

Worship in Spirit and Truth

The word “worship” that is used in the Bible in its raw form means to bow down before the one being worshiped. But as this image suggests, it implies voluntary willful submission to the authority of the one being worshiped. The righteous expectation of the Sovereign Creator (God) is that those whom He created voluntarily and willfully submit to Him as Lord over their lives. All those who refuse to voluntarily and willingly submit He considers unrighteous enemies. These, “*exchange the truth of God for a lie, and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator*” (Romans 1:25). The chief creature they serve is themselves. They are their own lord (god). According to the Bible, the just punishment for this abominable way of living is everlasting punishment. Only those who worship the Sovereign Creator in the way He prescribes will avoid this outcome.

There are people throughout the world who are convinced that they are properly worshiping God when they are not. Millions of them identify themselves as Christian. At the judgment, they will hear Jesus say to them, “*Depart from Me, I never knew you.*” (See Matthew 7:23.) If you claim to be a Christian and are fully confident that you are not one of these people, you are likely wrong. Anyone who thinks that this cannot happen to him is the very type of person who will indeed hear these frightening words. So, if you are one of those who think there is absolutely no way that you will hear these words, please read on and take heed because your smugness strongly suggests that you may very well be self-deceived.

Jesus said, “*God is Spirit and it is necessary for those who are worshiping Him to worship in Spirit and truth*” (John 4:24). If you are not one of those who worship God in Spirit and in truth, you will hear Jesus say, “*Depart from Me, I never knew you.*” Are you now relaxing because you are convinced that you worship God in Spirit and in truth? If you happen to be one the millions of people who do not even read the Bible through once per year, how can you be so confident that you worship God in truth? If you don’t know your Bible, why do you think your understanding of Him is accurate? If your understanding of Him is incorrect, it is impossible to worship Him in truth.

I have talked with hundreds of people that call themselves Christian whose understanding of God is corrupt. Yet, they are fully convinced that their understanding of Him is excellent, even though they don’t know their Bible. (Many of these people have not even read the Bible through from cover to cover.) In I Timothy 4:1, the Apostle Paul warned that in the latter times, most of those assuming they know God would have a corrupt understanding of the truth and eventually fall away when under great trial. Instead of being firmly grounded in truth as revealed in God’s Word, people will pay attention to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons. They will buy into widely accepted teachings because they do not know God’s Word well enough to distinguish error from truth. They will embrace erroneous teachings because it “makes sense to them.”

You see, truth matters because if you don’t worship God in truth, you are not worshiping the true and living God at all. You are worshiping a God fabricated by your own mind. This is idolatry. We do not have a right to “create God in our own image.” God is not defined by our own imagination. He has revealed Himself in His Word and if our understanding of Him deviates from this, we are not worshiping Him in truth and we are in danger of hearing Jesus say, “*Depart from Me, I never knew you.*”

Because the stakes are eternal, I will now endeavor to discuss some widely accepted teachings that are corrupt and have no basis in truth. Those who embrace these teachings should therefore anticipate Jesus’ words, “*Depart from Me, I never knew you.*”

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Blatant deism: This doctrine teaches that God created everything including the laws of physics so that everything now runs independent of His involvement. It might be compared to a watch created by a watchmaker who then winds up the watch, walks away, and leaves it to operate on its own. Generally, people who identify themselves as Christian rightly reject this doctrine. Deists cannot worship God properly because their view of Him is so greatly distorted. But then again, why would anyone with such a view worship or pray to God in the first place? Afterall, according to their understanding, God does not hear or answer prayer.

Partial deism: While Christians generally consider blatant deism a false teaching, there are millions of people who are “partial deists” but most of them are not even aware of it. You may be one of them! Let me explain what I mean by partial deism because other people might use a different term to describe this.

The Bible portrays God as being sovereign over all things. In other words, God is in control of all things and everything occurs according to His purposes and design. This includes calamities that happen throughout the world which cause death and destruction. And it also includes both big and small calamities that happen in the life of every single individual. *“I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and I create calamity; I, the LORD, do all these things” (Isaiah 45:7).* For many people, this idea conflicts with their view of God. (These are typically the people who do not read their Bibles through once each year and therefore do not know the Bible sufficiently.) The Bible clearly teaches that God ordains all things that come to pass in accordance with His grand design. Yes, though He is righteous and never sins, God is even sovereign over the sins of other created beings that impact us. God is also sovereign over everything that Satan does. Everything is orchestrated by God.¹

There is a story that illustrates this at the end of the book of Genesis. Joseph’s brothers betrayed him deeply by selling him to men that took him down into Egypt and then sold him as a slave. After suffering deep emotional pain from such a betrayal, Joseph suffered mistreatment for years while in Egypt. But God ultimately raised Joseph up to a position of great power second in line to the king. After several years, Joseph’s brothers came down to Egypt to purchase food because there was a famine in their own country. Eventually, Joseph made himself known to his brothers and they became frightened, wondering if Joseph would put them to death. But Joseph told them something that illustrates how God is sovereign even over the sins that other people commit against us. He told them, *“Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? “But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:21-22).*

So, whether it is a tsunami that kills 250,000 people, a terrorist that kills 200 people, or a loved one that causes deep emotional pain, God has orchestrated it all for His grand purpose for good. This is why Paul could say, *“We know that for those who love God and are called according to His purpose, He is working all things together for good” (Romans 8:28).*

If anyone claiming to be a Christian balks at this, he is in great spiritual danger because the true worshipers worship God in truth. People do not have the right to discard the truth that God has revealed about Himself just because it does not fit with their view of God. That amounts to idolatry and idolaters will not inherit the Kingdom of God. (See I Corinthians 6:9-10.)

¹ To read how Satan’s evil deeds accomplish God’s ultimate purposes, see the Appendix; ***God’s dominion over Satan and his forces.***

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Further, unless a person believes these things, it is impossible for him to “live by faith.” The Bible says, *“The righteous”* (or “justified”) *shall live by faith”* (Romans 1:17). Faith is not a set of beliefs that a person has embraced. In essence, faith is “believing God.” God has revealed many things about Himself and has made promises that He wants us to believe. In other words, He wants us to trust Him and take Him at His Word. The only way we can really know if we have saving faith is if we trust Him when “bad things” are happening to us. If we get angry when something “bad” happens to us, this suggests that we really do not believe that God is working all things together for our good. Subconsciously, we are thinking that He is either being mean to us or simply does not know what He is doing. But some people just disassociate God from the “bad” thing altogether by assuming He is not sovereign over it. They might wrongly think that Satan did it and God has nothing to do with it. All of these thought patterns prove that the one thinking them is not living by faith. Living by faith requires a person to look at every single circumstance as having been ordained by God for his good. If a person is living any other way, he is living as an unbeliever (a natural man). Only those who live by faith will end up in heaven. This is why truth is so important. God must be worshiped in truth!

Practical deism: I believe that every Christian has engaged in practical deism on occasion. Let me explain. Blatant deism says that God wound up the universe and walked away leaving it to run on its own. God is not involved in the events that are occurring every day. While all Christians reject such a view as false, it is possible for them to go through periods of time when for all practical purposes, it is as if God is not actively involved in all the things that are happening in their life. They get so caught up in the affairs of everyday life that they lose sight of the fact that God is involved in every aspect and moment of life. If a Christian begins to think and live this way, it is because he is stagnant in spirit. *“And it will come about at that time That I will search Jerusalem with lamps, And I will punish the men Who are stagnant in spirit, Who say in their hearts, ‘The LORD will not do good or evil!’”* (Zephaniah 1:12). Even if a Christian claims to believe that God is sovereign over all things, it is possible for him to become stagnant in spirit so that subconsciously, it is as if God is not involved. Or, as Zephaniah says it, *“The LORD will not do good or evil.”*

In this state of heart and mind, a person is unable to worship God in Spirit and in truth. Practically speaking, he is not operating in accordance with truth. We must recognize that God is not pleased with this state of heart and mind because it represents a heart of unbelief. Remember, unbelievers do not go to heaven. They end up in hell. So, not only must we think true thoughts about God, we must also actively believe them in our hearts or we cannot worship God in truth.

Inadequate view of God’s righteousness: If you ask most people why God should let them into heaven, they will say something like, “I have tried to live a good life.” Such an answer shows that the person does not comprehend God’s absolute righteousness. It suggest that God is less than perfect in His justice and can let a person that has broken His laws go unpunished. The Bible teaches that God will not let the guilty go unpunished. (See Exodus 34:7 and Nahum 1:3.) Anyone who has this understanding of God assumes he can gain God’s approval based upon his own goodness and without the need for a substitute sacrifice (Jesus). Such a view is antichrist and insulting to God who sent His only begotten Son to die as a substitute sacrifice for sinners. Anyone who has this mindset cannot properly worship God. Such a person is operating outside the realm of truth and God must be worshiped in truth. (Such a person is headed for hell.)

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Inadequate view of our own sinfulness: Typically, if you ask an unbeliever if he is a good person, he will answer, “Yes.” This answer demonstrates that the perception he has of his own goodness is not at all based in reality. God has declared that no people are good and that, by nature, they are all rebels bent toward evil. Anyone who thinks he is not that bad diminishes the need for a substitute sacrifice and therefore insults God who gave His only begotten Son as the only payment for sin. In addition, it suggests that the person believes he does not deserve punishment and rather, he is owed favor from God. Such a person cannot worship God in truth because his understanding is greatly distorted and not based in truth. God demands that people worship Him in truth.

Insincerity: No hypocrite will be in heaven. (See Matthew 24:51.) To worship God in truth, a person cannot pretend to be something he is not. The New Testament portrays the Christian life as one that is truly righteous and holy. In fact, the life that Jesus desires for us to live is impossible in our own power. This is why He said, “*Apart from Me, you can do nothing*” (John 15:5). So, to worship God in truth, we must live this impossible life through the power of Jesus. Nothing less will do. For example, Jesus said that unless we **forgive others from the heart**, His Father will not forgive us. (See Matthew 6:15.) If a person harbors bitterness or resentment towards another person that sinned against him in the past, he has not forgiven him. He might be tolerant toward him and claim to have forgiven. But the resentment proves that it is an insincere forgiveness and not genuine. He is living a lie and in this condition, he cannot worship God in truth. Only those who worship God in truth will be in heaven. And this is in harmony with Jesus’ warning that His Father would not forgive people that retain bitterness or resentment towards others.

Forgiveness is just one example of something a person must do in order to worship God in truth. In reality, to worship God in truth, a person must obey all of Jesus’ wishes as documented in His Word. Anything less is hypocrisy and no hypocrite will be in heaven.

When Jesus said that it is necessary for those who are worshiping God to worship in Spirit and in truth, He was talking to a woman from Samaria. At first glance, it does not seem like Jesus provided much information but if you break this statement down, it speaks volumes. The implications behind it are so far reaching that one could write many books trying to convey them. From the woman’s responses to Jesus, it is clear that before the conversation began, she thought her understanding of God was adequate. By the time it was over, she learned that to receive the salvation that Jesus the Messiah was offering, she could no longer retain her old way of thinking. Though John does not provide more information, this woman undoubtedly began from that point on, to understand more about the implications behind the statement, “Those who worship God must worship Him in Spirit and in truth.” It takes more than a lifetime to fully learn about the implications of this statement because they are so far reaching.

So far, this article has focused on the last two words of Jesus statement, “*It is necessary to worship God in Spirit and in truth*.” In reality, it is impossible to worship God in truth unless you worship in Spirit. These two ideas are tied intrinsically together. As we observed what it means to worship in truth, we should have also concluded that unless we live by the Spirit, we won’t be able to live according to the truth. The section immediately above demonstrates that to worship in truth, a person must obey all of Jesus’ wishes as documented in His Word. Anything less is hypocrisy and no hypocrite will be in heaven. It is impossible to do this apart from Jesus’ living through us. In His analogy of the vine and branches, we get a glimpse of this Jesus-powered life.

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“I AM the true vine and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes it away. And every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it that it may bear more fruit....Remain in Me and I in you. As the branch is not able to bear fruit of itself if it does not remain in the vine, likewise, you are not able to bear fruit if you do not remain in Me.” “I AM the vine. You are the branches. He who remains in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for you are not able to do anything without Me. If anyone does not remain in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered, and they gather them and throw them into the fire and he is burned” (John 15:1,2,4-6).

Again, truth matters. Only those who bear fruit will be in heaven. Everyone else will be burned up. And the type of fruit that Jesus is talking about cannot be produced in our own power. It requires the supernatural power of God’s Spirit to be unleashed. Nothing less will suffice. Paul talked about this in the seventh chapter of Romans. *“When we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter” (Romans 7:5-6).*

People who attempt to worship according to the dictates of their religion cannot worship in truth. All they have is the power of their flesh. If they try to relate to God on the basis of their own goodness assuming they are keeping God’s laws, they will always fail miserably because the law only arouses sinful passions in such people. But God has made it possible for people to live righteously by a new and living way referred to by Paul as *“the newness of the Spirit.”* In the eighth chapter of Romans, Paul explains how those who believe the gospel are set free from the old way of living. The righteousness that God desires in their lives is produced as they *“walk in the Spirit.”* These people can worship God with sincere hearts because they live in the reality that God has revealed in His Word. Only those who are “in Christ” are able to obey all of Jesus’ wishes because the Holy Spirit is alive in them and moving them to do so. These are the ones who worship God in Spirit and in Truth.

Hopefully by now, you realize that to worship God in Spirit and in truth is a far-reaching matter. When the woman (in John 4) heard Jesus’ words, *“It is necessary to worship God in Spirit and in truth,”* she could not have understood all of the implications. But surely, her understanding of them improved as she learned to live in God’s reality after she first heard them. Likewise, our understanding of the implications of this statement will continue to improve as we aggressively seek to live in the truth that God has revealed in His Word.

Appendix: *God's dominion over Satan and his forces.*

God's involvement and control over these things cannot be fully understood by the human mind. But the Bible indicates that other powerful, spiritual forces are always involved in calamities but all under complete dominion of God.

Satan is fully under God's control: The first two chapters of the book of Job provides very important information about Satan. From the first two chapters of Job, we see how God brought about His ultimate purposes in Job and used Satan in the process. We get a glimpse of Satan's great power, including the creation and control of a tornado. But we also learn that he can do absolutely nothing without prior approval from God. In other words, he is on an unbreakable leash. Though Satan's intentions are always and only evil, he is actually nothing but an agent that carries out God's divine purposes.

There is another event worth noting that has similarities to **the COVID 19 crisis**. In the latter years of David's life, the Bible says that God moved David to sin by taking a census of the armed forces in Israel. (The Law prohibited kings from taking a census of their armies.) *Again the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel, and He moved David against them to say, "Go, number Israel and Judah"* (II Samuel 24:1). On the surface, this seems odd in light of James 1:13b: *"God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone."* But I Chronicles helps us understand how God's will was accomplished. The II Samuel passage says that God moved David to number Israel. But I Chronicles 21:1 says, *"Now Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel."* For reasons we cannot begin to fully understand, God had purposed to bring about the destruction of 70,000 Israelites and accomplish it through David's sin. The record of this historical event does not specify how all these Israelites died but there is no indication of bloodshed. This may have been accomplished by a virus such as COVID 19.

We know that God is righteous and does not sin. But He uses Satan to bring about His ultimate purposes. The story of David's sin and the story of Joseph has a similar ring to it. Joseph's brothers committed great evil against Joseph by selling him into slavery. (Though it does not say, Satan was undoubtedly at work behind the scenes.) Near the end of the story, Joseph's brothers told him that Jacob, their father, wanted Joseph to forgive them. Joseph had already forgiven them but he assured him with the following statement. *"You meant it for evil...but God meant it for good"* (Genesis 50:20). So, we see this dynamic at work. God, who is righteous and never sins, is working all things together (including the sins of humans and evil forces) to accomplish His good and righteous purposes.

God uses the sins of humans and Satan to accomplish His grand purposes. When we factor in Satan's evil intentions with God's divine and ultimately good purposes, we can better understand verses like Isaiah 45:7: *"I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the Lord, do all these things."* The King James Version uses the word "evil" in place of calamity.

Several years ago, a tsunami killed about a quarter million people living on the coast of the Indian ocean. Many people said in response, "If God is good and sovereign over all things, how could He let this happen?" One thing we can suggest is that Satan was involved and his intentions were evil. He wanted to kill as many people as possible. But God is good and He has purposes for everything. Nothing is happening outside His control.

Someone might ask, "What can He possibly accomplish that is good by arranging for such a horrific event?" Isaiah 26:9 tells us of at least one purpose: *"When Your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness."* Unless the inhabitants of the earth learn righteousness, they will perish and spend eternity in hell.

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The second chapter of Peter's second epistle says that the great flood and the doom of Sodom and Gomorrah teach mankind that *"the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment"* (II Peter 2:9). To summarize, Satan desires to kill and destroy. He is extremely powerful but fully under God's control. Satan's intentions are always evil but God is accomplishing His good and righteous purposes through it all. Below, other information from the Bible is provided which teaches us about Satan's involvement under God's sovereign control.

Some of Satan's tactics: He blinds the minds of unbelievers so that they end up in hell.² He snatches the Word of God from the hearts so that they end up in hell.³ He is always whispering into people's minds that judgment is not coming and that God does not really care about sin.⁴ Being called the tempter, he is always tempting us to disobey God and renounce our allegiance to Jesus. He often transforms himself into an "angel of light" in the form of false teachers in order to deceive them.⁵

Satan is given authority to cause us harm when we harbor pride and sin: On the night Jesus was betrayed, Jesus told Peter that Satan had demanded to sift him as wheat.⁶ We read in the context that Peter was harboring pride. The Apostles were arguing with each other as to which one of them was the greatest. Also, Peter boasted that he would never forsake Jesus. It seems from Luke 22:31 that due to Peter's pride, Satan had some sort of legal standing to demand or request permission to sift him as wheat. Pride attracts Satan and his demons because all pride is aligned with the kingdom of darkness. All presumptuous sin has its root in pride since the individual asserts himself as boss in his heart. Pride and sin always gives Satan an opening for attack. This is why we read, *"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble"* (James 4:6 NASB).

Thomas Bear, 5/5/2020

² The *"god of this age has blinded those who do not believe"* (II Corinthians 4:4a).

³ *"When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart"* (Matthew 13:19).

⁴ *"Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil"* (Genesis 3:4-5).

⁵ *"For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works"* (II Corinthians 11:13-15).

⁶ *"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat"* (Luke 22:31).