

SWORDS AND SHOVELS

THEOLOGY CLASS

LESSON THREE: WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF ALL THEOLOGY?



As we have made clear in the previous lessons, the focus of all our knowledge of Scripture and biblical truth is God himself. All our interaction with his Word must lead us to a deeper knowledge and love for God and his work in the world. At the heart of our relationship to God is the reality of worship. So at the end of the day, all theology must and does indeed lead us to a deeper and more true life of worship to him. So what does the Bible teach about worship?

One of the most important ways that we start understanding the meaning of worship in the Bible is not just by looking at the New Testament to see what the church did and how they gathered. Rather, it is by looking back to the beginnings of the Old Testament, to see how God himself was laying the foundations of worship as he revealed himself to the people of Israel.

Today our goal is to challenge a common assumption that Christians have: the Old Testament temple system of laws and sacrifices is totally separate and different from the New Testament story of grace, blessing and relationship with God.

The God of the Old Testament is the SAME God as the God of the New Testament, with the same purpose to save and redeem a people for himself. And you can't really understand the fullness of the New Testament unless you understand the true meaning of the Old Testament.

1. WORSHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

What is the Old Testament story of worship about?

- At its heart, it is a story of salvation. But from what to what? Was the salvation of the OT just from slavery to land ownership? What was the goal of God's salvation and work with Israel? Notice how the following text points beyond the laws and sacrifices to a relational purpose in the law:

Exodus 29:42-46

"42 It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there. 43 There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by my glory. 44 I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests. 45 I will dwell

among the people of Israel and will be their God. 46 And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God."

More than merely out of slavery and into freedom and land ownership - God rescued Israel from idolatry, to a life of knowing, loving and serving him.

But what about all the laws, rules and regulations? Doesn't the whole OT system basically revolve around showing people that they are sinners and that they need their sins forgiven? No!

To see this, we need to make a distinction between God's intention to bless and rule Israel, and his giving of the law in the Covenant at Sinai (please keep in mind the following points are only a brief and simple outline, there is much more to explore in these topics).

1. GOD'S DEEPER PURPOSES FOR ISRAEL

- God revealed himself to Israel as the Lord and Savior who was to rule over them as their King.
 - *"And the LORD said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them." (1 Sam 8:7)*
- He would protect them, he would conquer the land for them as a gift
 - *"The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent." (Exodus 14:14)*
- He would purify them and teach them his ways as his own people and as a light to the world
 - *"Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex. 19:5-6).*
- He would literally dwell among them and be their continual source of blessing

- *"I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. 12 And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people." (Lev. 26:11-13)*

2. GOD'S PURPOSES FOR GIVING THE LAW OF MOSES

- **Word** - to instruct the people, open the door to life in the presence of God.
 - *"the LORD said to me, 'Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.' 11 And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. 12 Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. 13 And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone. 14 And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess. (Dt 4:10–14).*
- **Priesthood**
 - Sin offerings - the idea of substitute and payment for the cost of sin, always done in faith and repentance
 - "...when he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed, 6 he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin. (Lev. 5:5–6)
 - Peace offerings – a celebration of relationship with God
 - Dedication/consecration of the people – to remind them of their calling and identity as God's people
- **God's Holy Place** - containing his **presence dwelling among the people**
- **Feasts/celebrations** - a celebration and thanksgiving for the reality of God's salvation - filled the whole calendar of Israel to continually teach and reteach to them the story of their life with God.

"God promised atonement and forgiveness through the sacrificial system, but not simply as the direct physical effect of the rites performed. Cleansing was his gracious gift to those who obeyed his word, seeking his forgiveness in repentance and faith." David Peterson, "Engaging With God"

3. SUMMARIZING GOD'S PURPOSES THROUGH THE LAW

What was the function of the OT law system?

- An understandable structure through which God's blessing and salvation can be communicated to the people
 - Deliver God's word
 - Define the terms of the covenant that God established with them
 - Point to the need for God and his salvation
 - Remind them of the need for sin to be paid for
 - Provide a way for God to dwell with them
- A method of instruction and formation through **repetition**

But why didn't it work?

4. THE PROBLEM OF IDOLATRY

When you read the story of idolatry in Exodus 32 carefully, you realize that the Israelites were *not* trying to abandon the Lord who led them out of Egypt. Rather, they were trying to secure his blessing and presence through their own actions and methods. This actually brings us to the heart of all idolatry that Scripture speaks of – the sinful inclination of the human heart is to secure blessing and peace on the basis of *our own* works and methods instead of putting our faith in the saving power of the Lord alone.

The Mosaic Covenant failed not because the law was faulty. Rather, it failed because of the failure and unwillingness of the hearts of the people to receiving in faith the blessings that God had set up for them through the specific means of worship that he determined. Rather than believing and receiving his ways, Israel constantly fell into trusting in their own works and pathways of worship.

5. WORSHIP IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: CONCLUSIONS

- Worship starts with God's gift of self-revelation and gracious redemption
 - Grace is at the foundation of the Old Testament
- Worship is narrow and broad
 - In the temple and out of the temple in all of life
- Worship is defined and determined by God alone
 - Worship is a two-way process of engagement between God and his people, but it is defined and specified by him, not by us.
 - All worship in the Old Testament that was created and initiated by men resulted in idolatry and judgement.
- Worship is about a life between God as his people
- Worship includes both respecting, fearing and exalting God, as well as serving him
- Worship can only take place through faith in what God has said about himself

- Not through how you feel that day, or how you feel God is, or what makes you feel good.

2. JESUS AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Everything that Jesus said about true worship was built and based on the teaching of the Old Testament. We can't fully grasp his perspective until we see what came before. And as we do, we can see came to fulfill the OT and to bring something better.

1. JESUS REPLACES THE TEMPLE

As we noticed above, the temple was the central dwelling place of God with his people. Now, notice how Jesus spoke of himself in relationship to the temple.

- “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.” (Matt. 12:6)
- “All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ – which means, ‘**God with us**’” (Mt. 1:22–23).
- “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:23–24).

Some observations:

- Jesus claimed that he represented the royal presence and Lordship of God better and more fully than the temple itself.
- As he saw the corruption of the Jewish worship of his day, he did not give any indication that this system would be restored. Rather, he pointed to a new reality, a new age, a new way that was coming through himself.
- Jesus ushers in a new and truer picture of worship that comes from the heart. But this worship is still completely determined and lead by God himself.

2. NEW COVENANT WORSHIP

As Jesus fulfills and replaces the Old Covenant, he comes to replace it with his New Covenant, which comes with a new way of worship. One that is centered on himself.

1. DID JESUS CANCEL ALL WORSHIP RULES?

Jesus did not erase all rules and practices related to worship. Rather, his gospel brings with it a new set of lifestyle and worship practices. Notice the specific aspects of the life of the New Testament church:

- Table fellowship, love and service to the saints
- Baptism and the Lord's supper
- Teaching and learning the Scriptures in the OT and the Apostles' teaching
- Reading Scripture
- Prayer
- Singing Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs
- Making disciples of all nations by teaching them to observe all that Jesus has taught us

Often times the assumption for Christians is that Jesus did away with all the laws and practices of the Old Covenant, this means that the worship that we partake in doesn't come with any specific components. And that we can structure our worship however we want, and in whatever format fits our time and culture.

This assumption is clearly false if we learned anything in the first section: God determines how he is to be worshiped. The heart of idolatry is that man decides how he is to approach God.

2. THE FORMATIVE POWER OF PRACTICE

But notice another very important aspect of Old Testament worship: the practices of the Old Covenant functioned as a tool to get the wonderful plan of salvation into the hearts and minds of the people. The practices and symbols always pointed to the greater story of salvation, and therefore always pointed the hearts of the people up to faith in God as their only Lord and Savior.

This illustrates a very basic but important characteristic of the human heart: your identity is shaped by your practices. If you want to understand yourself better, you don't always look only to what you *say* you believe. Rather, you look to the daily things that you *do*.

This is why the form and structure of our worship is so important: what we as Christians repeat over and over on Sunday will shape our whole view of what the Christian life is. Here are a few examples:

- A church that places large emphasis on very long and complicated sermons will, in the long term teach its people that Christianity is for smart people, and that it is mostly an intellectual activity
- If you are constantly calling people to feel something people will believe that Christianity is all about feeling

- If your worship service has a priest - you will teach people that they need help from another man to get to God, that Jesus isn't enough.
- If your church has very little emphasis on the authority of the Bible, you will over time teach people that Christianity is based on human ideas and preferences

That's just a couple of examples. But the basic idea is that the worship of the people of God is a formative activity; it shapes our spiritual senses and tastes over a long and slow process. And that is why it is so important for the church service to be equipped with the right elements.

3. GOSPEL SHAPED WORSHIP

So where do we get the right ingredients for worship that will correctly feed the heart of the church over time? Well it goes back to what we said earlier. Jesus came to fulfill and replace the Old Covenant with himself and his story. Therefore, the practice of our worship must be completely centered and built on the gospel itself.

As we understand this, it is very interesting to look to the history of the church and ask the same question: how did the church structure its worship over time? We don't have a lot of space here to go into details, but the short answer is that over hundreds of years, faithful Christians have sought to properly identify and include all aspects of the gospel message in their worship. When you boil the structure down to the foundational common parts, here is what you get:

- Adoration - we are called to start with exalting God for who he is; for his greatness and goodness
- Confession - when we see his glory, we are reminded of our sin and our need of cleansing and growth
- Assurance - Affirmation of grace and forgiveness that is found freely in Jesus
- Thanksgiving - Rejoicing in his gift and salvation
- Petition - as children of God we are called and commanded to come to him and to ask of him. We are not outsiders to his kingdom and his work. And we have the right to ask boldly in Jesus' name that he help us.
- Instruction - we come to hear his word, to be changed, shaped and equipped to live as his people
- Communion - we partake of Christ, remember his work on our behalf and our deep unity with him as his people
- Charge/Blessing - we go out into life as God's people, he is our king, and we live in all things that those who walk with him in all things and tell his story in all that we do.

The interesting thing is, that when you look even at the Old Testament, and you look past all the different sacrifices and ceremonies, and you focus on the meaning behind them, you see that this is the basic story of worship that is found from Genesis to Revelation. Some examples

include, Isaiah 6 or Solomon's dedication of the temple in 2 Chronicles. When you look at the patterns of worship, you see that they follow a general pattern that mirrors the flow of the gospel.

As we understand this, these are the principles that we seek to guide us in building and forming our own weekly worship. This doesn't mean that there is some specific formula that we are trying to copy. There are multiple ways to do these things. And yet, as our anchor, we must learn to have the gospel be the central thing that shapes our worship.