



## **Old Testament Worship**

Worship is a vitally important subject. Angels and men were created in God's image to worship Him. There is no higher activity in which we could possibly be engaged. Man's chief end is to glorify God. But how are we to worship and who decides? Is it a matter of what we think God would like? Is it what pleases us and what will attract the crowds? Is it just a matter of being sincere and then anything will do?

Recently I visited Kenya and preached in a church there. The service was very different from a Free Church (Continuing) one. There were man-made hymns, instrumental music, hand-clapping, women leading parts, prayers from a prayer book, bowing to a cross, etc. Roman Catholics accept many practices in worship for which they have no warrant from Scripture. Luther led in the Reformation but he allowed practices which were not specifically condemned. Calvin rightly asserted the Regulative Principle of Worship – nothing should be in the worship but what God specifically commands in Scripture. Really what matters is not what great men have done or what tradition lays down, but what God Himself asserts.

### **Creation**

In six days God created heaven and earth and all that is in them. He prepared an environment for man and then on the sixth day took of the dust of the ground, moulded it, put it to His lips and breathed into it and it became a living soul. Man was formed as the crown of creation by God and for God's glory. Worship was natural and perfect. Man's first full day on earth was a Sabbath. God rested that day from His labours and sanctified the day. Even in paradise when man was perfect he needed one day in seven to be holy. The Sabbath was made for man's benefit and was to be spent in the public and private exercises of worship.

### **The Fall**

God relates to and gives Himself to man in covenants. First He made with man the covenant of works and required perfect obedience. Sadly our first parents listened to Satan rather than God, disobeyed and fell into a state of sin and misery. The reverential fear which was natural turned into a dread of God which caused man to run away and hide. Yet God made another covenant with man and promised a Saviour in the form of the seed of the woman. He took animals and killed them to provide clothes of skins, so initiating worship by means of animal sacrifices which pointed forward to the Lamb of God.

### **Cain and Abel**

Interestingly the first death of a human being was by the direct hand of a man and not God. Why did Cain murder Abel? Both had appeared before God to worship Him with sacrifices. Cain brought of the fruit of the ground. It was a thank offering and no doubt of considerable value. However it failed to recognise the impossibility of a sinner approaching God acceptably without blood. Rejecting God's revelation in the Garden of the need for a blood sacrifice, he brought what he thought was best. By faith Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain when he came with a firstling of the flock. Faith is the gift of God and He gave it sovereignly to Abel who was in His elect but did not grant it to Cain. Jealousy on Cain's part led to religious hatred and then to murder.

## **The Patriarchs**

Abraham was called out of idolatry (Josh. 24:2). He set up altars in the promised land and paid tithes to Melchizedek, the priest of the most high God. In obedience to God he practised circumcision. God said of him, *'For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord'* (Gen. 18:19). Isaac meditated in the field in the evening (Gen. 24:63) which appears to be secret worship. Jacob, having deceived his father and angered his brother, had to flee the family home. No doubt, feeling desolate, he lay down to sleep in the open field. Here God, amazingly, appeared to him and he declared that it was none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven. He worshipped God with a vow: *'If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God: and this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee'* (Gen. 28:20-22). Eventually he returned to Bethel in faith and repentance.

## **Moses**

Moses' experience of the majesty of God at the burning bush had a profound effect upon him for the rest of his life: *'Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground'* (Exod. 3:5). Having reluctantly agreed to return to Egypt to lead God's people out, he had a shocking experience: *'And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him'* (Exod. 4:24). Moses had neglected to circumcise his son and only the swift action of his wife in performing the operation saved his life. God is so holy that all His commandments must be carefully observed.

Amongst the commandments spoken by God on Mount Sinai and written on tables of stone was the second, part of which states: *'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God'* (Exod. 20:4-5). In ancient times, and sadly also today, images, pictures and crosses were used as aids to the worshippers. But here the Regulative Principle is clearly laid down. God is to be worshipped only as He Himself lays down. The fact that people find statues or pictures helpful is no warrant. This principle is further emphasised when God says: *'And look that thou make them after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount'* (Exod. 25:40). No room was left for the free use of Bezaleel's artistic talents.

## **Nadab and Abihu**

The sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, were commissioned by God to assist their father in the priestly work. It is shocking then to read that God sent fire to destroy them and Aaron was not allowed to mourn. What had they done wrong? We are told that they offered *'strange fire'* to the Lord (Lev. 10:1). They came with an offering which God had not prescribed, and in that situation their sincerity could not save them. Acceptable worship requires positive obedience to God's Word.

## **Korah, Dathan and Abiram**

Korah, Dathan and Abiram were jealous of Moses and Aaron. They argued that all the Israelites were holy and therefore could be priests. They wanted to lead in worship and tried to do so, but the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up alive. The 250 princes who took censers with them and offered incense which God had not commanded were burnt with fire. Of the people who sided with them, 14,700 died in the plague which followed. God alone has the right to decide on the kind of worship to be offered to Him and who should perform it.

## **1 Samuel**

When the ark of the covenant was returned from the land of the Philistines the men of Bethshemesh rejoiced and offered sacrifices. However, motivated by curiosity, they approached the ark and looked inside, and God slew a huge number of them. Their irreverence left them crying out like the Philistines, *'Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?'* Later, King Saul is told by God to go and destroy all the Amalekites and all their livestock. He saved some of the best animals alive and when challenged about this by Samuel he said that it was in order to worship God with sacrifices. Samuel's answer is significant: *'Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams'* (1 Sam. 15:22).

## **2 Samuel**

When David went to the house of Abinadab to bring the ark up to the tabernacle which he had built for it in Jerusalem, initially he used a cart driven by the sons of Abinadab. At a certain point the oxen shook the cart and Uzza, one of them, reached his hand out to steady the ark lest it fall from the cart. Touching the ark he immediately fell down dead. David was shocked and stopped the operation. Later, it was completed using the divinely-given instructions that only the Levites should carry the ark and all went well. God is awesome. David, himself, was not ashamed to dance enthusiastically before the ark, though he was despised by Michal his wife. Worship was very dramatic and external in the Old Testament and dancing was prescribed: *'Praise him with the timbrel and dance'* (Psalm 150:4).

## **Temple**

King David wanted to build a temple for the Lord but was not allowed to because he had shed so much blood. However he gathered much material for the work and also received the plan from God: *'All this, said David, the Lord made me understand in writing by his hand upon me, even all the works of this pattern'* (1 Chron. 28:19). Nothing significant was left to David or Solomon to decide. This is further emphasised in the days of Hezekiah when with regard to the music used in temple worship: *'He set the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet: for so was the commandment of the Lord by his prophets'* (2 Chron. 29:25). All the temple music was commanded by God.

## **Psalms**

The book of Psalms is God's hymnbook. Its contents, unlike any other book of praise, are totally inspired by God. Because of this it is impossible to get better songs of worship. These are the ones that God Himself has authored by His Spirit operating upon the writers so that they will truly glorify Him. It is important to remember that there is essentially only one church in the Old Testament and the New Testament, one way of salvation and one Saviour. Christian experience is essentially the same. Old Testament believers had to be born again and exercise faith in Christ to be saved. We all notice how, whatever experience we are going through, we can find comforting and encouraging words in the Psalms. Much more could be said on the subject of worship from the Psalms but space is limited. Note however the command: *'O give thanks unto the Lord; call upon his name: make known his deeds among the people. Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him: talk ye of all his wondrous works. Glory ye in his holy name: let the heart of them rejoice that seek the Lord'* (Ps. 105:1-3). No man-made hymn can match the Psalms.

## **Isaiah**

Isaiah was called to be a prophet by receiving a vision of the holiness of God which compelled him to cry out: *'Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts'* (Is.6:5). A coal from off the altar fitted him for the task. Awesome reverence is appropriate in worshipping

God. Hypocrisy is detestable to Him: *'Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men'* (Is. 29:13). God would bring His judgment upon the hypocrites.

## **Conclusion**

1. Reverence is essential in worship because God is holy and awesome.
2. Sinners can only approach God with blood. Consciousness of sin and repentance and faith in Christ is required.
3. God Himself sets the pattern for worship.
4. God gave us the Sabbath as a special day of worship and foretaste of heaven.
5. God hates hypocrisy and demands sincerity.
6. Wrong worship is dangerous no matter how sincere.
7. God delights in the worship of His people.
8. God gave us the Psalms and let us use them to praise Him.

William Macleod

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