

LESSON 10

May 9, 2021

Unit III: Courageous Prophets of Change Empty Rituals Are Useless

DEVOTIONAL READING: Jeremiah 29:10-14

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 29

PRINT PASSAGE: Isaiah 29:13-24

Key Verse—They also that erred in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine. (Isaiah 29:24, KJV)

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“Those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding; those who complain will accept instruction.” (Isaiah 29:24, NIV)

Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do these things:

- Consider how God’s promise of mercy will triumph over God’s judgment.
- Believe that the essential nature of God is forgiveness, not punishment.
- Rejoice in the manifestation of God’s love in your own life.

KEY TERMS

Lips (verse 13)—Hebrew: *saphah* (saw-faw’): speech; language.

Lip service (refer to verse 13): a verbal statement of allegiance not backed by action.

Wayward (verse 24)—Hebrew: *taah* (taw-aw’): to err, go astray; “erred” (KJV).

Woe (verse 15)—Hebrew: *ah* (aw’) or *hoy* (hoh’ee): an interjection often translated “Woe!” or “Alas!” signaling alarm or grief.

INTRODUCTION

Theologian A. W. Tozer wrote that “God is trying to call us back to that for which He created us, to worship and enjoy Him forever.” He also identified worship as the “missing jewel” in the church today. Several other authors have written thought-provoking commentaries about worship and the conflicts that have arisen within congregations over preferred worship styles and sacred music genres. Input and complaints from worshippers of all ages have led some congregations to promote both “traditional” and “contemporary” worship formats to satisfy worshipper preferences. In many ways, we have allowed that for which God created us—worship—to divide us rather than to unify us. The point, however, is not the “how” (the outward form and fashion) of worship but the “who” (the substance and object) of our worship. An overemphasis on form can lead to empty, perfunctory rituals and entertainment masked as real worship. True worship focuses only on God as an audience of one. The question, then, is not if we know how we worship, but if we know and adore the God that calls us to worship Him in spirit and in truth (see John 4:23). The issue of real worship as opposed to ritualistic worship is not new. God’s chosen people, the nation of Israel, became guilty of allowing their worship to become nothing more than meaningless rituals. God used the prophet Isaiah to show them the uselessness of approaching Him with insincerity while expecting to receive His continued blessings.

THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT

The book of Isaiah is named for its author, the prophet Isaiah. A contemporary of Hosea and Micah's, Isaiah ministered to Judah during the reigns of Uzziah (Azariah), Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. The focus of his prophetic ministry was to condemn the empty ritualism and idolatry that was evidence of the nation's spiritual decline. Chapters 28–31 make up a series of prophetic oracles. Oracles typically consisted of songs of blessing for obedience and warnings for disobedience that began with the interjection “woe.” Chapter 29 contains a specific woe oracle against Jerusalem. Isaiah describes the coming judgment on the city (verses 1-12), the folly of empty worship, and the promise of future restoration (verses 13-24).

ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Perfunctory Worship Exposed

(Isaiah 29:13-16)

KJV

13 Wherefore the Lord said, 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:

14 Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid.

15 *Woe* unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the LORD, and their works are in the dark, and they say, Who seeth us? and who knoweth us?

16 Surely your turning of things upside down shall be esteemed as the potter's clay: for shall the work say of him that made it, He made me not? or shall the thing framed say of him that framed it, He had no understanding?

NIV

13 The Lord says: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their *lips*, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.

14 “Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.”

15 *Woe* to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their work in darkness and think, “Who sees us? Who will know?”

16 You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, “You did not make me”? Can the pot say to the potter, “You know nothing”?

Gospel songwriter Margaret Douroux once said, “God knows your name. That’s good news and bad news.” God not only knows us by name, but He also knows everything about us, even the very intent of our hearts. We may be able to fool people some of the time, but we can never hide anything from God. Isaiah discovered that many Israelites who claimed to know God were only going through the ritualistic motions of worship. They carried on as if God was unaware that their worship was insincere and empty (verse 13). Many were more concerned with appearing righteous and upholding visible demonstrations of virtue in front of others. They had little concern for the things that mattered most to God—mercy, justice, and fairness. God knew the intent of their hearts and would judge them accordingly (verse 14). God was also aware of their secret plans to form an alliance with Egypt against Assyria, although they tried to hide it from Him (verse 15). God is ever present and all-knowing. Nothing can ever be hidden from Him—not our deeds, our thoughts, or

the intentions of our hearts. Israel's faulty worship resulted from faulty thinking about God. True worship honors God by being God-centered rather than self-centered. Self-centered worship treats God as the created and not the Creator (verse 16). Israel's insistence on doing things their own way was a rejection of God's sovereignty and a reversal of the divine order. Their worship did not touch the heart of God; it was nothing more than lip service (ritualistic worship) to God. Israel treated God as if He were mere clay that could be manipulated by their rituals and ceremonies. Such empty forms of worship will never be received or acknowledged by God.

What Do You Think?

Who receives the "applause" in your corporate worship setting—worship leaders or God?

Transformation Promised

(Isaiah 29:17-24)

KJV

17 Is it not yet a very little while, and Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field, and the fruitful field shall be esteemed as a forest?

18 And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness.

19 The meek also shall increase their joy in the LORD, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.

20 For the terrible one is brought to nought, and the scorner is consumed, and all that watch for iniquity are cut off:

21 That make a man an offender for a word, and lay a snare for him that reproveth in the gate, and turn aside the just for a thing of nought.

22 Therefore thus saith the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob, Jacob shall not now be ashamed, neither shall his face now wax pale.

23 But when he seeth his children, the work of mine hands, in the midst of him, they shall sanctify my name, and sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and shall fear the God of Israel.

24 They also that *erred* in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine.

NIV

17 In a very short time, will not Lebanon be turned into a fertile field and the fertile field seem like a forest?

18 In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see.

19 Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.

20 The ruthless will vanish, the mockers will disappear, and all who have an eye for evil will be cut down—

21 those who with a word make someone out to be guilty, who ensnare the defender in court and with false testimony deprive the innocent of justice.

22 Therefore this is what the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, says to the descendants of Jacob: "No longer will Jacob be ashamed; no longer will their faces grow pale.

23 "When they see among them their children, the work of my hands, they will keep my name holy; they will acknowledge the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob, and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.

24 "Those who are *wayward* in spirit will gain understanding; those who complain will accept instruction."

Isaiah's message shifted from announcing God's condemnation of ritualistic worship to the promise of future transformation. God declared that in the future, things would be different for His people. When God intervenes, the moral change in the nation would result in a reversal of roles between the mighty and the weak. Figuratively, Isaiah described it as the forested Lebanon's becoming a field and a fertile field's becoming a forest (verse 17). At the appointed time, the messianic age, Isaiah predicted five future blessings and transformative changes for Israel. The spiritually impaired would no longer exist in Israel and all the people would be receptive to the Word of God (verse 18). Those identified as the afflicted and needy would experience spiritual refreshing (verse 19), and their oppressors would be cut off (verses 20-21). God's family would expand to include Gentiles. Jacob (the nation of Israel) is pictured watching over his children; their iniquities would no longer be a source of shame to their forefathers (verses 22-23). Finally, those that rebelled against God would be receptive to instruction and would come to know the truth (verse 24). The purpose of discipline is restoration rather than condemnation. God disciplines His children to bring about spiritual transformation in their lives in preparation for promised blessings. When their worship is genuine, true believers can trust God to forgive and restore in spite of great personal failure. Worship that is sincere and God-focused transforms the worshipper in the presence of God. Worship focused on personal gratification rather than giving God the glory and honor He deserves is simply a meaningless ritual with no possibility of spiritual transformation.

What Do You Think?

How can experiencing spiritual worship become the focus rather than a "feel good" experience?

A CLOSING THOUGHT

God is not moved by empty religious rituals that have no regard for God's presence and fail to glorify Him for who He is. Judah's spiritual condition deteriorated to the point that their worship was nothing more than lip service. In their minds, God's own people elevated themselves above God. They depended on their own intellect for deliverance rather than trusting God to provide for them. Believers who turn their focus away from God become guilty of giving "lip service" to God. Distracted, superficial worship that is merely a matter of habit and obligation means nothing to God.

YOUR LIFE

This week, take a personal inventory of your understanding of what real worship involves. Your worship is not validated by the place, the style of music, the choir, the size of the crowd, or the charisma of the preacher, but by the condition and sincerity of your heart and your relationship with God. Always remember that God only accepts our worship when it is offered in spirit and in truth.

YOUR WORLD!

In the church today, much is being written, discussed, and even debated about worship. Congregations have been divided over how to worship and what styles of music should be used. The solution to this challenge is a simple focus on the one whom we worship, rather than on the way in which we worship Him. God does not care about the rhythm of the songs, the length of the prayers being offered, or the delivery style of those who preach His Word. What He desires is a heart that delights in His presence and overflows with love for Him.

CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious God, as we worship You privately or publicly, help us to focus our attention on You. Forgive us when we have been guilty of coming into Your presence with distracted minds and empty words. Draw us closer that we may worship You in spirit and in truth. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

CONCLUSION

(Preparing for Next Week's Lesson)

Sometimes, providing challenging or unpopular advice can be dangerous to the messenger. Jeremiah faced this dilemma when he was summoned by King Zedekiah for a third time. Next week's lesson will explore how this bold prophet faced the threat of death for giving unwelcomed and unheeded advice (see Jeremiah 38:14-23).

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

(May 10-16, 2021)

Jeremiah: The Suffering Preacher of Doom

MONDAY, May 10	"Apostles Speak Truth to Council"	(Acts 4:13-22)
TUESDAY, May 11	"Prophet Jeremiah Is Arrested and Imprisoned"	(Jeremiah 37:11-16)
WEDNESDAY, May 12	"Ebed-Melech's Trust in Jeremiah Honored"	(Jeremiah 38:7-13; 39:15-18)
THURSDAY, May 13	"Jeremiah Reaffirms Prophecy of Zedekiah"	(Jeremiah 37:17-21)
FRIDAY, May 14	"Jeremiah's Last Days in Jerusalem"	(Jeremiah 38:24-28)
SATURDAY, May 15	"Jerusalem Destroyed; People Exiled"	(2 Kings 25:1-12)
SUNDAY, May 16	"Zedekiah Must Submit to Babylonian Conquest"	(Jeremiah 38:14-23)