

THEISM

God Seeks True Worshipers

A recitation of worship events in the Bible reveals that although God initiated worship requirements, true worship was a grateful response to God's perceived blessings, commandments, and promises. The first record of an offering in the Bible is that of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:2-5). Although the Bible does not stipulate what offerings were required, it declares that Abel offered by faith (Hebrews 11:4). Since faith comes from hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17), then God would have given some word of instruction to Cain and Abel regarding their offerings. Having been saved from the flood, Noah "built an altar to the Lord . . . and offered burnt offerings on the altar" (Genesis 8:20). This, incidentally, is the first mention of an altar and burnt offerings.

After God promised Abram that his descendents would possess the land of Canaan, Abram "built an altar to the Lord" at Shechem (Genesis 12:7). He later built an altar between Bethel and Ai, "and called on the name of the Lord" (Genesis 12:8). After Abram was blessed by God with increased livestock, silver and gold, Abram returned from Egypt to the altar between Bethel and Ai and again "called on the name of the Lord." (Genesis 13:4). After Lot was separated from Abram and God had renewed the land promise to Abram, "Abram . . . dwelt by the terebinth trees of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and built an altar there to the LORD" (Genesis 13:18). Years later, God tested Abraham. He sent Abraham up into a mountain to offer his son, Isaac, on an altar (Genesis 22:9). But Abraham's hand was stayed by an angel of the Lord. Abraham then offered a ram rather than his son "as a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:13).

Years after Abraham's death, God appeared to Isaac when he went to Beersheba. God promised to multiply his descendents. "So he built an altar there and called on the name of the LORD" (Genesis 26:25). When Jacob came to Bethel as he journeyed toward Haran, he dreamed of a ladder between heaven and earth on which were angels ascending and descending. When he awoke he poured oil on the stone that had been his pillow and vowed that if God would be with him, he would serve him (Genesis 28:10-22). Many years later, after he had prospered through God's blessings, Jacob came to Shechem, erected an altar to God, and declared that "God is the God of Israel" (Genesis 33:20). After Jacob's sons had acted disgracefully at Shechem, "God commanded Jacob, 'Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there, and make an altar there to God'" (Genesis 35:1). Jacob obeyed (Genesis 35:7).

In all these instances, offerings and worship were responses to God's blessings, promises and commandments. True worship is more than making sacrificial offerings. It is a demonstration of attitudes of gratitude, trust and obedience – gratitude toward God for his blessings, trust in God that he will fulfill his promises and obedience to God's commandments.

When God, through Moses, delivered the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and led them toward the land of Canaan, he caused them to pause for more than a year at Mt. Sinai where, through Moses, they were not only organized as a nation but were also instructed by God in worship practices and procedures. A tabernacle with its courts, rooms and furnishings was erected as a place for worship. A priesthood was designated, inaugurated, and clothed. Altars were built for burning sacrifices and incense. Types of offerings, their purposes and procedures were designated. The Sabbath, holy days and festivals were established. All this was done specifically as directed *by* God for worship *to* God.

Ideally, Israel's worship to God was to have been in grateful response to what God had done for them in delivering them from Egyptian bondage and bringing them into the Promised Land. Costs to individuals of sacrificial offerings would have been considered insignificant

compared to the blessings they would have considered themselves to have received from God. Moreover, their trust in the graciousness of God would have led them to expect greater blessings from God in the future in accordance with his promises (Deuteronomy 7:9-26; 28:2-14; Hebrews 11:6). Therefore, to take the name of God in vain (Leviticus 24:10-16, 23; Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11), or to worship other gods (Deuteronomy 4: 19, 23; 5:7; 8:19; 11:6; 30:17-18), was but serious indication not only that God was not appreciated, but that also, in spite of God's wondrous blessings, God was not believed and would therefore not be obeyed.

Before the descendants of Israel entered the Promised Land, Moses reminded them of God's blessings and exhorted them to worship and serve God (Deuteronomy 4-11). After the conquest, Joshua admonished Israel to remain faithful to God (Joshua 24). Yet, the history of the people of Israel reveals that they frequently turned away from God.

When people turn away from God, God turns away from them (2 Chronicles 15:2) and true worship toward God languishes. Sometimes people worship other gods (2 Kings 17:16). Sometimes people try to retain worship toward God, but fashion their worship according to their own desires rather than God's will (Colossians 2:20-23). They may distort God's manner of worship, like Jeroboam, who erected golden calves at Dan and Bethel (1 Kings 12:28-29; 2 Kings 10:29), or they may synchronize worship to the true God with that of other gods, like those who came to live in the cities of Samaria (2 Kings 17:29-33).

True worship requires a spirit of obedience toward to God. Worship is not simply the performance of rituals. God wants neither animals nor costly goods. "To obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Samuel 15:22). God desires "mercy and not sacrifice, and knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6). God requires that you "fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deuteronomy 10:12). God wants you "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly" (Micah 6:6-8, see also Isaiah 1:13-17; Jeremiah 7:22-23). True worship requires reconciliation with others before worship toward God (Matthew 5:23-24). True worship prohibits substitution of human desires and standards for the commandments of God (Matthew 15:1-9; Mark 7:13).

When Jesus talked with a woman in Samaria, she questioned whether true worship was done in Jerusalem or in a mountain of Samaria. Jesus responded that "the hour is coming . . . when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (John 4:23). Notice that the Father is seeking true worshipers, i.e., those who worship in spirit and in truth. Should we ask how the Father now seeks true worshippers, we might observe that God desires our grateful and obedient response to his son's sacrificial death on the cross to atone for our sins (John 3:16; 1 Corinthians 15:3). We're greatly blessed for God to have made us his sons and joint heirs with Christ (John 1:12-13; Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 4:4-7).

If the Patriarchs worshipped God in gratitude for his gifts and promises to them, and if Moses and the prophets called upon Israel to worship God for the great deliverance he had given to them from Egyptian bondage and for his promises of prosperity in the Promised Land, how much more should not we who have received the gift of God's grace of eternal salvation through Jesus Christ appreciate and be thankful to God? Recognition of God's grace toward us through Christ Jesus should overflow in thanksgiving and in obedient faithful service to God in this life. Then, when this life is over, that sense of having been blessed will overflow in everlasting worship and eternal service to God for having been redeemed (Revelation 4:8-11; 5:9-14; 22:3).