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Worship: A Meditation

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I remember the night I first discovered the meaning of the word worship. That morning I had been to church and had gotten into a brief discussion with the Pastor about what he kept calling the 'worthiness of God.' I remember thinking that this phrase seemed odd to me and I wasn't sure what to make of it. Oh, I had heard it used before. It was the sort of thing one nodded one's head to and then went on one's way. Like talk about the 'glory' of God. I was never sure what that meant either, and given all the violent things God was sometimes said to do for the sake of his 'glory' I wasn't sure I cared to know. But now I began wondering about this phrase. Worthy? Was God worthy? Worthy of what?

And it occurred to me that to say God is worthy is to say God is worthy of worship. Yes, that must be it. But there was something dismaying about this thought because I knew at once that I did not really experience God as *worthy* of worship. Oh, to be sure, I now 'worshipped' God – I attended church each Sunday and muttered 'amen' when prayers were said. I also read and thought a great deal about God. And I had more or less accepted that it was a good thing to worship God. At least for me. But worthy? Was God *worthy* of worship? Something in me balked at this.

But what was it? What was wrong with me? If indeed God was worthy of worship then my inability to immediately acknowledge this could only signify some terrible flaw in myself. What could it be? So there I sat on the couch in my apartment that Sunday evening trying to understand why I failed to experience God as worthy of worship. And it wasn't long before the answer came to me. The God of the Bible, the God of Church preaching, the God of the many classical theologians I had read and studied, did not seem to me worthy of worship for the rather simple reason that he was just too mean and cruel.

Now I know about cruelty and meanness. When I was a child I was rather small for my age and tended to get bullied a lot. And the thing about a bully was, if he was at all clever, he would never admit to being a bully. No, the reason he was badgering you always had to do with something you were doing wrong. Maybe you had looked at him the wrong way, or were wearing the wrong color shirt, or had the wrong color hair. Maybe you had meant something you hadn't said or had said something you hadn't meant. Maybe you were standing with your weight on the wrong foot or breathing too loudly or gazing off in the wrong direction. Oh, there were any number of reasons why the bully was right to bully you, and if he was a big enough bully he could even get you to admit to them. Of course he knew, and you knew, and he knew that you knew, that he was just being mean and cruel. But no one said so. To say so was to subject yourself to a lot more bullying.

Now I could bow down to God, just as I could humor a bully. I could say my prayers and mutter my 'amens.' I could go through all the motions of the worship service, and even call God 'worthy,' if that's what he wanted. After all, God was very big, and one didn't want to get on his bad side. But worship? Really worship from the heart? Well, this was just asking too much. Even the schoolyard bullies didn't ask that. It just wasn't happening.

And as I sat there thinking all this I began to wonder what God would have to be like in order for me to truly worship him. I mean, not just go through the motions of worship but truly worship from my heart. What *would* I consider worthy of worship? And immediately I knew the answer. This God would have to be good. Really, honestly, good. Not 'good' with a wink. Not 'good' with an asterisk attached pointing to a footnote explaining that every now and then he had to torture someone forever to prove how 'just' he was. But *really* good. Good without bounds or qualification. And as I sat there thinking about what this goodness would be like, and wishing that God were actually like this, something began to happen. I began to feel the warmest glow start to radiate in my heart. And this warm radiant glow grew in me until it was quite pronounced. And I felt at once that this was the very goodness I'd been seeking. My eyes began to brim with tears at the sheer beauty of it. It was *so* good. I just sat there stunned. And for the first time in my life I knew what it meant to say: 'thou art worthy.' I was worshipping.

But *what* was I worshipping? Was it the God of the Bible? Well, it certainly seemed to be the God of some *parts* of the Bible. The parts about loving your neighbor as yourself, and loving your enemy. The part about the prodigal son. The part about forgiving unto 70 times 7 times. One could see how these must have flowed from this very heart of goodness. But there were other parts of the Bible, far too many for comfort, where the God depicted seemed at a far remove from what I was now experiencing. The Biblical God of somber menace, of wrath and irascibility, of storm and fury, seemed to have little to do with what was radiating in my heart. For the first time in my life I was worshipping, but I could not say *who* I was worshipping. I could not say what powers this God had or didn't have. I couldn't tell you his/her pedigree. I could only say that this, at last, was *worthy* of worship.

But whoever I was worshipping, it was clear to me that it was *my* God. This was who I would like to spend eternity with. This was who I could even accept being persecuted for. This was *my* God. Not the God I was supposed to worship, or the God I had been taught to worship, but the God I did *in fact* worship. And this God's essence was perfect goodness. Real, honest, goodness. Not goodness for the show of it, not goodness with an asterisk attached, not goodness that would be called ill-tempered bullying in anyone else. It was a goodness that cared infinitely, a goodness that understood infinitely, a goodness that wanted only to heal and never to condemn, a goodness that would not rest until every last molecule of the universe was safe.

This was *my* God. Perhaps others had *their* Gods and perhaps, after all, they were not the same as my God. Maybe this was the reason it had taken me so long to return to religion after having abandoned it as a child – because I could not find a church or synagogue where my God was honored and worshipped unqualifiedly. And yet, mustn't this very

goodness have been what the earliest followers of Jesus experienced? Is it even conceivable that they could have agreed to be stoned, persecuted, and crucified for a God who was nothing but a demand to cower and submit? Unthinkable! And I remembered Jesus' saying that foxes have their holes and fishes the sea but the Son of Man has no place to rest his head. And it occurred to me, looking at the state of religion in our world, that after two thousand years he *still* has no place to rest his head.

But I do not begrudge them their God. Let them have their God, so long as I can have mine. Maybe everyone will spend eternity with whatever God they worship. Those who worship a God of wrath, a God of judgment, a God of violence and fury, well...

But I will spend eternity with my God, my God of perfect goodness. Let others have their God. I had found mine. And having found my God, I had discovered the meaning of worship.