

Meaningless Worship

Bible Background • ISAIAH 29

Printed Text • ISAIAH 29:9–16A | Devotional Reading • LUKE 8:9–14

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: **KNOW** that God expects worship from the heart; **UNDERSTAND** that God is worthy to be praised; and **PRAISE** God from the heart.

In Focus

Have you ever heard the old English idiom about the person who can't see the forest for the trees? This proverb generally describes a person who gets so caught up in the details of a situation or life itself that he or she fails to see the complete picture. Details serve as distractions that cause us to focus our attention on the smaller, less important things in life rather than living life to its fullest.

This idiom can also apply to our relationship with God. It is so easy to get caught up in the daily burdens and blessings of life that we forget about the Life Giver. We fail to consult God about our daily decisions or even spend time with Him on a daily basis. Then, even though we faithfully attend church, our worship can become hollow. We lift our voices and sing songs without meaning, we say “Amen” to teachings we have no intention of honoring, and we fulfill our religious regulations without any thought to our righteous relationship.

Today's lesson focuses on the nation of Judah during a time when the nation's prosperity and the people's pleasures caused them to forget about God and serves as a reminder that God is always to be worshiped in spirit and in truth.

Keep in Mind

“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” (Isaiah 29:13, KJV).

Focal Verses

KJV **Isaiah 29:9** Stay yourselves, and wonder; cry ye out, and cry: they are drunken, but not with wine; they stagger, but not with strong drink.

10 For the LORD hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and hath closed your eyes: the prophets and your rulers, the seers hath he covered.

11 And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed:

12 And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned.

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?

16a Surely your turning of things upside down shall be esteemed as the potter's clay:

The People, Places, and Times

Worship. The first clear mention of a worship act is found in Genesis 4:2–7. Previously, Adam and Eve recognized that God had given them “every herb... and every beast” (1:29–30), so their children Cain and Abel brought simple offerings to Him. We do not know precisely where or how the offerings were made. But we are told they brought two types of offerings, and Cain’s was rejected while Abel’s was accepted.

The brief account in Genesis 4 tells us two very important things about worship: First, God acknowledges worship. We do not know whether God had spoken to the brothers at this particular site prior to this point. But on this day, God spoke (4:6) and acted when they worshiped (vv. 4–5). God made this time holy for them. Second, God is the focal point of worship. Scripture does not mention an altar or any words spoken by these men. We do not know what prayers they might have offered. But we are told what God did; His action was a vital part of worship. In the same way, God is very

much involved in our worship and delights in the inner love and devotion of our hearts.

Background

Only God would dare to recruit a person for ministry by telling him he would be ineffective, but that’s exactly what happened to Isaiah. When God called Isaiah into the prophetic ministry, He told him that as a result of his message, the people would harden their hearts, plug their ears, shut their eyes and not understand with their hearts (Isaiah 6:10). Given the hopelessness of the situation, the perplexed prophet asked God, “‘Lord, how long will this go on?’ And [God] replied, ‘Until their towns are empty, their houses are deserted, and the whole country is a wasteland; until the LORD has sent everyone away, and the entire land of Israel lies deserted’” (vv. 11–12, NLT).

Years later, Isaiah told the northern kingdom of Israel—whose capital was Samaria—that its fate was set. “For the Lord will send a mighty army against it. Like a mighty hailstorm and

a torrential rain, they will burst upon it like a surging flood and smash it to the ground” (28:2, NLT). The Assyrians would utterly destroy Israel and take her inhabitants into captivity.

The destruction of Israel should have encouraged Judah, rightfully afraid of the Assyrians, to repent. However, instead of trusting the Lord to protect them, they entered into an alliance with Egypt. God told them, “I will cancel the bargain you made to cheat death and overturn your deal to dodge the grave” (from v. 18, NLT). He refers to Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, as Ariel (29:1). This was a symbolic name that meant, “altar of burnt offering” referring to the altar at the Temple entrance. The name implied the fate of the city: “Jerusalem will become what Ariel means—an altar covered with blood” (v. 2, NLT).

The prophet foretold that the Assyrian army would surround the city and besiege it. The situation would appear to be hopeless; then suddenly, their ruthless enemies would be driven away. God Himself, not the Egyptians, would strike the Assyrians and deliver the wayward people from complete destruction. In spite of this miraculous intervention, the Judeans would still not turn their hearts to God. The people would remain rebellious, their worship would remain superficial and their leaders would continue to place their trust in things other than God.

At-A-Glance

1. Warning to the Rebellious (Isaiah 29:9–12)
2. Warning to the Religious (vv. 13–14)
3. Warning to Rulers (vv. 15–16a)

In Depth

1. Warning to the Rebellious (Isaiah 29:9–12)

During the time of Isaiah’s ministry, many of Judah’s citizens were drunk—not from the cup of wine but rather the cup of rebellion. God had given them Levites as priests to teach them, prophets to warn them, and seers who foretold their destruction if they continued their sinful ways. However, just as alcohol dulls the physical senses to reason, the nation’s prosperity and the people’s pleasures had dulled their spiritual sensitivity to God. Again and again, God reached out and called out to His wayward people, and again and again they rejected Him.

A few years earlier, God had raised up the Assyrians to invade and destroy the northern nation of Israel. Now Isaiah was prophesying that God would use the Assyrians to besiege Jerusalem (Isaiah 29:1–4). Unlike Israel, God would not allow the Assyrians to destroy Judah, but His purpose was to warn them and to demonstrate His awesome power to preserve and protect them. When things appeared at their worst, God would intervene and destroy their enemies.

This dire prophecy should have driven the people to their knees. They should have cried out to God, but instead of crying out, they rejected Him. The nation was too strong, and things were going too well, to listen to what they viewed as a tired old prophet who was too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good.

This was the final straw. Instead of using the Holy Spirit to soften the people’s heart to His word, God sent “the spirit of deep sleep” (v. 10) to make them even more insensitive to His calling. The people who had closed their spiritual eyes would become spiritually blind. The prophets would continue to speak, but the people would not understand. The political and religious rulers would continue to govern, but no one would seek God’s direction. God’s

judgment against these rebellious people was to turn them over to their own hearts. There are consequences for rejecting God. That is why our Lord warns us: “Don’t harden your hearts as Israel did at Meribah” (from Psalm 95:8, NLT).

2. Warning to the Religious (vv. 13–14)

A lot of what serves as worship is nothing more than lip service. This situation is not new; it was also true of the ancient Judeans who worshiped in the Temple. “These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote” (Isaiah 29:13, NLT).

The Judeans claimed to be children of God, but they lived their lives in disobedience. Their religious ceremonies are just going through the motions. They prayed with their mouths and sang with their lips, but their hearts were far from God. They were “temple-fied.” They knew how to conduct themselves in the Temple. Like some of us, they knew when to sing, when to sit, when to stand, and the appropriate time to cut loose with a hearty “Amen.” But this was nothing but learned robotic behavior.

Hundreds of years later, Jesus would quote this passage from Isaiah to rebuke the people of His day (Mark 7:6–7), and it still holds true for many people today. We go to church and go through the motions. There is no passion in our praise and no warmth in our worship, because during the week there has been no obedience in our observance.

According to Jesus, “A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart” (from Luke 6:45, NLT). Even though the people of Judah were faithful in their religious practices, their everyday lives revealed the emptiness of their worship. They were spiritually superficial, their worship was worthless and God passed judgment on them. The

wisdom of heaven ceased to flow (see James 3:15–17), and God withheld spiritual understanding.

It is so very easy to allow our personal relationship with Christ to degenerate into a righteous ritual. We find ourselves going to church and going through the motions. True heartfelt worship begins with obedience, is sustained by daily communion, and bursts forth in an outpouring of public praise.

3. Warning to Rulers (vv. 15–16a)

The leaders of Judah sought advice from everyone but God. In their arrogance, they refused to accept God’s protection and instead trusted in a secret alliance with Egypt (2 Kings 18:21). They thought they were scheming in secret, but Isaiah revealed to them that God was well aware of their plans. In truth, they were not revolting against Assyria; they were rebelling against God, who was using the Assyrians to accomplish His will. How could they possibly think they knew better than God or that their plans were superior to His? They were dumber than a lump of clay. Clay does not question the hands that shape it nor does the created thing think of itself as higher than its creator. However, that’s exactly what the Judean rulers did. They doubted God’s ability and trusted their plans over His. Their arrogance would bring them to the brink of disaster before God intervened to save them (2 Kings 18:13–19:37).

The three greatest threats to our spiritual health are rebellion, empty religion and arrogance. When we truly worship God, we submit our lives to His truth, cultivate a vibrant relationship with Him, and humble ourselves to the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Search the Scriptures

1. What was God’s reaction to the people who resisted His prophets and rejected Him (Isaiah 29:10)?
2. How did Isaiah describe the empty worship the people offered up to God (v. 13)?

Discuss the Meaning

What are some “holy habits” we can build into our lives to ensure that we don’t lose sight of God in our daily lives? Think of your own relationship with a holy God.

Liberating Lesson

Unbroken fellowship with God is vital to our existence and peace of mind. Our praise and worship bring us into God’s presence and protection. However, continual disobedience stirs God’s wrath and puts us in a position to lose our greatest possession—a personal relationship with God.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

Sources:

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Say It Correctly

Assyrians. uh-SIHR-ee-uhnz.

Judea. joo-DEE-uh, -DAY-uh.

Genesis. JEN-uh-sis

Samaria. suh-MER-ee-uh.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Fruitless Worship

(Isaiah 1:10–17)

TUESDAY

Worshiping Our Own Achievements

(Isaiah 2:5–17)

WEDNESDAY

Lives Untouched by

Religious Observances

(Isaiah 58:1–7)

THURSDAY

Refusing to Listen

(Jeremiah 13:1–11)

FRIDAY

Tuning Out God

(Zechariah 7:8–14)

SATURDAY

Receiving the Word

(Luke 8:9–15)

SUNDAY

Hearts Far from God

(Isaiah 29:9–16a)

Notes
