

# We Come To Worship

A STUDY OF CORPORATE WORSHIP FROM THE SCRIPTURES.

## LESSON 1: The Worship of God in the Old Testament

Old Testament worship is God-initiated, sacrifice-centered, covenant-regulated, and mediated by holiness.

### God-Initiated

- › The most clarifying point about worship of God in the Old Testament is that the people, the means, the methods, and the place of worship of God were initiated by God himself.
  - God prepares the place, places man there, and establishes the relationship before man ever acts. (Genesis 2:8–15)
    - Worship begins with God's sovereign call, not Abraham's initiative (Gen. 12:1–3).
  - God reveals Himself, declares the place holy, and defines the manner of approach (Exodus 3:4–6, Exodus 20:24, 25:8–9, Deuteronomy 12:5)
  - God redeems His people to Himself before giving instructions for covenant worship (Exodus 19:3–6)
  - God determines who may approach Him and how closely (Exodus 24:1–2).
- › **God initiates the worship of Himself.** Just as God is the creator of all things, he is the one who defines his own worship that is pleasing to Him.
  - God defines/initiates who can worship and calls them to himself.
  - God initiates the means of their worship and what is acceptable to Him.
  - God alone initiates the place of his worship.
- › Principle: **God initiates worship through His revelation to us.** This means that our worship must be informed by His revelation to us, the Scriptures.

### Sacrifice-centered

- › Sacrifices were not simply transactional; they were relational with the desire of the worshiper to bring them into a right relationship with God.
- › “The purpose of the ritual with its accompanying liturgy was to foster penitence, thanksgiving, adoration, devotion, and humble surrender and consecration to God, and it brings the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms together into a natural synthesis”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark F. Rooker, Leviticus, vol. 3A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 57.

- › **It was designed to be an external action that represented an internal reality.** The holiness of God in contrast to the wickedness of man, desiring to be in right relationship with the creator, with the Lord setting means for man to recover that relationship in the sacrificial system.
  - God Himself provides a covering for sinners through the death of another. Their sinful nakedness, covered by the blood/death of a sacrifice (Genesis 3:21)
  - The first recorded acts of worship after the Fall are offerings presented to God. Abel's sacrifice is accepted because it is offered in faith (cf. Heb. 11:4), while Cain's is rejected. Showing more than a sin atonement, but a relationship/faith in God (Genesis 4:3-5)
  - God ratifies His covenant with Abraham through divinely prescribed sacrificial animals, demonstrating that covenant fellowship is established through sacrifice (Genesis 15:9-18)
  - Even before the Mosaic Law, Job regularly offered sacrifices on behalf of his family, demonstrating that sacrificial worship predates Israel (Job 1:5).
  - Abraham prepares to offer Isaac until God provides a ram as a substitute. This is one of Scripture's clearest pictures of substitutionary sacrifice and foreshadows God's provision of Christ (Genesis 22:9-14)
  - The Passover lamb becomes the means by which Israel is delivered from judgment. Redemption and worship are inseparably connected through sacrifice (Exodus 12:21-27).
  - The opening chapter of Leviticus begins with the burnt offering, showing that covenantal access to God begins through substitutionary sacrifice (Lev. 1:1-4)
  - Sacrifices without a contrite heart are unacceptable, yet right sacrifices, offered in genuine faith, delight the Lord. (Psalm 51:16-19)
  - God rejects hypocritical sacrifices divorced from righteous living (Isaiah 1:11-17)
- › Sacrifice is God's appointed means to atone for the sins of man, but it also functions to bring man back into the right relationship with Him and provide a way of demonstrating true thankfulness to God and right worship of God in following His commands.
- › Principle: **The Worship of God, at its essence, is sacrificial.** In other words, the worship of God has costly obedience.
  - Focus is on outpouring towards the Lord, which comes from something of value from us. Rightly pointing and administering all things of value back to the source.
  - Yet, it is in a joyful position, delights in the lord and has a contrite heart.

### Covenant-regulated

- › A covenant is a commitment that establishes a relationship between two or more persons. Biblically, covenants are always initiated by God, and they are for the salvation and eternal relationship with his people.
  - Before giving the Law, God establishes the covenant relationship first, then binds them to worship and obedience that flow from being His covenant people (Exodus 19:5-6)

- The covenant establishes exclusive worship of the Lord, forbids idolatry, and defines the fundamental obligations of God's covenant people (Exodus 20:1-17)
- Worship is inseparably connected to covenant commitment. Israel formally enters the covenant by agreeing to obey God's revealed Word (Exodus 24:3-8)
- God requires that worship conform to His revealed commands. Worship that departs from His covenant regulations is rejected (Leviticus 10:1-3, Deuteronomy 12:4-14)
- God forbids the adding or subtracting of his commands because he is the initiator, and His covenant is the "regulation" in which they worship Him (Deuteronomy 12:29-32)
- › **Worship of God is established through His covenants.** The Lord will create his covenant relationship with his people before prescribing the worship of those people in the covenant.
  - Regulations, means, and manner of worship are defined in the covenant.
  - The revelation of the covenant is essential to the nature of the worship of God.
- › Principle: **God establishes the new covenant in Christ and becomes the center of our worship.**
  - Christianity is Christocentric because Christ is at the center of the new covenant of worship we have with God.

## Mediated by Holiness

- › God-initiated covenants still required that sinful people could not approach the holiness of God on their own. Access to God required an appointed mediator, a consecrated priesthood, through the sacrificial blood, in reverence of God's holiness. This priest not only performs the worship, but he represented the people before the Holy God.
  - God's holiness determines how sinful man may approach Him. Even Moses could not approach God casually, but only according to God's command (Exodus 3:5).
  - Access to God's presence was exceptional and mediated (Exodus 24:9-11)
  - God appoints the mercy seat as the place where He meets with His covenant mediator. His presence is accessed according to His own provision (Exodus 25:21-22)
  - Even the high priest could not enter God's immediate presence whenever he wished. Access to God's holiness was carefully regulated and required God's appointed means (Leviticus 16:1-2).
  - The ministry of the high priest on the Day of Atonement provided covenant cleansing so that God's people might stand before Him. Cleansing precedes communion (Leviticus 16:30)
  - The priesthood existed not only to offer sacrifices but to guard God's holiness and instruct the people in holy living. Priestly mediation included both representation before God and teaching God's covenant (Leviticus 10:8-11)
- › **God granted His presence only through those appointed as covenant mediators.**
  - Even the high priest could not determine the time and place when he would meet God, but he must listen to God's commands. Of course, even this high priest must cleanse

himself and atone for his sins before they can have fellowship with God or closeness to God.

- › Principle: **A Holy God can only be worshiped in holiness.** The OT Testament System, it was the mediator who was granted this access. But now worship in the New Testament is through Christ, the final, perfect priest.
  - This aspect of worship is effectively unchanged through time. Holy God is worshipped through a holy mediator, a holy person. Holiness has no fellowship with sin. Light has no fellowship with dark.
  - God does not hear the prayers of the unrighteous (Proverbs 15:29). Does not provide covenant access to those outside the covenant, or to those who do not come through a holy mediator.
  - This is why the NT emphasizes that we be “in Christ” to access this kind of worship of God. He is the mediator that we come before God.

## Conclusion

- › **Old Testament worship is God-initiated,**
  - God initiates worship; his revelation to us is the guide of our worship.
- › **sacrifice-centered,**
  - The worship of God, at its essence, is sacrificial.
- › **covenant-regulated,**
  - We worship through the established new covenant in Christ, and it becomes the center of our worship.
- › **and mediated by holiness.**
  - A Holy God can only be worshiped in holiness, and we come to him now through Christ.
- › True worship is engaging God on his terms, by his grace, and in a way that includes obedience, reverence, and service.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Peterson, *Engaging with God*, p.73