



"God Seeking Worshippers"

Horatius Bonar
(1808-1889)

For ages before **God** sought a temple, he had been **seeking worshippers**. He could do without the former, but not without the latter. His first sanctuary was but a tent; and three thousand years had elapsed before he said, Build me a house wherein I may dwell. Yet all this time he was **seeking** for **worshippers** amongst the sons of men. By man's sin **God** had lost the worship of earth, and he had set himself to regain it.

1. **He wants LOVE.** Being the infinitely loveable **God**, he asks love from man — from every man; love according to his worth and beauty.
2. **He claims OBEDIENCE.** For his will is the fountainhead of all law; and he expects that this will of his should be in all things conformed to.
3. **He expects SERVICE.** The willing and living service of man's whole being is what he claims and desires, — the service of body, soul, and spirit.
4. **He asks for WORSHIP.** He does not stand in need of human praise or prayer; yet he asks for these, he delights in these, he wants the inner praise of the silent heart. He wants the uttered praise of the fervent lip and tongue. He desires the solitary praise of the closet; and still more the loud harmony of the great congregation; for "the Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob," (Psa 87:2). True praise is a 'speaking well of **God**', (1 Peter 1:3), speaking of him in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, according to his excellency. "Bless the Lord, O my soul" (Psa 103:1), "Blessed be the **God** and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:3).

It was of "worship" that the Lord spoke so much to the woman of Sychar. To Nicodemus he said nothing of this; nor indeed to any others. It was in regard to "worship" that the Samaritans had gone so far astray, therefore he speaks specially of this, — even to this poor profligate. He spoke to her of "the Father," and of "the worship of the Father" (John 4:21); reminding her that **God** was a spirit and that "they who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." And then he adds these memorable words, "the Father seeketh such to worship him."

It was of the difference between outward and inward religion, between the real and the unreal, between the acceptable and the unacceptable, that he spoke to the woman. Samaria and Jerusalem, Gerizzim and Moriah, these were but external things. There was no religious virtue connected with them; **God** is not the **God** of the outward, but of the inward; not the **God** of places, but of living creatures; not the **God** of cities and mountains, but the **God** of hearts and souls. No rites, however numerous or gorgeous or

beautiful, can be a substitute for the life and the spirit. The question is not intellectual, or aesthetic, or pictorial, but spiritual; not as to what gratifies our eye or ear, our sense of the great or the tasteful, but what is acceptable to **God** and according to his instructions.

*Where am I to worship **God**?* man asks; but he answers it in his own way; as all false religions, and indeed some true ones, have done. On certain sacred spots, he says, where some man of **God** has lived, where some martyr's blood has been shed, where the footsteps of good men are recorded to have been, which have been consecrated by certain priestly rites, — there and there only must men worship **God**. **God**'s answer to the question, Where am I to worship **God**? is, **EVERYWHERE**: on sea and land, vale or hill, desert or garden, city or village or moor, — anywhere and everywhere. For certain purposes **God** set apart Sinai for a season, and then Moriah; but not to the exclusion of other places. And even these consecrations are at an end. Sinai is but the old red granite hill, — no more, — where now no man worships. Moriah is but the old limestone platform, now desecrated by false worship. “Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father” (John 4:21).

*When am I to worship **God**?* man asks; but he answers it in his own way also. Only at certain times, he says, — certain hours, and certain days, fixed and arranged by priestly authority, or ecclesiastical law, or traditional rule. **God**'s answer is, “at all times and seasons”: pray without ceasing. The naming of certain hours and days is necessary for the gathering together of the **worshippers**; but worship is to be perpetual, without restriction of times. All hours are holy; all days are holy, in so far as worship is concerned; only one day having been specially appointed of **God**, and that not for restriction but for order.

*How am I to worship **God**?* man asks; and he has answered it also in his own way. In the gorgeous temple, in the pillared cathedral, with incense, and vestments, and forms, and ceremonies, and processions, and postures, he says. But these performances are the will-worship of self-righteousness, not the obedient service of men worshipping **God** in ways of his own ordination. Man cannot teach man how to worship **God**. When he tries it, he utterly fails. He distorts worship; he misrepresents **God**, and he indulges his own sensuous or self-righteous tastes. His “dim religious light” is but a reflection of his own gloomy spirit, and an ignorant misrepresentation of him “who is light, and in whom is no darkness at all.” **God**'s answer to man's question is given in the Lord's words, “they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.” The vestments may or may not be comely; that matters not. The music may or may not be fine: the knees may or may not be bent; the hands may or may not be clasped; the place of worship may or may not be a cathedral, or a consecrated fabric. These are immaterial things; adjuncts of religion, not its essence. The true worship is that of the inner man; and all things else are of little moment. As it is with love, so it is with worship. The heart is everything. **God** can do without the bended knee, but not without the broken heart.

It is of the Father that Christ is here speaking; — of him whose name is not only **God** but Father, the **God** and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. As the fountainhead of all being in heaven and in earth, the paternal Creator, the Father of spirits, the great Father-spirit, the **God** of the spirits of all flesh, whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain, yet who

visiteth earth in his fatherly love, — as such he is here spoken of by our Lord. He is a spirit, yet he is no vague or cold abstraction, no mere assemblage of what we call attributes, but full of life and love; with the heart of a father, with the pity and power and care of a father, and also with all a father's resources and rights. Though we have broken off from that father and gone into the far country, that does not change his paternal nature, though it alters our relationship to him and the treatment we are to receive at his hands. He made the fatherly heart of man, and he did so after the likeness of his own. That fatherly heart yearns over his wandered family; "His tender mercies are over all his works."

It is as Father that he is **seeking worshippers**, and **seeking** them here on earth among the fallen sons of men.

He seeketh! That word means more than it seems. He is in search of something; of something which he has lost; of something which he counts precious; of something which he cannot afford to lose. Great as he is, there are many things which he cannot think of letting go. His very greatness makes him needy, for it makes him understand the value, not only of every soul which he has formed, but of every atom of dust which he has created. When he misses any part of his creation, he goes or sends in search of it; he will not part with it. Men of common souls, when they lose anything, are apt to say, Let it go, I can do without it. Men of great minds, when they lose anything, say, I must have it back again, I cannot afford to lose it. Much more is this true of the infinite Jehovah. It is his greatness that makes him so susceptible of loss. Others may overlook the lost thing. He cannot. He must go in quest of it.

It is the same kind of **seeking** and searching as the prophet Ezekiel, speaking in the name of Jehovah, declares, — "I will search and seek," (Eze 34:11); and to which our Lord so often refers, when he represents himself as "**seeking** the lost" (Luke 19:10); it may be the lost sheep, or the lost piece of silver, or the lost son.

We must not dilute these expressions, and say that they simply imply that **God** is willing to have us back again if we will come; that he is willing to take us as **worshippers** if we will come. All that comes very far short of the meaning. And though we may say, what can the infinite Jehovah be in want of; what can he need, to whom belongs not only the heaven of heavens but the whole universe; — still we must see how anxious he is to show us his unutterable earnestness in **seeking** and in searching.

*Such is the attitude of **God**! He bends down from his eternal throne to seek; as if the want of something here on earth, on this old sinful earth, would be a grievous and irreparable loss. What value does he attach to us and to our worship!*

Yes, the Father seeketh **worshippers**! He is in search of many things of which sin has robbed Him; affection, homage, allegiance, reverence, obedience; but worship, — the worship of man, and of man's earth, he is specially **seeking** and claiming. He so created this world, that from it there should arise, without ceasing, wide as the universal air, that fragrance of holy worship, from the creatures which he had made and placed upon its

surface. The command is not merely, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy **God** with all thy heart,” but “thou shalt worship the Lord thy **God** and him only shalt thou serve.” Over this broken command he mourns; “it grieves him at his heart”; and he seeks to have it restored in man. He loves worship from human hearts and lips, and he will not be satisfied without it. It might seem a small thing to lose the worship of a creature’s heart, here on this low and evil earth. Can he not let it go? It will only be the worse for the creature, not for him, who has the worship of heaven, and of ten thousand times ten thousand angels. No, he cannot lose that worship. It is precious to him. He must have it back.

O man, **God** speaks to you and says, “Worship me.” He comes up to each sinner upon earth and says, “Worship me.” If he does so, he must care for you and he must care for your worship. It is not a matter of indifference to him whether you worship him or not. It concerns him, and it concerns you. Perhaps the thought comes up within you, what does **God** care for my worship? I may praise, or I may not, what does he care? I may sing, or I may blaspheme, what does it matter to him? He cares much. It concerns him deeply. He is thoroughly in earnest when he asks you to worship him. He wants these lips of yours, that tongue of yours, that heart of yours. He wants them all for himself. Will you give him what he wants?

You say he has enough of praise in heaven, what can he want on earth? He has angels in myriads to praise him, does he really desire my voice? Will he be grieved if I refuse it? Yes, he desires your voice, and he will be grieved if you withhold it. He has many a nobler tongue than yours, but still he wants yours. He has many a sweeter voice than yours, still he is bent on having that poor sinful voice. Oh come and worship me, he says.

This answers the question so often put by the inquiring, What warrant have I for coming to **God**. **God** wants you. Is not that enough? What more would you have? He wants you to draw near. He has no pleasure in your distance. He wants you to praise him, to worship him. He is **seeking** your worship. Do you mean to ask, What warrant have I for worshipping **God**? Rather should you ask, What warrant have I for refusing to worship him? Is it possible that you can think yourself at liberty not to worship him; nay, think that you are not under any obligation to worship him, until you can ascertain your election, or feel within you some special change which you can consider **God**’s call to worship him?

His search for **worshippers** is a world-wide one. It goes over the whole earth; and his call on men to worship is equally universal. He made man to worship and to love; can he ever forego such claims, or can man ever be in a position in which that claim ceases, or that obligation is cancelled? Can his sinfulness or unworthiness exempt him from the duty, or make it unwarrantable in him to come and worship Jehovah?

Let us hear how he speaks to the sons of men, Jew and Gentile: —

*“Make a joyful noise unto **God**, all ye lands!
Sing forth the honour of his name,
Make his praise glorious.” (Psa 66:1, 2)*

Again he speaks, —

*“O sing unto the Lord a new song;
Sing unto the Lord, all the earth!
Sing unto the Lord,
Bless his name!
Show forth his salvation from day to day.” (Psa 96:1, 2)*

Again he speaks, —

*“Praise ye the Lords
For it is good to sing praises unto our **God**;
For it is pleasant;
Yea, praise is comely.” (Psa 147:1)*

Nay, he calls on all nature to praise him. He claims the homage of the inanimate creation.

*“Let the heavens rejoice,
And let the earth be glad;
Let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof
Let the field be joyful, and all that is therein;
Then shall the trees of the wood rejoice
Before the Lord.” (Psa 96:11-13)*

Thus is **God seeking** for **worshippers** here on earth. And what is his gospel but the proclamation of his gracious search for **worshippers**? He sends out his glad tidings of great joy, that he may draw men to himself and make them **worshippers** of his own glorious self.

The shepherd loses one of his flock; and he misses it. The shepherd misses the sheep more than the sheep misses the shepherd. The sheep is too precious to be lost. It must be sought for and found; whatever toil or peril may be in the way. Even life itself is not to be grudged in behalf of the lost one, “The good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep,” as if the life of the sheep were more valuable than that of the Shepherd.

The woman loses one of her ten silver pieces, she cannot afford to lose it. She must have it back again. She seeks till she finds it. It does not miss her, but she misses it. She seeks and finds!

The father loses his son; and is troubled. The son may not miss the father, but the father misses the son; nor can he rest till he has taken him in his arms again, and set him down at his table with gladness and feasting.

But the passage we are considering brings before us something beyond all this. It is not the shepherd **seeking** his sheep, nor the woman her silver, nor the father his son; it is Jehovah **seeking worshippers!** and he is in earnest. He wants to be worshipped by the sons of Adam. He desires the worship of earth no less than that of heaven. He has the praise of angels, but he must have that of men. Such is the value he sets upon us, and such is his love?

But it is spiritual worship, and spiritual **worshippers** that he is **seeking**: “The Father seeketh such to worship him.” The outward man is nothing, it is the inner man he is in quest of. The worship must come, not from the walls of the temple, but from the innermost shrine. It must be something pervading the man’s whole being, and coming up from the depths of the soul; otherwise, it is but as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. Forms, sounds, gestures, dresses, ornaments, are not worship. They are but

*“Mouth-honour breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, but dare not.”*

Instead of constituting worship, these outward things are often but excuses for refusing the inward service. Man pleases himself with a sensuous and theatrical externalism, because he hates the spiritual and the true. **God** says, “Give me thine heart.” Man says, “No; but I will give you my voice.” **God** says, “Give me thy soul.” Man says, “No; but I will give thee my knee and my bended body.” But it will not do. “**God** is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”

But what provision has **God** made for all this? It is not enough to say to us, “Be **worshippers**,” — this might be said to the unsinning, and they would at once comply. “Let all the angels of **God** worship him.” But say this to a sinner, and he will ask, “How can I, a man of unclean lips and unclean heart, approach the infinitely holy One? It would not be safe in me to come, nor would it be right in **God** to allow me to approach.” There must be provision for this; — something which will satisfy the sinner’s conscience, remove the sinner’s dread, win the sinner’s confidence, on the one hand, and satisfy **God**, vindicate righteousness, magnify holiness, on the other.

For this there is the twofold provision of the blood and the Spirit. The blood satisfies **God**’s righteousness and the sinner’s conscience. The Holy Spirit renews the man, so as to draw out his heart in worship. It is the blood that propitiates, and it is the Spirit that transforms. **God** presents this blood freely to the sinner; **God** proclaims his desire to give this Spirit freely.

“May I use this blood?” perhaps one says. Use it! Certainly. Thou fool, why shouldst thou ask such a question? Use it! Yes; for thou must either use it, or trample on it. Which of these wilt thou do?

“May I expect the Spirit?” some one may say. Expect him! What! art thou more willing to have the Spirit than **God** is to give him? Art thou so willing, and **God** so unwilling? Thou fool, who has persuaded thee to believe such a lie?

God has come to thee, O man! saying, "I want thee for a worshipper": wilt thou become one? Remember, thou must either be a worshipper or a blasphemer; which wilt thou be?

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Bonar has been called "the prince of Scottish hymn writers." After graduating from the University of Edinburgh, he was ordained in 1838, and became pastor of the North Parish, Kelso. He joined the Free Church of Scotland after the "Disruption" of 1843, and for a while edited the church's *The Border Watch*. Bonar remained in Kelso for 28 years, after which he moved to the Chalmers Memorial church in Edinburgh, where he served the rest of his life. Bonar wrote more than 600 hymns. At a memorial service following his death, his friend, Rev. E. H. Lundie, said:

His hymns were written in very varied circumstances, sometimes timed by the tinkling brook that babbled near him; sometimes attuned to the ordered tramp of the ocean, whose crested waves broke on the beach by which he wandered; sometimes set to the rude music of the railway train that hurried him to the scene of duty; sometimes measured by the silent rhythm of the midnight stars that shone above him.

(This article was taken from the book: *The Rent Veil*)