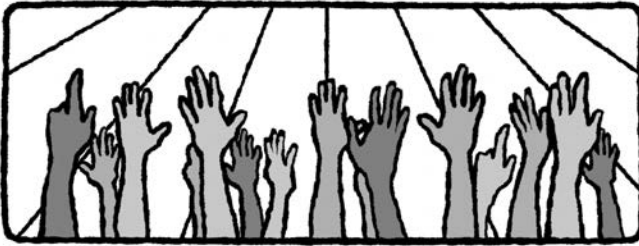


Worship That Never Ends



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Psalms 134; Isaiah 42:10–12; Revelation 14:3; Psalm 15; Psalms 101:1–3; Psalm 96; Revelation 14:6–12; John 4:23, 24.*

Memory Text: “I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have my being” (*Psalm 104:33, NKJV*).

As our experience of God's grace and power increases, we are prompted to ask with the psalmist: “What shall I render to the LORD for all His benefits toward me?” (*Ps. 116:12, NKJV*). The inevitable reply is to devote one's life to being faithful to God.

In the Psalms, Israel is not simply a nation but “the great assembly” (*Ps. 22:22, 25, NKJV; Ps. 35:18*). This reveals Israel's primary calling to praise God and to bear witness about Him to other nations because the Lord wants all the world to join His people in worship. The Lord's people are identified with the righteous, who worship the Lord and whose hope is in Him and in His love.

Praising the Lord in the congregation is perceived as ideal worship. This does not mean that the prayer and praise of the individual in Israel assume a secondary meaning. By contrast, the individual's worship of God feeds the communal worship with renewed praise (*Ps. 22:22, 25*) while in turn individual worship develops its fullest potential in close relationship with the community. The worshiping community also is called the “assembly of the upright” (*Ps. 111:1*). The upright know God (*Ps. 36:10*) and are known by God (*Ps. 37:18*), and this experience permeates every aspect of their existence.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 23.

Lift Up Your Hands in the Sanctuary

Read Psalm 134. Where is the worship offered here? What is the outcome of the worship of the Lord?

Psalm 134 recalls the Aaronic priestly blessing in Numbers 6:24–26 (*also Ps. 67:1*) and highlights blessing as the underlying principle and outcome of the relationship between God and Israel. The people bless God in the sanctuary, and God blesses His people from Zion. The blessings extend to all of life because the Lord is the Creator of heaven and earth. The mention of Zion as the place of divine special blessings underlines the Lord’s covenantal bond with His people. It is thus within the covenant of grace that Israel exercises the privilege to bless the Lord and is blessed by Him.

Read Psalm 18:1; Psalm 36:1; Psalm 113:1; Psalm 134:1, 2; and Psalm 135:1, 2. How are the worshipers depicted here?

The Psalms often depict the worshipers as the servants of the Lord. “Who by night stand in the house of the LORD” (*Ps. 134:1, NKJV*) likely refers to the night guard of the Levites (*1 Chron. 9:23–27*) or to the praise that was offered to God by the Levites both day and night (*1 Chron. 9:33*).

Because the Israelites worshiped the invisible God, who could not be represented in the form of any image, the sanctuary served to reflect the glory of the Lord and provide a secure environment for sinful people to approach their holy King. This encounter is initiated by the Lord Himself and is regulated by His statutes and decrees.

“Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (*1 Pet. 2:4, 5, NKJV*). What we see here, in the words of Peter, is a New Testament expression of the same ideas presented in these psalms, that of God’s people, now a holy priesthood, offering praise and thanksgiving to their Lord Jesus Christ, their Creator and Redeemer, for all the good things that He had done for them.

As New Testament believers, we, also, have a priestly role in that we are called to mediate the good news of the gospel to the world. What are the most effective ways we can do this?

Sing to the Lord a New Song

Read Psalm 33:3, Psalm 40:3, Psalm 96:1, Psalm 98:1, Psalm 144:9, and Psalm 149:1. What is the common motif in these texts?

These psalms summon people to sing a “new song.” What is a “new song” here? The reason for the “new song” is the fresh recognition of the Lord’s majesty and sovereignty over the world and gratitude for His care and salvation as the Creator and Judge of the earth. Deliverance from enemies and from death, and God’s special favor toward Israel, are some of the more personal motives to sing “a new song.” While other songs also praise the Lord for His loving-kindness and wonders, the “new song” is a special song, expressing rekindled joy and promising renewed devotion to God. The new experience of divine deliverance inspires the people to acknowledge the Lord as their Creator and King. The common themes in the psalms that tell of “a new song” are trust in God, praise of His wonderful works, and deliverance from affliction, among other things.

Read Isaiah 42:10–12, Revelation 5:9, and Revelation 14:3. What can we infer about the “new song” from these biblical texts?

God’s people Israel is depicted in affectionate terms as “a people near to Him [God]” (*Ps. 148:14, NKJV*), implying that of all the creation, Israel has the most special status, and thus is most obliged and privileged to praise God. The Bible thus encourages believers of all generations to sing the new song in praise of their Redeemer, which carries their unique testimony about salvation in the blood of the Lamb. A “new song” can depict a fresh song that no one has ever heard before, a song that commemorates a vivid experience of God’s grace in one’s life. The “new song” can also express hope, in which case the newness of the song is demonstrated in the anticipation of the unique, unprecedented experience of God’s majesty in the future. True worship goes beyond sacrifices and offerings and reflects a living relationship with God that is always fresh and dynamic. In a sense, one could simply say that the “new song” is a new expression, even each day, of our love and appreciation for what God has done for us.

Dwell on God’s blessings in your life. If you were to sing a new song, what would it be?

Lord, Who May Abide in Your Tabernacle?

Read Psalm 15. Who are the people worthy of worshiping in God's presence?

The answer given in this psalm is the summary of the requirements already given in God's law and the prophets: the ones whose actions ("works righteousness") and character ("in his heart") (*see Deut. 6:5, Mic. 6:6–8*) are a reflection of God. The sanctuary was a holy place, and everything in it, including the priests, was consecrated. Thus, holiness is a mandatory requirement for entering the presence of God. Israel's holiness was to be comprehensive, uniting worship with ethics and exercised in all aspects of life. The law was given to God's people to enable them to fulfill their greatest potential (i.e., live as a kingdom of priests). The royal priesthood includes a life of holiness in the presence of God and bringing the covenant blessings to other nations.

Read Psalm 24:3–6 and Psalm 101:1–3. What does it mean to be holy?

"A perfect heart" is the worshiper's greatest quality before God. The Hebrew *tamim*, "perfect," conveys the notion of "completeness" and "wholeness." A "perfect" vine is whole, undamaged, and healthy (*Ezek. 15:5*). Animals offered as sacrifices had to be *tamim*, or without blemish (*Lev. 22:21–24*). "Perfect" speech is entirely truthful (*Job 36:4*). A "perfect heart" thus is a "pure heart" (*Ps. 24:4*) or a heart of integrity (*Ps. 15:2*). It seeks God (*Ps. 24:6*) and is restored by God's forgiveness (*Ps. 51:2–10*). A blameless life springs from the acknowledgment of God's grace and His righteousness. Divine grace inspires and enables God's servants to live in the fear of the Lord, which means to live in unhindered fellowship with God and in submission to His Word. A testimony of a devoted and pious life brings praise to God and not to one's own self. Notice that most requirements in Psalm 15 are given in negative terms (*Ps. 15:3–5*). This is not about earning God's favor but about avoiding the things that would separate us from God.

How can we make conscious choices to avoid the things that push us away from God? What are some of those things, and how can we avoid doing them?

Declare His Glory Among the Nations

Read Psalm 96. What manifold aspects of worship are mentioned in this psalm?

Worship includes singing to the Lord (*Ps. 96:1, 2*), praising His name (*Ps. 96:2*), proclaiming His goodness and greatness (*Ps. 96:3, 4*), and bringing gifts to His temple (*Ps. 96:8*). In addition to these familiar traits of worship, Psalm 96 highlights one not so obvious aspect of worship—the evangelical dimension in proclaiming the Lord’s kingdom to other peoples (*Ps. 96:2, 3, 10*).

Yet, singing, praising, bringing gifts, and proclaiming the gospel are not separate actions but are varied expressions of worship. The proclamation of God’s salvation to all nations gives substance to praise and content to worship. Notice how the reasons for worship coincide with the message proclaimed to other peoples: “for the LORD is great” (*Ps. 96:4*), “for all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens” (*Ps. 96:5, NKJV*), “the LORD reigns” (*Ps. 96:10, NKJV*), and “for He is coming to judge the earth” (*Ps. 96:13, NKJV*). Thus, the goal of evangelism is to unite other peoples with God’s people, and ultimately the whole creation in the worship of the Lord (*Ps. 96:11–13*).

Worship springs from the inward recognition of who the Lord is, that is, Creator, King, and Judge (*Ps. 96:5, 10, 13*). Worship thus involves remembering God’s past acts (Creation), celebrating His present wonders (God’s sustaining of the world and His present reign), and anticipating His future deeds (end-time judgment and a new life in a new heavens and earth).

Judgment in the Psalms means restoration of the divine order of peace, justice, and well-being in a world presently burdened by injustice and suffering. Hence, the whole earth rejoices in anticipation of God’s judgments (*Ps. 96:10–13, Ps. 98:4–9*). The fact that the Lord is a righteous Judge should additionally motivate people to worship Him in holiness and “tremble,” and should caution them against taking worship lightly (*Ps. 96:9*). Worship involves both immense joy and confidence (*Ps. 96:1, 2, 11–13*) and holy fear and awe (*Ps. 96:4, 9*).

The universal appeal of Psalm 96 to worship the Creator and the Judge is reflected in God’s final gospel proclamation to the world, the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6–12. In many ways this psalm seems to incorporate this end-time message: creation, salvation (“everlasting gospel”), worship, and judgment. It’s all there.

Compare this psalm with the three angels’ messages (*Rev. 14:6–12*). In what ways does it teach the same basic truths as does this end-time message that we are to proclaim to the world?

When God Does Not Delight in Sacrifices

Read Psalm 40:6–8, Psalm 50:7–23, and Psalm 51:16–19. What important issue do these texts address? Why does God not delight in the sacrifices that He prescribed in His Word (*Exod. 20:24*)?

Like the prophets, the psalmists decry various misuses of worship. Their main point in these verses is not the Lord's aversion to Israel's sacrifices and festivals but the reasons for such repugnance: the fatal distance between worship and spirituality.

God is not rebuking His people for their sacrifices and burnt offerings but for their wickedness and acts of injustice that they had done in their personal lives (*Ps. 50:8, 17–21*). The Psalms are not preaching against sacrifice and worship but against *vain* sacrifice and *empty* worship, demonstrated in the unrighteousness of these worshippers.

When the unity between the outward expression of worship and the correct inner motivation for worship falls apart, rituals usually become more important in and of themselves than does the actual experience of drawing close to God. That is, the forms of worship become an end in themselves as opposed to the God whom those rituals are supposed to point to and to reveal.

Read John 4:23, 24. What point is Jesus making here that fits exactly with what the psalms for today are warning about?

Sacrifices alone are not enough. What good were these sacrifices if the hearts of those offering them were not filled with repentance, faith, and a sorrow for sin? Only when accompanied by repentance and sincere thanksgiving could the sacrifices of bulls please God as “sacrifices of righteousness” (*Ps. 51:19, see also Ps. 50:14*). Jesus, quoting Isaiah, expressed it like this: “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me” (*Matt. 15:8, NKJV*). The problems the psalmists saw were the same problems that Jesus encountered with some of the people, especially the leaders, during His earthly ministry.

How can we make sure that we, as Adventists, with all this light and knowledge, don't fall into the trap of thinking that merely knowing truth and going through the rituals of the truth is enough?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “How to Pray,” pp. 39–42, in *A Call to Stand Apart*.

Central to worship is the need for repentance, true repentance: “Repentance includes sorrow for sin and a turning away from it. We shall not renounce sin unless we see its sinfulness; until we turn away from it in heart, there will be no real change in the life.

“There are many who fail to understand the true nature of repentance. Multitudes sorrow that they have sinned and even make an outward reformation because they fear that their wrongdoing will bring suffering upon themselves. But this is not repentance in the Bible sense. They lament the suffering rather than the sin. Such was the grief of Esau when he saw that the birthright was lost to him forever. Balaam, terrified by the angel standing in his pathway with drawn sword, acknowledged his guilt lest he should lose his life; but there was no genuine repentance for sin, no conversion of purpose, no abhorrence of evil. Judas Iscariot, after betraying his Lord, exclaimed, ‘I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood.’ Matthew 27:4.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, pp. 22, 23.

“Although God dwells not in temples made with hands, yet He honors with His presence the assemblies of His people. He has promised that when they come together to seek Him, to acknowledge their sins, and to pray for one another, He will meet with them by His Spirit. But those who assemble to worship Him should put away every evil thing. Unless they worship Him in spirit and truth and in the beauty of holiness, their coming together will be of no avail. Of such the Lord declares, ‘This people draweth nigh unto Me with their mouth, and honoreth Me with their lips; but their heart is far from Me.’ Matthew 15:8, 9. Those who worship God must worship Him ‘in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him.’ John 4:23.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 50.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What is the worshiper’s greatest offering to God (*Ps. 40:6–10; Rom. 12:1, 2*)?
- ❷ How are individual and communal worship related? Why do we really need both? How does each one enhance the other?
- ❸ Many people understand worship to pertain only to prayer, singing of hymns, and study of the Bible and spiritual literature. While these activities are essential for worship, is worship limited to them? Give some examples of other forms of worship.
- ❹ Ellen G. White wrote: “His service should not be looked upon as a heart-saddening, distressing exercise. It should be a pleasure to worship the Lord and to take part in His work.”—*Steps to Christ*, p. 103. How can worship of the Lord become a pleasure?

No Hair, but a Hat: Part 8

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Sekule learned of two other Sabbath-keepers in the military: a lieutenant preparing for baptism and an older man born in a Seventh-day Adventist home. The Bosnian War was raging, and the lieutenant tried to convince Sekule that desperate times called for desperate measures.

“This is a special time, and you have to eat what you have,” he said. “You can practice your religion after you leave the military, but now you have to eat for your health.”

Sekule decided that the lieutenant wasn’t an Adventist. He was talking like Sekule’s unbelieving parents, and Sekule didn’t want to eat meat.

Sekule longed to meet the soldier born in an Adventist home. He wanted to ask for advice about what to eat, what to do if he were sent to the front, or just to pray together. He felt so alone.

One day, someone pointed out the Adventist to Sekule in the mess hall. Sekule watched as the man sat down with a plate of pork sausages and brown beans fried in lard, removed the sausages, and ate the beans.

A struggle broke out inside Sekule. *He’s eating unclean food*, he thought. *Are you stupid? You’ve lost so much weight and you don’t have strength because you don’t want to eat anything. Look at him. He’s smart. When you leave the military, you can eat whatever you want.*

Sekule took a step toward the serving line. Then he took another step. He wasn’t hungry—he was famished after eating only bread with tea for 20 days.

A few steps away from the food, he stopped. *I won’t take it*, he thought. *If God died for me, I will be faithful to Him.*

After a few months, spring arrived, and Sekule ate budding leaves on trees. He also ate grass that he knew was edible from his childhood.

Four months into his military service, he left the barracks to eat his first meal with a spoon. An Adventist pastor invited him to his home for a meal.

Not long after that, Sekule was sent to Serbia’s capital, Belgrade, to serve under the military’s top general. He was one of the best teleprinter typers in the country. His new barracks were located only a 20-minute walk away from a Seventh-day Adventist seminary. In his new role, he was allowed to leave the barracks whenever he wanted, and he ate vegetarian meals at the seminary nearly every day. Sekule believed God was rewarding his faithfulness.

Sekule enjoyed good health in the military. Never once did he fall ill. He lost only his hair. He entered the military with hair and left with none. He says it was as if God were saying, “If you are faithful to Me, I will take care of you. Yes, you will have problems. Yes, you lost your hair. But it is not a problem. I have a hat for you.”

Read about SEKULE SEKULIĆ’s post-military life in the third quarter 2023 Mission quarterly available at bit.ly/adultmission. Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help spread the good news of Jesus’ soon coming in Montenegro and around the world.