



Why Worship God?

From fear, for rewards or for love?

Brad Jersak

The legend is told of a sage who was found marching through the streets of her ancient city, bearing a torch in one hand and a pail full of water in the other. It was plain to everyone that she was focused on a mission, with a stern expression and long, determined strides. Just where she was headed was not as clear. Up and down the streets she went, muttering prayers as the flames danced and the water sloshed.

At last someone asked, “Where are you going? What are you doing? What is the torch and bucket you’re carrying?”

She replied, “With this bucket of water, I will douse the flames of hell and with this torch, I will burn down the gates of paradise.”

“But why?” they asked, breathless at such boldness. She replied, “So that God’s people will worship him, not for fear of hell or hope of reward, but simply for the love of God.”

WORSHIPING FROM FEAR

Some worship God out of fear. They conceive of God as a punishing judge and they worry about being locked out of paradise, thrown into the outer darkness or cast into a lake of fire. The fear of being burned alive forever in everlasting hell darkens their hearts and distorts their gospel, reducing it to a kind of fire-insurance. The end game is not about knowing or loving God from a full heart of gratitude, but a desperate plan to avoid eternity in a blazing furnace. “Faith” is then (1) a withering admission that humanity deserves to be burned and (2) an affirmation of the right doctrine or

praying the right prayer or performing the right rituals to escape that terrifying outcome.

Worshiping God from fear falls miles shy of a willing response of trust. It’s more like a gun-to-the-head ultimatum. “Just tell me what to do! Anything!” Rather than worshiping in spirit and in truth (John 4:23), such disciples merely want to evade their destiny in a dungeon.

WORSHIPING FOR REWARDS

Other religious devotees are not so terrified. Their focus is on their rewards, their inheritance, their mansions in glory. They might think about the comfort that awaits them, the crowns they will receive, and the eternal banquet in the sky. These images of paradise are, without a doubt, described in the Bible. They offer solace to the suffering, joy to the despairing, and freedom to those who experience life as spiritual bondage or emotional torment. To them, the good news does sound like a grand upgrade!

Yet sadly, a good many focus on the gift rather than the Giver. They pine for celestial luxury but have the heart of a gold-digger (someone who marries for fortune, rather than for love). God is, for them, a means to an end... and because of their reward mentality, tend also to misunderstand faith, conceiving it as the password to earning their presumed reward.

WORSHIPING FOR LOVE

In both cases, the obsession with avoiding hell or inheriting heaven warps our notion of God and makes salvation instrumental instead of

relational. God is their heavenly fire-insurance salesman or their casino slot machine, rather than a loving heavenly Father or beloved Husband with whom we’re forever united and in communion.

Jesus’ definition of “eternal life” was NOT escaping hell or earning heaven. Praying to his Father, Jesus said, “*Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent*” (John 17:3).

Jesus does not say that eternal life is the reward you get for knowing God. Rather, **knowing God IS eternal life. Heaven IS the relationship.** And the kingdom of heaven is *within us*—that is, the very presence of the Beloved who has made our hearts his home! As John (“the beloved”) testifies, “*We love him because...*” NOT because we’re saved from hell or promised paradise. No. “*We love because he first loved us*” (1 John 4:19).

The first two motivations are common entry points into Christian faith. Starting there may be part of the human condition and one of the challenges of growing up. Sadly, many believers (including pastors and teachers) become stuck there. I, too, once mainly believed in Jesus in order to avoid hell and attain heaven. But as I see more clearly how high, wide, deep and long God’s love is for me, so too my love grows and I love God for God’s own sake. May we all deepen in our love for God, so that knowing God finally becomes the point. □

In addition to the many roles Brad fulfills for CWR/PTM, he is Principal of St. Stephen’s University in Canada.