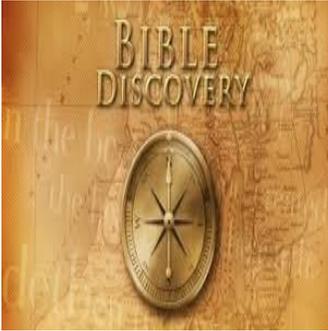


Fellowship Starts with Praise



“In spite of the throbbing pain in their bodies and the disheartening atmosphere, at midnight the men were heard praying and singing praises to God! What a strange sound this was to the other prisoners, who were used to only hearing the groans or cursing of those who had been beaten. Then suddenly, there was an earthquake that shook the prison! The doors flew open, and the bonds of every prisoner were broken!”

No, I'm not telling a story retrieved from some adventure book or fairy tale novel. This is the true story of Paul and Silas, told by the historian Luke in the Book of Acts in God's indisputable Word. This is our scriptural demonstration that praise elevates us into God's Presence and Power. Paul and Silas knew the secret of how to lift their hearts above their troubles and enter into God's presence and power. Through praise and worship, their hearts were raised into the joyous presence and peace of God, and provided God a channel for his power to operate in their circumstances.

By turning to, reading and understanding God's Word, we too have confidence that God inhabits the praises of His people. In other words, God *“dwells”* within wherever His praise is pronounced. This means that praise is not merely a reaction from coming into His presence but that praise is the vehicle of faith which transports us into the presence and power of God! Praise and worship is our “gate-pass” allowing us to enter the sacredness of His glory, to come into His throne room, to enter the Holy of Holies, to commune personally with our Lord God. The psalmist writes, *“Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name”* (Psalm 100:4).

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This corresponds with what Jesus taught that His presence will inhabit the gathering of believers who congregate in His name: *“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them”* (Matthew 18:20). A *“gathering in His name”* means that Jesus must be the focus of those assembled. He must be the One preached about, The One prayed through, the One sung about — the One praised and worshiped! *“I will declare your name to my brothers, in the presence of the koinonia will I sing your praises”* (Hebrews 2:12). Christ's presence, along with His virtue & anointing, is manifested in the type of gathering we call fellowship, & fellowship begins with praise.

It's essential then we call out asking that *“God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us.”* It is our call that God not only join us, but that our Heavenly Father comes within our midst and lead us, giving us his light, his life - his Spirit! Have you ever noticed when *“gifts of the Spirit”* operate within a church service? The power and anointing of the Holy Spirit usually becomes evident, subsequent to a time of worship and praise. Some think that worship is a response after the Holy Spirit moves upon them. However, could it be the other way around? Might it be that God's presence responds when we move upon Him with worship; that lifting up Jesus Christ through praise and worship invokes the Lord's presence and power to flow in our midst. The psalmist asks that the *people praise the Lord*. He calls for *the nations to be glad and to sing for joy*.

But, *what is Praise?* Praise means *“to commend, to applaud or magnify.”* For the Christian, praise to God is an expression of worship, lifting-up and glorifying the Lord. It's an expression of

humbling ourselves, of centering our attention upon the Lord with heartfelt expressions of love, adoration and thanksgiving. Praise recognizes that the Lord rules justly and guides the nations of the earth. Praise brings our spirit into fellowship and intimacy with God – it magnifies our awareness of our spiritual union with our Holy God. Praise transports us into the realm of the supernatural; into the presence of God. *“Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim You, who walk in the light of your presence, O Lord.”* (Psalms 89:15).

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There are many actions involved with praise to God – verbal expressions of adoration and thanksgiving – singing & shouting; physical expressions through playing instruments, lifting or clapping our hands, standing to proclaim, or sitting in reverence. But true praise is not just going through the motions. Jesus spoke about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, whose worship was only an outward show and not from the heart. *“These people honour me with the lips, but their hearts are far from me.”* (Matthew 15:8) Genuine praise to God is a matter of an attitude from the heart – it comes from total surrender with humility, it comes from sincere devotion to the LORD from way down deep within our very being.



Unpretentious, honest
praise pleases the LORD

We must never lose sight that unpretentious, honest praise and worship pleases the LORD. He eagerly awaits our sincere approach in worship. In fact, Jesus reminds us, *“...true worshipers worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”* (John 4:23) So what is it that is required of us if we are to be worshipers who worship the Father in spirit and in truth? How do we find fellowship - first with God - then with one another? Let me share two quick points on having fellowship through praise.

Fellowship starts with Praise to God as a Lifestyle

If we're to enjoy fellowship, we must begin with the sort of praise to God that we causes us to live the life designed and fulfilled by Him in all we do, say and think. All too often, praise to God is something that many people leave at church, an event happening only when they come together with other Christians. However, praise must be a part of a believer's lifestyle inter-mingled with their daily prayer-life. At work, in the car, at home in bed, or anywhere; praise to the Lord brings the refreshing of the Lord's presence, along with His power and anointing. *“...I will bless the LORD at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth.”* (Psalms 34:1) Praise is our expression of faith, our declaration of victory! Praise is our acknowledgement that all that we have and are is from God. Praise acknowledges the harvest and the blessings of the earth are from the Lord. It declares we believe God is with us; is in control of the outcome of all our circumstances. Praise is our “sacrifice” which we offer to God, not just because we feel like it, but because we believe in Him and wish to please Him. *“...let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.”* (Hebrews 13:15) When we make praise our lifestyle – our way of living - we discover fellowship which is sweet and meaningful and fulfilling, we discover we are constantly walking in Christ; and what is more, we discover that Christ is walking in us!

**Praise must be
part of
believer's
lifestyle**

Fellowship starts with Praise that Sends the Enemy Running

Since praise manifests God's presence, we must realize praise repels the presence of the enemy, Satan. An atmosphere which is filled with sincere worship and praise to God by humble and contrite hearts not only gathers God's people in fellowship but is disgusting to the Devil. Satan fears the



The battle belongs to the Lord!

went out at the head of the army”! (2 Chronicles 20:21) Can you picture the scene as they went, men of praise rather than great warriors leading the army declaring, *“Praise the LORD, for His love endures forever!”* And the scripture says, *“...as they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes against the men of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who were invading Judah; and they were defeated.”* (2 Chronicles 20:22)

Dr. Charles Stanley states, *“Only One person is worthy of all our praise, and that is Jesus Christ.”* When God’s people begin to praise His name, it sends the enemy running! The enemy who comes against you with doubt and fear – must flee. The enemy with his temptations to weaken and destroy you – must fail. The enemy with his lies and his tricks – must be defeated.

“Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.” (1 John 4:4)

Our weapon is our praise; our victory is the Lord! I challenge you if you would be in fellowship, first with God and then with God’s people, to become a person of praise, and you too will experience the release of the power of God! May I suggest as faithful followers of Jesus, we find fellowship through our praise; we enjoy the power of the Lord in our midst; we know we’ve the victory in Jesus & are surrounded by the witnesses who are of Christ.

I believe God’s mission for us is to bring our brothers & sisters, our friends & our neighbours back to church. He’s not finished with us yet. In pursuing mission with God, I believe that mission starts with our fellowship – working together. I believe that our fellowship starts with praise! And I believe that praise belongs to our Heavenly Father and He is pleased to receive our praise through His Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to whom we owe all that there is and ever shall be! We owe Him our very lives!