



# WORSHIPPING GOD

A GENERAL SURVEY OF WHAT  
THE BIBLE TEACHES ABOUT  
WORSHIPPING GOD



F. WAYNE MAC LEOD

# **Worshipping God**

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God

**F. Wayne MacLeod**

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## Preface

Many books have been written about worship. It is not my intention to replace these works, nor do I pretend to have any particular insights into this subject. My purpose in writing this book is to survey the teaching of the Bible on this important topic.

We will work our way through the Bible, beginning in Genesis, examining passages written at various times. While the praise of God varied in these periods, some principles apply to all generations.

I trust that Scripture will speak for itself and give us a greater awareness of the obligation and privilege of worship.

God bless,

F. Wayne Mac Leod

## Chapter 1 – Rejected Worship and the Importance of the Heart

While Scripture gives us all we need to know for life and doctrine, there are many things it does not tell us. The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 is an example of this. Adam and Eve had two sons. The first was Cain and the second Abel. As these boys grew up, they each took on a profession. Genesis 4:2 tells us that Cain worked the ground while his younger brother was a keeper of sheep. We read in Genesis 4:3:

*3 In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, 4 and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. (Genesis 4)*

Remember that Cain and Abel lived before God gave His Law to Moses. While these two brothers did not have the written Law, somehow, they knew they could bring an offering to the Lord God as an act of worship and thanksgiving. Many years before Moses, God communicated to His people what He required and how they were to worship Him.

What is striking in Genesis 4:3 is that Abel brought “the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions.” There are two details we need to notice in this phrase.

Notice first the reference to the firstborn of the flock in verse 3. Abel had no way of understanding the significance of the firstborn. Many years later, Israel would be freed from the bondage of Egypt, and the Lord gave this command to His people:

*11 “When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, 12 you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD’s. 13 Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. 14 And when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. 15 For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD*

*killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.’ (Exodus 13)*

When the angel of death passed over the homes in Egypt, he spared the firstborn in all homes that had the blood of a lamb painted on their doorposts. Every firstborn Egyptian, however, perished. This was God’s final judgement on Egypt, resulting in the release of Israel from bondage.

How did Abel know to offer the firstborn of his flock to the Lord? Way before this Law was given through Moses, God communicated to Adam and his children what He expected of them. Scripture is silent about how God shared these details.

Notice also that Abel brought the fat portions of his offering to God. Consider what God told Moses many years later about this fat portion of the animal sacrifices:

*17 But the firstborn of a cow, or the firstborn of a sheep, or the firstborn of a goat, you shall not redeem; they are holy. You shall sprinkle their blood on the altar and shall burn their fat as a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the LORD. (Numbers 18)*

Many generations before God gave the Law to Moses, Abel already knew what God required.

What is true of Abel’s offering is also true for Cain’s. The Law of Moses required offering the firstfruits of the ground and the ripe fruits of the land:

*12 All the best of the oil and all the best of the wine and of the grain, the firstfruits of what they give to the LORD, I give to you. 13 The first ripe fruits of all that is in their land, which they bring to the LORD, shall be yours. Everyone who is clean in your house may eat it. (Numbers 18)*

Both these young men brought legitimate offerings to God. They had a clear understanding from God of what He required from them.

While both men brought legitimate offerings, Genesis 4:4-5 goes on to say:

*And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, 5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. (Genesis 4)*



For the first time in the Bible, we see God rejecting an act of worship. God had “no regard” for Cain’s offering. In other words, God did not approve or look on it with favour.

As we have already noted, there does not seem to be anything wrong with the actual offering brought to God. Why then did God reject Cain’s act of worship?

To answer this, we need to examine Cain’s response to the rejection.

Notice in Genesis 4:5 that he became very angry. His anger was so great that the Lord warned him that if he did not control it, it would cause great devastation:

*5 So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. 6 The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.” (Genesis 4)*

If Cain had any question about why God had rejected his worship, God certainly addressed this in these verses. God told him that there was sin in his heart threatening to take over. That sin stood in the way of his worship. What would you do if God spoke to you about your sin and warned you that it was about to overcome you? Would you not take this seriously? Cain, however, ignored what God said and gave into his sin. We see the fruit of this in Genesis 4:8:

*8 Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. (Genesis 4)*

Cain killed his brother. Such was the intensity of his bitterness toward him. This reveals the evil of his heart and the deep resentment and jealousy he harboured toward Abel. It was with this attitude that he stood before God and offered the fruit of the ground.

The apostle John picks up on Cain’s anger toward his brother when he says:

*11 For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. 12 We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous. - 1Jn 3:11-12*

Notice how John connects loving one another with the example of Cain. "We should not be like Cain," he tells his readers, instead "we should love one another." Cain is an example of one who hated his brother and yet still came to worship God.

The Lord Jesus taught us the importance of a right relationship with our brothers and sisters as we come to worship God. Consider His instructions in Matthew 5:

*23 So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5)*

According to Jesus, if we want our offering to be acceptable to God, we must first be reconciled with our brothers and sisters in Christ. This may be, in part, the reason for the rejection of Cain's act of worship.

The apostle Jude, warning his readers about false teachers, has this to say about Cain:

*4 For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ... 11 Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error and perished in Korah's rebellion. 12 These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted (Jude)*

Jude speaks here about teachers who "crept in unnoticed" (verse 4). They were "hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear" (verse 12). These individuals participated with his readers in worship but walked "in the way of Cain" (verse 11). Just as Cain killed his brother, these false teachers would destroy the faith and harmony of the church. They had motives other than the glory of God in mind.

We see from these verses what the apostle Jude felt about Cain. He was not a man who sought the truth and the glory of God but worshipped alongside his brother with an ulterior motive.

Speaking about Abel's offering in Hebrews 11:4, the author of Hebrews says:

*4 By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.  
(Hebrews 11)*

As Abel brought his offering, he was commended as righteous. He came with a very different motivation than his brother. Mention is made of his faith. While both men came with offerings to the Lord, God rejected Cain's. The context indicates a difference in the hearts of these men who stood before God that day. Cain was full of jealousy and anger. Abel came as a righteous man with faith in God.

In Genesis 4, we see God rejecting the worship of a man whose heart was not right with Him. He looked beyond the external rituals to the attitude of the heart. What pleased God was not the sacrifice but the heart. When the attitude is not right, neither is the act of worship.

For Prayer:

Father, we see here that You look beyond the outward act to our heart. In the story of Cain and Abel, we see two men coming to worship. One is accepted because he approached You as a righteous man by faith. The other was rejected because of the bitterness and sin in his heart. I ask Lord that you would help us to consider the attitude of our heart in worship. May our hearts overflow in genuine praise and thankfulness. May our adoration be from our heart and not just actions and words.

## Chapter 2 – The Altars of Genesis: Personal Expressions of Praise and Confidence

We come now to the days of Noah in Genesis 8. He lived in a time of great spiritual rebellion and evil. Genesis 6 describes the world as corrupt in God's sight and filled with violence:

*11 Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. 12 And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. (Genesis 6)*

Of all families on the earth, only Noah and his children walked with God.

God determined to punish the earth for its rebellion but protect Noah and his family. He commanded him to build a large boat and fill it with animals of all kinds. God then sent a flood that covered the surface of the earth and destroyed every living creature. Notice what took place when the waters of the flood subsided and Noah and his family stepped on dry ground:

*20 Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. 21 And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. (Genesis 8)*

Noah built an altar and sacrificed some of "every clean animal and some of every clean bird." I don't know how many kinds of animals and birds were with Noah at that time, but this sacrifice was a significant one that would have taken some time to complete. For every clean animal, one of its kind was sacrificed to God as a token of thanksgiving for sparing its species on the earth.

This practice is often repeated in the book of Genesis. In Genesis 12, the Lord appeared to Abram and told him that He would give him and his descendants the land of Canaan. When Abram heard this, he responded by building an altar to the Lord God.

*7 Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.  
(Genesis 12)*

The altar that Abram built served two purposes. First, the altar was a means for Abram to express his gratitude to the Lord God for this promise. Notice, however, that we have no record in this verse that Abram offered a sacrifice on the altar that he built. While he may certainly have done so, it is not mentioned. This leads us to the second reason for Abram building that altar. Abram did not remain in this region but continued his journey. The altar, however, would remain as a testimony to the goodness and mercy of his God. For the first time in history, the name of the Lord God was recognized in this dark corner. Abram declared "his glory among the nations, his marvellous works among all the peoples" (Psalm 96:3). Abram's altar was a public declaration of the goodness and mercy of his God.

Abram continued this practice throughout his life. In Genesis 13, God told him that He would make his offspring "as the dust of the earth." In other words, counting his offspring would be like counting the dust of the earth. Notice Abram's response:

*16 I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. 17 Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you." 18 So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the LORD.  
(Genesis 13)*

When Abram heard the promise of God, he again built an altar to express his trust and confidence in what God said. Remember that at this point, Abram had not yet experienced the fulfilment of the promise of God. He built an altar, however, to express his gratitude and belief that God would do what He said. Abram worshipped God by faith, even before he saw the fruit of His promise. That altar represented Abram's deep confidence in God, who would fulfil every word He had given him.

We see a similar practice in the life of Abraham's son Isaac. When Isaac was in the region of Beersheba, the Lord appeared to him and confirmed

the promise He had made through his father, Abraham:

*24 And the LORD appeared to him the same night and said, "I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake." 25 So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the LORD and pitched his tent there. And there Isaac's servants dug a well. (Genesis 26)*

Isaac trusted the Lord and built an altar as a token of gratitude and faith in His promise.

Isaac's son Jacob would take this a step further. After many years in exile in Mesopotamia, Jacob decided to return to the land God had promised Abram. After a long journey, he arrived in the city of Shechem of Canaan. Purchasing a parcel of land, Jacob pitched his tents and built an altar to the Lord. He called that altar El- Elohe-Israel.

*18 And Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram, and he camped before the city. 19 And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for a hundred pieces of money the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent. 20 There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel. (Genesis 33)*

The name means "God, the God of Israel." Remember that the name Israel did not represent a nation at this time. An angel of God gave this name to Jacob after fighting with him.

*27 And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." (Genesis 32)*

By naming that altar El-Elohe-Israel, Jacob (now called Israel) was saying that this God was his God. He publicly declared this by the presence of this altar in the land. He was not ashamed of His God but declared Him openly to all.

Jacob does a similar thing in Genesis 35. Here the Lord spoke to the patriarch and told him to go to Bethel and build an altar for Him. Bethel was where God revealed His purpose to Jacob when he fled from his brother Esau who wanted to kill him (see Genesis 35:1). In obedience to the command of God, Jacob told his household to put away their foreign

gods and purify themselves. Together they went to Bethel and built an altar in remembrance of the God who met him in his time of distress:

*3 Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.” (Genesis 35)*

Genesis 35:5-7 describes what took place as they set out for Bethel:

*5 And as they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. 6 And Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, 7 and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother. (Genesis 35)*

As Jacob travelled through dangerous territory, the hand of the Lord was on him and his family, protecting them from their enemies. Jacob built an altar in Bethel and called it “El-bethel,” meaning “God of Bethel.”

As Jacob and his family stood before that altar, they remembered the goodness of God. Jacob recalled how the God of his fathers met him at this very place to bless and encourage him as he fled for his life. His heart would have been filled with gratitude as he considered what God had done for him and how He had been faithful to His promise.

What do the altars of Noah, Abram, Isaac and Jacob teach us about the worship of God? They were erected to declare the goodness and grace of God. They demonstrated the confidence of those who built them in the yet unfulfilled promises of God. They were public statements proclaiming the Lord God of Israel as their God. They were testimonies to the faithfulness of God in their lives. Worship before these altars was very personal. Those who built these altars often had a very specific reason to offer their praise. Often, they were erected spontaneously in gratitude and confidence in God and His promises.

For Prayer:

Father God, as we examine the various altars built for you in the book of Genesis, we gain insight into what it means to worship You. Thank you for

the life, and hope you give us as your people. We recognize that we owe our very lives to You. Give us the boldness to declare you as our God in this dark world. May we not be ashamed to express our confidence in You and Your promises. Thank you that even though we do not now see the fulfilment of all Your promises, we can be sure that you will be faithful to Your Word. Help us never to forget what You have done for us. May we unashamedly declare You to be our salvation, our help, our strength in times past, and our confidence for what is ahead.



## Chapter 3 – Principles for Worship in Exodus

As we move now to the book of Exodus, remember that the book was written about a special time in the life of God's people. They were enslaved in Egypt, but God was now preparing them to become a nation. Exodus teaches us about the Passover and the dedication of the firstborn to the Lord. The book recounts the movement of God's people through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. For the first time, God's people built a portable tabernacle that moved with them everywhere they travelled. In those days, God also gave Moses the Ten Commandments and revealed His requirements for His people and their worship of His name.

It is not my purpose to examine the requirements of God in the laws and celebrations of that period. Rather, I want to take a moment to explore some underlying principles that Exodus reveals about the worship of God. While written at a particular time in Israel's history, these worship principles still apply to all times and cultures.

### *Exclusivity*

Listen to the words of God in Exodus 22:20:

*20 "Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the LORD alone, shall be devoted to destruction. (Exodus 22)*

The words of the Lord are very strong. God told His people that they were to worship "the Lord alone." He would not tolerate devotion to any other god. To worship or sacrifice to another god was an offence punishable by death.

God knew the temptation His people would face as they travelled through the wilderness and met people of various nations and religious beliefs. In Exodus 34, He warned Israel:

*12 Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. 13 You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim 14 (for you*

*shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God) (Exodus 34)*

Lest His people be tempted to worship another god, the Lord commanded them to tear down and destroy all religious shrines and articles used in the worship of other gods. God required that they remove all hints of pagan worship from the land lest they become a temptation for His people.

When we choose to worship the Lord God, we commit to putting aside all other gods. He demands the exclusive right to our hearts. He will not share worship with another god. To worship the God of Israel was to turn aside from all other gods. This principle sounds easy, but many things can take God's place in our hearts. If you want to worship God, all idols must be pulled down. He must have our undivided attention.

### *Simplicity*

The second principle for the worship of the God of Israel is the principle of simplicity. Consider what the Lord said in Exodus 20:23-26:

*23 You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. 24 An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. 25 If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it. (Exodus 20)*

In Exodus 20:23, the Lord reminded the people of Israel that they were not to make any gods of silver or gold. Instead, they were to build an altar of mounded earth to offer their sacrifices to God. If the need arose to build an altar of stone, no tool was to be used in its construction. The stones used to make the altar were to be used as they were found.

Admittedly, the tabernacle was quite elaborate, but this was limited to one place and one building. Outside of this tabernacle, God required that worship be simple. This prevented the people from setting up alternative centres for worship and wandering from His purpose.

This principle of simplicity is one that we would do well to keep in mind. The more elaborate our worship becomes, the more it can distract from God. People can easily focus on the altar instead of the God they came to worship. They can become so caught up in the glitter that they no longer see their God. They can become so attracted to those leading in worship that their eyes are turned from their Saviour. Simplicity helped to keep the right focus.

### *Purity*

We discover the third principle for the worship of God in Exodus 40:30-32, where we read:

*30 He set the basin between the tent of meeting and the altar, and put water in it for washing, 31 with which Moses and Aaron and his sons washed their hands and their feet. 32 When they went into the tent of meeting, and when they approached the altar, they washed, as the LORD commanded Moses. (Exodus 40)*

There was a basin of water in the tabernacle, located in front of the altar, where sacrifices were made. That basin was conveniently placed there so that the priests could wash their hands and feet before sacrificing to the Lord God. To stand before the Lord with unclean hands was to defile the altar and show disrespect. Those who approached the Lord God were to cleanse themselves before offering their sacrifice.

In Matthew 15:1-2, Jesus defended His disciples when the Pharisees questioned Him about why they did not wash their hands. He told His accusers that the purity of heart was more important than the cleanliness of one's hands. The principle of washing the hands and feet before approaching the altar reminded the priests of that day that they were not to approach God without first cleansing themselves from the defilements of this world.

God expected that those who come to Him would come with clean hands and a pure heart. If we are to worship the Lord as He intends, we will do well to examine ourselves, confessing any known sin and turning from any attitude or action that would hinder our worship.

## *Restraint*

From Exodus 23:18, we discover that the worship of God required restraint.

*18 “You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the fat of my feast remain until the morning. (Exodus 23)*

Also, consider the words of Exodus 30:9:

*9 You shall not offer unauthorized incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering, and you shall not pour a drink offering on it. (Exodus 30)*

Notice what these verses tell us. God’s people could not do what they wanted in worship. They were not to offer blood with leavened bread. They were not to allow fat to remain until the morning. They were not to use unauthorized incense. God had some basic guidelines about acceptable worship. His people were required to stay within those guidelines.

Imagine what would have happened if the people were given the freedom to do as they pleased in the worship of God. Maybe some would have said, “we don’t like seeing so many animals killed; let’s stop these countless sacrifices.” Another might say, “I don’t see why we need to clean up this fat tonight; we’ll do that in the morning when we have more time.” Soon the worship of God would look nothing like God ordained.

Exodus challenges us to allow the Scriptures to be our guide in how we worship. These Scriptures point to what God desires from us. God encouraged His people in the book of Exodus to exercise restraint in their worship, lest their worship evolve into something He never intended it to be.

## *Diversity*

While we are to exercise restraint in worship, God still allows for a diversity of expression. Consider what took place in Exodus 35:

*22 So they came, both men and women. All who were of a willing heart brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and armlets, all sorts of gold objects, every man dedicating an offering of gold to the LORD. 23 And every one who possessed blue or purple or scarlet yarns or fine linen or goats’ hair or tanned rams’ skins or goatskins brought them. 24 Everyone*

*who could make a contribution of silver or bronze brought it as the LORD's contribution. And every one who possessed acacia wood of any use in the work brought it. 25 And every skillful woman spun with her hands, and they all brought what they had spun in blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. 26 All the women whose hearts stirred them to use their skill spun the goats' hair. 27 And the leaders brought onyx stones and stones to be set, for the ephod and for the breastpiece, 28 and spices and oil for the light, and for the anointing oil, and for the fragrant incense. 29 All the men and women, the people of Israel, whose heart moved them to bring anything for the work that the LORD had commanded by Moses to be done brought it as a freewill offering to the LORD. (Exodus 35)*

What is striking in this passage is the diversity of gifts brought to the Lord. The people of God donated their jewellery, yarns, linens, or goat hides. Others offered gold, silver, and acacia wood. Those who were skilled spun goats' hair and brought it to the Lord. Other gifts included precious stones, spices, and fragrances. All these gifts were offered with a willing heart to the Lord God. God was pleased to receive such a diversity of contributions from His people to construct the tabernacle. Skilled artisans offered the fruit of their art. Those who did not have such skills brought their treasures.

There is great freedom of expression within the parameters God has established for worship. God's people were encouraged to be creative in what they could offer to build the tabernacle. The same principle is true today as well. As we continue to build the church of God, we are called to seek out what we can offer creatively. God has given us various gifts and talents. If we are open to His leading, we will be surprised at what we can offer to expand His kingdom on this earth. The worship of God is enhanced as each believer creatively offers their gifts and talents to Him.

### *An Offense to the World*

Finally, consider the words of Moses to Pharaoh in Exodus 8:25-26:

*25 Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, "Go, sacrifice to your God within the land." 26 But Moses said, "It would not be right to do so, for the offerings we shall sacrifice to the LORD our God are an abomination to*

*the Egyptians. If we sacrifice offerings abominable to the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us? (Exodus 8)*

When Pharaoh permitted Moses to worship God in the land of Egypt, Moses told him that their offerings and sacrifices would be an abomination to the Egyptians.

Moses understood that the worship of God would offend the Egyptians. Understanding this, Moses felt the need to remove the people from Egypt before offering their sacrifices. He had permission to worship God in Egypt, but he would have to compromise the requirements of God to do so. Moses refused to compromise. He would not make the worship of God less offensive to the Egyptians. He would worship as God required.

The temptation to compromise is very real. How easy it is to try to make our worship more appealing to the world. We do not honour God, however, by seeking to please those who have unclean hands. The One we need to satisfy is God. We cannot be distracted by compromises to please people. Our faith and worship will be offensive to the unsaved, but we are not seeking to please them. We desire to please the Lord God alone.

For Prayer:

Lord God, thank you for the principles we learn in the book of Exodus regarding the worship of Your name. Help us to understand that those who come to You must reject all other gods. Help us to see the gods we set up in our hearts in opposition to You. Give us the grace to tear down those idols so that our hearts are devoted to You alone. Help us to come before you with clean hands and a pure heart. May we never stray from Your purpose in worship. Give us eyes to see what we can offer to You as our act of worship. Help us not to focus on pleasing people but on pleasing You. Teach us to worship as You require.

## Chapter 4 – Leviticus and Nature of The Offerings we Bring

In the book of Leviticus, God details His requirements for the offerings brought to Him. It is not my purpose to go into detail about these requirements. What is important in this study is to see what these regulations teach us about the offerings that delight the heart of God. While we no longer offer animal sacrifices, some key principles in Leviticus help us understand the worship God expects of us today.

### *Without Blemish*

The book of Leviticus begins with the regulations of God for a burnt offering. Notice what God said about this burnt offering:

*3 “If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the LORD. (Leviticus 1)*

The animal brought to the Lord had to be “without blemish.” The phrase “without blemish” occurs seventeen times in the book of Leviticus. Each time it is in connection with an offering brought to the Lord. This shows us that the Lord requires the best that we have.

The Lord also placed this same requirement on the priest who brought the offering. Listen to the words of God in Leviticus 21:

*16 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 17 “Speak to Aaron, saying, None of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. 18 For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, 19 or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, 20 or a hunchback or a dwarf or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. 21 No man of the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD’s food offerings; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. 22 He may eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy and*

*of the holy things, 23 but he shall not go through the veil or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries, for I am the LORD who sanctifies them.” (Leviticus 21)*

No priest who had any kind of physical deformity could approach the altar. His deformities disqualified him from service.

The apostle Peter speaks of the Lord Jesus as being a lamb without blemish or spot in 1 Peter 1 when he says:

*17 And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each One’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, 18 knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. (1 Peter 1)*

An animal sacrificed to the Lord had to be without defect because it represented the Lord Jesus, the Lamb of God sacrificed for our sins. The priests who represented the Lord also needed to be without spot or blemish for the same reason. They reflected the perfect nature of the Great Lamb of God who would offer Himself for our sin.

Beyond this, however, is the fact that the Lord God is worthy of our very best. We bring Him no honour if we offer what we would not be pleased to accept ourselves. Our offerings are a declaration of God’s worth. When we present to God what is blemished and worthless, we reveal our heart toward Him. We owe our lives and all we enjoy to Him. Surely, He is worthy of our finest treasures.

#### *Covered or Sprinkled with Oil*

The second requirement of God for the offering was that it be sprinkled or covered with oil.

*1 “When anyone brings a grain offering as an offering to the LORD, his offering shall be of fine flour. He shall pour oil on it and put frankincense on it. (Leviticus 2)*

*4 “When you bring a grain offering baked in the oven as an offering, it shall be unleavened loaves of fine flour mixed with oil or unleavened wafers*



*smeared with oil. (Leviticus 2)*

*5 And if your offering is a grain offering baked on a griddle, it shall be of fine flour unleavened, mixed with oil. (Leviticus 2)*

*7 And if your offering is a grain offering cooked in a pan, it shall be made of fine flour with oil. (Leviticus 2)*

Notice the words used to describe how the oil was presented to the Lord:

- 1) "pour oil on it" (Leviticus 2:1)
- 2) "smeared with oil" (Leviticus 2:4)
- 3) "mixed with oil" (Leviticus 2:5)
- 4) "made of fine flour with oil" (Leviticus 2:7)

While the oil was used in different ways, it was an important ingredient in the offering brought to the Lord.

Why was oil important, and what did it represent? To answer this, let's consider how oil was used in the remainder of the book of Leviticus. In Leviticus 8, we discover that when Aaron and his sons were ordained to the priesthood, they were anointed with oil to set them apart from all other people:

*30 Then Moses took some of the anointing oil and of the blood that was on the altar and sprinkled it on Aaron and his garments, and also on his sons and his sons' garments. So he consecrated Aaron and his garments, and his sons and his sons' garments with him. (Leviticus 8)*

Notice that not only were Aaron and his sons consecrated to the Lord and His purpose, so were their priestly garments. Once sprinkled with oil, these garments were used exclusively for service in the tabernacle.

The anointed priests were from that point onward to live for the Lord and in His service. They were not to profane themselves or defile their consecration. They were entirely devoted to the Lord:

10 "The priest who is chief among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil is poured and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose nor tear his clothes.  
11 He shall not go in to any dead bodies nor make himself unclean, even for his father or for his mother. 12 He shall not go out of the sanctuary, lest

he profane the sanctuary of his God, for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is on him: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 21)

When oil was sprinkled on an object, it set that object aside for the Lord and His exclusive use.

Related to this was the fact that oil was used to declare an unclean individual clean again. We see this in the case of a leper who was healed from leprosy. When all evidence of his disease was gone, the priest would declare the leper clean. Notice what was involved in this ceremony:

*14 The priest shall take some of the blood of the guilt offering, and the priest shall put it on the lobe of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot. 15 Then the priest shall take some of the log of oil and pour it into the palm of his own left hand 16 and dip his right finger in the oil that is in his left hand and sprinkle some oil with his finger seven times before the LORD. 17 And some of the oil that remains in his hand the priest shall put on the lobe of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot, on top of the blood of the guilt offering. 18 And the rest of the oil that is in the priest's hand he shall put on the head of him who is to be cleansed. Then the priest shall make atonement for him before the LORD. (Leviticus 14)*

The priest sprinkled the leper with oil seven times. He then put it on the lobe of their right ear, thumb, and big toe. He poured what was left on the head of the leper who needed cleansing. With the anointing of oil and the atoning sacrifice completed, the priest could declare the individual clean. Purification required oil and a sacrifice.

The prophet Joel speaks of a day when the Spirit of God would be poured out upon all flesh:

*28 "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. 29 Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. (Joel 2)*

Isaiah says something similar when he tells us that the Lord Jesus would "sprinkle" many nations:

*13 Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. 14 As many were astonished at you— his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—15 so shall he sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him, for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand. (Isaiah 52)*

This work of opening eyes to see and ears to hear what was never revealed is most certainly a work of God's Spirit who was sprinkled upon the nations, giving them insight, understanding, and consecrating them to God. The requirement of oil with the offerings shows us the role of the Spirit of God in worship. He must anoint and consecrate our worship. It is because of Him that we can worship. He sets us aside as holy to God and seasons every act of praise and adoration.

### *Free from Leaven*

Leviticus 2:11 tells us that no offering brought to the Lord was to contain leaven.

*11 "No grain offering that you bring to the LORD shall be made with leaven, for you shall burn no leaven nor any honey as a food offering to the LORD. (Leviticus 2)*

To understand this, let's consider the teaching of the Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul. Consider first the light bulb moment that took place when the disciples of Jesus finally understood what Jesus was referring to when He spoke about "the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees:

*11 How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." 12 Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (Matthew 16)*

The disciples came to understand that when Jesus spoke about the "leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, He was referring to their false teaching. This false teaching was leading many astray from the truth of God's Word. Luke's gospel gives us a deeper understanding of Jesus' use of the phrase "leaven of the Pharisees" when he says:

*1 In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, he began to say to his disciples first, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. (Luke 12)*

According to Luke's account, the "leaven of the Pharisees" represented hypocrisy. These religious leaders appeared to be holy in front of the people, but they were full of sin and evil inside.

Finally, in 1 Corinthians 5, the apostle Paul says this about leaven:

*6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 8 Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Corinthians 5)*

The apostle Paul speaks here about "the leaven of malice and evil." There can be no question that leaven represents hypocrisy, falsehood and evil.

The application of the principle of unleavened offerings is very simple. If we worship God and bring Him our offerings of praise, they must be free from hypocrisy, falsehood and evil. Our sin and hypocrisy will only hinder our worship and make it offensive to God. The leaven of sinful attitudes and behaviours must be addressed if we are to worship God as He deserves.

### *Seasoned with Salt*

*13 You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt. (Leviticus 2)*

According to Leviticus 2, God commanded that all offerings brought to Him be seasoned with salt. Of note in Leviticus 2:13 is that the Lord calls this the "salt of the covenant."

Salt was used for various purposes in Bible times. It had a cleansing effect and was used for medicinal purposes. It also was used for preserving. Salt came to represent a lasting and healthy bond between two individuals. A

covenant of salt is a covenant that is permanent and free from defilements.

When salt was placed on an offering, it reminded the worshipper that they were in a covenant relationship with the God they worshipped. By adding salt to their offering, God's people reminded themselves of their obligation to Him as their covenant God. They also recalled His grace and faithfulness as a covenant-keeping God.

Just as salt cleansed the offering of any impurities, they too were to keep themselves pure before Him. Listen to the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:

*13 "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. (Matthew 5)*

As representatives of the Lord Jesus, we will have a purifying and preserving impact on this world. We do so through our lives and message.

Jesus often condemned hypocrites of His day. These individuals came to worship or serve but were more concerned about people noticing them than the glory of God. Others came with sin and rebellion in their heart. God is not interested in this kind of worship. He is looking for purity, sincerity and faithfulness in those who come to Him. Our worship needs to be seasoned with salt—purifying our actions and offerings from hypocrisy, sin and impure attitudes.

We come before a covenant-keeping God whose heart is devoted to His people. We must let the salt of God's Spirit dissolve and purify improper ambitions and attitudes. Only then can we bring a pleasing offering.

### *Blood Poured Out*

Repeatedly in the book of Leviticus, we have a reference to the blood of the sacrifice presented to the Lord. This blood was poured out against the sides or base of the altar of sacrifice. Consider the following examples:

*5 Then he shall kill the bull before the LORD, and Aaron's sons the priests shall bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. (Leviticus 1)*

*15 And the priest shall bring it to the altar and wring off its head and burn it on the altar. Its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar.*

*(Leviticus 1)*

*9 and he shall sprinkle some of the blood of the sin offering on the side of the altar, while the rest of the blood shall be drained out at the base of the altar; it is a sin offering. (Leviticus 5)*

As each animal was killed, the blood was placed in a vessel and brought to the altar. Before those present, that blood was sprinkled on the altar, and the remainder drained at its base. While it would have been easy to let the blood drain on the ground, God wanted that blood to be visible as an important reminder of the cost of forgiveness, and so He incorporated this into the regulations for every sacrifice.

In Leviticus 8, notice how the blood of an animal sacrifice is used in the ordination of the priest:

*22 Then he presented the other ram, the ram of ordination, and Aaron and his sons laid their hands on the head of the ram. 23 And he killed it, and Moses took some of its blood and put it on the lobe of Aaron's right ear and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot.*

*(Leviticus 8)*

Blood was applied to the right ear, thumb and toe of the priests who were ordained. The application of this blood set them aside for God's service. What is true for the priest's ordination was also true for the consecration of an altar used to offer sacrifices for the forgiveness of God's people:

*18 Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement for it, and shall take some of the blood of the bull and some of the blood of the goat, and put it on the horns of the altar all around. 19 And he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it and consecrate it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel. (Leviticus 16)*

Those who approached the altar to offer sacrifices needed to be covered by the blood of a sacrificed animal. The penalty for their sin needed to be paid by the death of an animal on their behalf. The writer to the Hebrews has this to say about the forgiveness of sin under the law:

*22 Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. (Hebrews 9)*

Of course, as believers in the Lord Jesus, we understand that as the Lamb of God, He paid the full price for our forgiveness. His blood covers the sin of all who belong to Him.

We need to understand that there would be no access to God without this blood. As the writer to the Hebrews tells us, “without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin” (Hebrews 9:22). Without the forgiveness of sin, we cannot approach a holy God. Worship is only possible through the death of the sacrificed Lamb of God.

The death of the Lord Jesus alone gives us access to the Father. He paid the supreme price so that we could stand before the Father in praise and worship. As you stand before the Lord your God, recognize the cost paid for this privilege.

### *Surrendered Fat*

The Law of Moses required that the priest burn the fat of every sacrifice on the altar.

*35 And all its fat he shall remove as the fat of the lamb is removed from the sacrifice of peace offerings, and the priest shall burn it on the altar, on top of the LORD's food offerings. (Leviticus 4)*

Leviticus 3:16 declares that all fat belonged to the Lord.

*16 And the priest shall burn them on the altar as a food offering with a pleasing aroma. All fat is the LORD's. (Leviticus 3)*

The Law forbade eating the fat of any sacrifice made to the Lord, and anyone found guilty of violating this law was cut off from the people of God:

*25 For every person who eats of the fat of an animal of which a food offering may be made to the LORD shall be cut off from his people. (Leviticus 7)*

Why did God require the fat of each animal sacrifice? Let me attempt to answer this using two passages of Scripture. Consider first Genesis 45:18:

*18 and take your father and your households, and come to me, and I will give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you shall eat the fat of the land.'*  
(Genesis 45:18)

Notice what Pharaoh told Joseph in this verse. He told him to offer his family the best of the land of Egypt— “the fat of the land.” The “fat of the land” referred to the best and richest pastureland Pharaoh had. Fat is a symbol of great blessing, prosperity, and abundance.

The second passage I would like to consider is from Deuteronomy 31:20:

*20 For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to give to their fathers, and they have eaten and are full and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, and despise me and break my covenant. (Deuteronomy 31)*

Notice what God told His people in this verse. He informed them that the day would come when God’s people would enter a land flowing with milk and honey. God would shower His blessings on them in abundance. He warned them, however, that the temptation would be for them to grow fat on this blessing. This would ultimately result in them turning from Him to other gods.

The richness of God’s benefits can cause us to become so comfortable that we worship the blessing more than the One who blesses. This is what happened to Israel. She became so happy in her prosperity that she desired it more than God. How do we protect ourselves from this temptation? We offer the fat to God. We surrender all our privileges and possessions to Him and give Him complete control over all we have. We recognize that all we have comes from the Lord. He does not bless so we can grow fat, but so we can glorify His name.

What does this teach us about the offerings we bring? True worship comes from a surrendered and pure heart. I come offering the fat of my life, my blessings, everything I have to Him. I give Him that right to use every gift He has ever given. True worship involves the sacrifice of all we have to Him as our Creator and Lord.

*Aroma of Frankincense*



The final detail I want to examine in the book of Leviticus has to do with the inclusion of frankincense with the offerings presented to the Lord God. Frankincense was a gum obtained from a tree that could be dried and ground into a powder. When it was burned, it emitted a fragrant aroma. It was offered along with an offering to the Lord.

*1 "When anyone brings a grain offering as an offering to the LORD, his offering shall be of fine flour. He shall pour oil on it and put frankincense on it. 2 and bring it to Aaron's sons the priests. And he shall take from it a handful of the fine flour and oil, with all of its frankincense, and the priest shall burn this as its memorial portion on the altar, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD. (Leviticus 2)*

Why was frankincense required with the offering? To answer this, let's consider the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 141:

*2 Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice! (Psalm 141)*

Notice how the Psalmist asked the Lord to consider his prayers as incense. We find a similar thought in the book of Revelation:

*8 And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, 10 and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." (Revelation 5)*

John describes the bowls of incense as the prayers of the saints. Notice in Revelation 5:8-10 that these prayers rose to God in songs of praise and thanksgiving.

In Revelation 8:3-5, John shows his readers the response of God to the prayers of the saints rising with incense to the throne of God.

*3 And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, 4 and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. 5 Then*

*the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. (Revelation 8)*

God responded to the prayers of the saints that rose with incense to His throne with peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake. What followed was a series of judgements on the earth.

The frankincense of the Old Testament offerings, like the prayers of the saints of God, rose to heaven. God heard those prayers of praise, thanksgiving, and cries for justice. He cast down His censor to the earth, and justice prevailed. These prayers moved God as they rose like incense to His throne.

Leviticus teaches us that the offerings we bring to God must be Spirit-sprinkled, undefiled, and purified by the salt of the covenant we have entered with God. He is worthy and demands the “fatty” portion –that is, the very best we have. It is the blood of His sacrifice that makes our worship possible. As the incense of our prayers and praise rise to Him, He is moved and responds from heaven.

For Prayer:

Father, You deserve that best we have. May our hearts be so full of gratitude that we offer you our all. As we come to worship, may our heart and minds be sprinkled with the purifying salt of our covenant relationship with You. May the oil of Your Spirit motivate, cover, and convict us of any sin that hinders our praise. Thank you for the assurance that our prayers and offering will rise to like frankincense as a pleasing aroma to You.

## Chapter 5 – What Numbers Teaches Us About the Seriousness of Worship

Worshipping God is not something we can take lightly. While it is a privilege to give thanks and praise to the Lord, it is also a very serious matter. In the book of Numbers, we have many examples of individuals who did not take the worship of God seriously and suffered catastrophic results. Let's take a moment to consider some of these stories.

### *Aaron's Sons*

Consider first the case of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu. In Numbers 3, we read:

*3 These are the names of the sons of Aaron, the anointed priests, whom he ordained to serve as priests. 4 But Nadab and Abihu died before the LORD when they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD in the wilderness of Sinai, and they had no children. So Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests in the lifetime of Aaron their father. (Numbers 3)*

Nadab and Abihu died because they offered "unauthorized fire" before the Lord. According to Leviticus 10:1-2, they put this fire in a censer with incense and brought it to the Lord. When they did this, "fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them:"

*1 Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. 2 And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. 3 Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD has said: 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.'" And Aaron held his peace. (Leviticus 10)*

Leviticus 16:12-13 explains more fully what is happening here. Listen to the requirement of God for the use of the censer:

*12 And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the LORD, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it*

*inside the veil 13 and put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die. (Leviticus 16)*

The fire used in the censer was to come from the altar in the tabernacle. It appears that Nadab and Abihu did not take fire from the altar but obtained it from another source. In His fury, the Lord struck them dead because they did not observe His requirements for the worship of His name.

### *Miriam's Opposition*

In Numbers 12, Miriam and Aaron approached Moses with bitterness and jealousy in their heart, questioning his authority from God. They felt that they should have the same right to speak for God as Moses:

*1 Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. 2 And they said, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it. (Numbers 12)*

Now you might ask what this has to do with the subject of this study. Moses was God's chosen representative to lead His people in the worship of His name. He revealed God's purpose for their lives and worship. The regulations God gave Moses would guide the worship of God for generations to come. When God heard Miriam's complaint, Numbers 12:5 tells us that he "came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent." God rebuked Miriam and Aaron that day. He punished Miriam by striking her with leprosy for questioning the authority He had given Moses:

*10 When the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, like snow. And Aaron turned toward Miriam, and behold, she was leprous. (Numbers 12)*

### *Complaining People*

As we move to Numbers 14, we read how, even though the Lord led and provided for His people in the desert, Israel grumbled and complained about their lot:

*1 Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. 2 And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! (Numbers 14)*

Notice the response of the Lord in Numbers 14:11-12:

*11 And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? 12 I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they." (Numbers 14)*

According to the Lord, the people of Israel despised Him. They refused to trust Him despite the evidence of His power among them. Instead of worshipping the Lord and being confident in His leading, God's people resorted to grumbling. Were it not for the intercession of Moses, God would have destroyed them in the wilderness. Their refusal to worship and honour God in the desert nearly cost them their lives.

### *Korah's Rebellion*

In Numbers 12, we saw how God punished Miriam for questioning the authority of Moses as the spiritual leader of His people. In Numbers 16, we have the story of a Levite by the name of Korah who rose up and also questioned Moses and his authority:

*1 Now Korah the son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men. 2 And they rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, 250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men. 3 They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?" (Numbers 16)*

Moses told Korah and his followers to put incense in a censer and stand before the tabernacle entrance to settle this matter. God would determine who would lead His people in worship. When Korah and his followers

arrived with their censers, the decision of the Lord was clear. Numbers 16 tells us that the earth opened and swallowed Korah and his followers, killing them all:

*31 And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. 32 And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods. 33 So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. (Numbers 16)*

Korah and his descendants perished for assuming that they could lead the people of God in worship just as Moses and Aaron did.

### *Turning to other gods*

The final example I would like to examine is found in Numbers 25. While in Shittim, Israel turned its back on God and began to worship the gods of the Moabites. Numbers 25:1-5 describe the response of God:

*1 While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. 2 These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. 3 So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel. 4 And the LORD said to Moses, "Take all the chiefs of the people and hang them in the sun before the LORD, that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel." 5 And Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Each of you kill those of his men who have yoked themselves to Baal of Peor." (Numbers 25)*

For the sin of worshipping other gods, God commanded that the chiefs of Israel be hanged as an example of God's jealous fury. Moses then commanded the judges of Israel to kill all who had turned to the Baal of Peor.

What do we see from these examples from the book of Numbers? God takes the praise of His name seriously. He held those who led God's people in worship responsible to rule according to the principles He established. Those who chose to complain and grumble instead of worshipping were subject to His wrath. Those who turned to other gods were put to death.

While the worship of our God is a tremendous privilege, it is also an obligation God takes seriously. God took it very seriously when His people chose to grumble, complain, and question His purpose instead of worshipping as He ordained. Worship was an expression of trust and submission. We cannot worship if we cannot trust our God. Nor can we worship if we are unwilling to submit to His purpose.

For Prayer:

Father, as we examine these passages in the book of Numbers, we see that You called Your people to surrender to You and Your ways. Instead, they chose to walk in rebellion, grumbling and complaining. We cannot worship if we are unwilling to submit to Your purpose. Teach us to walk willingly in obedience. I ask that You banish our grumbling spirit and replace it with a heart of adoration and confidence in You. Teach us that to worship You aright, we must walk in submission and obedience.

## Chapter 6 – How God Protected Worship in Deuteronomy

While the book of Deuteronomy teaches us much about the worship of God in the Old Testament, there is one theme I would like to focus on here in this chapter. It was important to the Lord that the worship of His name be undefiled. God knew how easily His people were influenced by the world around them. The temptation was to bring those pagan practices into the celebration of His name. Throughout the book of Deuteronomy, God warns His people about this and challenges them to keep the worship of His name pure and free from foreign influences.

As the people of Israel entered the land of Canaan, they encountered nations who worshipped other gods. In Deuteronomy 7, the Lord instructed His people on what they were to do with these nations:

*1 "When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, 2 and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. 3 You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, 4 for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. 5 But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire.*  
(Deuteronomy 7)

The command of the Lord God was very clear in Deuteronomy 7. When God gave these lands to His people, they were to destroy their enemies (verse 2). They were to make no covenant with them nor show them any mercy (verse 2). They were forbidden to intermarry with them lest these nations influence their children to turn from the one true God (verse 3).



Upon entering their land, Israel was to break down every pagan altar, dash every sacred pillar, chop down every Asherim, and burn every image with fire (verse 5). There was to remain no trace of pagan idolatry in the land the Lord was giving them. None of these artifacts were ever to be used in the worship of the God of Israel. Nor were their influences ever to be found in the worship of His name.

God warned His people that if they forgot Him and turned to other gods, they would perish like the nations who lived in Canaan before them:

*19 And if you forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. 20 Like the nations that the LORD makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 8)*

Moses pleaded with his people not to be deceived by the pagan gods around them lest they turn from worshipping one true God and fall under His wrath:

*16 Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; 17 then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you. (Deuteronomy 11)*

To protect His people from this temptation, the Lord placed several safeguards around the worship of His name. In Deuteronomy 12, the Lord commanded His people to destroy every trace of pagan worship in the land the Lord was giving them:

*1 "These are the statutes and rules that you shall be careful to do in the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. 2 You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. 3 You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place. 4 You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way. (Deuteronomy 12)*

In Deuteronomy 4, the Lord made it clear that His people were not to worship Him like the nations worshipped their gods. In other words, they were not to look to these nations for guidance in how to worship the Lord God of Israel. All they needed to know about worship was found in the law of God

It is all too easy for us to look at the entertainment industry of our day and see what attracts a crowd. We can seek to apply those principles to the worship in our church. God, however, warns His people in Deuteronomy 12:4 by saying, "You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way." The principles we need for worshipping God are not found in a pagan society but in the holy Word, He has given.

Consider the words of Deuteronomy 12:8-11:

*8 "You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes, 9 for you have not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance that the LORD your God is giving you. 10 But when you go over the Jordan and live in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and when he gives you rest from all your enemies around, so that you live in safety, 11 then to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell there, there you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, and all your finest vow offerings that you vow to the LORD. (Deuteronomy 12)*

Notice several key points here in these verses. God's people were not to do what was right in their own eyes (verse 8). Instead, when they crossed the Jordan to inherit the land of Promise, they were to go to the "place that the LORD your God will choose" and bring "all that I command you." It would have been easy for the people of God to worship God as they pleased, but this is not what is presented here in Deuteronomy 12. God chose the place, and God determined what they were to bring to worship Him in that place.

Worship originates in the heart of God. There is something very incredible about this. If we believe that worship originates in our hearts, we place God in our debt because we offer Him this wonderful gift of praise and thanksgiving. If, on the other hand, we see worship as originating from the

heart of God, then we see worship not so much as our gift to God but rather His gift to us –a gift of intimacy and communion. What is important for us to see in Deuteronomy 12:11 is that God is sovereign over worship. He gives us this privilege, creates the heart to do so, and ordains how we approach Him.

God required that any burnt offering brought to Him be brought to the place He had chosen. These offerings were not to be sacrificed in any other place:

*13 Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place that you see, 14 but at the place that the LORD will choose in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I am commanding you. (Deuteronomy 12)*

A special place was set aside for the worship of God. All burnt offerings were brought to the tabernacle and offered on the sacred altar. The blood of that sacrifice was poured out on that altar alone:

*26 But the holy things that are due from you, and your vow offerings, you shall take, and you shall go to the place that the LORD will choose, 27 and offer your burnt offerings, the flesh and the blood, on the altar of the LORD your God. The blood of your sacrifices shall be poured out on the altar of the LORD your God, but the flesh you may eat. 28 Be careful to obey all these words that I command you, that it may go well with you and with your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 12)*

The people of Israel were bound to follow the principles God set out for their worship. Deuteronomy 12, speaking about the worship of God, ends with the following words:

*32 "Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it. (Deuteronomy 12)*

The worship of the God of Israel was strictly regulated. God set out His requirements in the law of Moses and expected His people to abide by those principles as they worshiped Him. This was to protect the worship so that it did not deteriorate through the influences of the pagan nations around them. Let me take a moment as we conclude to highlight several

examples of how God protected the worship of His name in the book of Deuteronomy.

### *Place of Worship*

We have already mentioned this, but it is worth noting from Deuteronomy 16 that the Passover offerings were not to be offered in just any town in Israel. They were brought to the place the Lord had chosen –to the tabernacle of God:

*5 You may not offer the Passover sacrifice within any of your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, 6 but at the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell in it, there you shall offer the Passover sacrifice, in the evening at sunset, at the time you came out of Egypt.  
(Deuteronomy 16)*

By centralizing the worship, God was assuring that it would be kept free from defilements and variations. He also guaranteed that only certain people, accountable to Him, offered these sacrifices in the prescribed way.

### *Removal of All Foreign Influences*

The Law of God forbid planting a tree as an Asherah beside the altar of the Lord:

*21 "You shall not plant any tree as an Asherah beside the altar of the LORD your God that you shall make. 22 And you shall not set up a pillar, which the LORD your God hates. (Deuteronomy 16)*

The Asherah was a symbol of a Canaanite goddess. The Canaanites planted a tree to represent her. In Deuteronomy 16:21, God warned His people about worshipping Him and any other god. God required that those who worshipped Him remove all foreign influences. He would not share His glory with any other god. He would not have His worship defiled by pagan influences.

### *The Wages of a Prostitute*

*18 You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a dog into the house of the LORD your God in payment for any vow, for both of these are an abomination to the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 23)*

According to Deuteronomy 23, God's people were not to bring the wages of a prostitute or a dog into the house of the Lord. Many commentaries see the reference to "dog" as referring to a male prostitute. In the Canaanite religion of the day, prostitutes were used in worship to assure the fertility of the land. Their wages brought money into these pagan temples.

While this was the practice of the Canaanites, the Lord God of Israel made it very clear that this practice was an abomination to Him. No money obtained from such a practice was welcome in the temple. Only what was obtained by godly means and given with a cheerful heart was approved by God.

This law of God demanded that people consider the nature of the gifts they brought into the temple. God would not have His worship corrupted by ill-gotten gain.

### *Altars of Uncut Stone*

There were times when the people of God built an altar to worship the Lord outside of the tabernacle. While this was acceptable, God required that these altars be made from earth or uncut stones. No iron tool was used in their construction:

*4 And when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, concerning which I command you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall plaster them with plaster. 5 And there you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones. You shall wield no iron tool on them; 6 you shall build an altar to the LORD your God of uncut stones. And you shall offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God (Deuteronomy 27)*

This regulation kept the people of God from making other centres of worship. All worship was centred around the tabernacle and its laws. It would be easy to imagine some enthusiastic worshipper creating an elaborate altar that would draw people away from the temple and God's established order.

Clearly, these passages in Deuteronomy show us that the Lord God wanted the worship of His name to be kept from the defilements of pagan cultures. He regulated worship by centralizing it and setting up rules to keep people from doing as they pleased.

#### For Prayer

Father, we can be so easily influenced by the pagan and worldly ideas in our day. We admit that our worship and Christian lives sometimes reflect the world's attitudes and not Your heart. Reveal to us where we have wandered from the truth and give us the courage to tear down every idol and idolatrous influence in our lives so that we can worship You as You require. May our lives and worship be pure and undefiled.

## Chapter 7 – Worship in Everyday Circumstances

Just before his death, Moses chose Joshua as his successor. Joshua was a military commander, so his leadership style would be quite different from that of Moses. While Joshua would lead men into battle for the conquest of the Promised Land, the Lord God reminded him that the secret to his success would not be in his military might but his faithfulness and worship of the Lord His God:

*5 No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. 6 Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. 7 Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. 8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. (Joshua 1)*

The Lord told Joshua that he was to be careful to do according to the law Moses. It was only then that he would have success wherever he went.

After assuming command of the nation of Israel, Joshua and his army reached the Jordan River just opposite the land God had promised to give them. As he prepared to cross the river, Joshua determined that he would send the priests ahead of the army. It might seem somewhat strange that he would send the priests ahead of his soldiers. The real battle, in Joshua's mind, however, was a spiritual one. It was God who would win this battle. The priests, as God's earthly representatives, stood, therefore, on the front line carrying the Ark of God where the presence of God was manifested.

The day before crossing the Jordan, Joshua's military commanders went through the camp of Israel preparing the people:

*2 At the end of three days the officers went through the camp 3 and commanded the people, "As soon as you see the ark of the covenant of the*

*LORD your God being carried by the Levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place and follow it. 4 Yet there shall be a distance between you and it, about 2,000 cubits in length. Do not come near it, in order that you may know the way you shall go, for you have not passed this way before." 5 Then Joshua said to the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you." 6 And Joshua said to the priests, "Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on before the people." So they took up the ark of the covenant and went before the people. (Joshua 3)*

Joshua told the people that day to consecrate themselves because God would make His presence known among them.

When the day to cross the river arrived, the priests went ahead of the people with the ark. The Lord stopped the river's flow as they entered the water, and the people crossed over on dry ground. Joshua had twelve stones placed at that site as a reminder of what the Lord had done. In years to come, these stones would testify to the glory of the God of Israel and call all who saw them to fear His name:

*21 And he said to the people of Israel, "When your children ask their fathers in times to come, 'What do these stones mean?' 22 then you shall let your children know, 'Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.' 23 For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, 24 so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever." (Joshua 4)*

The worship of God that day was not on an altar made from earth or stone but in the hearts and minds of the people who saw God stop the river. Joshua sent the priests at the head with the ark to prove that God was a God of power and might. Joshua put the Lord first. The glory for the crossing did not go to Joshua but to the Lord His God. Joshua willingly took second place so the people could see the power of God.

Once the people had reached the other side of the Jordan, Joshua's second great act as leader was to have all the men circumcised.

*2 At that time the LORD said to Joshua, "Make flint knives and circumcise the sons of Israel a second time." 3 So Joshua made flint knives and*



*circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth. 4 And this is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the males of the people who came out of Egypt, all the men of war, had died in the wilderness on the way after they had come out of Egypt. 5 Though all the people who came out had been circumcised, yet all the people who were born on the way in the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised. (Joshua 5)*

Consider what is taking place here. The army of God had arrived in enemy territory. They would not be welcome. Yet, Joshua demands that the entire army be put out of commission for days to be circumcised. Militarily this did not seem to be a good decision, but Joshua knew that the secret to his success was not in his military but rather in obedience to God. For this reason, Joshua made sure that each man in his army bore the covenant sign of God in their flesh. If they were going to be successful, they would first need to be obedient.

Not long after this incident, the Lord God confirmed His approval of Joshua's decision. One day as he was near the city of Jericho, Joshua saw a man standing before him with a sword in his hand. Joshua 5:13-15 describe this event:

*13 When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand.*

*And Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" 14 And he said, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, "What does my lord say to his servant?" 15 And the commander of the LORD's army said to Joshua, "Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so. (Joshua 5)*

The Lord revealed Himself to Joshua that day as a mighty warrior.

The first great military challenge for Joshua was the city of Jericho. The Lord told him how he was to defeat the city. He commanded the priests to circle the city with the ark of the covenant once a day for six days. At the head of this procession were seven priests with trumpets. On the seventh day, the priests were to walk around the city seven times. At the end of the seventh lap, they were to blow the trumpet and shout. When they obeyed,

the city walls fell, and Israel went in and defeated the inhabitants. Once again, the Lord God is given first place and received the glory for what took place that day.

As the people of God ravaged Jericho, a soldier named Achan saw some treasures and decided to keep them for himself. This was contrary to the command of God, who wanted everything in the city destroyed.

In the coming days, when Joshua sent his soldiers to attack the small city of Ai, Israel was defeated. Joshua asked the Lord about this defeat. The Lord told him that one of his men had taken forbidden articles from Jericho. Listen to the words of Joshua when he discovered that Achan was the guilty party:

*19 Then Joshua said to Achan, "My son, give glory to the LORD God of Israel and give praise to him. And tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me." (Joshua 7)*

Joshua challenged Achan to give glory and praise to the Lord by telling the truth and making amends for his sin. Joshua understood that Achan's sin had placed a barrier between the nation and God. For Joshua giving glory and praise to God required a confession of sin. Only then could the nation be restored to right standing with God and give Him the praise He deserved. Achan, his family were killed, and the articles taken from Jericho were destroyed, removing the obstacle to God's blessing on the nation.

With the hindrance to God's blessing and presence removed, Joshua again went to Ai, and this time God gave Israel victory. Notice what took place after the conquest of Ai:

*30 At that time Joshua built an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, 31 just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, "an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an iron tool." And they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD and sacrificed peace offerings. 32 And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. 33 And all Israel, sojourner as well as native born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and*

*half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded at the first, to bless the people of Israel. 34 And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. 35 There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them. (Joshua 8)*

That day, Joshua built an altar to the Lord, offered burnt offerings for the people's sin, and read the word of the law of God to the people. In that service of worship, Joshua reminded the people of their obligation to God. Fresh in their minds was the death of Achan and the humiliating defeat at Ai. This service of worship was a powerful reminder of the importance of obedience to God.

Throughout the book of Joshua, we see how this great military commander would go in the strength of obedience to conquer the land God had promised His people.

As an old man, nearing the end of His life, Joshua gathered the people of God to Him and commanded them:

*6 Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left, 7 that you may not mix with these nations remaining among you or make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them or serve them or bow down to them, 8 but you shall cling to the LORD your God just as you have done to this day. 9 For the LORD has driven out before you great and strong nations. And as for you, no man has been able to stand before you to this day. 10 One man of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is the LORD your God who fights for you, just as he promised you. 11 Be very careful, therefore, to love the LORD your God. 12 For if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you and make marriages with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, 13 know for certain that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the LORD your God has given you. (Joshua 23)*

Joshua passed on the words he had received from Moses. He called his people to be strong and serve the Lord. They served the Lord by walking according to His commandments. He promised that if they served and loved the Lord with their whole heart, He would make His presence known among them. If, however, they chose to follow the ways of the nations around them, the Lord would drive them out of the Promised land.

Just before he died, Joshua spoke these words to the people he had faithfully served:

*14 "Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt and serve the LORD. 15 And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."*

*(Joshua 24)*

Joshua challenged his people to fear and serve the Lord by putting away all other gods. He called them to make up their mind about who they were going to serve. He told them that He had made up his mind –both he and his family would serve the Lord. As the people reflected on the life of Joshua, they could not help but see the tremendous blessing of God. He had been an example of a man who had served the Lord with his whole heart. They lived now in their own land with freedom and prosperity because God had used this worshipper to bring them hope. In Joshua, they saw an example of what it meant to serve the Lord with their whole heart.

The story of Joshua is that story of a man who made up his mind to worship the Lord God of Israel. While the word "worship" is rarely found in the book, the term "serve" carries the same sense. Joshua served the Lord by walking in obedience and giving Him first place in his battles and personal walk. He honoured the Lord by removing offensive obstacles to His presence.

Unlike Moses, Joshua did not go up to the mountain to speak with God, nor did he offer sacrifices on the altars of Israel. Joshua was not a priest. He was a military man, and his worship was expressed in how he lived his life. He lived with a commitment to obey and trust the Lord in all he did. He

lived with a commitment to seek the presence of the Lord in every battle. Joshua worshiped the Lord best in how he lived and served Him in his everyday circumstances.

For Prayer:

Father, thank you that worship is part of our everyday life. Thank you that we can experience your presence in whatever you have called us to do. Teach us to honour, obey and serve you in our daily routine. Help us to seek your presence in whatever you have called us to do. May our lifestyle be one of praise and thanksgiving to You.

## Chapter 8 - Worship and Blessing

After the days of Joshua, a series of judges led the nation of Israel. These judges were often military leaders who protected and rescued Israel from the hands of her enemies. To the human eye, these judges were often seen as deliverers. There was, however, something more profound taking place in those days. Consider how Judges 2 describes the days of Israel's judges:

*16 Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. 17 Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so. 18 Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. 19 But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. 20 So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he said, "Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice (Judges 2)*

Notice what these verses tell us. God raised up judges to speak for Him and lead the people in the path of truth. Israel ignored these judges and turned from God. When they abandoned the Lord to serve other gods, God left them to their enemies until they repented and returned to Him. This appears to be a repeating cycle throughout the book. Consider the events leading up to the ministry of judge Othniel in Judges 3:

*7 And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. They forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth. 8 Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia. And the people of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years. (Judges 3)*

Israel “forgot” the Lord their God and served Baals and Asheroth. Do you see what is happening here? Israel ceased worshipping God and chose to worship the gods of the nations around her. As a result, God delivered His people into enemy hands. For eight years, Israel lived in bondage to the king of Mesopotamia.

Consider also what happened in Judges 10:

*6 The people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroath, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites, and the gods of the Philistines. And they forsook the LORD and did not serve him. 7 So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the Ammonites, 8 and they crushed and oppressed the people of Israel that year. For eighteen years they oppressed all the people of Israel who were beyond the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, which is in Gilead. (Judges 10)*

Because Israel turned from the worship of God to serve Baal and the Ashtaroath, God handed them over to the Philistines. This time they were in bondage to the Philistines for eighteen years.

What is important to notice here is the cause of Israel’s defeat and bondage—she turned from the worship of the Lord her God. Let me be more precise here. Worship is not just what happens for twenty minutes in church before the sermon. In the last chapter we saw how Joshua used the word “serve” to describe his worship. Worship involves a life. You can sing all the worship songs you want, but if you are not committed to living as an act of worship, your songs mean very little. Israel turned her back on the worship of God when she surrendered to other gods. This had a disastrous impact on her as a nation.

When Israel stopped serving and worshipping the Lord, she abandoned the blessings of God. God would not share her with other gods, and so He withdrew His benefits. Without the Lord’s benediction, the enemy was more than ready to invade and take over her land.

What happens today when we abandon the worship of God? What results when we do not give Him glory and praise in the decisions we make? What is the implication of not honouring His name in our schools and

government? Do we not experience what Israel did? Does He not withdraw His blessings and benefits? Do we not place ourselves under His wrath instead?

If we see worship as a few songs on Sunday morning, we miss that whole point of Scripture. Worship is not just what we sing; it is how we live and think. Worship is a lifestyle that honours the Creator and recognizes Him as Lord. It is a heart that bows in surrender to Him.

In the book of Judges, we see that worship was not just a nice thing to do for God; it was life and blessing for the nation. Similarly, our blessing as the people of God depends on our worshipping God as the Lord of our thoughts, actions and words. Only as we honour Him in all we do can we experience the fullness of His blessing on our lives. Only in the worship and service of God can we experience life as it was intended.

There is one more detail in the book of Judges I want to touch on in this chapter. Let me begin with an illustration from Judges 13. In this chapter, we meet a man by the name of Manoah whose wife was barren. One day an angel appeared to Manoah's wife and told her that she would conceive and bear a child. When she told her husband this, he wanted to hear for himself and asked the Lord to send the angel again to speak with him. God heard that prayer and sent the angel a second time. When Manoah saw the angel, he offered a burnt offering on the rock where the angel appeared. Listen to what took place when he brought his gifts of worship to the Lord:

*19 So Manoah took the young goat with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to the LORD, to the one who works wonders, and Manoah and his wife were watching. 20 And when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the LORD went up in the flame of the altar. Now Manoah and his wife were watching, and they fell on their faces to the ground. 21 The angel of the LORD appeared no more to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the LORD. 22 And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God."*  
(Judges 13)

Judges 13:20 tells us that the flame from that gift went up toward heaven and the angel of the Lord went up with it. Notice the response of Manoah



and his wife –they fell on their faces to the ground (verse 20). More than this, Manoah speaking to His wife, said: “We shall surely die, for we have seen God” (verse 22).

Consider also what took place in the life of Gideon, one of the judges of Israel. Gideon heard the call of God to serve as a judge, but like Moses, he was reluctant to accept that call as he felt unworthy and unprepared. In Judges 6, however, he brought an offering to the Lord of a young goat with some unleavened cakes. Listen to the story of what took place that day when the Lord appeared to Him.

*19 So Gideon went into his house and prepared a young goat and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the terebinth and presented them. 20 And the angel of God said to him, “Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and put them on this rock, and pour the broth over them.” And he did so. 21 Then the angel of the LORD reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes. And fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes. And the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight. 22 Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the LORD. And Gideon said, “Alas, O Lord GOD! For now I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face.” 23 But the LORD said to him, “Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die.” 24 Then Gideon built an altar there to the LORD and called it, The LORD Is Peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites. (Judges 6)*

When Gideon brought his offering to the Lord, the angel reached out the tip of his staff and touched it. Fire sprang up from the rock and consumed his offering. As this took place, the angel who had been speaking to him disappeared. When Gideon saw these things, he cried out “Alas, O Lord GOD! For now I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face.” These words were words of fear and terror. We understand this from the response of the Lord to Gideon in verse 23: “Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die.” Like Manoah, Gideon, upon experiencing the presence of God, feared for his life.

We should see here in the book of Judges the connection between the worship of God and His blessing upon the nation of Israel. God’s benefits

were removed from those who turned from Him and the worship of His name. Worship and service of God were not an option for those who wanted to know God's fullness in their lives. Worshipping God is the key to our blessing as a nation. Worship, however, must be seen as much more than what takes place on Sunday at church. It is a life of consecration and devotion to the Lord God. When our lives are devoted to worshipping His name, His blessing flows like water upon us and our nation. We suffer under deep oppression and bondage when our hearts and lives do not honour our Creator God.

Those who worshipped God experienced not only His blessing but also the reality of His presence. God revealed Himself to them. God allows those who worship Him in heart and life the grace to know and experience His glory and power. These individuals see God's presence in their lives. They walk in His authority and are not consumed. Their response is to fall in reverent fear and wonder at His feet. Why His presence should not destroy them is a matter of great astonishment. Undeserving as they are of this gracious presence, they open their hearts and hands to receive all He pours out. These are the vessels into which this glorious presence is poured.

What a privilege it is for us to be empowered and enabled by the presence of God. That presence delights to flow in vessels of reverent obedience and praise. Let us never take this presence for granted, however, for it is indeed a fearful presence to those who abandon the worship of His name.

For Prayer:

Father, help us to see that worship is much more than singing a few songs on Sunday. Teach us that true worship involves our heart, mind, will and actions. True worship requires the surrender of all we are to You. Teach us to walk in obedience and to serve you with all our heart, mind and spirit. Reveal Your presence as we surrender to You. Help us never to take Your presence and blessing for granted. Help us see that your power will flow through reverent and obedient hearts that worship and honour Your name.

## Chapter 9 – King David, the Worship Leader

King David was one of the most influential psalmists in Israel. There is much to say about him and his influence on the worship of God. The focus of this chapter will be the life of David, his heart and his impact on Old Testament worship. I would also like to examine how worship affected every aspect of David's life.

### *David as Musician*

In 1 Samuel 16, we read the story of how an evil spirit regularly afflicted King Saul. This evil spirit was so troublesome that Saul sought a means of relieving his torment. His servants suggested that some quiet music might help soothe him and give him relief.

*15 And Saul's servants said to him, "Behold now, a harmful spirit from God is tormenting you. 16 Let our lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre, and when the harmful spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well." (1 Samuel 16)*

Saul agreed to this and commanded his servants to bring him a man who could play a musical instrument to minister to him in these times. Among Saul's servants was a young man who knew David. He suggested that he might be the musician Saul needed.

*18 One of the young men answered, "Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the LORD is with him." (1 Samuel 16)*

1 Samuel 16: 23 tells us that David played the lyre, and whenever an evil spirit came upon Saul, his music refreshed the king, and the harmful spirit left him.

*23 And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him. (1 Samuel 16)*

The music David played not only calmed Saul but caused the evil spirit to leave. There was power in the music David played. We are not told what the tunes were that David played or what he sang in those times, but the power of those words and notes drove the demonic forces of hell away. I have a suspicion that the songs David played reflected something of his faith and confidence in God. The demons fled the presence of his praise. In those days, David saw first-hand how the enemy of God's people withdrew at the sound of God-honouring worship.

While David would move on from being a musician, he never forgot his musical roots. 1 Chronicles 23:1-5 David organized the priests of the tabernacle. He commissioned 4,000 priests to offer praises to the Lord with the instruments David had made for this purpose:

*5 4,000 gatekeepers, and 4,000 shall offer praises to the LORD with the instruments that I have made for praise." (1 Chronicles 23)*

It was David who commanded the Levites to appoint singers and musicians for the service of God. He incorporated a variety of musical instruments to praise God. Notice that these musicians were not to be timid in their playing. According to David in 1 Chronicles 15:16, these musicians "should play loudly on musical instruments."

*16 David also commanded the chiefs of the Levites to appoint their brothers as the singers who should play loudly on musical instruments, on harps and lyres and cymbals, to raise sounds of joy. (1 Chronicles 15)*

For David, musicians were to express their worship of God in how they played their instruments. As a musician, David expressed his worship through musical instruments and songs.

### *David as a Sinner*

While David had the heart to worship God in song and music, he was far from perfect and fell into sin like each of us does. Sometimes he paid a steep price for his sin. We read the story in 1 Samuel 11-12 of David's sin of adultery and murder.

God was displeased with David for these sins. Through Nathan the prophet, the Lord informed David that the child of this adulterous

relationship would die. This grieved David very much, and he refused to eat, seeking the Lord's forgiveness and favour. The Lord, however, took the life of David's child. Notice what took place when David heard of the death of his child.

*19 But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David understood that the child was dead. And David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" They said, "He is dead." 20 Then David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. He then went to his own house. And when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate. (2 Samuel 12)*

David rose from his place on the ground, washed, changed his clothes and worshipped the Lord. Why would David worship the Lord in this time of great despair? He did so because he accepted his punishment as a just penalty for his sin. David submitted to the Lord not just in the good times but also in the difficult. He worshipped God as a just and righteous God.

Another incident took place in David's life in 1 Samuel 24. On this occasion, David became proud and ordered a census of the men in his army. For a moment, the king forgot that his strength was not in his army but the Lord his God. This pride of heart angered the Lord and resulted in a pestilence that killed 70,000 men in the nation within a few days.

As God struck these individuals, David went to the property of Araunah the Jebusite. He determined to build an altar to the Lord his God, worship him and repent of his sin. When Araunah saw David coming, he paid homage to him and inquired about his presence. David told him he had come to offer a sacrifice to the Lord for his sin. Out of deep respect for David and likely understanding the circumstances surrounding David's sacrifice, Araunah offered the property to David free of charge. David refused, saying:

*24 But the king said to Araunah, "No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. (2 Samuel 24)*

As a sinner, David understood that the solution to his sin was to get right with God. This would take place through confession and worship. David paid the full price for the property where he worshipped. He would not

add to the sin of his pride, offering something to the Lord that cost him nothing. David accepted his guilt and willingly paid full price to be reconciled to God.

David worshipped God by paying the full price for the property on which he made this offering. He gave his resources to God as an act of worship. The king took full responsibility for his actions and refused compromise of any kind when it came to being restored to God. Notice the response of God:

*25 And David built there an altar to the LORD and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the LORD responded to the plea for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel. (2 Samuel 24)*

The plague was averted because of David's act of worship. David's pride had brought separation between himself and God. The healing of the nation came through confession of sin and the restoration of uncompromising worship and obedience.

### *David as a Warrior*

King David was known as a warrior king. The Lord gave him great success in his battles. What we need to understand about David is that he brought the Lord into the decisions he made in these battles. Consider the following examples:

*1 Now they told David, "Behold, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah and are robbing the threshing floors." 2 Therefore David inquired of the LORD, "Shall I go and attack these Philistines?" And the LORD said to David, "Go and attack the Philistines and save Keilah." (1 Samuel 23)*

Notice here how David "inquired of the Lord" about whether to attack the Philistines. Only when the Lord told him to go did he attack them.

In 1 Samuel 30, we read how the Amalekites burned David's city and took his wives and daughters captive. The people of the city were so distressed that they spoke of stoning David. Listen to David's response:

*6 And David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in soul, each for his sons and daughters. But David strengthened himself in the LORD his God. 7 And David said to*

*Abiathar the priest, the son of Ahimelech, "Bring me the ephod." So Abiathar brought the ephod to David. 8 And David inquired of the LORD, "Shall I pursue after this band? Shall I overtake them?" He answered him, "Pursue, for you shall surely overtake and shall surely rescue." (1 Samuel 30)*

David "strengthened himself in the Lord his God" and "inquired of the Lord." In an act of worshipful submission to God, David called upon the Lord for wisdom. He knew what he wanted to do, but before acting upon his desire, he sought the will and purpose of God. While David was king of Israel, he bowed to the will and purpose of his Lord. The phrase "David inquired of the Lord," or its equivalent, is repeated many times in 1 and 2 Samuel (see 2 Samuel 2:1; 5:19-23).

David bowed to the will of God and chose to seek His purpose in the battles he fought. David acknowledged God as the one true Commander and submitted to His objective. We worship God when we bring all our desires and will into subjection to Him as our Lord.

There is something else about David as a warrior. God gave him many victories, but David never took those victories for granted. 2 Samuel 22 is a song of David written after the Lord gave him victory over his enemies.

*2 He said, "The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, 3 my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my savior; you save me from violence. 4 I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies. (2 Samuel 22)*

David, the warrior, writes a song of thanksgiving to God for the victory He had given him. As mighty as David was, he gives all glory to God for his success – "the Lord is my refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my savior." David worshipped God by submitting to His will and recognizing God as the source of all his victories. He openly confessed Him to be his salvation and stronghold.

### *David as a Visionary*

David was also a visionary. He bought a property from a Jebusite on which he built an altar to the Lord. Not content with just an altar on that piece of

property, David determined that he would construct a house for the Lord:

*1 Then David said, "Here shall be the house of the LORD God and here the altar of burnt offering for Israel." (1 Chronicles 22)*

This piece of land purchased by David would be the location for the great temple of Solomon. David's vision was to see a magnificent structure where the God of Israel would be forever worshiped.

While God did not give David the privilege of constructing this temple, David's vision was so strong that he devoted great resources to its completion. 1 Chronicles 29 gives an account of what David had put aside for the construction of this house of the Lord:

*1 And David the king said to all the assembly, "Solomon my son, whom alone God has chosen, is young and inexperienced, and the work is great, for the palace will not be for man but for the LORD God. 2 So I have provided for the house of my God, so far as I was able, the gold for the things of gold, the silver for the things of silver, and the bronze for the things of bronze, the iron for the things of iron, and wood for the things of wood, besides great quantities of onyx and stones for setting, antimony, colored stones, all sorts of precious stones and marble. 3 Moreover, in addition to all that I have provided for the holy house, I have a treasure of my own of gold and silver, and because of my devotion to the house of my God I give it to the house of my God: 4 3,000 talents of gold, of the gold of Ophir, and 7,000 talents of refined silver, for overlaying the walls of the house, 5 and for all the work to be done by craftsmen, gold for the things of gold and silver for the things of silver. Who then will offer willingly, consecrating himself today to the LORD?" (1 Chronicles 29)*

Lest we miss the extent of what David gave here, notice that he gave 3,000 talents of gold. A talent is equal to 75 lbs. or 34 kg. In other words, the weight of gold alone was 225,000 lbs. or 102,000 kg. --an absolute fortune. David invested all this and much more into the construction of a temple he would never see. David worshipped his God by giving generously so that He could have a glorious house of praise.

*David as a Leader*



Finally, let's consider David as a leader of his people. He was unashamed of his commitment to the Lord God. Consider what took place when the ark of the covenant was brought into the city of Jerusalem:

*12 And it was told King David, "The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God." So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing. 13 And when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six steps, he sacrificed an ox and a fattened animal. 14 And David danced before the LORD with all his might. And David was wearing a linen ephod. 15 So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the horn. (2 Samuel 6)*

As the ark was carried into the city, David went before it, dancing and celebrating "with all his might." When his wife Michal rebuked him for dancing in such a way, David responded:

*21 And David said to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me above your father and above all his house, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the LORD—and I will celebrate before the LORD. 22 I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be abased in your eyes. But by the female servants of whom you have spoken, by them I shall be held in honor." (2 Samuel 6)*

That day David declared boldly that he was not ashamed to worship the Lord with all his might before the people of Israel. He cared little about what other people thought of him and his delight in His God.

As a leader of his people, David appointed Levites to thank and praise the Lord:

*2 And when David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the peace offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD 3 and distributed to all Israel, both men and women, to each a loaf of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. 4 Then he appointed some of the Levites as ministers before the ark of the LORD, to invoke, to thank, and to praise the LORD, the God of Israel. (1 Chronicles 16)*

While David was not a priest, the worship of God was very important to Him, so he made sure that there were individuals responsible for bringing

thanks and praise to the Lord God regularly.

1 Chronicles 29:10-22 describes one of the very last acts of David as the leader of his people. Here in this passage, David prays before the nation. He blessed the Lord and confessed before the people that all he had came from Him. That day David called upon the people to bless and worship the Lord. He offered a thousand bulls, one thousand lambs, and one thousand lambs as an offering to the Lord. The people celebrated the Lord with a great feast. After these events, Solomon took his place as king, and David passed into the presence of His Lord.

For Prayer:

Lord God, thank you for the heart of worship You gave David. Teach us to submit all our decisions to You so that we can worship through our obedience and submission to Your purpose. Give us an unashamed heart to confess You like David before all people. May our lives bring praise as we confess our failures and sin. Teach us to recognize you as the source of all blessing and strength. May all our life be an offering of praise to You.



## Chapter 10 – Religious Clutter

After the death of David, his son Solomon built the first permanent structure for the worship of God. Solomon's temple would replace the tabernacle, which was a portable tent. David wanted the Lord to have a beautiful building where people could come to worship.

1 Chronicles 29:1-9 summarizes the material donated for the construction of this temple in the days of David. The following chart gives us a sense of what was available to Solomon when he began the construction project:

Material	Talents	Pounds	Kilograms
Gold	8,000	600,000	272,155
Silver	17,000	1,275,000	566,990
Bronze	18,000	1,350,000	612,349
Iron	100,000	7,500,000	3,401,942
Precious Stone	Unspecified	Unspecified	Unspecified
Wood	Unspecified	Unspecified	Unspecified

This material alone represents an immense fortune in our day. 2 Chronicles 2:8 tells us that Solomon also contacted the king of Tyre and hired men to cut cedar, cypress and alnum timber from Lebanon and bring it to Jerusalem for the temple construction:

*8 Send me also cedar, cypress, and alnum timber from Lebanon, for I know that your servants know how to cut timber in Lebanon. And my servants will be with your servants, (Chronicles 2)*

Solomon assigned men to work in the hills cutting stone for the construction:

*2 And Solomon assigned 70,000 men to bear burdens and 80,000 to quarry in the hill country, and 3,600 to oversee them. (2 Chronicles 2)*

According to this verse, 153,600 men worked in the hills preparing stone for the temple. This was no ordinary construction project. Even by today's standards, it was an enormously expensive undertaking. 1 Kings 6:38 tells us that it took Solomon seven years to complete the construction project even with this large workforce.

When the temple was completed, a great service of dedication took place. 1 Kings 8:62 describes the sacrifices that took place on that day of dedication:

*62 Then the king, and all Israel with him, offered sacrifice before the LORD.  
63 Solomon offered as peace offerings to the LORD 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep. So the king and all the people of Israel dedicated the house of the LORD. (1 Kings 8)*

We can only imagine how much time it would have taken to sacrifice 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep, not to mention the cost of these sacrifices.

The temple was furnished with the highest quality furnishings. Carved pillars and embroidered material made this building the most luxurious building in the nation.

Solomon stood in front of the people at the temple's dedication and prayed to the Lord God. Let me highlight a few thoughts from his prayer.

*33 "When your people Israel are defeated before the enemy because they have sinned against you, and if they turn again to you and acknowledge your name and pray and plead with you in this house, 34 then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of your people Israel and bring them again to the land that you gave to their fathers. (1 Kings 8)*

Notice that Solomon prays that God would forgive His people when they pleaded with Him in the temple he built for Him. He repeats this in verses 35-36 when he says:

*35 "When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you, if they pray toward this place and acknowledge your name and turn from their sin, when you afflict them, 36 then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel, when you teach them the good way in which they should walk, and grant rain upon your land, which you have given to your people as an inheritance. (1 Kings 8)*

Solomon's request in these verses is that God would forgive if His people prayed "toward this place." This phrase or similar is repeated seven times in Solomon's prayer:

1. "pray toward this place" (verse 30)

2. "plead with you in this house" (verse 33)
3. "pray toward this place" (verse 35)
4. "stretch out his hand toward this house" (verse 38)
5. "pray toward this house" (verse 42)
6. "pray to the LORD toward the city that you have chosen and the house that I have built for your name" (verse 44)
7. "pray to you toward their land, which you gave to their fathers, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name" (verse 46)

The repetition of this phrase so often in Solomon's prayer may have some significance. He seems to be promoting a practice of facing the temple when praying to God. While we do not want to read too much into this, the temple begins to take on an important role in Solomon's faith.

To understand what is taking place here, I would like to return for a moment to 2 Samuel 7:1-7. This passage takes us back to David and his desire for a temple in Jerusalem. Speaking to Nathan the prophet one day, David said:

*1 Now when the king lived in his house and the LORD had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, 2 the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent." (2 Samuel 7)*

As David reflected on the fact that the ark of God was in a tent while he lived in a cedar palace, he felt ashamed. He believed that the Lord God deserved much more than a tent and determined in his heart that he would make Him the most luxurious building in the world.

God spoke to Nathan, however, and gave him a message for David:

*4 But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, 5 "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in? 6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. 7 In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I*

*commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" (2 Samuel 7)*

God reminded David that day that He never asked him for a house of cedar. God had determined that His people worship Him in a tent. Consider the words of God to His people in Exodus 20 about the kind of altar they were to build Him:

*24 An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. 25 If you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it. (Exodus 20)*

God required that the altar used to worship His name be made from a mound of dirt or uncut stones. He told His people that they would profane the altar if they used any tool to build it.

David proposed constructing an elaborate and luxurious building made from stones cut from the hills and shaped by human tools. The finest artisans would carve its walls and pillars. Yet God told Nathan:

*7 In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" (2 Samuel 7)*

While God never commanded David to build Him this temple, He understood David's heart. God allowed Solomon to build the temple, but when it was completed, He spoke very plainly to him and said:

*1 As soon as Solomon had finished building the house of the LORD and the king's house and all that Solomon desired to build, 2 the LORD appeared to Solomon a second time, as he had appeared to him at Gibeon. 3 And the LORD said to him, "I have heard your prayer and your plea, which you have made before me. I have consecrated this house that you have built, by putting my name there forever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time. 4 And as for you, if you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my rules, 5 then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your*

*father, saying, 'You shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel.' 6 But if you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, 7 then I will cut off Israel from the land that I have given them, and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight, and Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. 8 And this house will become a heap of ruins. Everyone passing by it will be astonished and will hiss, and they will say, 'Why has the LORD done thus to this land and to this house?' (1 Kings 9)*

The words of God to Solomon that day were important. Notice the phrase "all that Solomon desired to build" in verse 1:

*1 As soon as Solomon had finished building the house of the LORD and the king's house and all that Solomon desired to build, (1 Kings 9)*

This temple, with all its luxury, was a gift from Solomon to God. God accepted his gift and chose to bless the house he had built for him but issued a warning. God told Solomon that if the nation turned from Him, he would not hesitate to cast this house out of His sight and make it a heap of ruins. God told Solomon that passersby would ask the question, "Why has the Lord God done this to this land and this house" (1 Kings 9:8).

Historically, we know that this temple was stripped of all its gold, silver and precious stones and brought down to the ground. God would ultimately abandon the temple and leave it as a heap of ruins.

The question we need to ask is this: What does Solomon's temple teach us about worship? This temple was an expression of David's passion for God. God did not require the wealth and luxury found in this building. While God did accept this offering from David and Solomon, He made it clear that there was something much more important to Him –the obedience and devotion of His people. If His people turned from Him, God would not hesitate to destroy the temple and give all its wealth to the pagan nations around them.

How easy it is to become so focused on a building and forget God. Understand, however, that it is not just church buildings that can take God's place. We have all met people whose denominations, traditions and preferences have become as important to them as God. While these things



may be good in their place, God will not hesitate to cast them from His sight and leave them as a heap of ruins if they ever take His place in our lives.

Worshipping God may certainly take place in the context of great buildings, traditions and preferences but remember that God alone deserved first place in our hearts and worship.

For Prayer:

Lord God, thank you that You receive our gifts and delight in our sacrifices. Teach us, however, that the greatest gift we offer You is a heart of devotion and faithfulness. Help us not to be distracted by the externals of worship. You accept praise from those who worship in the simplicity of heart. Give us the grace to cast off the clutter that surrounds us so that our hearts can focus on You alone.

## Chapter 11 - Worship and the Health of the Nation of Judah

After the days of Solomon, the nation was divided in two. Jeroboam became king of the northern kingdom of Israel, and Rehoboam, Solomon's son, ruled the southern kingdom of Judah. Under the leadership of Jeroboam, Israel turned from the worship of the Lord God to establish a new religion and priesthood. Many true priests of God left Israel and moved to Judah, where they could continue to worship the God of Abraham.

*13 And the priests and the Levites who were in all Israel presented themselves to him from all places where they lived. 14 For the Levites left their common lands and their holdings and came to Judah and Jerusalem, because Jeroboam and his sons cast them out from serving as priests of the LORD, 15 and he appointed his own priests for the high places and for the goat idols and for the calves that he had made. 16 And those who had set their hearts to seek the LORD God of Israel came after them from all the tribes of Israel to Jerusalem to sacrifice to the LORD, the God of their fathers. (2 Chronicles 11)*

Our reflection on the teaching of Scripture about worship moves exclusively to the nation of Judah during the period. If there is one thing we learn about the worship of God during the reign of the various kings of Judah, it is the deep connection between worship and the nation's health.

While Judah continued to worship the Lord God of their ancestors, this did not mean that they were always true to their confession. Once Solomon's son Rehoboam was established as king, he turned his back on the Lord God.

*1 When the rule of Rehoboam was established and he was strong, he abandoned the law of the LORD, and all Israel with him. 2 In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, because they had been unfaithful to the LORD, Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem 3 with 1,200 chariots and 60,000 horsemen. And the people were without number who came with him from Egypt— Libyans, Sukkiim, and Ethiopians. 4 And he took the fortified cities*

*of Judah and came as far as Jerusalem. 5 Then Shemaiah the prophet came to Rehoboam and to the princes of Judah, who had gathered at Jerusalem because of Shishak, and said to them, "Thus says the LORD, 'You abandoned me, so I have abandoned you to the hand of Shishak.'" (2 Chronicles 12)*

The words of the prophet Shemaiah are striking: "You abandoned me, so I have abandoned you..." (verse 5). Because Rehoboam rejected the law of the Lord and the worship of the God of his fathers, God allowed Egypt to invade and take the fortified cities of Judah. The defeat of these "fortified" cities had nothing to do with their lack of defence but was the direct result of abandoning the worship of God.

Notice from 2 Chronicles 12 that the Lord allowed the Egyptians to enter the house of the Lord and plunder it.

*9 So Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem. He took away the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king's house. He took away everything. He also took away the shields of gold that Solomon had made, (2 Chronicles 12)*

This was in direct fulfilment of the promise God made to Solomon in 1 Kings 9:6-8. God told Solomon that while He would bless the temple he had built, if the people ever turned from the worship of His name, He would cast it off, and it would become a "heap of ruins." God issued a warning to Rehoboam when the Egyptians took away the temple treasures.

When King Abijah took the throne in Judah, he found himself in conflict with Israel. On one occasion, as he stood against Jeroboam in battle, Abijah rebuked Israel's king for turning from the worship of the God of Abraham.

*9 Have you not driven out the priests of the LORD, the sons of Aaron, and the Levites, and made priests for yourselves like the peoples of other lands? Whoever comes for ordination with a young bull or seven rams becomes a priest of what are not gods. (2 Chronicles 13)*

Abijah openly declared his commitment to worship the God of his fathers.

*10 But as for us, the LORD is our God, and we have not forsaken him. We have priests ministering to the LORD who are sons of Aaron, and Levites for their service. 11 They offer to the LORD every morning and every evening burnt offerings and incense of sweet spices, set out the showbread on the*

*table of pure gold, and care for the golden lampstand that its lamps may burn every evening. For we keep the charge of the LORD our God, but you have forsaken him. 12 Behold, God is with us at our head, and his priests with their battle trumpets to sound the call to battle against you. O sons of Israel, do not fight against the LORD, the God of your fathers, for you cannot succeed.” (2 Chronicles 13)*

Jeroboam showed no fear of Abijah's God and attacked him and his army. Notice the response of Abijah to this attack:

*14 And when Judah looked, behold, the battle was in front of and behind them. And they cried to the LORD, and the priests blew the trumpets. 15 Then the men of Judah raised the battle shout. And when the men of Judah shouted, God defeated Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah. 16 The men of Israel fled before Judah, and God gave them into their hand. (2 Chronicles 13)*

Judah cried out to the Lord in this time of trouble. The priests blew their trumpets, and God defeated Jeroboam. The eyes of Judah's army turned to God for help. They recognized God as the source of their victory. God's blessing was upon those who recognized Him and sought His heart.

Consider the words of the Lord to King Asa in 2 Chronicles 15:

*1 The Spirit of God came upon Azariah the son of Oded, 2 and he went out to meet Asa and said to him, “Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: The LORD is with you while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you. (2 Chronicles 15)*

2 Chronicles 15 goes on to say that as soon as King Asa heard the words of this prophecy, he “put away the detestable idols from the land of Judah,” gathered the people in Jerusalem, and sacrificed to the Lord God. That day they swore an oath with shouting and the sound of trumpets and horns (2 Chronicles 15:14). They devoted themselves to worship the Lord God alone. Notice the result of this commitment:

*15 And all Judah rejoiced over the oath, for they had sworn with all their heart and had sought him with their whole desire, and he was found by them, and the LORD gave them rest all around. (2 Chronicles 15)*

Judah knew the blessing of God because they sought Him “with their whole desire.” When God became their heart's desire, she experienced

peace and rejoicing. There is a deep connection in this passage between the worship of God with a whole heart and the nation's health.

Listen to the description of the life of King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 17:

*3 The LORD was with Jehoshaphat, because he walked in the earlier ways of his father David. He did not seek the Baals, 4 but sought the God of his father and walked in his commandments, and not according to the practices of Israel. 5 Therefore the LORD established the kingdom in his hand. And all Judah brought tribute to Jehoshaphat, and he had great riches and honor. 6 His heart was courageous in the ways of the LORD. And furthermore, he took the high places and the Asherim out of Judah. (2 Chronicles 17)*

The presence of the Lord God was with Jehoshaphat because he did not worship Baal but sought the God of his fathers. Because he devoted his heart to seek the Lord God of David, God blessed him, and the kingdom of Judah prospered under his reign. 2 Chronicles 20 gives us a powerful example of Jehoshaphat's commitment and devotion to the Lord God.

As 2 Chronicles 20 opens, we discover that the Moabites, Ammonites and the Meunites came up against Jehoshaphat (verse 1). Seeing the size of this army, Jehoshaphat was afraid. Notice, however, the first thing the king did when he saw this enemy army.

*3 Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. 4 And Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD. (2 Chronicles 20)*

In his despair, Jehoshaphat "set his face to seek the Lord." Calling the nation together, he proclaimed a fast to seek the support of the Lord. As they gathered, the Spirit of God came upon Jahaziel who spoke these words:

*15 And he said, "Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the LORD to you, 'Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God's. (2 Chronicles 20)*

When Jehoshaphat heard these words, 2 Chronicles 20:18 tells us that he bowed his head with his face to the ground and worshipped the Lord with

all of Judah. A powerful worship service took place that day as they prepared to face the enemy.

The next day, as they stood before the enemy, Jehoshaphat challenged the army to “believe in the Lord” and the word spoken by His prophet. He then called for the people to sing to the Lord (2 Chronicles 20:21). There before their enemies, the people of Judah sang: “Give thanks to the LORD, for his steadfast love endures forever.”

2 Chronicles 20:22 tells us what happened next:

*22 And when they began to sing and praise, the LORD set an ambush against the men of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed. 23 For the men of Ammon and Moab rose against the inhabitants of Mount Seir, devoting them to destruction, and when they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, they all helped to destroy one another. (2 Chronicles 20)*

As they worshipped the Lord their God, the enemy was confused and turned against each other. The battle was won that day in a worship service. God descended in power to bless and remove their enemies.

While there are numerous examples of God’s miraculous work through the kings of Judah who devoted themselves to worship the Lord God, the point has been made. The blessing of God rested on those who committed themselves to honour His name.

Let me take a moment to conclude with a statement about those who turned their back on the Lord. Consider first an example from the life of King Jehoram. Listen to the words of 2 Chronicles 21:

*5 Jehoram was thirty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned eight years in Jerusalem. 6 And he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done, for the daughter of Ahab was his wife. And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD ... 8 In his days Edom revolted from the rule of Judah and set up a king of their own. (2 Chronicles 21)*

The passage tells us that Jehoram did evil in the sight of the Lord. It goes on to say that Edom, who had been subject to Judah, revolted and set up their own king. Judah lost her influence and authority over Edom. There is a very subtle connection between turning from God’s worship and losing influence and authority.

The connection between Judah's loss of authority and power becomes clearer when a letter arrived at the palace from Elijah, the prophet. That letter read:

*12 And a letter came to him from Elijah the prophet, saying, "Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father, 'Because you have not walked in the ways of Jehoshaphat your father, or in the ways of Asa king of Judah, 13 but have walked in the way of the kings of Israel and have enticed Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem into whoredom, as the house of Ahab led Israel into whoredom, and also you have killed your brothers, of your father's house, who were better than you, 14 behold, the LORD will bring a great plague on your people, your children, your wives, and all your possessions, 15 and you yourself will have a severe sickness with a disease of your bowels, until your bowels come out because of the disease, day by day.'" (2 Chronicles 21)*

Elijah prophesied that God's wrath would fall on Jehoram and the nation of Judah. God would send a plague, and Jehoram would experience a prolonged disease of his bowels that would ultimately take his life. Jehoram would die because he refused to bow the knee to the Lord God of Judah.

King Amaziah began his reign by worshiping the Lord God but turned his back on Him later in life. 2 Chronicles 25 tells us that Amaziah "sought the gods of Edom" (2 Chronicles 25:20). Listen to what happened when Amaziah chose to worship the gods of Edom and not the true God of Judah:

*20 But Amaziah would not listen, for it was of God, in order that he might give them into the hand of their enemies, because they had sought the gods of Edom. 21 So Joash king of Israel went up, and he and Amaziah king of Judah faced one another in battle at Beth-shemesh, which belongs to Judah. 22 And Judah was defeated by Israel, and every man fled to his home. 23 And Joash king of Israel captured Amaziah king of Judah, the son of Joash, son of Ahaziah, at Beth-shemesh, and brought him to Jerusalem and broke down the wall of Jerusalem for 400 cubits, from the Ephraim Gate to the Corner Gate. 24 And he seized all the gold and silver, and all the vessels that were found in the house of God, in the care of Obed-edom. He*

*seized also the treasures of the king's house, also hostages, and he returned to Samaria. (2 Chronicles 25)*

Because Amaziah abandoned the worship of the God of Judah, God handed him over to Israel. The Israelites broke down the wall of Jerusalem and took gold and silver treasures from God's house. They also seized the treasures of the palace and brought hostages back with them to the capital of Samaria.

King Manasseh abandoned the worship of God and burned his son as an offering in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom. He used fortune-telling, omens, sorcery, and dealt with mediums and necromancers" (2 Chronicles 33:6). 2 Chronicles 33:7 tells us that Manasseh even set up a pagan idol in the temple of the Lord.

*7 And the carved image of the idol that he had made he set in the house of God, of which God said to David and to Solomon his son, "In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever (2 Chronicles 33)*

This contempt for the worship of God brought God's wrath on the nation of Judah:

*25 Because they have forsaken me and have made offerings to other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands, therefore my wrath will be poured out on this place and will not be quenched. (2 Chronicles 34)*

Notice that the wrath of God would be poured out on the temple and the people of God because they made offerings to other gods. The nation's downfall was not a result of enemy nations so much as it was because they abandoned the worship of God.

2 Chronicles concludes with God's judgement on a people who had done "evil in the sight of the Lord" (2 Chronicles 36:11). While God sent prophets to warn them, Judah "mocked these messengers of God (2 Chronicles 36:16). Because they turned their backs on Him, God brought the Chaldeans against them. 2 Chronicles 36:17-21 describes the result of Judah's refusal to bow the knee to her God:

*17 Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and*



*had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged. He gave them all into his hand. 18 And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his princes, all these he brought to Babylon. 19 And they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. 20 He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, 21 to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years. (2 Chronicles 36)*

It is impossible to read Judah's history and not see the connection between her health as a nation and her worship of God. Her prosperity depended on her worship. As long as she bowed the knee to Her God and delighted in Him, she knew His favour. When she worshipped other god's however, she brought about her condemnation and judgment. The temple of God was destroyed because God's people worshipped other gods. The nation of Judah fell because her heart no longer delighted in the worship of her one true God.

For Prayer:

Father, we see from 2 Chronicles that there is a deep connection between our delighting in You and our health and blessing as a people. We are most healthy and blessed when we are in a right relationship with you. Worship is not just something we do on a Sunday but an attitude of the heart that delights and honours You every day of the week. Give us a spirit of gratitude, worship and obedience. Teach us to walk each day in an attitude of worship and delight in You. May we know the fullness of joy and peace that this attitude of praise can bring to our lives.

## Chapter 12 – Worship in Exile

In the last chapter, we saw how Judah lost everything because she chose to turn her back on the Lord God. She began to worship other gods and abandoned the God of her fathers. As a result, God stripped her of her land and sent her into exile.

Some of the most powerful worship comes out of deep distress. It is in these times that the Lord has our full attention. We have nowhere else to turn but to the Lord. In these times of agony, we find ourselves crying out as never before to the source of our hope and confidence. God makes Himself known in suffering as never before. In this chapter, I would like to look at the period of Israel's exile to see what it has to teach us about worship in difficult times.

As we begin, let's consider the book of Esther. In this book, we meet a young girl by the name of Esther and her uncle Mordecai. They are Jewish exiles in Persia at the time of King Ahasuerus. King Ahasuerus' wife was removed from her position as queen after she had publicly embarrassed her husband. Through a series of miraculous events Esther, was chosen to replace her as queen.

King Ahasuerus promoted an official by the name of Haman to the top official of the land. This meant that everyone was to bow to him and show him the respect his position demanded. In fact, in that culture, he would have been seen as a god.

In Esther 3, however, while everyone bowed before Haman, Esther's uncle Mordecai refused. When Mordecai was questioned about this refusal, he responded by telling his questioners that he was a Jew:

*3 Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you transgress the king's command?" 4 And when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew. (Esther 3)*

His response shows us that Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman for religious reasons. This reveals something about the commitment of

Mordecai to worship and bow down to the Lord God of Israel alone.

When Haman discovered that Mordecai was a Jew, he determined to kill not only Mordecai but his entire race as well. When news of Haman's plan reached the ears of the Jews, many fasted and wept before the Lord their God (Esther 4:3).

Mordecai decided to ask Esther to plead the case of her people before the king. Approaching the king without an invitation was to risk her life, but Esther determined before God to take that risk. Before going to see the king, however, notice her request in Esther 4:16:

*16 "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish." (Esther 4)*

Esther called for her people to fast and pray for her protection and favour with the king. She recognized her need for the Lord God and His protection. There is something about risking your life that draws you closer to God. Esther and her people are forced to cry out to God in this great trial. God heard that prayer and miraculously rescued his people. We can only imagine the joy praise that resulted from His intervention in those days.

Consider also the words of Jeremiah to the exiles of his day in Jeremiah 29:

*4 "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ... 6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. 8 For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, 9 for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 29)*

The prophet told the captives of Babylon that they were to accept their condition and pray for the welfare of their enemies. Jeremiah prophesied

that their prosperity was tied to the health of their enemies. According to Jeremiah, God expected His people to flourish where they were and recognize His presence in their pain and suffering. It was there in their exile that they would know the presence of God to bless and keep them.

This time of exile was not an easy one for the people of God. God's people cried out to Him with many questions. They struggled to understand what God was doing. Consider the words of Lamentations 1:

*15 "The Lord rejected all my mighty men in my midst; he summoned an assembly against me to crush my young men; the Lord has trodden as in a winepress the virgin daughter of Judah. 16 "For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my spirit; my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed." 17 Zion stretches out her hands, but there is none to comfort her; the LORD has commanded against Jacob that his neighbors should be his foes; Jerusalem has become a filthy thing among them. 18 "The LORD is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word; but hear, all you peoples, and see my suffering; my young women and my young men have gone into captivity... 20 "Look, O LORD, for I am in distress; my stomach churns; my heart is wrung within me, because I have been very rebellious. In the street the sword bereaves; in the house it is like death. (Lamentations 1)*

God's people cried out in their pain. They felt abandoned and broken. There was no one to comfort them in their despair. Notice, however, in Lamentations 1:18 how they recognized that God was in the right and they had rebelled against His word. In their exile, Judah confessed her sin and acknowledged the holiness of the God of Israel.

In their prosperity, the people of God had turned from their God. Listen now to their cry:

*18 Their heart cried to the Lord. O wall of the daughter of Zion, let tears stream down like a torrent day and night! Give yourself no rest, your eyes no respite! 19 "Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the night watches! Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord! Lift your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street." (Lamentations 2)*

Their despair drove them to God. Their heart cried out to Him. They rose at night to pour out their heart to God for their children. God's people recognized that they were being punished for their sin and rebellion. Their punishment seemed more than they could handle. In these times of despair, however, sparks of worship and confidence began to spring up. In their agony, they cried out to God for comfort and victory.

*15 He has filled me with bitterness; he has sated me with wormwood. 16 He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; 17 my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; 18 so I say, "My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD." 19 Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! 20 My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. 21 But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: 22 The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; 23 they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 24 "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." (Lamentations 3)*

The hardened heart of rebellion was now softening. Those who had turned from God began to look to His steadfast love and mercy. Those who ran from Him now declared Him to be their portion and hope.

Daniel was a young Jewish exile called to enter the service of the Babylonian king. His commitment, however, was to honour the God of his fathers and observe His Laws. When called into the king's service, he refused to defile himself with the royal food, choosing only to eat vegetables and drink water (see Daniel 1:8-15). He did this as an act of worship to the one true God of Israel.

Daniel's friends made a similar commitment to the Lord God of Israel. When King Nebuchadnezzar made a great image and demanded that everyone bow down and worship it, Daniel's friends refused, choosing rather to be thrown into the fiery furnace. God honoured this commitment and protected them from the flames (see Daniel 3:10ff).

In Daniel 6, the Babylonian king signed a decree declaring that no one could worship any other god but him for thirty days. Consider the response of Daniel to this decree:

*10 When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously. (Daniel 6)*

Daniel refused to worship the king of Babylon. He unashamedly prayed to the God of Israel and risked being thrown into the den of lions rather than deny the one true God. Once again, God protected Daniel from the lions, and when it was discovered that his God had shut their mouths, King Darius declared:

25 Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: "Peace be multiplied to you. 26 I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring forever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. 27 He delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions." (Daniel 6)

These were days of tremendous suffering. Under the evil decree of Haman, the survival of the entire Jewish nation was at stake. Haman risked his life by not bowing down to worship Haman. Esther risked her life by approaching the king without an invitation. Daniel's friends were cast into a fiery furnace for not bowing down to the king's image. Daniel was thrown to the lions because he rejected the worship of King Darius.

Powerful things were taking place in those days. God moved in ways His people had never seen before, closing the mouths of lions and allowing His people to pass unharmed through the flames. God reversed the decrees of powerful leaders and softened hardened hearts. Pagan kings recognized the God of Israel as the one true God.

Among these exiles were people who experienced the worship of God on a whole new level. They worshipped a God of miraculous deliverance and hope. They bowed to a God of sustaining power. In those days, the God they sought was not an abstract idea but a real person who touched them and revealed Himself to them in ways they had never experienced before. Some of the most sincere and powerful worship times were experienced in those days of tremendous persecution and loss.

For Prayer:

Father, in times of ease, we often fail to understand what we have in You. As we look briefly at worship in the time of exile, we see deep grief and pain, but also some of the most incredible miracles and revelations of Your presence. We realize that worship is not limited to good times when everything is going well. Sometimes the most powerful praise is born in the most trying circumstances. Give us the grace to find You in our suffering. Give us a heart of worship even when things are not going as we would like.

## Chapter 13 – Worship and Suffering

If there is one book of the Bible that speaks to the question of suffering, it would be the book of Job. It recounts how Satan killed Job's children and stripped him of his health. The physical pain Job experienced was intense, but it was not the only pain he knew in those days. His friends and wife abandoned him. Beyond this was the loss of the sense of God's presence and comfort. Job felt truly alone.

As I approached this book to consider what it teaches about worship, I was struck by Job's heart. Let's take a moment to examine this amid the abandonment and pain he felt in those days.

As we begin, we catch a glimpse of Job's concern for his children and their relationship with the Lord.

*4 His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. 5 And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually. (Job 1)*

As a father, Job was concerned for his children. He knew that in their celebrations, they may have sinned against God, and so he rose early in the morning after their parties to offer a sacrifice for them in case they had said or done something that had offended God.

Job 1 describes how Satan killed Job's children. We have just seen how concerned Job was for their spiritual wellbeing. He took his role as a father seriously. To lose his children in this way would have been a tremendous blow. Notice the response of Job, however, to the loss of both his children and property.

*20 Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. 21 And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." (Job 1)*



Upon hearing this tragic news, Job did two things. First, he tore his robe and shaved his head. This was a sign of deep grief. Job felt pain and agony in this loss. Second, Job fell on the ground and worshipped the Lord. Job blessed the name of the Lord, confessed that everything he had, came from Him, and that He had the right to take whatever He wanted from him. He bowed in humble submission to God's purpose.

When Job's wife saw what he was going through and the suffering he was experiencing, she approached him and said: "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die" (Job 2:9). Listen to the response of Job that day:

*10 But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips. (Job 2)*

Job refused to curse God even in the suffering and pain he experienced.

As the pain and suffering continued day after day, Job grew tired and weary of life. In Job 3, this pain is very evident. In this chapter, Job cursed the day of his birth, wishing he had never been born to experience such pain. Job did not understand what was happening in his life or why God allowed him to go through such agony.

By the time we get to chapter 6, Job longs for death as a release from suffering. In his despair, he cried out:

*8 "Oh that I might have my request, and that God would fulfill my hope, 9 that it would please God to crush me, that he would let loose his hand and cut me off! 10 This would be my comfort; I would even exult in pain unsparing, for I have not denied the words of the Holy One. 11 What is my strength, that I should wait? And what is my end, that I should be patient? (Job 6)*

Notice a few details in these words of Job. First, despite the suffering Job experienced, he did not deny the existence of God. He prayed to God and recognized Him as the source of life. Second, Job refused to deny the words of the Holy One. He chose to walk in obedience to the truth of God and believe what He said even though it did not make sense to him. Third, notice that he called God the "Holy One." The implication here is that God was perfect in all He did. He would not accuse God of wrongdoing. Finally,

notice that his comfort in death would be that he had not denied the Holy One. He would stand before God with a clean conscience and experience the comfort his heart longed to know. In his suffering, Job acknowledged God as the Holy One.

Job knew that he could not stand before a perfect God. God was so much greater than man in Job's mind that there was no reason for God even to consider him. It amazed Job that the Holy One should set his heart on him:

*17 What is man, that you make so much of him, and that you set your heart on him, 18 visit him every morning and test him every moment? 19 How long will you not look away from me, nor leave me alone till I swallow my spit? 20 If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of mankind? Why have you made me your mark? Why have I become a burden to you? 21 Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity? For now I shall lie in the earth; you will seek me, but I shall not be.” (Job 7)*

Job was keenly aware that God made much of him, set his heart on him, and visited him every morning. This was uncomfortable for him. As God drew near, Job became keenly aware of his sinfulness. “Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity,” he cried.

This deep sense of unworthiness is evident in the words of Job in Job 9 when he says:

*1 Then Job answered and said: 2 “Truly I know that it is so: But how can a man be in the right before God? 3 If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times. 4 He is wise in heart and mighty in strength—who has hardened himself against him, and succeeded?— 5 he who removes mountains, and they know it not, when he overturns them in his anger, 6 who shakes the earth out of its place, and its pillars tremble; 7 who commands the sun, and it does not rise; who seals up the stars; 8 who alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea; 9 who made the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the chambers of the south; 10 who does great things beyond searching out, and marvelous things beyond number. (Job 9)*

Job confesses God to be a wise and mighty God who does great and marvellous things beyond number. As he stood before this God, he declares: “how can a man be in the right before God.” In the heart of Job,

the God he served was an awesome and holy God who removed mountains, shook the earth and commanded the sun.

Though he understood just how small he was before this great and awesome God, Job dared to approach him and beg for mercy:

*2 I will say to God, Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me. (Job 10)*

As he cried out to God for mercy that day, Job went on to recognize Him as His Creator. He told God how he had experienced His “steadfast love” and that His care had preserved his spirit. He also confessed that if he had sinned against such a God, he would indeed be guilty and disgraced:

*11 You clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews. 12 You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit. 13 Yet these things you hid in your heart; I know that this was your purpose. 14 If I sin, you watch me and do not acquit me of my iniquity. 15 If I am guilty, woe to me! If I am in the right, I cannot lift up my head, for I am filled with disgrace and look on my affliction. (Job 10)*

While Job could not understand what God was doing in his life, he accepted Him as a God of wisdom and might whose will and purpose were final:

*10 In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind. ... 13 “With God are wisdom and might; he has counsel and understanding. 14 If he tears down, none can rebuild; if he shuts a man in, none can open. 15 If he withholds the waters, they dry up; if he sends them out, they overwhelm the land. 16 With him are strength and sound wisdom; the deceived and the deceiver are his. (Job 12)*

Job understood that God possessed wisdom and knowledge beyond his understanding. While he knew that the wisdom of God was beyond him, there is still a boldness in the spirit of Job that cried out: “But I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God. (Job 13:3). His desire to know God and approach Him is so powerful in Job that he is willing to risk his life to stand even for a moment in His presence. Job did not take approaching God lightly. He knew that to approach His majesty was a terrifying thing:

*11 Will not his majesty terrify you, and the dread of him fall upon you? (Job 13)*

As terrifying as it was to stand before this majestic God, the longing in Job's heart to do just that was so strong that he was willing to risk his life to approach Him:

*15 Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face. (Job 13)*

What would Job ask of God if he had the privilege of drawing near to Him? He tells us in Job 13:20 that he would have two requests to make:

*20 Only grant me two things, then I will not hide myself from your face: 21 withdraw your hand far from me, and let not dread of you terrify me. 22 Then call, and I will answer; or let me speak, and you reply to me. 23 How many are my iniquities and my sins? Make me know my transgression and my sin. 24 Why do you hide your face and count me as your enemy? (Job 13)*

What are the two requests Job would make to God? First, he would ask Him to withdraw His hand and remove the dread and terror he felt as he approached. Second, he asked that God would speak to Him and reveal His face. For that to take place, Job asked God to show him any sin that stood between them. I have met people in my life who turn from God at the least sign of pain and suffering. This is not the case for Job. His heart cries out all the more for God. He longs to draw near to Him. He wants to see His face. He wants to hear God again. He does not doubt God's goodness but struggles to understand His purpose.

Job continues to worship God and places his hope in Him. He would wait until God answered his prayers, and his transgressions were sealed up in a bag.

*14 If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my service I would wait, till my renewal should come. 15 You would call, and I would answer you; you would long for the work of your hands. 16 For then you would number my steps; you would not keep watch over my sin; 17 my transgression would be sealed up in a bag, and you would cover over my iniquity. (Job 14)*

Consider the words of Job in chapter 19:

*25 For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. 26 And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, 27 whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me! (Job 19)*

Job experienced great pain in his life. He made this clear when he said, "My heart faints within me!" (Job 19:27). Despite this agony of body and soul, Job declared that he had a Redeemer. Despite his experiences in life, Job proclaimed that His Redeemer would stand victorious on the earth in the end. His God would triumph over evil. Job expected to see him personally. We can only imagine what kind of hope this would have brought Job in his suffering. He worshipped God as a God of victory over sin, pain and rebellion. He proclaims his confidence in His God and worships Him as the victorious Redeemer.

In Job, we have a strange contrast between agony and hope, despair and confidence, complaint and praise. In Job 23:2, Job was experiencing a particularly difficult day:

*2 "Today also my complaint is bitter; my hand is heavy on account of my groaning. (Job 23)*

That day was a day of bitter complaint because of his agony. Job found himself groaning in deep pain and bitterness of soul. In this despair, notice the heart of Job:

*3 Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat! 4 I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. 5 I would know what he would answer me and understand what he would say to me. (Job 23)*

Job's heart longs to find God. When many others would be running away from God, Job's heart cries out for Him all the more. His great desire was to cling to the One who had allowed such pain. He wanted to speak to Him and hear Him explain what was happening. In his anguish, more than anything else, he wanted to hear from God.

Job knew that his only hope was in the Lord God. It was He alone who could prolong life and raise those who were despairing of life:

*22 Yet God prolongs the life of the mighty by his power; they rise up when they despair of life. (Job 24)*

Job understood how small he was before the Creator God. Listen to what he says about his God in Job 26:

*8 He binds up the waters in his thick clouds, and the cloud is not split open under them. 9 He covers the face of the full moon and spreads over it his cloud. 10 He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters at the boundary between light and darkness. 11 The pillars of heaven tremble and are astounded at his rebuke. 12 By his power he stilled the sea; by his understanding he shattered Rahab. 13 By his wind the heavens were made fair; his hand pierced the fleeing serpent. 14 Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?" (Job 26)*

Job's God did miraculous things. He set the limits of the waters, divided day and night, stilled the raging of the sea and filled the clouds with moisture. These were but the outskirts of God's ways –just a small sampling of His power and might. Despite his agony of body and soul, Job marvelled at the power and wisdom of his mighty God. Such understanding was hidden from humankind. Only God knew its source:

*20 "From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? 21 It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from the birds of the air. 22 Abaddon and Death say, 'We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.' 23 "God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. (Job 28)*

This is the deep reflection of the heart of Job in his agony of body and soul. His heart is lifted in praise and recognition of God as a wise and all-powerful God. His pain and suffering do not cause him to turn from God. If anything, they remind him of his own frailty and the majesty and glory of the God he served.

In chapter 31, Job is brought to a place of deep soul searching. He searched every corner of his life to see if there was anything he had done that would deserve the punishment of God. In this chapter, Job sought to know if he had failed to walk faithfully with his God. He confessed that if he had been unfaithful in any way, he deserved the wrath of Almighty God. Job did not run from God. His deepest desire is to understand any shortcomings, confess them and be restored to fellowship again.

When God finally does speak, notice Job's response:

*3 Then Job answered the LORD and said: 4 "Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. (Job 40)*

Job chose to be silent before God and to let Him speak. He would not justify his actions. What could he say before such wisdom, holiness and majesty? In the end, after God had spoken, Job would declare:

*5 I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; 6 therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42)*

Job did not dispute the words of God. Instead, he humbly bowed and confessed his unworthiness. In the words of Job 42:5-6, however, we catch a glimpse of the delight of Job's heart to move from just hearing about God to seeing him personally. This was his great desire throughout the book. He wanted to know this God he worshipped. He longed to speak with Him. He yearned to approach Him. This, of course, is the true heart of worship.

In the person of Job, we see a man whose body was overwhelmed with pain. He struggled with a despairing soul but still found it in his heart to worship the Lord God of Israel. Though wracked with pain, he still cried out in worship: "Though he slay me, I will hope in him. (Job 13:15). It is possible to worship and trust the Lord in suffering and pain. May God give us this kind of heart as we face the obstacles life throws at us.

For Prayer:

Father, thank you for Job's heart of worship and confidence. We recognize that it is all too easy for us in our suffering to walk away. I pray that we never doubt Your grace and wisdom in pain. Teach us to worship and confess You as Lord in these times of trial and suffering. Give us the grace to rest in You and wait for You. More than this, fill us with a sense of awe and worship as we bow in submission to your purpose. Speak to us in our suffering. Reveal Yourself to us in our trials. May our hearts be filled with the wonder of your mercy, majesty and holiness. When everything around us seems to be falling apart, fill our hearts with worship and praise in the knowledge that You never change.

## Chapter 14 – Worship, the Great Purpose of Life

The Bible describes Solomon as one of the wisest men who ever lived. Notice, however, what he discovered with this accumulated wisdom:

*13 And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 14 I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

*(Ecclesiastes 1)*

Solomon described life as an “unhappy business.” He examined “everything that is done under the sun” and compared it to “striving after the wind.”

While Solomon appreciated the great wisdom God had given him, listen to how he speaks about it in Ecclesiastes 1:18:

*18 For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. (Ecclesiastes 1)*

The more a person knew, the more their troubles increased. Knowledge and wisdom brought with it great responsibility.

In Ecclesiastes 2, Solomon recounts how he devoted himself to pursuing pleasure at one point in his life.

*1 I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” (Ecclesiastes 2)*

In this pursuit, he tried to “cheer his body with wine:”

*3 I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. (Ecclesiastes 2)*

Notice here that he was still guided with wisdom in his attempt to cheer his heart with wine. In other words, Solomon knew the disaster that awaits those who abuse strong drinks, so he was sensible in its use.

Along with wine, Solomon also accumulated great possessions:



*4 I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. 5 I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. (Ecclesiastes 2)*

He surrounded himself with singers and concubines described in verse 8 as the delight of the “sons of man.”

*8 I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. (Ecclesiastes 2)*

Ecclesiastes 2:10 tells us that Solomon kept his eyes from no pleasure. He indulged fully in what the world had to offer:

*10 And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. (Ecclesiastes 2)*

Once again, He describes this pursuit in verse 11 as a striving after wind:

*11 Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2)*

He was left feeling empty by what this world had to offer.

Solomon had this to say as he reflected on his hard work and achievements:

*18 I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, 19 and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. 20 So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, 21 because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. (Ecclesiastes 2)*

Solomon worked hard and achieved much during his reign, but as he considered this, he wondered if he would leave it all behind to someone who did not appreciate it. Maybe his hard work would be handed over to

those who would squander it. What was sure is that one day he would die, and all he worked so hard to accomplish would be given to someone else. He saw certain meaninglessness in all of this.

Reflecting on the difference between human beings and animals, Solomon had this to say:

*18 I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. 19 For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 3)*

We both breathe the same air and die the same death. The king wondered if there was any advantage to being a human over an animal.

Solomon went as far as to say that there were times when it was better to be dead than alive:

*1 Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. 2 And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. 3 But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 4)*

Reflected on the tears of those who were oppressed in this life, Solomon wondered if it would not be better for them to be dead, for at least in death, there would be rest from their agony. Notice further that Solomon wondered if such a person were better never to have been born, so they did not experience oppression, sickness, or disappointment in life.

While Solomon had riches beyond measure, he tells us that money will never satisfy. The more we have, the more we need. The rich who crave wealth will find they will never have enough, and those riches they desire will ultimately destroy them:

*10 He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. 11 When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? 12 Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little*

*or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep. 13 There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt (Ecclesiastes 5)*

If Solomon found no ultimate satisfaction in the wealth and pleasures of this world, what did bring him meaning and satisfaction in life? Scattered throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, we find the answer to this question in the person of God.

Solomon reminds his readers that God put eternity in their hearts and that true joy can only be found by rejoicing in Him and what He has given:

*10 I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. 12 I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; 13 also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man. 14 I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. (Ecclesiastes 3)*

In Ecclesiastes 2:18-23, Solomon describes the futility of work and toil on this earth. Here in Ecclesiastes 3:10, however, he tells us that God has given the children of man a business in which they are to take pleasure, for this is God's gift to them (Ecclesiastes 3:13). As we are faithful in the business God has given us, God will make things beautiful in His time. While serving ourselves and our own interests is vanity, serving the purpose of God is something in which we can be joyful and find great meaning. It is our great privilege to be part of this work.

Notice how Solomon concludes Ecclesiastes 3:10-14: "God has done it, so that people fear before him" (verse 14). To "fear" in our contemporary understanding is to be afraid of someone or something. This, however, is not what Solomon is saying here. The word "fear" in the Bible has the sense of respecting, reverencing or holding someone or something in high regard. Is this not what worship is all about? When we worship someone, we hold them in high regard. We respect, honour and celebrate their worth.

God has a purpose for our lives. As we engage in the work God has given us, He makes his presence known. His blessing and enabling are given to those who are faithful to His calling on their lives. As we experience Him in this way, the reality of His protection, provision and enabling, fill us with wonder, and our hearts are lifted in praise and worship. I have often found my heart rejoicing in the truth God reveals as I fulfil my calling to open up the Word of God to His people. I have stood in awe at how He has provided so that thousands of people worldwide can receive this teaching. God reveals Himself to us through His calling on our lives. It is through that calling that we can express our deepest praise and worship of His name. Solomon discovered this to be deeply meaningful.

As wise as Solomon was, there was one thing he knew—the wisdom of God was past finding out. He understood that no matter how much one learned, there would always be things beyond our ability to understand.

*16 When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, 17 then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.*  
(Ecclesiastes 8)

There is a mystery to life and God's ways:

*5 As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything. (Ecclesiastes 11)*

Solomon was held in high regard in his day. His wealth and power were unprecedented. As great as he was, however, Solomon understood that he could never grasp the mind of God, nor could he stand before His power. This great God will bring each of us to judgement. Only those who fear the Lord will be spared:

*12 Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. (Ecclesiastes 8)*

As Solomon concludes his reflection on the meaning of life, he challenges his readers to remember their Creator:

*1 Remember also your e in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them" (Ecclesiastes 12)*

He tells us that in the end, what is important in life is to fear God and keep His commandments:

*13 The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Ecclesiastes 12)*

Our purpose on this earth is to reverence, respect and celebrate the worth of our God. We do this by participating in the business of His kingdom and walking in faithful obedience to Him. According to Solomon, this is not an option but the "whole duty of man." In other words, this is why we are on this earth. Nothing else has meaning apart from the worship of God and walking in obedience to Him.

For Prayer:

Father, we often fill our lives with the things of this world and seek to find meaning and purpose in them. We are also left disappointed in what we see. Teach us what Solomon had to learn. Show us that only in the worship of Your name and in obedience to Your purpose can we find true meaning and purpose for our lives.

## Chapter 15 – Passionate Worship

The Song of Solomon is a unique book in the Bible. On a very basic level, it is an expression of the love and passion of a couple in love with each other. It is a description of God's intention for married love. Interpreting the book at this level is sufficient in itself. I believe, however, that we are completely justified in taking our interpretation a step further. In the Old Testament, the Lord often compared His relationship to His people to marriage.

Consider, for example, the words of Isaiah 54:

*5 For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. 6 For the LORD has called you like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God. 7 For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you. 8 In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you," says the LORD, your Redeemer. (Isaiah 54)*

Here the Lord compares Himself to Israel's husband. She had been unfaithful to Him, and He turned His back on her for a time, but He would not leave her forever. He would return with "great compassion" to her.

Consider also the words of the Lord through His prophet Jeremiah:

*20 Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel, declares the LORD.'" (Jeremiah 3)*  
*31 "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 31)*

God compares the unfaithfulness of His people toward Him to the infidelity of a wife toward her husband.

Finally, listen to the words of the Lord through the prophet Hosea:

*16 "And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.'" (Hosea 2)*

The Lord told the people of Hosea's day that the day would come when they would call him "My Husband" as a symbol of the closeness and commitment they would have toward Him as their God.

What is abundantly clear from the above passages is that marriage is often used to symbolize the commitment between God and His people. If this is that case, then the Song of Solomon is not only important because of what it teaches us about married love but also for what it teaches us about God's intention for our relationship with Him. With this in mind, let's take a moment to consider what Song of Solomon has to teach us about the relationship God desires with His people.

The book opens up with the words of the bride:

*2 Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine (Song of Solomon 1)*

There is passion and longing in the words of the bride. She longs to be near her loved one. She can think of nothing as wonderful as being with him and in his embrace. While this passion is very strong in her, she also realizes that she is unworthy of his attentions. Listen to what she confesses to her friends:

*6 Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has looked upon me. My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept! (Song of Solomon 1)*

The bride confesses that her skin has been burned by the sun. She had been forced to do manual labour in the vineyards. Notice how she regrets the fact that she had not kept her "own vineyard." She refers here to her own body. Her skin and body showed the effects of hard labour in the vineyards. She understands that she is not perfect and has faults with her skin and body, but those shortcomings do not dampen her love and passion for the one she loves. After confessing that she had not taken care of herself as she should have, the bride cries out:

*7 Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon; for why should I be like one who veils herself beside the flocks of your companions? (Song of Solomon 1)*

As imperfect as she is, her passion for her lover cannot be dampened. She cries out for the one her soul loves. She longs to find him and be near him. She does not let her unworthiness keep her from seeking him.

Notice the response of her lover to her in the following verses:

*8 He: If you do not know, O most beautiful among women, follow in the tracks of the flock, and pasture your young goats beside the shepherds' tents. 9 I compare you, my love, to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots. 10 Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with strings of jewels.*  
(Song of Solomon 1)

Her lover assures her of his delight in her also, despite her sun-damaged skin. He goes on in verse 15 to say:

*15 He: Behold, you are beautiful, my love; behold, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves.* (Song of Solomon 1)

She is assured that in his eyes, she is beautiful, and in this great love, she delights:

*3 She: As an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.* (Song of Solomon 2)

In this relationship between the bride and the husband, there is a deep and passionate desire to be together:

*10 My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away* (Song of Solomon 2)

They long to hear each other's voices and see each other's faces:

*14 O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.* (Song of Solomon 2)

When that is not happening, they will do anything to be restored.

*1 On my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not. 2 I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not.* (Song of Solomon 3)



Notice how the bride sought her husband at night but could not find him. She desired him so much that she left the comfort of her bed and went out into the night to find him. She could not bear to be without him.

Her husband returns the same love and devotion.

*9 You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride; you have captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace. 10 How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride! How much better is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than any spice! (Song of Solomon 4)*

His heart has been captivated by his bride. He delights in her love more than the finest wine.

On one occasion, as the bride searched for her husband, her friends, not completely understanding the passion she was demonstrating for him, ask:

*9 Others: What is your beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful among women? What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you thus adjure us? (Song of Solomon 5)*

What is it about this man that you so frantically search for him? What makes your heart so passionate about him? In essence, this is what her friends ask. Without thinking, the bride responds:

*10 She: My beloved is radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand. (Song of Solomon 5)*

For the next six verses, she goes on to describe his head, hair (verse 11), eyes (verse 12), cheeks, lips (verse 13), arms, body (verse 14), and legs (verse 15). She ends her description in verse 16 with these words:

*16 His mouth is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable. This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem. (Song of Solomon 5)*

The bride openly declares how much she values her husband. He was “altogether desirable.” He was her beloved and her friend. She is unashamed of how she feels toward this man ‘distinguished among ten thousand.’ What was most amazing and precious to her is that this man was hers alone:

*3 I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine (Song of Solomon 6)*

There is one final detail I want to touch on here in the Song of Solomon. While the couple's love is tested, notice the bride's words to her husband in the final chapter:

*6 Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD. 7 Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised. (Song of Solomon 8)*

"Set me as a seal upon your heart," she asks. When the king placed his seal on a document, it made it official and binding. Nothing could change what he decreed. By asking her husband to set her as a seal on his heart, the bride asks for a lifelong commitment that nothing in the world could ever break. She reminds her husband that love is as strong as death. What can overcome death? Even the strongest enemy will be overcome. The love this husband and wife had was a love that was as strong as death itself. Notice also that she reminds her husband that the flame of love they experienced was the "very flame of the Lord." In other words, the relationship they had was a gift from God, and the flames of his Spirit fanned it. It was a flame that even the great floods could not drown out. It was more valuable than anything this world could offer. The wealth of the whole world would be insufficient to pay for such a treasure.

What does the Song of Solomon teach us about worship? It challenges us to examine our hearts. Worship can be very ritual and routine. We go through the motions, but there is very little passion in the heart. If there is one thing that Song of Solomon describes for us, it is the passion of the husband and wife for each other. Is this not what the Lord longs for in our worship? Do our lifeless and thoughtless expressions of worship truly honour Him? Who is the Lord God to You? Are you passionate about Him? Do you long to be in His presence? Do you long for Him to be very real to You? Do you want to hear him? Do you feel His absence? Do you delight in His desire for You? True worship springs from a heart that is passionately in love with the Creator. This passion fuels worship like nothing else. May the Lord fan this passion into flames.

For Prayer:

Father, forgive us for making worship a duty and obligation. We pray that You would forgive us for the shallowness of our love for You. Open our eyes to see You in a new way. Give us a deeper passion for intimacy with You. May the example we see here in the Song of Solomon become a reality for us. May I worship from a heart of passion and devotion. May my heart rejoice in God, my Saviour.

## Chapter 16 – Worship and the Fear of the Lord

One of the key themes in the book of Proverbs is the concept of the fear of the Lord. The Biblical understanding of fear, when it pertains to God, refers to reverence and respect. In other words, the person who fears God holds Him in high regard and lives to honour Him in everything they do.

The second great theme of the book of Proverbs is that of wisdom. Wisdom refers to the skill of living life. These two great themes often collide in Proverbs. Consider the opening words of the book in Proverbs 1:7:

*7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1)*

If you want to know how to live your life to the full, you need to start by reverencing and honouring God.

We live in a world filled with opportunities and temptations. Notice, however, the advice of Proverbs 28:26:

*26 Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered. (Proverbs 28)*

According to this verse, only fools do what they think is best in their own mind. Our way of thinking is not the same as God's. Throughout the history of humankind, we have witnessed the devastation resulting from unwise human decisions. Pride, sin, greed and lust have tarnished our ability to think and make wise decisions. For this reason, we need to distrust our way of thinking and lean instead on the wisdom of God.

Listen to the words of Proverbs 16:

*25 There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. (Proverbs 16)*

Our insight and wisdom are insufficient to live as our Creator intended. Proverbs 3 challenges us not to lean on our understanding but instead to seek God in all our ways:

5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. 6 In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make

straight your paths. 7 Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. (Proverbs 3)

The teaching of Proverbs 3:5-7 is vital. We are not to trust our insights and reasoning. Rather, we are to acknowledge God –that is to say, we are to bring Him into our decisions. When we seek Him, He will direct our paths. We are to seek Him and His wisdom in “all our ways.” I remember years ago thinking about how radical it sounded to trust the leading of the Lord more than my understanding, but the older I have become, the more I see how important this is. I am coming to understand that God knows much more than I do and that I can trust Him far more than my reasoning.

Notice how Proverbs 3:5-7 concludes with reference to fearing the Lord instead of being wise in our own eyes. There are two different ways we can live. We can live by doing what is wise in our own eyes—doing the best we can without consulting God. Or we can fear the Lord by seeking His heart and purpose for our lives

This wisdom of God is available to all who will come to Him and seek His face. Proverbs 1 speaks about wisdom calling aloud from the streets and in the market places:

*20 Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; 21 at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: 22 “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? (Proverbs 1)*

This wisdom of God has many benefits. According to Proverbs, it provides healing and refreshing for our flesh:

*7 Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. 8 It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones. (Proverbs 3)*  
*20 My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. 21 Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. 22 For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh. (Proverbs 4)*

This wisdom God provides to all who will seek it is better than all the treasures of this world:

*19 My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver. (Proverbs 8)*

In God's wisdom, we find healing, refreshment, and life. It gives us a life worth more than anything money could buy. Many have gone before us, testifying that they would have given up all they owned to know the life the wisdom of God offered.

Notice what this great wisdom teaches:

*1 My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, 2 making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; 3 yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, 4 if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, 5 then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. 6 For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; (Proverbs 2)*

Verse 5 tells us that if we seek the wisdom of God, it will lead us to the fear of God. The great secret to living life to the full is found in the fear of God. This great wisdom of God will ultimately lead you down the path of worship and reverence of God's name. On this path alone, you will find your purpose in life.

If you want to live as God intended and experience the blessings and fullness of life, then you need to fear and reverence God. Proverbs 3 tells us that for this to take place, we need to die to our understanding and bow in submission to God and His purpose:

*7 Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. 8 It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones. (Proverbs 3)*

Those who truly reverence and respect God will hate evil and turn from it:

*13 The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate. (Proverbs 8)*

*6 By steadfast love and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the LORD one turns away from evil. (Proverbs 16)*

Those who fear the Lord willingly surrender to Him and His purpose. They recognize that they are sinners and no longer trust their own reasoning.

Instead, they seek the Lord in all they do. They cry out for His wisdom and insight in all their ways. They live in the fear of the Lord all day long:

17 Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the LORD all the day. (Proverbs 23)

The promise of God to those who fear the Lord and bow in reverent submission is rest, satisfaction and security.

*23 The fear of the LORD leads to life, and whoever has it rests satisfied; he will not be visited by harm. (Proverbs 19)*

According to the writer of Proverbs, those who live this life of worship and surrender to God find it so satisfying that they value it more than great worldly treasures and riches:

*16 Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble with it. (Proverbs 15)*

What does all this have to do with worship? The wisdom of the book of Proverbs points us directly to the fear of the Lord as the way of true satisfaction and purpose in life. The fear of God causes us to bow the knee in surrender. It leaves us in awe of the Creator. It stirs our hearts to delight in Him.

Those who fear God seek His face daily. They turn from every other god to live and worship Him alone. They cry out for His wisdom and choose to walk in obedience. They devote their lives in entirety to Him and His purpose. They live not for themselves but for Him. Fearing God is much more than singing a song to God—it has to do with devoting every day to living and walking in His wisdom. Resisting all other voices but His alone, we walk in intimacy and delight in His name.

For Prayer:

Father, teach us what it means to fear you. Help us to hold You in the highest regard. Show us how to live reverently before You. Keep us from leaning on our understanding. Help us instead to seek You and Your purpose in our lives. May our lives be lived for You in their entirety. May each day find us crying out to You and seeking Your face and Your purpose. May this be our daily act of worship.





## Chapter 17 – Worship in the Psalms

If one book of the Bible speaks to this theme of worship, it would be Psalms. The whole volume is dedicated to the praise of the Lord God of Israel. It would be quite easy to write an entire study on this subject from the psalms alone. My goal, however, is to summarize, in one chapter, what these psalmists teach us about worshipping God. To do this, we need to break the book up into various themes.

### *Call to Worship the Lord*

The book of Psalms is a call to God's people to worship the Lord their God. It reminds us that this is not only our privilege but also our obligation:

*1 Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens! ... 6 Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD! (Psalm 150)*

Understanding His worth, the psalmist calls for everything that has breath to praise the Lord. He does not limit this praise to humankind. He also requires that the inhabitants of heaven rejoice and praise His name:

*1 Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights! 2 Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts! 3 Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! 4 Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! 5 Let them praise the name of the LORD! For he commanded and they were created. (Psalm 148)*

Notice how he shows us that the sun, moon, and stars declare the praise of their Creator as they reflect His glory.

Throughout the book, the psalmists invite God's people to join them in thanksgiving to the Lord God:

*1 Oh come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! 2 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! (Psalm 95)*

The book of Psalms is an invitation to worship and praise the Lord God of Israel.

### *Expression of Passion and Desire for God*

The book of Psalms gives us a window into the hearts of the psalmists. It reveals their passions and desires for their Creator, showing us that they did not worship out of obligation and duty but from the depths of their being. Consider the words of the psalmist in Psalm 42:

*1 As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. 2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? (Psalm 42)*

The psalmist compares his desire for the Lord to a thirsty deer seeking water. His soul thirsted for God as a man crossing a dry and weary desert longed for water:

*1 O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; 55 my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. (Psalm 63)*

These psalmists communicated their desire to be in the courts of the temple singing for joy to their Saviour:

*2 My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. ... 10 For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness. (Psalm 84)*

We catch a glimpse of the passionate heart of these psalmists to worship their God. Their adoration of God was the intense longing of their hearts. It was in these times of worship that they found their deepest joy.

### *Praising the Character of the Lord God*

What was it about the Lord God that captivated the hearts of the psalmists? They cried out with thanksgiving and praise to a God who was majestic and glorious:

*1 O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. (Psalm 8)*

*1 The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. (Psalm 19)*

They rejoiced in His strength and protection over their lives:

*1 O LORD, in your strength the king rejoices, and in your salvation how greatly he exults! (Psalm 21)*

*1 Blessed be the LORD, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle; 2 he is my steadfast love and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield and he in whom I take refuge, who subdues peoples under me. (Psalm 144)*

These psalmists expressed delight in God's Word with all its promises and direction for life:

*7 The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; 8 the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; ... 10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. (Psalm 19)*

*72 The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces... 92 If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction. 93 I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life... 97 Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. (Psalm 119)*

Despite the troubles that came their way, these psalm writers worshipped a God who demonstrated His favour, mercy, love, and faithfulness toward them:

*2 O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. 3 O LORD, you have brought up my soul from Sheol; you restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit. (Psalm 30)*

*1 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! 2 Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble (Psalm 107)*

*5 Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, 6 who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? 7 He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, 8 to make them sit with princes, with*

*the princes of his people. 9 He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the LORD! (Psalm 113)*

The God these psalmists of Israel praised was a sovereign, holy and all-knowing God:

*7 For God is the King of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm! 8 God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne. (Psalm 147)*

*1 I will sing of steadfast love and justice; to you, O LORD, I will make music.*

*2 I will ponder the way that is blameless. Oh when will you come to me? I will walk with integrity of heart within my house; (Psalm 101)*

*1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me! 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. 3 You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. (Psalm 139)*

In a world filled with injustice and evil, the psalms of Israel called the children of God to bow before a just God:

*8 From the heavens you uttered judgment; the earth feared and was still, 9 when God arose to establish judgment, to save all the humble of the earth. Selah (Psalm 76)*

*6 The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory.*

*7 All worshipers of images are put to shame, who make their boast in worthless idols; worship him, all you gods! ... 9 For you, O LORD, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods. 10 O you who love the LORD, hate evil! He preserves the lives of his saints; he delivers them from the hand of the wicked. 11 Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart. 12 Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name! (Psalm 97)*

Knowing that they often fell short of God's laws, the psalmists celebrated His wonderful forgiveness and faithfulness:

*1 Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. 2 Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. (Psalm 32)*

*2 O you who hear prayer, to you shall all flesh come. 3 When iniquities prevail against me, you atone for our transgressions. (Psalm 65)*

*1 I will sing of the steadfast love of the LORD, forever; with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations. 2 For I said, "Steadfast love will be built up forever; in the heavens you will establish your faithfulness." (Psalm 89)*

Through their worship songs, the psalmist of Israel reminded believers of the character and awesome qualities of their God. In many ways, the psalms were theological reflections on the Lord God of Israel. They reminded people of His character and work and reassured them of His promises.

### *Reminders of God's Past Work*

Many psalms were written to remind the worshipper of the wonderful deeds of the Lord in their history. While we do not have the space to consider each of these psalms, let me cite a few examples.

David wrote Psalm 3 when his son turned against him and sought to kill him:

*1 O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; 2 many are saying of my soul, "There is no salvation for him in God." Selah 3 But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. 4 I cried aloud to the LORD, and he answered me from his holy hill. Selah 5 I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the LORD sustained me. (Psalm 3)*

David testified in this psalm to the protection and favour of the Lord despite his son's evil scheme. This psalm reminded Israel that God would sustain them as He sustained David in his trial.

David wrote Psalm 51 after he committed adultery with Bathsheba.

*1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. (Psalm 51)*

In this psalm, David openly shares his deep grief over the sin he had committed. He cast himself completely on God and cried out for mercy and

forgiveness.

Psalms 137 was written to describe the grief of those who had gone into exile because of their sin:

*1 By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. 2 On the willows there we hung up our lyres. 3 For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4 How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? (Psalm 137)*

These psalms were the personal testimonies of those who experienced the discipline or forgiveness of God. They reminded Israel of the blessings, temptations and goodness of God in the lives of those who had gone before them.

### *Troubling Questions*

One thing is quite clear in the book of Psalms. Life did not always go as expected. Even those who belonged to God suffered. This suffering sometimes was at the hands of unbelievers. On these occasions, the psalmists question God and His purpose. The Psalms of Israel reflect a human inability to understand the ways of God in suffering and pain. Consider the following examples:

*1 Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? 2 In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor; let them be caught in the schemes that they have devised. 3 For the wicked boasts of the desires of his soul, and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces the LORD. 4 In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him; all his thoughts are, "There is no God." 5 His ways prosper at all times; your judgments are on high, out of his sight; as for all his foes, he puffs at them. (Psalm 10)*

*1 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? 2 How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Psalm 13)*

*5 How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealousy burn like fire? 6 Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call upon your name! 7 For they have devoured Jacob and laid waste his habitation. (Psalm 79)*

On occasions of suffering, the psalmists lamented that God seems distant and the enemy near. They confessed their inability to comprehend God's purpose and cried out for Him to reveal His presence. The psalmists do not attempt to hide their human frailties and misunderstandings. They show us that we can worship a God whose ways we cannot understand. They remind us that we do not need to have all the answers before committing ourselves to Him. Some of the most powerful expressions of worship in the psalms come from the lips of worshippers who cannot understand God's purpose for their lives.

#### *Warnings to Those who Abandon God and His Purpose*

Other psalmists speak words of warning to those who have ignored the purpose of God. They remind their readers of the judgement that is to come for all who wander from Him:

*11 Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. 12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Psalm 2)*

*3 Our God comes; he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest. 4 He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people (Psalm 50)*

*27 For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. (Psalm 73)*

These psalms call the worshipper to repent and turn to God. They remind God's people that they would all give an account of their lives to their Creator.

#### *Cries for Deliverance*

A great number of psalms are prayers for deliverance in times of trouble. These Psalms boldly request the presence, support and relief of God in

times of struggle and pain.

*1 Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have given me relief when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer! (Psalm 4)*

*1 Hear my prayer, O LORD; give ear to my pleas for mercy! In your faithfulness answer me, in your righteousness! ... 3 For the enemy has pursued my soul; he has crushed my life to the ground; he has made me sit in darkness like those long dead. (Psalm 143)*

*11 Have you not rejected us, O God? You do not go out, O God, with our armies. 12 Oh grant us help against the foe, for vain is the salvation of man! (Psalm 108)*

These psalmists were often brought to the end of their physical and emotional resources. They had nowhere to turn in these days but to the Lord. They cast themselves fully on Him for deliverance and healing.

### *Confidence in the Lord's Support*

The psalmists also demonstrate confidence and faith in God when difficulties and trials surrounded them. They express their faith in God even when they do not understand His ways.

*8 Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping. 9 The LORD has heard my plea; the LORD accepts my prayer. 10 All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled; they shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment. (Psalm 6)*

*11 By this I know that you delight in me: my enemy will not shout in triumph over me. (Psalm 41)*

*1 God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered; and those who hate him shall flee before him! 2 As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away; as wax melts before fire, so the wicked shall perish before God! (Psalm 68)*

In these psalms, the writers express their assurance and faith in the God of Israel as their Deliverer. These psalmists declare their confidence in the Lord God and His promises in times of tremendous upheaval.



### *Prayers for God's Special Favour*

The writers of the psalms understood their need for God's favour in many different ways. We have already seen how they cried out for deliverance from their enemies. This, however, was not their only cry to God.

They cried out for forgiveness when they sinned against the Lord God and asked Him to teach them how to live:

*11 For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great. (Psalm 25)*

*4 Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. 5 Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long. (Psalm 25)*

They ask God for the enabling to serve Him well and to use their time on earth wisely:

*1 Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the royal son! 2 May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice! ... 4 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor! (Psalm 72)*

*12 So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. (Psalm 90)*

These worship leaders reflected their need for God to give them the passion and ability to live and worship Him as He deserved. These psalms were prayers for His favour and blessing on their lives.

### *How their Worship was Expressed*

We have examined the reasons for worship in the book of Psalms. Let me conclude with a final word about how this worship was expressed to God.

The Psalms are both personal and corporate prayers. Many of these psalms, however, were put to music. Notice that Psalms 120-134 are all described as "A Song of Ascents." Most commentators believe that a song of ascent was sung as the people of God went to Jerusalem for their special festivals. These psalms were composed much like Easter or Christmas hymns to remind them of the occasion.

Notice also that Psalm 30 was composed as a song for the dedication of the temple.

*A Psalm of David. A song at the dedication of the temple. (Psalm 30)*

Psalm 92 was written as a song to be sung on the Sabbath:

*A Psalm. A Song for the Sabbath. (Psalm 92)*

Psalm 34 was written to be sung at the time of a memorial offering:

*A Psalm of David, for the memorial offering (Psalm 34)*

The psalmists wrote songs to be sung on special occasions in the worship of God.

Some psalms were sung to common tunes of that day. Psalm 22, for example, was sung to the music of "Doe of the Dawn," while Psalm 45 was sung to "Lilies." Psalm 56 used the tune of "Dove on Far of Terebinths." Other psalms have a note to the choir director so that he knew how to sing the psalm.

*To the choirmaster: according to Do Not Destroy. A Miktam of David, when he fled from Saul, in the cave. (Psalm 57)*

The note to the choirmaster in Psalm 57 told him the tune and the occasion for the writing of the psalm.

We should also note that these notes to the choir directors also indicated the type of instruments that should accompany the singing of the psalm.

*To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments. A Psalm. A Song. (Psalm 67)*

*To the choirmaster: for the flutes. A Psalm of David. (Psalm 5)*

Throughout the book of Psalms, references are made to the various musical instruments used in temple worship. We have already mentioned stringed instruments and flutes in Psalm 67 and Psalm 5. Beyond this, we have reference to cymbals (Psalm 150:5), trumpet (Psalm 47:5; 81:3), lute (Psalm 92:3), harp (Psalm 33:2; 57:8), tambourine (Psalm 88:2; 149:3), pipe (Psalm 150:4), and lyre (Psalm 92:1; 7:17).

We also have reference to God's people dancing before their God (Psalm 149:3; 150:4), bowing down before Him (Psalm 5:7; 45:11), and lifting their hands to Him (Psalm 141:2).

The book of Psalms teaches us that His people worshipped Him by expressing their passion, fears and confidence in Him. They celebrated His character and cried out to Him for deliverance and strength to live in His purpose. They confessed their inability to understand His ways but cried out for grace to trust Him more. They expressed their worship in song, music and personal expressions of delight in Him. They shared their experiences through songs and prayers written down for generations to come.

For Prayer:

Father God, thank you for the passionate expressions of praise and confidence in You in the book of Psalms. We confess that we do not always understand Your ways. Teach us to trust you when we find ourselves in trials and trouble of various kinds. We thank You, Lord, for Your love, faithfulness, holiness, justice and mercy. We pray that You would teach us to delight in You even when we don't understand your ways.

Lord, thank you for how the book of Psalms displayed human confusion and emotions. It is easy for us to go through a form of worship that expresses no integrity of heart. Forgive us for times we have not been honest with you in our praise. Thank you that our confusion and misunderstandings do not threaten you. Give us confidence in these times to trust you when we do not understand Your ways.

Renew our hearts so that they can truly delight in You again.

## Chapter 18 – The Praise of the Nations

The book of Isaiah has some important truths to teach us about worshipping God. In this prophecy, the prophet Isaiah reminds his people of the number one hindrance to their relationship with God:

*3 The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." 4 Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged. (Isaiah 1)*

Isaiah tells us that God's people did not know Him. The word "know" does not mean that they had never heard about God or have any interaction with Him. The term is used here to speak of an intimate relationship with God. This is explained in verse 4 when the Lord tells us that His people were "utterly estranged." In other words, they knew about God and had dealings with Him, but they were not currently fellowshiping with Him. They had different interests and no time for God. According to Isaiah, God's people were "laden with iniquity." That is to say; their hearts were filled with sin and rebellion. This kept them from a deep relationship with their Creator and hindered their worship.

Israel continued to perform her religious duties, but God had no interest in their sacrifices because His people were not in a right relationship with Him. Listen to what He told them through the prophet Isaiah:

*11 "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. 12 "When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? 13 Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. 14 Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. (Isaiah 1)*

God's people did not seek Him. The prophets lied to the people. The leaders led them astray. As a result, God no longer rejoiced over their young men, nor did He have compassion on His people:

*13 The people did not turn to him who struck them, nor inquire of the LORD of hosts. 14 So the LORD cut off from Israel head and tail, palm branch and reed in one day— 15 the elder and honored man is the head, and the prophet who teaches lies is the tail; 16 for those who guide this people have been leading them astray, and those who are guided by them are swallowed up. 17 Therefore the Lord does not rejoice over their young men, and has no compassion on their fatherless and widows; for everyone is godless and an evildoer, and every mouth speaks folly. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still. (Isaiah 9)*

Because Israel had forgotten the God of her salvation, she could no longer expect His blessing on her nation:

*10 For you have forgotten the God of your salvation and have not remembered the Rock of your refuge; therefore, though you plant pleasant plants and sow the vine-branch of a stranger, 11 though you make them grow on the day that you plant them, and make them blossom in the morning that you sow, yet the harvest will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain. (Isaiah 17)*

As God examined Israel's worship, He saw that while she approached Him with words and deeds, her heart was far from Him. She did not come to Him with a spirit of love and devotion:

*13 And the Lord said: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, (Isaiah 29)*

This grieved the Lord, who wanted His people to approach Him with a sincere heart of gratitude and praise. He was not interested in heartless acts of obligation and duty. He longed for those who would love and worship Him in sincerity.

Other gods had captured the attention of God's people. They trusted in their wealth. They delighted in their prosperity. They enjoyed being like the nations around them. God would not allow this to continue. He would fight to win their heart. Notice what He told them in Isaiah 3:

*18 In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents; 19 the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarves; 20 the headdresses, the armlets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets; 21 the signet rings and nose rings; 22 the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags; 23 the mirrors, the linen garments, the turbans, and the veils. 24 Instead of perfume there will be rotteness; and instead of a belt, a rope; and instead of well-set hair, baldness; and instead of a rich robe, a skirt of sackcloth; and branding instead of beauty. (Isaiah 3)*

God determined that He would remove all pagan interests that stood between Himself and His people. He would refine them like metal in the fire, removing these impurities:

*10 Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. 11 For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another. (Isaiah 48)*

God refined them because their sin and rebellion were profaning His name. They were His people, but their lives were not bringing Him glory. He would not share His glory with idols. The purpose of this refining was to turn His people from their idols to their Creator once again:

*7 In that day man will look to his Maker, and his eyes will look on the Holy One of Israel. 8 He will not look to the altars, the work of his hands, and he will not look on what his own fingers have made, either the Asherim or the altars of incense. (Isaiah 17)*

In their judgement, God's people would again "yearn for" and "earnestly seek" the one true God. Once again, they would seek Him as "the desire of their soul."

*8 In the path of your judgments, O LORD, we wait for you; your name and remembrance are the desire of our soul. 9 My soul yearns for you in the night; my spirit within me earnestly seeks you. For when your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness. (Isaiah 26)*

In Israel's distress, she would turn to God and "whisper" a prayer to Him:

*16 O LORD, in distress they sought you; they poured out a whispered prayer  
when your discipline was upon them. (Isaiah 26)*

When they were stripped of everything else, they would cry out to His name:

*2 O LORD, be gracious to us; we wait for you. Be our arm every morning,  
our salvation in the time of trouble. (Isaiah 33)*

This is what God longed to hear. He wanted a people who would turn to Him with all their hearts and seek His support and strength.

God reassured His people that while He had punished them, He would not be angry with them forever:

*17 Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry, I struck him; I hid my face and was angry, but he went on backsliding in the way of his own heart. 18 I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners, 19 creating the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace, to the far and to the near," says the LORD, "and I will heal him. (Isaiah 57)*

He reminded them that there was purpose in their punishment:

*1 Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; 2 but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. (Isaiah 59)*

The sin of God's people separated them from Him. Their iniquity hid His face, and He did not hear them any longer. This matter needed to be resolved. God assured His people that He would not rest until He had restored their health:

*1 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch. (Isaiah 62)*

Though restoring His people and the worship of His name would be difficult for them, God repeatedly promises in the book of Isaiah that He would not abandon His children. He would help them and hold their hand as they passed through the refiner's fire:

*13 For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you,  
“Fear not, I am the one who helps you.” (Isaiah 41)*

He would be with them, protect and keep them through the troubling waters:

*1 But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. 2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.  
(Isaiah 43)*

Though at times, His presence would seem distant, the Lord reminded His people that He would never forget them:

*21 Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you; you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.  
(Isaiah 44)*

*15 “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. 16 Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me. (Isaiah 49)*

The Lord loved His people. The process of perfecting them and removing the obstacles to worship and intimacy would not be easy, but He assured them that it was not only for their good, but He would hold their hand and help them all the way. His passion was that His people be restored to the worship of His name.

God’s people would not be the same after the refining work of God. Isaiah prophesied that they would be released from exile in Assyria and return to Jerusalem to “worship the Lord on the holy mountain.”

*12 In that day from the river Euphrates to the Brook of Egypt the LORD will thresh out the grain, and you will be gleaned one by one, O people of Israel. 13 And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain at Jerusalem. (Isaiah 27)*



As they returned from exile to their homeland, the people of God would break out into singing because their God had comforted and restored them:

*8 The voice of your watchmen—they lift up their voice; together they sing for joy; for eye to eye they see the return of the LORD to Zion. 9 Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem. (Isaiah 52)*

These returned exiles “recounted the steadfast love” and the “praises of the Lord” to all who would listen:

*7 I will recount the steadfast love of the LORD, the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD has granted us, and the great goodness to the house of Israel that he has granted them according to his compassion, according to the abundance of his steadfast love ... 9 In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. (Isaiah 63)*

They gave thanks to the Lord for His salvation:

*1 You will say in that day: “I will give thanks to you, O LORD, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. 2 “Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.” (Isaiah 12)*

The refining of the Lord changed His people. They went into exile, a rebellious people who had turned to foreign idols. As they came back, they declared: “the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation” (Isaiah 12:2). Their hearts were transformed from the adulterous heart of idol worshippers to a heart of passion and worship for the one true God.

This, however, was not all God had in store for this renewed people. Consider the words of Isaiah 2:

*2 It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, 3 and many peoples shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the*

*LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. (Isaiah 2)*

God would reach the world through His renewed people. Isaiah prophesied that the day would come when nations would come to the God of Israel and learn His ways. It was the purpose of God to use Israel to be a light to the entire world:

*5 And now the LORD says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him—for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength— 6 he says: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (Isaiah 49)*

In Isaiah 18, the prophet tells us that the day was coming with the inhabitants of the nation of Cush would bring tribute to the Lord God of Israel:

*7 At that time tribute will be brought to the LORD of hosts from a people tall and smooth, from a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide, to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the LORD of hosts. (Isaiah 18)*

Egypt also would swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts:

*18 In that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the LORD of hosts. One of these will be called the City of Destruction. (Isaiah 19)*

Nations would lift up their voices and sing for joy over the majesty of the Lord God of Israel:

*13 For thus it shall be in the midst of the earth among the nations, as when an olive tree is beaten, as at the gleaning when the grape harvest is done. 14 They lift up their voices, they sing for joy; over the majesty of the LORD they shout from the west. 15 Therefore in the east give glory to the LORD; in the coastlands of the sea, give glory to the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. 16 From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One. (Isaiah 24)*

It was the purpose of God to teach Israel to worship His name so that through them, the name of the Lord would be declared to the whole earth. The result would be that “from the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One” (Isaiah 24:16).

The Lord God declared through Isaiah that He longed for the hearts of whole nations who were not even seeking Him:

*1 I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, “Here I am, here I am,” to a nation that was not called by my name. (Isaiah 65)*

God wanted these nations to seek Him and bow in worship of His name. Let me conclude with the word of Isaiah in Isaiah 64:

*1 Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence— 2 as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence! 3 When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 4 From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him. (Isaiah 64)*

Notice Isaiah’s heart here. He asked God to rip open the heavens and come down. He pleaded with God to make His name known to His enemies so entire nations would tremble in His presence. He wanted the whole world to know that there was no God like the God of Israel who “acts for those who wait for Him” (Isaiah 64:4).

Isaiah shows us the heart of God for people of every nation to know and worship His name. When His people turned to other gods, the Lord punished and refined them. He would not give His glory to another. He longed for intimacy with His people and went to great lengths to restore them. God’s heart was not limited to Israel, however. He sought the adoration of whole nations who did not even seek Him or know Him. He desired that the entire earth acknowledge Him and worship His name. This is the purpose of world missions—that every nation would one day bow the knee and worship our God.

For Prayer:

Father God, it is beyond comprehension that You would seek the praise and worship of Your sinful creatures. Isaiah shows us how you pursued a rebellious people who turned from you to worship foreign gods. You did not give up on them but refined them so that they could know and honour Your name. Teach us to worship. Remove the rebellion and sinfulness of our hearts so that we can bring You the honour and praise you deserve. Thank you that Your heart is that every nation comes to recognize You as the sovereign and holy Lord of All. May our lives and words testify to Your worth. May our testimony lead others to bow down before You in praise and adoration.

## Chapter 19 – A Jealous God Seeks Praise

A quick reading of the book of Ezekiel from the perspective of worship reveals several important themes. These themes come in the repetition of several keywords and phrases.

### *“My Name’s Sake”*

The first phrase repeated in the book of Ezekiel is the phrase “my name’s sake.” The phrase occurs four times in Ezekiel 20. Listen to what the Lord says in these verses:

*9 But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made myself known to them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt. (Ezekiel 20)*

*14 But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out. (Ezekiel 20)*

*22 But I withheld my hand and acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out. (Ezekiel 20)*

*44 And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I deal with you for my name’s sake, not according to your evil ways, nor according to your corrupt deeds, O house of Israel, declares the Lord GOD.” (Ezekiel 20)*

Notice what the Lord is telling us through Ezekiel. God acts for His name’s sake so that it will not be profaned. A name represents the character and reputation of the individual who bears it. The Lord expects His name to be held in high regard. It is a serious matter to defile His name or misrepresent His character. As we worship the Lord God, we lift His name high. We express our delight in His character and person. God wants us to recognize Him for who He is and bow to His great name.

In these verses, we see that God defends the honour of His name. Those of us who belong to Him will do likewise. We will live in such a way that His name is lifted high. We will speak so that nothing we say will defile His name or cause anyone to question His character.

### *“My Holy name”*

Very closely related to this first phrase are the words, “My holy name.” This exact expression occurs twelve times in the English Standard Version of the Bible. Of these twelve occurrences, eight of them are found in the book of Ezekiel. While the phrase “my name’s sake” is a general expression referring to God’s character in general, “my holy name” expresses a particular focus on the holiness of God.

Through the use of this expression in Ezekiel, the Lord God communicates His desire that His holy name not be profaned by His people:

*39 “As for you, O house of Israel, thus says the Lord GOD: Go serve every one of you his idols, now and hereafter, if you will not listen to me; but my holy name you shall no more profane with your gifts and your idols. (Ezekiel 20)*

He told them that He had a concern for His holy name:

*21 But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. (Ezekiel 36)*

He desired that the holiness of His name be made known in Israel:

*7 “And my holy name I will make known in the midst of my people Israel, and I will not let my holy name be profaned anymore. And the nations shall know that I am the LORD, the Holy One in Israel. (Ezekiel 39)*

He also revealed that He was jealous of His holy name:

*25 “Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob and have mercy on the whole house of Israel, and I will be jealous for my holy name. (Ezekiel 39)*

In Ezekiel 8, God gave Ezekiel a vision. In this vision, he told Ezekiel to dig a hole in the wall of the outer temple court. When he did, he found an entrance. God told him to go through that entrance.

*9 And he said to me, “Go in, and see the vile abominations that they are committing here.” 10 So I went in and saw. And there, engraved on the wall all around, was every form of creeping things and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel. (Ezekiel 8)*

In that outer court, the prophet saw unclean engravings and idols. God then brought Ezekiel into the inner court of the house of the Lord. Ezekiel tells us what he saw there in verse 16:

*16 And he brought me into the inner court of the house of the LORD. And behold, at the entrance of the temple of the LORD, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men, with their backs to the temple of the LORD, and their faces toward the east, worshipping the sun toward the east.*

*(Ezekiel 8)*

There in the temple of the Lord, twenty-five men worshipped the sun. The people of God defiled the temple and the holy name of God. God went on to tell Ezekiel that He would not pity them:

*18 Therefore I will act in wrath. My eye will not spare, nor will I have pity. And though they cry in my ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them."*

*(Ezekiel 8)*

The wrath of God would fall on those who defiled His holy name through the worship of pagan gods in His temple. God treasures His holy name. Those who worship Him must turn from all other gods to reverence His name alone.

### *"Profane"*

The third important theme in the book of Ezekiel is found in the use of the word "profane." This word is found twenty-eight times in the prophecy. The term is used most often as a warning or accusation. It speaks about the sin of Israel and how they dishonoured their God.

The Lord accused the false prophets of profaning Him by the words they spoke in His name:

*19 You have profaned me among my people for handfuls of barley and for pieces of bread, putting to death souls who should not die and keeping alive souls who should not live, by your lying to my people, who listen to lies. (Ezekiel 13)*

By their sinful lifestyle, the people of Israel profaned the name of God among the nations, forcing God to discipline them:

*9 But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made myself known to them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt. (Ezekiel 20)*

Israel profaned the Sabbath by not walking as God had commanded. This would bring the wrath of God upon them:

*13 But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness. They did not walk in my statutes but rejected my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live; and my Sabbaths they greatly profaned. "Then I said I would pour out my wrath upon them in the wilderness, to make a full end of them. (Ezekiel 20)*

The priests profaned the holy things of God by not distinguishing the holy from the unclean:

*26 Her priests have done violence to my law and have profaned my holy things. They have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them. (Ezekiel 22)*

God took the profaning of his name and worship seriously. He expected that those who belonged to Him hold Him and His worship in high regard. In fact, God severely punished Israel because she had profaned and disrespected His holy name.

### *"Jealousy"*

The word jealousy appears ten times in Ezekiel. Ezekiel portrays God as a jealous God who would not share His glory with another. He longed for and would fight for the adoration of His people.

The jealousy of God aroused His fury when Israel turned to other gods:

*13 "Thus shall my anger spend itself, and I will vent my fury upon them and satisfy myself. And they shall know that I am the LORD—that I have spoken in my jealousy— when I spend my fury upon them. (Ezekiel 5)*

God tells His people that He would direct His jealousy fury against them because of their rebellion:



*25 And I will direct my jealousy against you, that they may deal with you in fury. They shall cut off your nose and your ears, and your survivors shall fall by the sword. They shall seize your sons and your daughters, and your survivors shall be devoured by fire. (Ezekiel 23)*

The Hebrew word used for “jealousy” refers to an intense passion or zeal. What is the cause of the Lord’s jealousy? Ezekiel 5:13 tells us that God’s people would know that He was Lord when He exercised His jealous fury. God wanted His people to bow to Him as Lord. He wanted their obedience and worship.

This same thought is expressed in Ezekiel 39 when the Lord said:

*25 “Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob and have mercy on the whole house of Israel, and I will be jealous for my holy name. (Ezekiel 39)*

Ezekiel 39:25 tells us that the Lord God is jealous for his holy name. God would restore the fortunes of His people and have mercy on them so that they would worship His holy name.

God’s jealousy is not just for His holy name, however. Ezekiel 36 tells us that it also extends to His people:

*6 Therefore prophesy concerning the land of Israel, and say to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I have spoken in my jealous wrath, because you have suffered the reproach of the nations. (Ezekiel 36)*

God expressed His jealous fury because Israel suffered the reproach of the nations. He wanted His people to be restored to fellowship with Him. The jealousy of God was not only for His name but also for the wellbeing of His people.

The deepest expression of this jealousy is illustrated in Ezekiel 16, where God describes His relationship with Israel. He begins by telling us that He discovered Israel as a child, abandoned and dying:

*6 “And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ 7 I made you flourish like a plant of the field. And you grew up and became tall and*

*arrived at full adornment. Your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare. (Ezekiel 16)*

When the Lord discovered Israel, He felt pity and restored her to health. He blessed her and provided for her so that she grew up to be a beautiful woman.

When this young child matured and came of age, the Lord took her as His wife:

*8 "When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine. (Ezekiel 16)*

God blessed Israel, His wife, and she experienced His wonderful provision and mercy:

*10 I clothed you also with embroidered cloth and shod you with fine leather. I wrapped you in fine linen and covered you with silk. 11 And I adorned you with ornaments and put bracelets on your wrists and a chain on your neck. 12 And I put a ring on your nose and earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. 13 Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour and honey and oil. You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. (Ezekiel 16)*

Israel lacked no good thing in her relationship with God. She did not remain true to Him, however. She turned from God to other gods:

*15 "But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passerby; your beauty became his. (Ezekiel 16)*

Notice the response of God to this unfaithfulness:

38 And I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy. (Ezekiel 16)

The jealous wrath of God was aroused for His people. They broke their vow of faithfulness. There was a special relationship between God and His people. The fact that His jealousy was aroused shows how important that relationship was to Him.

*“That You May Know that I am Lord”*

There is one final theme I would like to touch on in this chapter. That theme is found in the phrase “that you may know that I am Lord.” These words occur seventy-two times in Ezekiel (English Standard Version). With this number of occurrences, it is obvious that this is a very important theme in the book.

What is important for us to understand is the connection between the jealous fury of the Lord in Ezekiel and this desire they know that He was Lord. Consider the link here in the following verses:

*4 And my eye will not spare you, nor will I have pity, but I will punish you for your ways, while your abominations are in your midst. Then you will know that I am the LORD. (Ezekiel 7)*

*9 My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and who give lying divinations. They shall not be in the council of my people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord GOD. (Ezekiel 13)*

*26 And they shall dwell securely in it, and they shall build houses and plant vineyards. They shall dwell securely, when I execute judgments upon all their neighbors who have treated them with contempt. Then they will know that I am the LORD their God.” (Ezekiel 28)*

Notice what these verses are saying. God would punish His people so that they would know that He was the Lord (Ezekiel 7:4). God’s hand would be against the prophets who saw false visions so that they would see that He was the Lord (Ezekiel 13:9). Finally, God would restore the fortunes of His people and allow them to dwell in security so that they would understand that He was the Lord (Ezekiel 28).

The jealous anger of the Lord had a purpose. It was to restore His people to the conviction that He was the one true Lord. Knowing that He was the one true Lord, God’s people would bow to Him in praise and obedience. He, in turn, would bless them as His people, and they would walk in fellowship with each other.

What does all this tell us about worship? Ezekiel reminds us that God is not only deserving of our worship but jealous for that worship. His passion is that the world would know Him as Lord. He demands that His name be held in high regard and jealously seeks out those who will bow before Him. His blessing rests on those who worship Him as Lord, and they enjoy wonderful fellowship with Him. The God of Ezekiel jealously seeks our heart of worship today.

For Prayer:

Father God, thank you that You are worthy of our praise and adoration. Ezekiel reminds us, however, that you are jealous for that worship from us. Thank you that Your heart longs for our devotion and praise. We are unworthy of such attention. Teach us to worship in all we do. Teach us to live for You and speak of You with reverence and respect. Help us to honour Your name in word, thought and deed. Thank you that all who do so experience no lack in their lives. Thank you that You delight to bless all who will worship and honour Your name.

## Chapter 20 – Worship in the Minor Prophets

It falls on us now to summarize the theme of worship in the minor prophets. It is quite striking to see how similar these books are when it comes to this topic. Remember, however, that the same God inspired each of them to communicate this call to His people.

### *Idolatry*

Let's begin with the accusations that God had against His people. The first of these accusations had to do with the fact that the people of God had turned from the one true God to worship other gods. Like the nations around them, they had fallen into idolatry. Listen to the words of Hosea and Zephaniah to the people of their day:

*12 My people inquire of a piece of wood, and their walking staff gives them oracles. For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the whore. 13 They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good. Therefore your daughters play the whore, and your brides commit adultery. (Hosea 4)*

*1 When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. 2 The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols. (Hosea 11)*

*4 "I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests, 5 those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the LORD and yet swear by Milcom, 6 those who have turned back from following the LORD, who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him." (Zephaniah 1)*

The heart of God grieved when He saw His people turn their backs on Him, the all-knowing and all-wise God to consult a piece of wood. His heart broke when He called after Israel but the more He called, the more she

chased after idols. God's people turned their backs on Him to worship the stars in the heavens.

### *Unacceptable Worship*

The second matter addressed in the minor prophets is that God's people did not worship Him as He required. They spoke of worship and practiced worship, but their hearts were not in what they did. They did not seek God with all their heart. Consider the words of the people of Hosea's day:

*1 "Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. 2 After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. 3 Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth." (Hosea 6)*

Notice what the people of God are saying. "Come, let us return to the Lord," for He will heal and revive us. These words sound wonderful but notice the response of God in the very next verse to these words:

*4 What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away. (Hosea 6)*

God saw through these spiritual words to the heart of His people. He heard what they were saying but knew that their love for Him was like the morning dew that disappeared as soon as the sun rose. Their lips spoke one thing, but their heart was far from God. They worshipped with a divided heart.

The prophet Amos communicates something similar when he says:

*4 "Come to Bethel, and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; 5 offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel!" declares the Lord GOD. (Amos 4)*

God's people brought their sacrifices to God, but they also transgressed against Him. They offered thanks to God with gifts containing forbidden

heaven. They worshipped God, but they did not do so as He commanded.

Micah gives us a picture of the worship leaders of his day when he says:

*11 Its heads give judgment for a bribe; its priests teach for a price; its prophets practise divination for money; yet they lean on the LORD and say, "Is not the LORD in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us."  
(Micah 3)*

The concern of the religious leaders was not for God but their own profit.

The priests of Malachi's day were also slack in their worship:

*6 "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?' 7 By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we polluted you?' By saying that the LORD's table may be despised. 8 When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 1)*

Notice how the priests brought blind, lame and sick animals to offer to the Lord. They did not bring the best they had to Him as required by the Law of Moses. They brought what they did not want themselves. They dishonoured the name of their God by bringing polluted offerings and sacrifices.

Notice the response of God to this kind of worship from His people:

*21 "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. 22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. 23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. (Amos 5)*

Though the people of God went through the motions and worshipped God, what they offered was unacceptable to Him because of the attitude of their hearts.

*Sins Hindering Worship*

The worship of God's people was unacceptable to Him for many reasons. Hosea accused His people of having a spirit of whoredom within them.

*4 Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. For the spirit of whoredom is within them, and they know not the LORD. (Hosea 5)*

He also spoke about the pride of God's people that hid His face from them:

*5 The pride of Israel testifies to his face; Israel and Ephraim shall stumble in his guilt; Judah also shall stumble with them. 6 With their flocks and herds they shall go to seek the LORD, but they will not find him; he has withdrawn from them. (Hosea 5)*

Hosea told his people that the Lord rejected their offerings because they forgot their Maker and loved their comfortable palaces and possessions more than Him:

*13 As for my sacrificial offerings, they sacrifice meat and eat it, but the LORD does not accept them. Now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins; they shall return to Egypt. 14 For Israel has forgotten his Maker and built palaces, and Judah has multiplied fortified cities; so I will send a fire upon his cities, and it shall devour her strongholds. (Hosea 8)*

In the prophecy of Malachi, the Lord rejected the offerings of the priests because they had not been faithful to their wives:

*13 And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. 14 But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. (Malachi 2)*

Malachi also rebuked the priests of his day because they were not faithful to God's Law.

*17 You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?" (Malachi 2)*

If our worship is to be acceptable, we must walk faithfully with God, deal with sins against our brothers and sisters and commit ourselves to walk



according to His Word.

### *God's Call to Repentance and Restoration*

Despite hindrances to worship and the pride of Israel's heart, God still desired that His people return to Him and glorify His name. This heart of God is obvious in the book of Hosea. Listen to the words of the prophet as they convey the great passion of God for His people:

*10 Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season, I saw your fathers. But they came to Baal-peor and consecrated themselves to the thing of shame, and became detestable like the thing they loved. (Hosea 9)*

Imagine that you are travelling through a desert dying of hunger and thirst when suddenly you come upon a grapevine filled with delicious fruit. What would be your response? This was the delight of the Lord toward the nation of Israel.

God longed to restore His people to Himself, but they turned from Him:

*13 Woe to them, for they have strayed from me! Destruction to them, for they have rebelled against me! I would redeem them, but they speak lies against me. 14 They do not cry to me from the heart, but they wail upon their beds; for grain and wine they gash themselves; they rebel against me. (Hosea 7)*

Notice how God sees them wailing on their beds, grieving over their condition, but they still would not turn to the one who loved them. Despite their stubborn rebellion, listen to the call of God through Joel:

*12 "Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; 13 and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. (Joel 2)*

The door was wide open for God's people to return to Him and be blessed. God was a gracious and merciful God who longed for His people. God told them that it was time for them to repent and seek Him once again:

*12 Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the LORD, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you. (Hosea 10)*

Though they had sinned against Him, the Lord desired to rain righteousness upon them.

### *The Type of Worship God Required*

There is one final point I want to make from the minor prophets. God called His people to return to Him despite their sin and rebellion. He reminds them, however, that He expected that they would do so in a particular way. Consider the words of Hosea:

*1 Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. 2 Take with you words and return to the LORD; say to him, "Take away all iniquity; accept what is good, and we will pay with bulls the vows of our lips. 3 Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride on horses; and we will say no more, 'Our God,' to the work of our hands. In you the orphan finds mercy." 4 I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. (Hosea 14)*

Notice what God told those who accepted His offer to return in this passage. God invited them to return but required that all who wanted to be restored come to Him with words. "Take with you words and return to the LORD," He said. Notice the words Israel was to speak to the Lord.

First, according to Hosea, Israel was to say: "Take away all iniquity." In other words, those who came to the Lord were to come recognizing their sin genuinely seeking His forgiveness. Their sin hindered the worship of God, so it needed to be forgiven if their relationship was to be restored.

Second, God's people were to tell him: "we will pay with bulls the vows of our lips." These words were words of commitment to God. In speaking these words, they were devoting themselves to be faithful to Him, and the covenant vows they had made to Him. Before this, they had broken those vows and turned from God. He was asking them to renew their vows and commit themselves wholeheartedly to walk faithfully with Him from that point onward.

Third, God wanted to hear Israel say: "Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride on horses; and we will say no more, 'Our God,' to the work of our hands." Not only did God want a vow of faithfulness from Israel, but He also wanted to hear her renounce all other gods to be faithful to Him alone. If they were to be restored to the worship of God's name, the people of God would need His forgiveness and a commitment in their hearts to turn from all other gods. If we are to worship God, we must all make this commitment. We cannot worship the God of Israel if our hearts are divided. He must receive all the glory and devotion.

Micah adds another dimension to this when he says:

*6 "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? 7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" 8 He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6)*

The prophet Micah tells us that the Lord is looking for three qualities in those who worship His name.

First, God is looking for those who do justice. Imagine people coming each week to worship the Lord but doing nothing about the injustice of their society. They come before God like the religious leaders of Jesus' day. Seeing a man battered and bruised on the side of the road, they pass by but do nothing. They come to the temple, stand before God and worship Him as a God of justice and mercy but do nothing to offer that same justice to those abused in their society. God is seeking those who will worship in deed and not just in words.

Second, God is seeking those who will love kindness. What would you feel about the uncaring and unconcerned attitude of a worshipper who ignored the cries of the desperate and helpless? Can we worship a God of compassion and mercy when we refuse to show this quality ourselves? Can we worship God if we say: "I am glad that God is generous, kind and compassionate, but those qualities are not for me? I would rather keep

God's blessings for myself. I refuse to be like Him. Can you worship God for what you would never want for yourself?

Finally, God is seeking worshippers who will walk humbly before God. The humility God is seeking will surrender to Him and His purpose. My life will be an act of worship. I will show by my actions that I bow down to a God of forgiveness, compassion and mercy. People will understand the nature of the God I worship by my actions.

The minor prophets challenge us to take the worship of God seriously. He deserves the best we have. These men of faith teach that outward actions do not make worship. Worship comes from a heart of devotion and commitment to God. It is communicated in word and deed. The worship God accepts imitates in life what it expresses in words of praise.

For Prayer:

Father, we confess that we have often failed to live out what we express in praise to You. Forgive us for worshipping You but not demonstrating Your character in our lives. Renew our love and devotion to You. Give us a heart of total consecration to You alone. Remove the obstacles to worship in our lives. May this be our great goal and ambition in life –to love and worship You in word, attitude and deed.

## Chapter 21 – The Restoration of Old Testament Worship in Ezra, Nehemiah and Haggai

As Israel's exile came to a close, the Lord moved among His people, placing a burden on their hearts for the restoration of worship in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah was in Susa when he met some Jews returning from Judah. He questioned them about the conditions in Jerusalem. They responded:

*3 And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire." (Nehemiah 1)*

This news deeply grieved Nehemiah, who wept and fasted for days. Listen to his prayer:

*5 And I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. (Nehemiah 1)*

It was the sin of God's people that sent them into exile. Nehemiah prayed for forgiveness and restoration. God heard that prayer and moved the heart of King Artaxerxes to send him to Jerusalem to oversee the rebuilding of the city.

God also moved in the life of Cyrus of Persia to release Jews to return to their homeland. Cyrus was concerned about the temple in Jerusalem and issued a command to rebuild it to the honour of their God.

*2 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel— he is the God who is in Jerusalem. 4 And let each survivor, in whatever place he*

*sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.” (Ezra 1)*

The king commissioned Ezra to ensure that this temple was constructed and worship reestablished.

During this time, the Lord also sent Haggai to speak to His people. These men (Nehemiah, Ezra and Haggai) would be God’s instruments to rebuild the city and temple and reestablish worship in Jerusalem.

The reestablishment of worship in Jerusalem was not a simple matter of building a temple and picking up where they left off seventy years ago. Many important details needed to fall into place if the sound of worship would again rise to God.

### *Preparation of the Priests*

A group of priests returned from exile to Jerusalem to direct the worship of the God of Israel. As they examined these priests, they discovered that the names of some were not found in the registration of genealogies. These priests could not prove their qualifications, so they were excluded from the priesthood until they could consult the Lord on this matter.

*62 These sought their registration among those enrolled in the genealogies, but they were not found there, and so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. 63 The governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food, until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim. (Ezra 2)*

It was determined that only those called of God and qualified for service would lead the people in worship.

### *The People*

The people also needed to be prepared if they were going to worship God as He intended. Ezra, Nehemiah and Haggai saw many obstacles to worship in the lives of the citizens of Jerusalem.

In Ezra 9, we read:

*1 After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. 2 For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost." 3 As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. (Ezra 9)*

In Jerusalem, priests, Levites, and ordinary citizens had disregarded the Law of Moses and married foreign wives. They had given their sons and daughters to pagan nations in marriage. Ezra was appalled at this. It grieved him deeply that the people of God would be so unfaithful to the Law of God. Calling the people together, Ezra addressed this matter. The Lord moved, they confessed their sin and determined to put aside their foreign wives:

*1 While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly. 2 And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, addressed Ezra: "We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. 3 Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law. (Ezra 10)*

In the book of Nehemiah, we read about another issue that arose. It appears that some Jews were mortgaging their fields to get grain for their families and to pay the taxes imposed by the king (Nehemiah 5:2-3). To meet these expenses, Jews also borrowed money from their brothers (Nehemiah 5:4). When they could not pay back their loans, their brother forced their sons and daughters into slavery to pay off their debt (Nehemiah 5:5). It appears that these creditors were also demanding interest on the money they loaned, making it even more difficult for these

poor Jews to pay back what they owed (Nehemiah 5:7). Nehemiah addressed this matter and demanded that they cease requiring interest from their brothers. He also demanded that they return their fields and the money taken dishonestly:

*9 So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? 10 Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. 11 Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them." 12 Then they said, "We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say." And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. (Nehemiah 5)*

The prophet Haggai also spoke to an issue among the people of that day. Listen to his rebuke in Haggai 1:

*2 "Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD." 3 Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, 4 "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? 5 Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. (Haggai 1)*

Haggai rebuked the people because they took the time to rebuild their "panelled houses" but neglected the temple. The priority of these individuals was to be comfortable in their own homes, but they felt no urgency to build a temple to worship God. Haggai rebuked their indifference.

As Ezra, Nehemiah, and Haggai took steps to reestablish worship in the land of Israel, they were forced to address the sins of God's people. These sins would only hinder the worship of God and needed to be addressed if their worship would be pleasing to Him.

### *Preparation of the Temple and its Articles for Worship*

The people were not the only ones who needed to be prepared for worship. They needed to build the temple and the articles used for



worship. Haggai rebuked the people's slackness in completing this project. The people listened and began construction.

Ezra 3 tells us that they began by building an altar:

*2 Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. (Ezra 3)*

Notice that this altar was built "as it is written in the Law of Moses." Every article required for worship needed to be constructed according to the purpose of God.

Ezra 3 tells us that the people of God kept the Feast of Booths and offered the regular offerings "as it is written" (verse 4).

*3 They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. 4 And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, 5 and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD. 6 From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid. (Ezra 3)*

Ezra, Nehemiah and Haggai, set the Law of God as their guide and led the people to do what was written in it. For their worship to be acceptable, it had to be done according to the Law of Moses.

When the foundation of the temple was completed, Ezra 3 tells us that the priests and Levites led the people in praise:

*10 And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. 11 And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted with a great*

*shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. (Ezra 3)*

Notice, however, that among those present in worship were older Jews who had seen the temple of Solomon. These individuals wept (Ezra 3:12). Haggai 2 helps us to understand why these older Jews grieved at this joyous occasion:

*3 'Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? (Haggai 2)*

These older Jews had seen the temple of Solomon in all its glory. The temple they were building now seemed like nothing compared to Solomon's. This was the cause of their weeping. Through Haggai, the Lord spoke to these elderly citizens and said:

*6 For thus says the LORD of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. 7 And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts. 8 The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the LORD of hosts. 9 The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts.'" (Haggai 2)*

That day the Lord declared that though this second temple would not be as large or richly ornamented, His glory would be revealed through it even more than the temple of Solomon. The temple of Ezra and Nehemiah's day would become more important than Solomon's. God was not looking for elaborate structures to reveal His glory. These ornate buildings could even become hindrances to the worship of His name. God was pleased to be worshipped in the simplicity of this second temple. Haggai reminds the older Jews of his day that they were not to focus on the externals but the presence of God.

### *Challenges to the Establishment of Worship*

We have already seen some of the difficulties Ezra, Nehemiah and Haggai faced as they reestablished the worship of God in Israel. These were not the only challenges they faced, however. In Ezra 4, we read:

*4 Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build 5 and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia. (Ezra 4)*

The attempt to discourage God's people worked and Ezra 4:24 tells us that the construction of the temple stopped for a time:

*24 Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia. (Ezra 4)*

Nehemiah recounts the efforts of their neighbours to discourage them.

*10 In Judah it was said, "The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall." 11 And our enemies said, "They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work." (Nehemiah 4)*

Nehemiah tells us that their fear of enemy attack was so great that they worked with weapons strapped to their side.

*16 From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, 17 who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. 18 And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. (Nehemiah 4)*

In Nehemiah 6, we read how Nehemiah's enemies hired a man to deceive him. Reflecting on this, Nehemiah said:

*13 For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me. (Nehemiah 6)*

It was the purpose of the enemy to tempt Nehemiah as a leader to sin. Nehemiah became the focus of the enemy's attack. Those who want to lead people into the worship of God will face opposition. They must be men and women of discernment and spiritual strength if they are going to overcome.

### *The Commitment of God's People*

There is one more detail I want to examine as we conclude our reflection on worship in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Haggai. As these leaders prepared the people for the worship of God, Nehemiah recounts how Ezra stood before the people and read the Book of the Law.

*8 They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. (Nehemiah 8)*

Ezra taught the word of God and explained it to the people. Nehemiah describes one of those occasions:

*2 And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. 3 And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God. (Nehemiah 9)*

The Jews spent a quarter of the day reading the Scriptures and another quarter confessing and worshipping God. Notice how their worship and confession flowed from the reading and exposition of the Scriptures. The Scriptures fuelled their worship. The more they learned of God, the more they had cause to worship. The more they read about His requirements, the more they had to confess their shortcomings.

In those days, the reading of Scripture not only fuelled worship and confession of sin but also led Israel to make a public commitment to the Lord God. They bound themselves to an oath before God. The terms of that oath are recorded for us in Nehemiah 10. The pledge they made to God that day begins with the following words:

*28 "The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, 29 join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord and his rules and his statutes. (Nehemiah 10)*

The remainder of the document lays out their commitment to never give their daughters to foreigners in marriage. They devoted themselves to keeping the Sabbath, to observing the Jewish festivals and sacrifices, and never neglect the house of the Lord. They made this vow of devotion to the Lord before God and His people.

Ezra, Nehemiah and Haggai remind us that leading the people of God in worship is hard work. It is not just a matter of singing a few songs on Sunday morning. Those who worship God must first deal with sin. Ezra, Nehemiah and Haggai, had to speak to worshippers about this. They had to deal with broken relationships between brothers and sisters. They were not always appreciated for their work. They faced temptations from the enemy and had to fend off these attacks. Ezra, Nehemiah and Haggai were true to the purpose of God in His Word. They taught the Law to the people, and that word brought confession of sin and fuelled praise and worship.

For Prayer:

Father God, forgive us for thinking that worship consists only of singing songs on Sunday morning. Help us to see that if we are to worship, we must understand and confess our sins. Just as Nehemiah had to deal with broken relationships among brothers and sisters, we will also need to mend our relationships if we are to worship You. We pray for spiritual leaders who lead us in the worship of the name of God. We ask that You would protect them from the attacks of the enemy against their spirit and soul. Help them as they give oversight to the worship of Your name. May they walk in discernment and wisdom. May we, as true worshippers, commit ourselves to live and walk in Your purpose for our lives, not just on Sunday, but every day of the week. Help us to do battle against all hindrances so that we can worship You in word and deed.

## Chapter 22 – Jesus and Worship

The Gospels of the New Testament describe a period of transition from Old Testament worship with all its sacrifices and regulations to a very different New Testament format. After the death of Jesus, New Testament Christians adopted a much simpler style of worship. While these adjustments, for the most part, would not take place until after the resurrection, there were hints of a coming change. Let's take a moment in this chapter to what was happening when Jesus was on this earth.

### *Jesus and His Family Worshipped According to the Jewish Traditions*

The first thing we need to understand is that the Lord Jesus and His family were devout Jews who worshipped according to the Law of Moses. This is quite evident from Luke 2 when Mary and Joseph brought baby Jesus to the temple to present Him to God:

*22 And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") 24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." (Luke 2)*

Notice that Jesus' parents brought their sacrifice according to the Law of the Lord. Jesus was presented to the Father as required by the Old Testament Law of Moses.

Later in Luke 2, we read about Jesus as a twelve-year-old boy. His parents are again in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of the Passover. Notice what the passage tells us:

*41 Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. 42 And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. (Luke 2)*

Notice first the phrase "his parents went to Jerusalem every year." Note also the words "they went up according to custom." These phrases tell us

that Jesus grew up in a devout Jewish home that regularly practiced the customs and traditions of the Jews according to the Law of Moses.

Jesus was well trained in Jewish traditions. Luke tells us that even as a boy of twelve, He could debate with the religious scholars of the day. On one occasion, when Jesus was in Jerusalem with His parents, He stayed behind to speak with the religious scholars. His parents noticed that He was missing, and when they could not find him among their companions, they returned to Jerusalem. Listen to the words of Luke 2:46-47:

*46 After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. (Luke 2)*

Even as a twelve-year-old boy, Jesus had a deep interest in the things of His Father and learned from Jewish scholars in the temple.

When Jesus became an adult, He continued the practice of attending synagogue on the Sabbath.

*16 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. (Luke 4)*

Notice the words “as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day.” We see here that it was a regular practice of Jesus to go to the synagogue as a faithful Jewish worshipper.

Luke 4 tells the story of one worship service in Nazareth:

*17 And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, 18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” 20 And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” 22 And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” (Luke 4)*

We see Jesus in this worship service reading the Old Testament Scriptures and preaching and teaching in the synagogue. He was an active participant in the Jewish worship services of His day. Luke goes describe Jesus as an itinerant Jewish preacher who went from synagogue to synagogue preaching and teaching:

*42 And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them, 43 but he said to them, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose."*

*44 And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea. (Luke 4)*

We have in Luke 22 the record of Jesus asking His disciples to prepare for the Passover. Together they celebrated this Jewish holy day:

*7 Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. 8 So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it." (Luke 22)*

The cleansing of the temple as recorded in Matthew 21, Mark 11, Luke 19 and John 2 show us that Jesus had a passion for the worship of the Father in the temple of the day. He drove out those who defiled it, much to the dismay of the religious leaders. As a devout Jew, Jesus celebrated Jewish holidays and worshipped in the Jewish synagogue.

### *Hints of Something New to Come*

While Jesus was a devout Jew, He hinted in His teaching of something new to come. During the celebration of the Passover, Jesus broke bread and told His disciples that it represented His body. Taking a cup of wine, he declared, "this is my blood of the covenant."

*26 Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." 27 And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 29 I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." (Matthew 26)*



Jesus speaks here about a new covenant. He symbolized the work of that new covenant by the breaking of bread and drinking of wine. What Jesus demonstrated in that meal would become a regular practice in the New Testament church. Christians would begin to break bread to remember the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Jesus also taught that there would be a difference in how new covenant believers lived and worshipped. Consider His words to those who questioned why His disciples did not fast as the Pharisees did:

*21 No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.*

*22 And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.”*

Jesus compares the religion of the Pharisees to an old garment that was torn and worn out. It was no longer compatible with the truth He taught.

One day the Pharisees and scribes asked Jesus why His disciples did not walk according to the traditions of the elders and wash their hands before they ate:

*5 And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”*  
*(Mark 7)*

Jesus responded:

*15 There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” (Mark 7)*

For Jesus, the cleanliness of the heart and mind was more important than outward cleanliness. He taught a faith that came from within and not just external ceremonial purity.

Jesus clashed with the Jews of His day for His acceptance of outcasts and sinners. He allowed Mary, whose moral character concerned the Pharisees, to anoint His feet and wipe them with her hair (Mark 14). The Saviour ate with tax collectors (Luke 19). Our Lord spent time speaking with a sinful Samaritan woman (John 4). Jesus accepted those the religious leaders

rejected. He hints that the door would be opened for the worst sinner to be forgiven and set free to worship the Father.

### *Rebukes to the Religious Leaders of the Day*

In His teaching, Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of His day for their hypocrisy and pride. Listen to what He taught in Matthew 6:

*1 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 6)*

Jesus knew that many worshipped God with ulterior motives. They wanted people to notice them and see how spiritual they were. Jesus rebuked this attitude and taught that people were to give secretly and pray with no desire to be noticed.

Jesus openly rebuked the Pharisees because they loved to show people how they tithed. They wanted to have the best seats in the synagogues and to be noticed in the marketplace. Despite all this show, these men neglected to treat people justly. They did not demonstrate the love of God in their attitudes and actions:

*42 "But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. 43 Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. (Luke 11)*

He would speak more powerfully about this in Luke 20 when He said:

*46 "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, 47 who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." (Luke 20)*

Jesus had no use for a religion of pride and hypocrisy. He rebuked those who used the Jewish faith to elevate themselves.

### *True Worship*

Jesus taught that true worship was not an external show. It began in the heart. Watching the people come into the temple one day, He saw the rich placing large sums into the treasury. However, when He saw a poor widow come in and give her last two coins, her devotion touched His heart. The rich gave what they did not need, but this widow gave what she needed for herself. Jesus saw the attitude of the widow's heart and was moved.

Jesus told the Samaritan woman that the time was coming when true worshippers would not be concerned about where they worshipped:

*21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. (John 4)*

*23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4)*

True worship would not be defined by locations but by the work of God's Spirit, motivating the heart through the truth about Christ.

While Jesus was a Jew, His death and resurrection changed how His followers worshipped. Jesus taught that true worship was from the heart and not defined by external laws and traditions alone. His death would open the way for the outcasts of society to come to faith and worship the Father. What He taught His disciples would become the basis upon which New Testament worship would be established.

For Prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank you for Your work on the cross through which we experience new life. Thank you for how that radically changed our worship. Thank you that because of Your death, no more animal sacrifice is required. I thank You for the new covenant established by Your death and the forgiveness it offers. I ask that You would give us this new heart to praise You for Your forgiveness and cleansing.

Forgive us for the times we have made worship all about the externals. Forgive us for the times our hearts have not been moved in worship. Teach us to worship in Spirit and Truth.



## Chapter 23 –The Establishment of New Testament Worship

We saw in the gospels that the Lord Jesus worshipped in the temple and preached in the Jewish synagogues. As we come to the book of Acts, we discover that the differences between Christians and Jews were such that it was more difficult to worship together. As a result, early Christians began to meet together for worship. Let's take a moment in this chapter to examine worship in this time of transition.

### *The Apostles Preached in the Temple and Synagogues*

The book of Acts contains numerous references to the apostles preaching in the Jewish synagogues (see Acts 13:5; 17:16-17; 18:4). In Acts 16, when he was in the region of Philippi, Paul sought out a place of prayer by a riverside where the Jews gathered on the Sabbath for worship. He joined these worshippers in and shared with them the message of the gospel:

*13 And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. (Acts 16)*

In Ephesus, Paul reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue for three months:

*8 And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. (Acts 19)*

In this transition, the apostles continued to join the Jews in worship and used this time to preach the good news about Jesus as the Messiah prophesied in the Jewish Scriptures.

### *Early Christians Continued to Worship in the Temple*

The apostles not only went to the temple to preach and reason with the Jews, but they also went to worship and pray. Consider the words of Acts 3:1-3:

*1 Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. 2 And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. 3 Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. (Acts 3)*

In Acts 22, Paul shares how the Lord spoke to him when he was praying in the temple:

*17 "When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance 18 and saw him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' (Acts 22)*

What was true of Paul was also true for the early converts to Christianity in Jerusalem. Notice what Acts 2:46 tells us about the practice of these early believers:

*46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, (Acts 2)*

The early converts to Christianity attended the temple together. They also gathered together for fellowship in individual homes. In some cases, the Jews included these early believers in their worship. Consider the case of Paul in Antioch in Pisidia:

*13 Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem, 14 but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. 15 After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it." (Acts 13)*

The Jews in Antioch of Pisidia asked Paul to share a word of encouragement as they gathered with them for worship.

We read Acts 5:12-13 of an incident where the Lord revealed His presence to the believers gathered in Solomon's Portico of the temple. This portico ran along the eastern wall of Herod's temple.

*12 Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico.*

*13 None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. (Acts 5)*

It appears from these verses that the early Christians in the book of Acts continued to gather in the temple to pray, worship and share their faith.

### *Worship Outside of the Temple*

In Acts 4, we read how the Jewish leaders were greatly annoyed because Peter and John preached in the temple. After questioning them about their message, the Jewish leaders forbade the apostles to preach in the name of the Lord Jesus. This declaration meant that they could no longer use the temple to teach.

Peter and John reported this news to the church in Act 4:23-24:

*23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 24 And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, (Acts 4)*

When they had shared their report, the believers joined with them in prayer to God for boldness. Acts 4:31 tells us that while the door to worship and preach in the temple was closing for them, the place where they were, shook and the Spirit of God filled each one of them with greater boldness:

*31 And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4)*

These believers experienced the wonderful presence and power of God outside of the temple walls. They understood that they did not have to worship God in this building. God would meet them wherever they gathered.

In Acts 12, we have another record of Peter being arrested. On this occasion, the angel of the Lord miraculously set him free from his bonds,

and he walked out. According to Acts 12, Peter went to the house of Mary, the mother of John. Notice how the believers had gathered at Mary's home to pray:

*12 When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. (Acts 12)*

In Acts 16, we read how Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns together in a Philippian jail:

*25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, 26 and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. (Acts 16)*

The apostles worshipped God in a dirty prison cell. God heard their praise and revealed His presence in a great earthquake. God would not limit His praise to the four walls of a temple.

After the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7, the early believers experienced persecution. Saul began to move from town to town dragging Christians out of their homes and bringing them to Jerusalem to be tried for their faith. To escape, believers scattered to the surrounding regions. They began to preach and share the message of the gospel with the inhabitants of these regions. It was not long before Gentiles heard the gospel and came to Christ. The church began to realize that salvation was not just for the Jews but Gentiles as well:

*44 While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. 45 And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. 46 For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, 47 "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10)*

These uncircumcised Gentile believers would never be permitted in a Jewish synagogue. As a result, believers found alternative places to gather



for worship. In Acts 20, we have a record of the apostle Paul gathering with believers in an upper room:

7 On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight. 8 There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered. (Acts 20)

From Acts 2:46, we understand that early Christians also gathered in smaller groups in their homes.

*46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, (Acts 2)*

While we do not have clear evidence in the book of Acts of what took place when believers gathered in large rooms or smaller home meetings, probably the best description of the worship of these early believers is found in Acts 2:42:

*42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2)*

Worship in the book of Acts consisted of four elements. First, the church devoted itself to the teaching of the Apostles. They gathered together to hear the preaching and teaching of these apostles and devoted themselves to live according to what they taught.

Second, the early believers devoted themselves to fellowship. Fellowship for these early believers involved ministering to one another in practical ways. This included the provision of food or support for physical needs. It also included encouragement in spiritual matters.

Third, worship for those first Christians included the breaking of bread. These believers made it a habit to eat together, and included in this was the celebration of the Lord's Table, in remembrance of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Finally, Christians in the book of Acts gathered together for corporate prayer. They worshipped God through prayer and cried out for greater boldness and wisdom to face the struggles that each day would bring.

The book of Acts shows us how early Jewish Christians continued to worship at the temple but supplemented this with more intimate times of fellowship and prayer with other Christians in homes. As opposition increased, these Jewish Christians were no longer welcome in the temple or synagogues. As Gentiles came to faith, the early church found alternative locations to gather for teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers.

For Prayer:

Father God, we see in the book of Acts how the early Jewish Christians were gradually forced out of the temple and the worship they were accustomed to. You showed them, however, that Your presence was not limited to the temple or Jewish synagogue. Forgive us for the times we have become so stuck on a tradition that we fail to see that we can worship You in any other way. Thank you for how Paul and Silas discovered Your presence in a dirty prison cell. Thank you for how You met with Your people in homes or large upper rooms. Teach us to worship You wherever we are. May we, as we worship, devote ourselves to the teaching of the apostles, to true and unhindered fellowship with each other, to remembering Your death and resurrection and to prayers of worship and intercession for each other.

## Chapter 24 – Worship in the New Testament Church

The letters of Paul to the Corinthians seem to give us the best picture of worship in the early church. We will examine this in the next chapter. In this chapter, I want to take a moment to survey the other New Testament epistles. For the most part, these books are surprisingly quiet about the form of worship, but there are a few themes I would like to emphasize here.

### *The New Testament Believers Met in Homes*

Scattered throughout the New Testament are references to the fact that New Testament believers met in homes. We have no reference to any church buildings. In the Old Testament, the temple or synagogue was essential to the worship of God. This does not appear to be the case in the New Testament. Believers gathered wherever they could.

In Romans, Paul greets Prisca and Aquila and the church in their house:

*3 Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 4 who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. 5 Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to Christ in Asia.*  
(Romans 16)

The church in Colossae met in the home of a woman by the name of Nympha:

*15 Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. (Colossians 4)*

Paul also addresses the church that was in Philemon's home:

1 Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker 2 and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house (Philemon 1-2)

We understand from these verses that the worship of God in the New Testament did not require elaborate or expensive buildings. Believers were able to worship in the simplicity of their homes.

## *Leadership in the Churches*

While believers met in simplicity in the New Testament, the church did have a clear leadership structure. Paul addressed his letter to the Philippians to the saints, overseers and deacons:

*1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: (Philippians 1)*

The apostle, writing to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:1-13, went into great detail about the qualifications of any man who would serve as an elder or deacon. He challenged Titus to appoint elders in every town where there was a church:

*5 This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— (Titus 1)*

Peter challenged the elders to shepherd the flock and exercise oversight of the work of God in those churches.

*1 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 2 shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5)*

Paul taught that the church should respect Christian workers working among them and esteem them highly because of their work:

*12 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. (1 Thessalonians 5)*

These leaders oversaw the worship of the New Testament church. They addressed any sin that would hinder the adoration of God. They helped to mend relationships and instructed believers in the word of God.

## *The Use of the Gifts of the Spirit*

The apostle Paul reminded believers in Rome about the spiritual gifts God had given the body. He encouraged each member of the church to use their gift for the benefit of the entire church:

*3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, 5 so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. 6 Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; 7 if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; 8 the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12)*

Paul speaks here about gifts of prophecy, serving, teaching, exhortation, generosity and mercy. These spiritual abilities were to be used in worship and service of God.

Writing to Timothy, the apostle said:

*14 Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. 15 Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. 16 Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Timothy 4)*

While some basic elements in the worship of the New Testament church were consistent, the flavour of the worship in each church differed slightly according to the gifts God had sovereignly given the church.

## KEY ELEMENTS IN THE WORSHIP OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

### *Reading and Teaching the Scripture*

While worship might differ slightly from church to church in the New Testament, there were nonetheless some basic elements that all churches shared in common. Listen to Paul's advice to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:

*13 Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. (1 Timothy 4)*

Paul encouraged Timothy as a leader in the church of Ephesus to devote himself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhorting, and teaching.

The apostle Paul encouraged the church in Colossae to read his letter publicly:

*16 And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea. (Colossians 4)*

Remember that the Scriptures were not as available to the New Testament church as they are to us today. The public reading of Scripture and teaching was a vital part of New Testament worship.

### *Prayer*

Another important element in the worship of the New Testament church was prayer. Paul expresses this to Timothy in 1 Timothy 2 when he says:

*8 I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; (1 Timothy 2)*

The prayers recorded in the book of Acts were prayers of petition for the needs of the body and community. They were also prayers of thanksgiving and adoration directed to God for His blessings.

### *Acts of Mercy and Compassion*

Another component in the worship of the New Testament church was their practical demonstration of love to the body and their community. Consider the words of Paul to the Philippians in regards to a financial gift he received from them:

*15 And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. 16 Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. 17 Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. 18 I have received full payment, and*

*more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.*  
(Philippians 4)

What is of particular interest to us here is that Paul told the Philippians that their gift was “a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God” (Philippians 4:18). In other words, by taking up an offering for him, they were worshipping God.

Paul challenged the Thessalonians to encourage the fainthearted and help the weak:

*14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. (1 Thessalonians 5)*

He also instructed Timothy on how to support widows in their midst (see 1 Timothy 5:3-16). While sheep and goats were no longer sacrificed as offerings to the Lord, God’s people continued to bring their offerings in the form of finances, time and effort to minister to the needs of believers in the church and the suffering in their community.

## Singing

There is also evidence in the New Testament that the early church incorporated singing into their worship. Writing to the Ephesians, the apostle said:

*18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, 20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, (Ephesians 5)*

Notice that the apostle encouraged the Ephesians to address each other in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. It is not my purpose to attempt to distinguish the difference between each of these musical styles. Suffice it to say that the apostle allows for a variety of music styles here. What is important for us to note is the purpose of these songs and hymns.

First, the church “addressed one another” by singing. In other words, these songs were intended to remind each member of the goodness of God in

their circumstances. As they sang, they spoke to each other about God and His character.

Second, Paul told the Ephesians that these psalms, hymns and spiritual songs were also intended to give thanks to God. Not only did the church speak to each other through songs, but they also spoke to God and expressed their adoration and worship of His name.

The apostle would say something similar to the Colossians when he wrote:

*16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3)*

Paul told the Colossians that they were to do two things in this verse. First, they were to teach and admonish each other through the word of Christ, and they were to give thanks to God through the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.

For Prayer:

Father, thank you for the leadership You have given us in our churches. Give them wisdom and discernment to address anything that would hinder the worship of your name in our midst. Thank you for the various gifts You have given to the body. Teach us how to use the gifts You have provided for the sake of the body of Christ. Father, thank you for the freedom we have to worship. We give thanks for the Word of Truth that You have preserved for us. Give us capable teachers to instruct us in that Word. Show us how we can use the resources You have given us to minister to each other and our community. Teach us how to use music to instruct each other in the truth. May our hearts be lifted in praise to You as we reflect our hope in songs of praise.



## Chapter 25 – Hindrances to Worship in the Corinthian Church

In First and Second Corinthians, Paul gives us a brief glimpse of the church in Corinth. In these two epistles, we see something of the organization and structure of the worship services of that day. Let's take a moment to summarise what these letters tell us about the worship and order of the early church in that city.

### *Organization*

In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians how God had given various offices and functions to the church.

*27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? (1 Corinthians 12)*

Paul told the Corinthians that God gave apostles, prophets and teachers to the church. These individuals had an important role to play. These offices were held by certain individuals uniquely gifted and called by God to exercise this role.

In verse 28, Paul went on to say that God also gave the church “gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.” Paul reminded believers that God gave these gifts to those He saw fit. Not everyone could work miracles, heal or speak in tongues (verse 29). Those who had these offices and abilities were to use them to worship the Lord and serve the body of Christ. Each person had a unique role to play in the overall worship and service of the church. The flavour of worship depended on the gifts God gave to the church and how He led those He gifted to use them.

## *The Use of Spiritual Gifts*

While the believers in Corinth were aware of the various gifts, they failed to discern how to use them in an orderly fashion. Paul takes the time in 1 Corinthians 12-14 to teach them how to use their God-given abilities in worship. He begins by reminding them of the purpose of God's gifts:

*4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12)*

Notice two important details here about spiritual gifts. First, it is God who empowers these gifts. No one can take credit for the fruit of these efforts. All glory and honour must go to God for any fruit or blessing obtained through these abilities. Second, the gifts were a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good of the church. In other words, God wanted these gifts to be used to strengthen, encourage and build up the church.

Paul went on to tell the Corinthians that each gift and office was important in the proper functioning of the body of Christ:

*12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ... 14 For the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. (1 Corinthians 12)*

For the church to worship God as He intended, they needed each member to use their gift. If the body had no prophets, who would warn them. If it had no teachers, who would show them God's purpose? If it had no encouragers, who would build them up in the trials they faced? Each person played a role in enabling the body to focus on Christ and His purpose.

In 1 Corinthians 14, the apostle Paul takes a moment to address some particular areas of concern in the Corinthian worship services. It appears that these times were somewhat chaotic. Listen to the advice Paul offers the church about this:

*26 What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. 27 If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. 28 But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. 29 Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. 30 If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. 31 For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, ... 33 For God is not a God of confusion but of peace (1 Corinthians 14)*

There are several points we need to make about these verses.

First, notice the format of the worship service Paul recommends. When believers came together, they were given the freedom to use their spiritual gifts to benefit the body. Verse 26 speaks about bringing a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, or a tongue and an interpretation. This shows us that music, teaching and prophecy (either spoken directly or through a tongue and interpretation) were all aspects of the worship in Corinth. Paul encourages the use of these gifts in worship.

Second, notice that Paul expected order and respect in the use of these various gifts. If individuals spoke in tongues during the church service, the leadership allowed only two or three people to do so. The apostle required that each tongue be interpreted. If no one could interpret, the individual speaking was to sit down and continue quietly to himself because there was no interpretation. The other requirement of Paul was that only one person speak out loud in a tongue at a time. Paul believed that God spoke through the gift of tongues to the church, but they needed to be interpreted to be understood and accomplish His purpose. Having more than one person speak out loud in a tongue at a time would only cause confusion and disrespect, so it was to be discouraged.

Regarding prophecy, Paul encouraged the church in Corinth only to allow two or three prophets to speak in a given worship service. As the individuals spoke, those who heard were to “weigh” what was said. In other words, they were to carefully evaluate what the prophet said to see if it was from the Lord. If someone else felt exercised to speak while the first person was speaking, then the second was to be given a chance, and the first was to listen in silence. Maybe the Lord gave the second person a word to confirm or refute the first. Those hearing the prophecies were to discern what the Lord was trying to say to them through these prophets. Paul believed that the Lord would speak to the Corinthians through tongues and prophecy, but the gifts needed to be exercised in a discerning and respectful way.

Paul would go on to say that every woman who prophesied or prayed was to cover her head when she did so:

*4 Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, 5 but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. (1 Corinthians 11)*

Remember that the spiritual gift of prophecy, as with all gifts, was for the common good of the body. A word of prophecy not spoken to the body would be of no use. It is to be assumed, therefore, that when a woman prophesied, she was doing so before the church. Women were given the same right to use their prophetic gift in the worship service as men. They were to do so, however, in submission to the leadership God had established in the church.

There appeared to be some flexibility in the worship services of the New Testament. While some regulations governed how things unfolded, believers were free to share a teaching, encouragement, or a word from the Lord. They were also encouraged to bring a hymn and sing. There was a certain amount of spontaneity in the worship as people used their spiritual gifts and shared what the Lord was putting on their hearts.

*The Lord's Supper*

Another important practice of the early church was the Lord's Supper. Paul reprimanded the church of Corinth because of how they practiced the Lord's Table in 1 Corinthians 11:

*20 When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. 21 For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. 22 What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not. (1 Corinthians 11)*

Notice that Paul speaks about individuals "going ahead with his own meal." One person would go hungry while another would get drunk (verse 21). This would hardly be possible in the way we practice the Lord's Supper in most churches today. The small piece of bread would not be sufficient to satisfy anyone's hunger, and even if your church uses real wine, it would not be possible for anyone to get drunk by drinking the wine in a small communion size cup.

The church in Corinth had a large meal with lots of wine to drink. The original Lord's Supper was celebrated at a table with lots of food and drink. After the meal, the Lord Jesus took some bread and broke it. He also took the wine and drank it with His disciples around the table. The celebration of the Lord's Supper likely took place at a church supper where believers shared a meal, and part of that meal was a remembrance of the Lord through the bread and wine.

In Corinth, certain individuals likely came early and ate as much as possible, leaving nothing for those who arrived behind them. Some of them would drink so much wine that they would get drunk at this supper. Paul rebuked the church for allowing this to happen and told them:

*20 When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. 21 For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. (1 Corinthians 14)*

In essence, the apostle told the Corinthians that this was not how the Lord taught them to celebrate this meal. By gorging themselves with food and getting drunk, they were dishonouring the memory of the Lord.

Paul advised the Corinthians to wait until everyone came together before eating. If anyone was hungry, they were to have something to eat at home so they would not be tempted to take more than they needed.

*33 So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another— 34 if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come. (1 Corinthians 14)*

Paul reminded the Corinthian believers that they were to be careful to examine themselves and their attitudes when they came to celebrate the Lord's Table because anyone who came with an ungodly attitude or sin in their lives would bring judgement on themselves.

*28 Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. (1 Corinthians 11)*

Even at this early stage of the church, believers struggled to keep their worship respectful and pleasing to God.

### *Use of Finances*

It appears that the church in Corinth, like the church in Macedonia, also received financial contributions from its members. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul tells the Corinthians about the generosity of the Macedonian churches:

*1 We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 2 for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 3 For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, 4 begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— ... 7 But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you — see that you excel in this act of grace also. (1 Corinthians 8)*

The apostle encouraged the Corinthians to excel in the grace of giving. Paul went on to tell the Corinthians that they were to lay aside a certain amount

each week, as God prospered them for the needs of believers in the city of Jerusalem.

*1 Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. 2 On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. 3 And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. (1 Corinthians 16)*

The church would store this money in a safe place until it could be taken to Jerusalem to help suffering believers in that city. Notice from verse 1 that Paul also gave this instruction to the church in Galatia.

Paul felt so strongly about this offering that he sent brothers ahead of him to encourage and oversee the collection of funds from the Corinthians for Jerusalem:

*5 So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction. 6 The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9)*

Part of worship involved bringing an offering to minister to believers suffering and in need.

## Divisions

Let me conclude with a word about another problem hindering the worship of the Corinthian church.

*10 I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. (1 Corinthians 1)*

Paul points out that there were divisions and quarrels among the believers in Corinth. The grievances between them were so strong that lawsuits were arising among them.

*1 When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? ... 5 I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, 6 but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? 7 To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? 8 But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers! (1 Corinthians 6)*

How do you worship with a believer that you are taking to court? The divisions among them would only cause their worship and service of God to suffer. These early Corinthian believers struggled in their relationship with each other. While they exercised the gifts of the Spirit, they did so in a way that seemed to bring confusion to their worship services. They were not experiencing a full measure of peace, love and patience with each other. This hindered their relationship with each other and their worship of God.

What do the epistles of Paul to the Corinthians teach us about worship in the early church? The early church worship encouraged participation. They gathered together and spontaneously shared what God had put on their heart. They did this through prophecy, a tongue, a hymn or an encouragement. A lesson from the Word of God was also an important part of their meetings.

The church in the days of the apostles practiced the Lord's Supper. It appears that they did so in the context of a communal meal where the bread and the wine were used to remember the Lord's death and resurrection.

As part of their worship, the early church gave financial aid to those who were in need. They collected money brought in by the people each week and distributed it to the needy in their community.



The early church was not perfect. We have hints of sexual sin in the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 5:1-2) and clear evidence of division. The apostle Paul had to intervene to restore order in their worship. Worship in Corinth was a battle. The enemy was more than happy to divide and cause confusion. Those who lead the people of God in worship must be aware of the enemy's tactics.

For Prayer:

Father, thank you for a glimpse into the worship service of the early church. I ask that we see the importance of every member of the body. Help us to make room for the gifts You have given us for our worship and service. Where there is division, I ask that You would restore harmony. Give us a generous spirit as we gather. Show us that by ministering to the poor and needy, we honour Your name and reveal Your love.

## Chapter 26 – The Seven Churches of Revelation

In the first part of the book of Revelation, the Lord God gave the apostle John a message for seven churches. The word God had for these churches teaches us something about the worship He requires.

As we begin, let's consider how these messages came to John. On that occasion, the apostle heard a voice speaking to him. Turning to see the source of that voice, John saw seven lampstands with the Son of man in the middle. Jesus often identified Himself as the Son of man (see Matthew 8:20; 12:40; 16:27).

While John had often seen the Lord Jesus, His appearance here was very different. John describes Him clothed in a priestly sash. His hair was white, and His eyes were like flames of fire. A sharp two-edged sword came out of His mouth, and His face shone like the sun in full strength. Notice the response of the apostle to this vision of the Lord Jesus:

*17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last (Revelation 1)*

The sight of the Lord Jesus in this vision was too much for John. He fell at His feet. While this was an act of worship, notice how John describes this event – "I fell at His feet as though dead." His soul was overcome by the glory he saw. He lay helpless before the Lord with a heart full of awe, wonder and fearful praise.

This glorious Lord Jesus spoke to John that day and gave him a message for the seven churches. Let's take a moment to consider these messages to see what the Lord expected from these churches as they worshiped and served Him.

### *Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7)*

In His message to the church of Ephesus, the Lord Jesus commended the church for their work, patient endurance in trial and commitment to the truth. The Lord, however, had a rebuke for the Ephesian church:

*4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. (Revelation 2)*

It appears that the church had devoted itself to truth and service but had lost sight of the Lord and their love for Him. Their service and devotion to truth became the priority of their lives, but their love for Christ had diminished. Their delight in Christ and passion for His presence were lost in their much serving.

The Lord Jesus goes on in Revelation 2:5 to say something very shocking:

*5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. (Revelation 2)*

This love for Christ was so important that losing it was a sin they needed to confess to God. If they did not recover this love for Christ, there was no hope for them as a church. Their lampstand would be removed.

How easy it is for us to go through the motions of worship and service. We can be dedicated to service and truth but lose our passion for the person of Jesus. Worship must begin with a heart that is truly in love with Christ. Love must be the foundation upon which all worship and service are built.

*Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11)*

The church of Smyrna was poor. The Jews of their city slandered them. The Lord Jesus told them that this would continue. God would not remove their suffering. Some of them would be cast into prison and tested. The Lord encouraged them to be faithful unto death.

How would you feel if this was the word of the Lord to you? What would your response be if you knew that your suffering would only get worse and that you might have to die for the Lord? Listen to the challenge of the Lord to this church:

*10 Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Revelation 2)*

The Lord God was calling this church to one of the greatest forms of worship –laying down their lives in faithfulness. It is relatively easy to worship the Lord when we are experiencing His blessings. How much

greater, however, is the praise of the one who suffers unending sorrow and pain in life. How wonderful is the worship of those who lay down their lives in faithful devotion? The Lord called the believers of Smyrna to offer their lives as an act of worship to His name. Would you be willing to do the same?

### *Pergamum (Revelation 2:12-17)*

Like the church in Smyrna, the church in Pergamum suffered for their commitment to the Lord Jesus. It appears that one of their members had died for his faithful witness to the Lord Jesus (verse 13). The Lord rebuked the church, however, because there were individuals among them who held to the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. It is not our purpose here to discuss these false teachings. Suffice it to say that the Lord called the church to return to the truth taught by the apostles. If they did not repent, the Lord would come quickly to judge them.

The Lord God required that the church of Pergamum worship Him in truth. The Word of God and worship must walk hand in hand. We cannot believe and teach error and worship God in truth.

Some time ago, I spoke with a pastor who told me that when he first came to his church, all the people wanted to study the Bible. He told me that he had to teach them to worship. The Lord spoke to me that day, and I said: "Don't forget that the truth of Scripture is what fuels our worship." The more we understand about God, the more we bow in praise. We must know and accept the truth about God if we are to worship Him as we ought. The teacher can also be a worship leader when he leads us into a deeper awareness of the truth about this God we worship. If we are to worship God as He deserves, we must search the Scriptures to know Him and accept what they teach us about Him.

All too many people worship an image they have created about God in their minds. They form this image from things they like about God or what they want to see in God, but this is not the God of the Bible. They worship a God created from their ideas. We must honour the God of the Bible. To do this, we need to study the Scriptures to know Him and His ways.

### Thyatira (Revelation 2:18-29)

The Lord commended the church in Thyatira for their love, faith, service and endurance. The issue the Lord had with this church, however, related to their practices. Listen to what He told them in verse 20:

*20 But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. (Revelation 2)*

The woman Jezebel encouraged the practice of sexual immorality and eating foods sacrificed to idols. The church in Thyatira is accused of tolerating this practice. God warned the church that He would address this matter and throw them into great tribulation unless they repented:

*22 Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works,  
23 and I will strike her children dead. (Revelation 2)*

Notice what the result of His judgement of the church of Thyatira would be in verse 23:

*23 And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works. (Revelation 2)*

The church would be an example for all other churches. God would judge them so that other churches would know that He searched mind and heart and gave each according to their works. God required that those who worship Him and claim His name submit to His purpose. If we are going to worship God, truly, we must examine our lives to be sure that we are not walking in sin. Sin will keep us from worshipping as God requires. This is what the psalmist taught when he said:

*3 Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? 4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. 5 He will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation.  
(Psalm 24)*

### Sardis (Revelation 3:1-6)

Writing to the church in Sardis, the Lord says:

*1 ... "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. (Revelation 3)*

Notice that the church of Sardis had a reputation of being alive, but in reality, they were dead. They enjoyed a reputation for being something they were not. In other words, they were hypocritical. The Lord tells them that He did not find their works complete in His sight. The implication is that they were spiritually lazy and somewhat indifferent to the purpose of God for them. They were content with having a reputation. Their heart was not so much for God as it was for what people thought about them.

How can you worship God when you think more of yourself than you do of God? When our reputation is more important than serving God, what kind of praise can we bring. You cannot worship God if you are in the way. He must become the centre of our focus. Only by dying to ourselves can we truly worship the Lord God as He requires.

#### *Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7-13)*

Revelation 3:8 tells us that the church of Philadelphia had "little power." The Lord told them in Revelation 3:10 that he would "keep them from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole earth." This church was not strong but what is interesting about this church is that it is the only church about which the Lord has nothing negative to say.

This church of "little power" had kept God's word and refused to deny His name (verse 8). They persevered with the little strength they had (verse 10). While many larger and more "significant" churches fell short of God's purpose, this little church held firm and honoured the Lord. A great reward lay ahead for them if they continued to persevere:

*12 The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. (Revelation 3)*

What a blessing it is to see listed here among these churches, a church of "little power." This church was small and insignificant in the eyes of the world. Though they didn't have much, they used what they had. The Lord

did not lose sight of this small church. He delighted in them as much as in the larger and more influential churches. He received their worship, small as they were and rejoiced in it.

In Luke 18, the Lord Jesus told a parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector:

*10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18)*

Notice how God received the praise of this humble tax collector. The Pharisee, with all his religious activities, did not touch the heart of God. God hears the humble cry of those of "little power" as much, and sometimes more than the great and worldly important.

#### *Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22)*

The final church addressed in Revelation two and three is the church of Laodicea. Notice that the Lord speaks of the church as being "lukewarm."

*15 "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. (Revelation 3)*

Notice what caused them to be lukewarm in verse 17:

*17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. (Revelation 3)*

The Laodiceans said they were rich and had prospered. They did not feel like they had any need. The members of this church became content with their worldly prosperity and blessing. These material things blinded them

to their need for God. The Lord counselled them to buy from Him “salve to anoint their eyes, so that they could see (verse 18).

The Laodiceans felt they had everything they needed. In their prosperity, they failed to see their need of God. This is pictured in verse 20 when the Lord said:

*20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.  
(Revelation 3)*

The picture here is of a church-going through all the motions of worship, but the Lord was not in their midst. He stood outside, knocking on the door of their church, asking to come in. The Laodiceans had not even noticed that He was not there.

How easy it is in our prosperity to lose sight of God. Everything seems to be going well for us. We have no significant issues we cannot resolve. God seems to be irrelevant in our daily routine.

How do we worship a God we feel we don't need? It is not that we have denied God; it is just that we become somewhat complacent toward Him. We depend more on our prosperity and bank account than we do on God. We trust what we can do more than we trust God. Materialism and an elevated understanding of our ability can blind us to God. This was the problem of the church of Laodicea. Until their eyes were open to their need, they could not worship God as He deserved.

For Prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank you for the letters You sent to the seven churches. Thank you for what they teach us about worship and what hinders our worship of your name. Help us never to lose our love for You. Show us how much we need You. May we renounce the temptations of the world and the flesh so that they do not hinder our worship. Teach us to repent of anything that would keep our lives from honouring your holy name.



## Chapter 27 – Worship in Revelation

In his vision, the apostle John records nine occasions when spontaneous worship erupted in heaven. In this final chapter, I would like to examine these occurrences to see what they teach us about the praise of God's holy name in heaven.

### *The Throne Room of Heaven (Revelation 4:1-11)*

In Revelation 4, the apostle John saw a vision of the throne room of heaven. Twenty-four elders surrounded a central throne from which came flashes of lightning and peals of thunder. Four living creatures resembling a lion, an ox, a man and an eagle surrounded that throne. What is of interest to us is what these four living creatures were doing:

*8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"*  
(Revelation 4)

Notice why these four creatures worshipped God. There are three causes for their praise in this verse.

First, they worship God as a holy God. He was perfect in all His ways, and no evil could be found in Him.

Second, they worship the One seated on the throne because He was Lord God Almighty. As Lord, every knee would bow to Him. He was Lord over all His creation. He was the Master of heaven and earth.

Third, the four creatures worship God because He is an eternal God who was and is to come. Death had no power over Him. He always existed and is the source of all things. He will never die, and as a result, our future is assured.

Notice what happened as these four creatures led in praise:

*9 And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship*

*him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, 11 "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created." (Revelation 4)*

The twenty-four elders around the throne also worshipped the Holy and eternal Lord God Almighty. Notice how they worshipped Him. Verse ten tells us that they cast their crowns before the throne. They did so as an act of submission to One who was worthy of glory and honour. They surrendered to Him because He was not only their Creator but the one to whom they owed their existence.

These creatures and elders recognized the worth of the Lord God. As important as they were in the kingdom of heaven, they fell before the One true God and acknowledged that He alone was worthy of praise. What can we say to such power and wisdom? All we can do is cast our crowns before Him in submission and gratitude.

#### *The Lamb and the Scroll (Revelation 5:1-14)*

In Revelation 5, John saw a scroll sealed with seven seals in the hand of the holy and eternal God seated on His throne. In the context of the book, as each seal was opened, the purpose of God unfolded on the earth. As John focused on this sealed scroll, he heard a loud voice saying:

*2 ... "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" (Revelation 5)*

No one in heaven or earth could open the scroll and unfold its purposes. No one was found worthy or qualified for such an awesome task. This realization so shook John that he began to "weep loudly." How could the purpose of God ever be unfolded if no one was worthy? What hope was there for the world if no one could open the scroll? As John wept, one of the twenty-four elders spoke to Him saying:

*5 And one of the elders said to me, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." (Revelation 5)*

John then saw a Lamb standing before the throne. This lamb, according to John, looked as if He had been slain. He approached the throne and took

the scroll from the hand of God. There can be no question that this Lamb represents the Lord Jesus who was slain for our sin. He alone was worthy to take the scroll and unfold the purpose of God on the earth.

Notice the response of those seated around the throne that day:

*8 And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, 10 and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." (Revelation 5)*

Heaven erupted in praise when the scroll was handed over to the Lord Jesus. Worship now focuses on the Lamb, who alone was worthy. They praised Him because His death accomplished the Father's plan. They celebrated Him because His work made it possible for people from every tribe and language to become members of the kingdom of God. As the living creatures and elders express their adoration and gratitude, the angels of heaven were also moved to cry out:

*12 saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Revelation 5)*

All creation then burst out in praise, saying:

*13 "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" (Revelation 5)*

All heaven and earth erupt in praise because the Lord Jesus was worthy to unfold the purpose of God for the salvation of His people. Revelation 4 focuses on the Father who sat on His throne. He was the eternal and holy God to whom all creation owed its existence. Here in Revelation 5, the focus shifts to Jesus the Son of God through whom forgiveness and eternal life are possible. The Lord Jesus is worshipped because He brought salvation and forgiveness to those who were lost in sin.

### *The Multitude before the Throne (Revelation 7:9-17)*

In Revelation 7, the apostle saw people from every nation, tribe and language standing before the throne of God and before the Lamb. These individuals were clothed in white, a symbol of their victory over sin. Notice that they take no credit for this victory but give all praise to God who sat on the throne and to the Lamb

*10 and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7)*

As the earth expresses its gratitude to the Lord God and the Lamb, the angels of heaven, the twenty-four elders and the living creatures all joined in:

*12 saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."  
(Revelation 7)*

Heaven and earth explode in praise for the victory the Lamb had given His people over sin and the grave. These children of God owed their salvation and eternal hope to the Lord God and the Lamb. Here in Revelation 7, they cry out in praise of His name.

### *The Sounding of the Seventh Trumpet (Revelation 11:15-19)*

As we come to Revelation 11, the Lord spoke to John about a great judgement coming to the earth. This judgement would unfold as a series of trumpets sounded in heaven. As the seventh and final angel appears to blow the trumpet and unleash God's wrath, John heard loud voices in heaven crying out:

*15 "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." 16 And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, 17 saying, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. 18 The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and*

*those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.” (Revelation 11)*

Notice the cause of their praise and worship—“the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ” (verse 15). The twenty-four elders express their praise because the Lord God Almighty had taken His “great power and begun to reign.” For thousands of years, the earth had been subject to sin and evil. Now the Lord God would overcome every hint of sin and rebellion and reign over a submissive earth as the undisputed King. Heaven cannot contain its joy. Its inhabitants are overwhelmed with excitement as they watch the Lord God defeat evil and take His place over a world free from sin. His victory is complete.

#### *The Praise of the 144,000 (Revelation 14:1-5)*

In a time of great turmoil and judgement on the earth, the Lord set apart 144,000 to be His faithful witnesses. These individuals faithfully served His purpose and stood before the Lamb of God. As they stood in victory over their tribulations, John heard the sound of harpists. As they played, the 144,000 witnesses sang a new song to the Lord God:

*2 And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, 3 and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. (Revelation 14)*

Notice that no one else could sing this song but the 144,000 who had gone through the tribulation. They alone understood the opposition they faced. Their worship was an expression of their personal experience and relationship with God. Their song expressed gratitude and worship to a God who had refined them and carried them in their trouble.

#### *The Victors over the Beast (Revelation 15:2-4)*

While the 144,000 expressed their unique song to the Lord, they were not the only ones to suffer for Him and experience His victory. In Revelation 15,

the apostle saw a vision of a great basin of water and fire. Standing beside that great basin were those who had conquered the beast. Grateful to the Lord God who had given them victory, they sang a song that Moses had written:

*3 "Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! 4 Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed." (Revelation 15)*

These victors sing of the justice and holiness of God. They rejoiced in the fact that the Lord God had upheld justice and conquered their enemy. They worship Him for his "righteous acts" and because He maintained truth and holiness.

#### *The Praise of the Third Angel (Revelation 16:4-7)*

Revelation 16 describes a great judgement of the earth as the seven bowls of God's wrath are poured out. Notice particularly that as the third bowl is poured out over the waters, the angel of God stopped for a moment to offer praise to God, who is holy and just in the judgements He brought

*4 The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. 5 And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, "Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. 6 For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!" 7 And I heard the altar saying, "Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!" (Revelation 16)*

Countless men and women would die as a result of this outpouring of God's wrath on the waters. But even in the outpouring of God's fury, the angel found cause for worship. God was just and holy in what He did. He punished the enemies of His people, upheld justice, and promoted holiness and righteousness on the earth. Have you ever praised God for His judgement in your life? Have you ever paused in a time of tragedy to offer Him praise and surrender to His purpose?

### *The Great Multitude in Heaven (Revelation 19:1-5)*

As God's judgement is completed on the earth and evil and sin are destroyed, heaven erupts in a great hallelujah:

*1 After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, 2 for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants."*

All of heaven shouts for joy at the work of God's judgement on the earth. The great prostitute Babylon had corrupted the world with immorality and the innocent blood of God's servants. She was now broken and defeated, and "the smoke from her goes up forever and ever" (verse 3). God's people rejoiced in the defeat of sin and evil. All rebellion against the God they loved was broken. For this great work, they bowed in praise before Him.

### *Another Great Multitude in Heaven (Revelation 19:6-8)*

Notice finally in Revelation 19, the great hallelujah that rose "like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder" (verse 6):

*6 "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; 8 it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. 9 And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God." (Revelation 19)*

Notice the cause for praise in verses six to eight. Heaven gives glory to the Lord God because He has taken His people as His bride. He had brought her to Himself and clothed her with fine linen, "the righteous deeds of the saints" (verse 8). Notice that God invited those He clothed with righteousness to the "marriage supper of the Lamb" (verse 9).

Here in the presence of her Divine Husband, the bride is filled with blessing and delight. Her God had saved her and devoted Himself to her. She was

secure for all eternity to rejoice in His person and presence. Her heart overflowed with praise for this wonderful act of grace.

Throughout the book of Revelation, heaven and earth worship a God whose character is holy, just, true and almighty. Recognizing its need, creation bows in humble surrender, casting its crowns before Him. His people delight in His salvation and justice. They praise Him for the victory He achieved over their enemy and the joy they know in His presence forever.

The book of Revelation speaks of great trials and sufferings to come. It also reassures us of victory for all who persevere to the end. Our God will not abandon us. The day will come when we join the hosts of heaven to express our gratitude and worship of the triune God who created, saved and preserved us. We will rejoice forever in His presence and delight in praise of His name.

#### For Prayer

Father, in the book of Revelation, we read about the worshipful response of Your people as they faced the trials that came their way. You revealed Yourself to them in their affliction. Thank you, Lord Jesus, that You are worthy to accomplish the purpose of God in salvation. Thank you, that You will bring justice, righteousness and conquer rebellion and sin. Thank you for the wonderful hope we have of eternity in Your presence. May our hearts be always surrendered and grateful to You. We look forward to the day when we shall join the hosts of heaven in praise of Your name.



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