

## 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.

### PREPARING THE LESSON

- Refer to the *Townsend Press SS Commentary Teacher’s Edition* for an additional lesson plan—with word studies, insights on teaching adults, learner matrices, etc.
- Review last week’s student assignments (“Your Life” and Your World!”).
- Thoroughly review your student book for your adult or young adult class.
- Please note that you have the option of using your subscription bundle supplements, i.e., Lesson Scenario, Student Activity Sheet, SSL-AAG.

### WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

Relationships suffer when humans lapse into immorality. Does immorality have consequences? Isaiah prophesied that God would punish Judah for immorality but would still be merciful and restore the nation.

### THE LESSON IN FOCUS

When you hear the word worship do you envision a spacious sanctuary or makeshift space designated as a church gathering site? Do you think of a certain style of sacred music or perhaps a carefully choreographed liturgical dance? Or do you imagine a busy team of personnel and sound

technicians dressed and blessed to “set” the atmosphere for worship? A study of biblical worship reveals that real worship has nothing to do with any of the aforementioned things. Yet, some of them have caused much debate and disagreement among believers when it comes to worship. Sadly, many people are more interested in the form of worship than the focus of their worship. Those who are fixated on the form of worship debate the issues of “traditional” versus “contemporary” styles of music, dress, and liturgy format. In either camp, the focus remains on form over substance—that is, on rituals rather than real worship. Worship is much more rhythm and rhyme, empty formality, and upbeat feelings. Real worship is about who we serve rather than how we serve. When God is the only focus, real worship becomes more significant than rituals and lip service. The people of ancient Judah drifted away from focusing on God as the object of their worship. This error led to Judah’s ultimate spiritual and moral decline. Although the people continued to go to the Temple, participating in the rituals of the faith, their hearts were not engaged in true, sincere worship. Whether then or now, when believers are fixated on form over focus in their worship, all their religious activity is reduced to nothing but useless, empty rituals.

### THE LESSON IN CONTEXT

The book of Isaiah, named for its author, spans this prolific prophet’s ministry to Judah during the reigns of four of its kings: Uzziah (aka Azariah), Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Judah had achieved political and economic success during Uzziah’s reign, but the nation’s moral and spiritual health experienced a dangerous decline. Isaiah condemned Judah’s empty ritualism and idolatry even though the people continued to ignore his warnings and calls for repentance. Thematically, the book can be divided into two distinct sections: Judgment (chapters 1–35) and Salvation (chapters 40–64), with a historical interlude in chapters 36–39. Isaiah’s judgment prophecies include a series of oracles or woes warning against alliance with Egypt as a source of military help (see chapters 28–35). Chapter 29 is an oracle specifically addressed to Jerusalem (called “Ariel” in Isaiah 29:1, 2, 7), predicting divine judgment in the form of military invasion. After condemning the nation for the emptiness of their worship, Isaiah prophesied that God would restore His people after He had judged them for their sins.

### OPENING INQUIRY (Choose from the items below.)

1. Why did the prophet condemn Judah’s worship?
2. Give an example of how meaningless traditions become a substitute for real worship.
3. Why is resorting to human wisdom a denial of God’s omniscience?
4. How is God’s faithfulness evident in this passage?

### INSIGHTS

Church leaders have preached, taught, and written about worship from multiple perspectives. Across the centuries, the church has witnessed changes from one “order of worship” to another and from a focus on one style of music over another to satisfy changing trends and preferences. Sadly, heated debate and division over the “correct” way to worship have taken precedence over conversations regarding the true mission of the church—to glorify God and to seek and save the lost. The object of real worship is not to please and satisfy the worshipper, but to please God. When the focus is on how rather than who, empty rituals and routines replace worship from the heart. The preacher or the singer becomes the focus and God becomes a mere afterthought. Real worship does not require a special kind of music, a special physical atmosphere, or special people to lead it. Acceptable worship, the kind that honors God, begins with love and reverence for God. Worship

is not just an obligatory weekly appearance at church; it is a heartfelt individual and communal celebration of God's worthiness.

## EXPLORATION

This week's lesson emphasizes the need to embrace a biblical perspective of real worship. Believers today can use Isaiah 29:13 as a test for examining whether their worship practices are actually meaningful and acceptable to God. Acceptable worship does not necessarily require the most common or familiar "elements" of our worship traditions. Invite the class to share which aspects of the worship experience are most and least meaningful to them. Challenge the students to examine their own understanding of worship and to honestly determine the ways in which they have been guilty of focusing on the form of worship instead of the One who deserves our worship.

## ADDITIONAL EXPOSITORY INSIGHTS FOR THE TEACHER

### Commentary on 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"?

Judah was more committed to the formality of worship than the true spiritual nature of the worship experiences. The people had rejected obedience to God's commandments and had no interest in pleasing God, yet they considered themselves righteous because of their membership and participation in the feast days and rituals of the Jewish faith community. They gathered to go through the motions of public worship but had no genuine relationship with God. Judah's worship did not come from a committed heart (verse 13), but from a sense of habit for appearances, rule

keeping, and traditions. Real worship is about entering God's presence and expressing heartfelt love and adoration for God. Thinking themselves to be wise, the people could quote the Scriptures and knew the right words to say, but their hearts had no true devotion to God. Isaiah declared that God had rejected their so-called wisdom (verse 14). The people took no thought of God's omniscience and His awareness of all their empty religion (verse 15). They twisted the Scriptures to justify themselves and regarded themselves as equal to God (verse 16). Their secretive plans denied God's sovereign authority and exposed them as believing that they were on the same level with Him. Without appropriate reverence for God's holiness and authority, there can be no proper worship. Acceptable worship requires the right perspective of who God is and an understanding of our relative place in that relationship. Because Judah lost sight of God, their worship became nothing more than routine, empty rituals. As a result, they forfeited many blessings and faced God's bitter judgment against them.

## DISCUSSION STARTERS

(Please review the appropriate student book's related biblical exposition section.)

- **Adult Question:**  
Who receives the "applause" in your corporate worship setting—worship leaders or God?
- **Young Adult Questions:**  
What is the benefit, if any, of distracted insincere worship? Who, if anyone, does it benefit?

## Commentary on 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.”

Against the backdrop of God’s impending discipline of Judah, Isaiah abruptly predicts a future transformation that will be vastly different. Based on the verses that follow, many believe that the phrase “in a short time” refers to God’s eternal kingdom. Isaiah prophesied that God would someday intervene to transform Judah, reversing things for her good. Using figurative language, Isaiah described the change using the illustration of Lebanon’s being turned into a fertile field—symbolically, a place of joy, understanding, and justice (verse 17). The spiritual impairments that prevented Judah from receiving the Word would be removed (verse 18). The afflicted and needy would experience joy instead of oppression and their oppressors would be cut off (verses 19-20). Those with political and judicial authority would be prevented from misusing it (verse 21). This prophesied transformation would also remove the nation’s stigma of disgrace and relieve their forefathers’ shame over their wickedness (verses 22-23). In that day, the wayward and complainers would be teachable and acquire the capacity to perceive spiritual things (verse 24). God’s people would participate in true rather than empty worship because they will have been transformed by God’s grace. Believers today have the opportunity to be transformed through true worship and to avoid offending God with mere lip service and empty rituals. Real worship transforms worshippers by bringing them into God’s presence. No one can encounter God through worship and remain unchanged.

## DISCUSSION STARTERS

(Please review the appropriate student book’s related biblical exposition section.)

- **Adult Question:**

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

- **Young Adult Questions:**

(1) When things have continued in the same way for a long time, it is hard to imagine a dramatic reversal. How have the events of the last twelve months reminded you that God has the power to turn things upside down?

(2) When you think about the holiness of God, what are you compelled to do? Give at least two examples.

## LIFE APPLICATION

- **Refer to Adult Book**

(See student lesson’s “Your Life” section.)

—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.

**(See student lesson's "Your World!" section.)**

—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.

• **Refer to Young Adult Book**

**(See student lesson's "Your Life" section.)**

—Talk is cheap. God is more concerned with the sentiments of the heart than the words of the mouth. It is time for a checkup; examine your heart and measure your overall spiritual health by the standard of God's Word. How healthy are you? Do not allow your worship to become shallow, hollow, and empty of any true desire to know and obey God's Word, but really hear what God has said to you.

**(See student lesson's "Your World!" section.)**

—God has always desired for His people to be restored to Him. Isaiah foretold a time when the hearts of God's people would be so open to Him that even the unsaved will stand in awe of their God.

## **NEXT WEEK'S LESSON**

The lesson topic for Sunday, May 16, 2021, is "The Consequences of Giving Challenging Advice." The Devotional Reading is Jeremiah 38:7-13; 39:15-18, the Background Scriptures are Jeremiah 37-38, and the Printed Text is Jeremiah 38:14-23.

## **CLOSING PRAYER**

Dear God, You created us to worship You. Forgive us for allowing so many distractions to block our focus when we gather to worship You. Help us to acknowledge You as the worthy focus of our worship. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## **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)