our spiritual growth. And as God teaches us His truth through His Word, He does so in a way that captivates our attention and opens our understanding. Just as Christ illustrated His teaching with tangible objects—a coin, a tree, or a sheep—you can use illustrations to cement biblical principles in the minds of your students. As you teach, instead of simply talking about how God’s Word reveals our heart (cf. James 1:22–25), bring a mirror to show your students.

Hot Shots encourage interaction between students and teacher through exercises, handouts, and lively illustrations. Use the suggestions provided in each lesson, but feel free to enrich the lesson by using your own ideas.

Each Hot Shot lesson follows the same format.



The Warm-Up introduces the lesson topic to your students through activities such as songs, games, handouts, and discussion questions.



The Bridge transitions from The Warm-Up to the main text of Scripture for the lesson.



The Content introduces and expands the main points. Throughout the lesson, you’ll use handouts and discussion questions to help students internalize what they’ve heard.



The Closing concludes the lesson by reviewing the main points and applying them to your students’ lives.

Handouts may be copied for church use. They are also available as a free PDF download on the *Worshiping Together* product page at positiveaction.org.

Before Each Lesson . . .

1. Read through the lesson and take note of the Lesson Aim, Objectives, and any preparation needed for creative teaching segments.
2. Adapt the lesson if necessary. Determine ahead of time if you’ll need to modify teaching methods or activities to fit your equipment or facilities.
3. Plan your schedule for class time. Each lesson can be taught in 30–45 minutes, but feel free to shorten or lengthen the lesson to fit your needs.
4. Be enthusiastic! Excitement on your part will help cultivate your students’ interest. If you don’t feel that one of the teaching ideas or Warm-Ups provided will excite your teens, modify it to fit your group.

Course Objectives

This study will . . .

- Define worship
- Note the elements of worship found in Psalm 96
- Examine the motivation for worship given in Psalm 96
- Detail necessary attitudes for true worship
- Discuss how all things, both animate and inanimate, give worship to God

Overview

Lesson 1: What in the World Is Worship?

Aim: To define worship and provide an overview of Psalm 96

Text: Psalm 96

Lesson 2: The Elements of Worship

Aim: To recognize the elements of worship given in Psalm 96

Text: Psalm 96:1–3

Lesson 3: Why Should We Worship?

Aim: To explore the reasons for worship given in Psalm 96

Text: Psalm 96:4–6

Lesson 4: How Should We Worship God?

Aim: To examine the attitude that should pervade all true worship

Text: Psalm 96:7–9

Lesson 5: Who Should Worship God?

Aim: To recognize the worldwide scope of worship directed to God

Text: Psalm 96:10–13

LESSON 1

What in the World Is Worship?

When we create something, we usually have some goal in mind for our creation. We create art to convey some message or compose music for others to enjoy. Designers and engineers construct devices to simplify our daily tasks, communicate with others, entertain, and make us more productive.

This desire to create reflects God's own nature and work of creation. He, too, creates with purpose, as we see in His creation of humanity. Genesis tells us that God did two special things when He designed the first man and woman. He created them in His image, and He gave them purpose—to worship Him.

Aim: To define worship and provide an overview of Psalm 96

Objectives: Students will . . .

- Define *worship* as “humble recognition and appreciation of God’s worth, resulting in awe and exaltation.”
- Explain the purpose of worship
- List the four questions of worship relating to Psalm 96

Text: Psalm 96

Lesson

In this lesson, we’ll look at what it means to worship. To lay a foundation for this study, we’ll survey Psalm 96 and study the psalmist’s invitation to worship the Lord. We will also develop a functional definition of worship to reference throughout the course of this study.



Begin by singing a song together about worshipping God. If your group is uncomfortable singing, play audio or video of others singing.

Discussion: Why is worship important to Christians? (Answers may include it’s a part of church; it honors God; it encourages us.)

Preparation

You will need . . .

- Lyrics to a song about worship, or audio or video of a song about worship (example: “O Worship the King” by Robert Grant)
- Handout 1.1 (make several copies, one for each group)
- Handout 1.2 (one copy per student)
- Pens or pencils



These things make worship important to us, but the greatest reason is that worship makes up part of our being—who we are as humans. God designed us to worship Him. So if worship is a central part of our being, we ought to understand first what worship is, and second, how to worship.



Maybe you've never thought much about this topic. Or maybe you think worship is just the part of a church service in which people play music and the congregation sings together. But worship, as defined by the psalmist, encompasses much more.

The word *worship* appears over 180 times in the Bible—and that number doesn't include similar words such as *praise*, *exalt*, and *sing*. Clearly, God considers worship an important subject, and He desires us to understand more about it.

So let's begin by answering the question, "What is worship?"

Defining Worship

The English word *worship* is a shortened form of "worth-ship". It denotes actions or words that ascribe worth to a person, object, or organization. Very simply put, the words we say and the things we do reveal what we value in life.

The words translated as *worship* in the Bible provide a more concrete illustration of ascribing worth. The literal meaning of both the Hebrew word *shachah* and the Greek word *proskyneō* is "to fall on one's face and give homage." These words convey the image of someone lying prostrate on the ground to bestow honor on someone else.

In Exodus 34:8, God revealed His glory to Moses. How does Moses respond?

Read Exodus 34:8. Moses physically bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped God.

Not every instance of worship in the Bible includes bowing, but each does portray attitudes of humility and reverence.

For the sake of this study, we will use the following definition for worship.

Worship is humble recognition and appreciation of God's worth, resulting in awe and exaltation.

Discussion: Discuss this definition of worship. Have the students give some examples from both Scripture and modern day. Note that humility is included as part of the definition because pride makes worship self-focused ("See what a good worshiper I am!") instead of God-focused.

Worship of God is revealed through our actions, words, and thoughts as we glorify Him. Basically, what we do reveals how much we value God.

Worship can be public or private, corporate or individual. In our study of Psalm 96, we will focus on public, corporate worship—acts of worship intended to direct both participants and observers toward God.

Created to Worship

We have an innate need to worship something. This natural desire shows up in the way we interact with others and how we prioritize our activities. We sin when we try to fill our need to worship with something other than God.

How does our need to worship show up in everyday life?

Handout: Divide the teens into groups and hand out copies of “Created to Worship.” Direct each group to work together and list 4–5 things that people worship besides God.

Discuss their responses, namely how people’s actions reveal what they worship. Answers may include the following points.

- Happiness and pleasure—People live to have fun. They spend their free time partying.
- Youth and beauty—People spend a lot of money and time trying to lose weight, dress fashionably, and take pictures of themselves to meet a cultural standard of beauty or to look young.
- Culture—People spend inordinate amounts of time trying to stay in touch with cultural references and movements. Some people obsess over art, music, and performances.
- Heroes and celebrities—People follow the personal lives of famous figures, dress like them, and buy their products.
- Education—People may view education as the answer to all of the world’s problems, or exalt science over faith.
- Sports and competition—Many people religiously follow sports teams or players, continually checking stats and watching games.
- Nature—Some people rely only on natural remedies for illnesses, or try to find peace and spiritual experiences only through nature.
- Power—People may pursue corporate positions to feel powerful. Some may bully others to make themselves feel in control.

It's easy to see what we worship by looking at how we spend our resources—our time, money, energy, and thoughts. We naturally pursue whatever we think will grant our desires; but in reality, only God can satisfy our needs.

Let's look at what the Bible has to say about our natural desire to worship.

The First Two Commandments (Exo. 20:1–6)

God delivered an extensive set of commands to Israel through the Law, but He condensed their essence in the Ten Commandments. God devoted the first two commandments to instruction about worship. God knows that much of our suffering and disobedience to Him comes from our desire to worship something else, and that we need guidance to worship as we should.

First, God issues the command to worship only Him. He tells us not have other gods—that is, any object of worship—in place of Him. Second, He instructs us not to create or bow down to them. In Hebrew, this phrase means *worship*. God knows that in our fallen state, we naturally seek out and worship false gods.

Altars, Temples, Synagogues, and Churches

Everywhere in Scripture we find people—both believers and unbelievers—building structures to use for worship. As early as Genesis 4, we see Cain and Abel bring offerings to God (vv. 1–5). Noah's first act after leaving the ark was to build an altar to God and offer sacrifice to Him (Gen. 8:18–20). Numerous people in the Old Testament built altars to worship God.

Solomon built the Temple to replace the Tabernacle constructed by Moses in the wilderness. In exile, God's people established synagogues. And after the resurrection, Jesus' followers crisscrossed the world establishing churches. These structures and organizations served as places for people to worship together.

Discussion: What non-religious buildings and gatherings can become places in which people worship something other than God? (Theaters and stadiums can be great opportunities for relaxation, but they can also become places where we gather to “worship” our favorite actress or sports team. Colleges provide a wonderful setting for learning, they can become temples devoted to human wisdom.)

Created for His Glory (Isa. 43:6–7)

In Isaiah 43:6–7, God tells us why He created us.

Read Isaiah 43:6–7. God created us to give Him glory. And when we worship Him, we give Him glory.

John emphasizes this truth in Revelation 4:11, where he says that God created all things for His own pleasure. And Paul closes the first half of Romans by declaring that everything is intended to glorify God forever (Rom. 11:36).

The Four Questions of Worship

Let's read Psalm 96 together.

Read Psalm 96. This psalm answers four major questions about worship. We will briefly look at the questions today and then spend our next four sessions answering them.

What Constitutes Worship of God (vv. 1–3)?

The psalmist begins by calling us to engage in worshipful actions. Though the writer mentions only a few activities, worship includes more than just songs and prayer.

Why Must We Worship God (vv. 4–6)?

God's command is sufficient to motivate our worship. However, the psalmist offers us additional reasons.

How Must We Worship God (vv. 7–9)?

God values the attitude and manner of our worship as much as our activities of worship. Here, the psalmist addresses how to appropriately worship God.

Who Should Worship God (vv. 10–13)?

Finally, the psalmist lists those who should worship.

Handout: Encourage the teens to read through Psalm 96 several times this week. Hand out "Four Questions" and instruct them to answer the questions on their own as they read. You might ask them to share some of their thoughts during the warm-up in the next four lessons.



Worship is humble recognition and appreciation of God's worth, resulting in awe and exaltation. God created us to behold Him and His glory, and in turn, let that recognition motivate our humble praise. Unfortunately, our sin nature turns our gaze away from God and encourages wrong worship. We need the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit to worship the Lord as He commands.

Discussion: Ask for any final questions. Then close in prayer, asking God to help the group worship Him publicly this week.

Created to Worship

Worship is a recognition and appreciation of worth which results in awe and exaltation.

God designed humans to have a relationship with Him, and worship is an integral part of that relationship. But what about people who don't know God? What do they worship? +List at least 4 things that people worship besides God. Discuss how their actions reveal what they worship. (For example, many people worship wealth. In order to get more money, they may steal from their employer or family.)

Four Questions

Read through Psalm 96 each day this week. As you read, take some time and answer the four questions below.

What constitutes worship of God (vv. 1–3)?

Why must we worship God (vv. 4–6)?

How must we worship God (vv. 7–9)?

Who should worship God (vv. 10–13)?



The Elements of Worship

Would you find it unsettling to see a group of clowns at a funeral? Or to hear a professor lecturing on macroeconomics at a wedding? Thanks to cultural conditioning—and hopefully, to wisdom as well—we understand what behavior is appropriate for certain settings.

What about worship within the church? Does God expect us to figure it out on our own? Thankfully, He does not. Through His Word, He teaches us what correct worship looks like. Psalm 96 begins with this very topic, identifying the characteristics of proper worship—that is, worship acceptable to God.

Aim: To recognize the elements of worship given in Psalm 96

Objectives: Students will . . .

- List and discuss the elements of worship in Psalm 96
- Understand that public worship is a form of communication
- Note ways in which believers can participate in corporate worship

Text: Psalm 96:1–3

Lesson

Scripture contains several passages about corporate worship. While this lesson focuses on Psalm 96, you may wish to read additional texts to enhance group discussion, such as Acts 2:42–47, 1 Corinthians 14:26–40, Ephesians 4:1–16, and Colossians 3:12–17.



Before class, obtain two 100-piece puzzles. Remove some pieces from the first puzzle and mix several pieces from the second puzzle into the first box. Place this mixed box on a table where the students can work on it as they arrive. Once they realize the puzzle pieces are mixed, continue with the lesson. You can give them the removed pieces if the incomplete puzzle is a distraction.



A puzzle with missing pieces or wrong pieces will never show the whole picture. Similarly, our worship reveals a wrong picture of God when we omit or add things we shouldn't.

Preparation

You will need . . .

- Two simple puzzles (100-piece or fewer)
- Before class, remove some pieces from the first puzzle and mix in several pieces from the second box. Place the mixed pieces on a table.
- Handout 2.1 (one copy per student)
- Pens or pencils

Discussion: C.H. Spurgeon, a nineteenth-century English pastor, said, “I believe that in public worship we should do well to be bound by no human rules, and constrained by no stereotyped order . . . Practices good in themselves are to be protested against if they gender to bondage . . . and if we worship God according to His guidance, the worship cannot invariably take the same form.”

—C. H. Spurgeon, 1874. “991 Worship, Modes of, May Be Altered.”
In *Flashes of Thought*, 506. London: Passmore and Alabaster.

Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? What might be some dangers of public, corporate worship without any rules or standard order? What might be the dangers of formalized, traditional worship only?

God’s Word should define and regulate our public worship. Historically, this has been called the regulative principle of worship.



Let’s begin by reading Psalm 96 again.

Read Psalm 96. You may wish to give the teens an opportunity to share some of their thoughts on the first question from last week’s handout.

Today, we will focus on the first three verses of the psalm, in which the psalmist mentions elements necessary for public worship. Before looking at each of these words, we should note that all the elements mentioned are forms of communication. True worship always attempts to communicate God’s glory to the participants, as well as to any outside observers.

Sing to the Lord

The first form of worship mentioned in this psalm is one we’re familiar with. Three times the psalmist instructs us to sing to the Lord. Music has always been a medium for worship, and it’s likely the first thing we think of when we identify worship in the church. Both believers and unbelievers sing about people or things that they value. Patriotic songs praise a country, while love songs croon about a special person.

Verse one teaches two important facts about truly worshipful singing. First, the psalmist describes this as a “new song.” Much has been written about this simple phrase, but it suffices to say that our song of worship differs from the song we sang prior to salvation. The song may be similar in appearance, but our motivations and values change. Rather than seeking our own pleasure, our songs now praise the One who created the world and redeemed us. Instead of singing to attract attention to ourselves, we sing to give God glory. Our goal is not to hear, “You sang so well.” Instead we desire to hear, “Wow! That reminded me of how great a God we serve.”

Second, the psalmist reminds his hearers that everyone—“all the earth”—should participate. So during corporate worship, all believers should take part. This doesn’t necessarily mean that every person must exercise their vocal chords—some simply can’t. But it does mean that every person should participate in worship by singing, listening, or directing their thoughts to God. So even if a soloist sings or an instrumentalist plays, each person can still participate in worship.

Cross Reference: Colossians 3:12–17 describes our new life in the body of Christ. Verse 16 specifically tells us to sing as a way of ministering to other believers. It is one way we can glorify God together.

What if you don’t sing well? Even if you think your voice won’t win any competitions, you can still participate in worshipful singing. God values our heart attitude rather than our performance. He accepts our flawed worship if it comes from a humble heart. And keep in mind that singing often improves with practice.

Bless God’s Name

After the threefold call to sing, the psalmist tells us to bless God’s name. The Hebrew word translated *bless* means “to bow down to someone.” Although similar to the Hebrew word for *worship*—which means “to prostrate before someone”—this word conveys the idea of greeting someone of higher authority while bowing before them respectfully. In context of Psalm 96, to “bless the Lord” indicates that the believer is respectfully submitting themselves to God as His servant. Those who observe true worship should come away with a clear understanding that God is our King and we are His subjects.

Discussion: How can we show respectful submission to God through our worship? (We pray asking for His will to be done. We listen attentively to His Word being preached. We worship God without distraction.)

Announce God’s Salvation

Next, the psalmist states that worship includes telling others about God’s salvation. This command shares its focus between the object of praise and the effect of that praise on its hearers.

To proclaim or tell God’s salvation means, “to make another person glad by sharing good news.” What is the salvation that we should proclaim? It’s the good news of redemption from sin—not only rescue from sin’s dominion through Christ, but also specific accounts of how God has delivered us from the destructive effects of sin.

Discussion: Give an opportunity for any of your students to share a specific way in which God saved them from a sinful habit or attitude.

Declare God's Glory and Works

Finally, the psalmist calls on us to talk about God's glory and works. How can we communicate God's glory to those around us? We can emphasize the greatness of God's wisdom and power. We can speak of His other attributes like love, justice, joy, and faithfulness. We can tell others what makes God glorious, describing Him the way we would a beloved friend or family member.

We also worship God by telling others about the wonderful deeds He has done. Where can we find examples of His deeds? A look back at history reveals that God has miraculously preserved both His people and His Word, showcasing His providence. And each of us can relate how God has provided and cared for us, His children.

Discussion: What are some specific events, perhaps from your own life, that showcased God's glory?



Worship is communication. Through it, we tell each other the story of God's glory and grace. Each time we gather to sing of His majesty and testify to His salvation, we take part in a great family reunion. Together, we catch up on the news about our great Father.

Handout: Pass out copies of "How We Worship God." If you have time, complete this handout together as a class. Otherwise, send it home as a private exercise and plan to discuss it later as a review.

How We Worship God

Consider all the worship services your church holds in a typical month. List elements of those services under the types of worship we discussed this week. Some activities may fit under multiple headings.

Singing to the Lord	
Demonstration of allegiance to God	
Sharing the good news of God's salvation	
Discussing God's glory and works	
Other parts of the services	