

## Study 0058

### The Old Covenant Era Worship: Conclusion

Although there is so much more to learn from the history of Israel, a nation chosen by God as His very own, we have to bring our study on worship in the Old Covenant Era to a close at this time. So far, we have seen how Israel metamorphosed from a people in bondage, to a people chosen to be a peculiar treasure, and a special and holy nation unto the God of the heavens and the earth.

From our study of worship in the Old Covenant Era, it is clear that God is not just interested in people worshipping Him for the sake of worship, but such people must be in a right relationship with Him, so that their act of worship can be acceptable before Him. We have thus seen that there is an acceptable worship of God and there is worship that is not acceptable to God, which really is idolatry (**Isaiah 66:3**).

The nation of Israel failed to understand that their freedom from Egypt was to bring them to the place where they would worship God as He pleased. Instead, they were more focused on entering into the Promised Land (a land flowing with milk and honey) and living as free men without any hindrance whatsoever. This misconception was largely responsible for their lack of interest in learning about the acceptable worship of God. Indeed, their interest in worshipping God was only in so far as He was going to take them out of the wilderness and into the Promised Land. Because the people did not learn about God, they also did not know how He operated (**Psalms 103:7**), so, when He asked them to go in and possess the Promised Land, they refused to go in (**Deuteronomy 1:6-8, 19-36**). This was the proverbial 'straw that broke the camel's back' and they ended up wandering about in the wilderness for another thirty-eight years, until that generation that rebelled against God had died off in the wilderness!

The time needed for them to learn about the acceptable worship of God, and to actually begin to worship Him was less than two years from the time of their deliverance from the bondage of Egypt; but because they were fixated on their inordinate desire to enter into the Promised Land, they made it seem like it was taking forever. Their murmuring and eventual rebellion cost those who were aged 20 years and above, the Promised Land (except Caleb and Joshua). But all along, God had made it clear that their worship of Him was the singular most important thing, and it was going to be the basis for prospering and blessing them (**Leviticus 26:1ff**).

To drive home the importance of the acceptable worship of God, the people were brought into a covenant relationship with God; asked to build a sanctuary for God; instructed to commemorate certain feasts annually, and in one case, once in 50 years, in honour of God; told to present sacrifices to God on a daily, weekly, monthly, and annual basis as a nation, and as individuals, to present obligatory and voluntary sacrifices (as the case may be); and given commandments to help them live in an acceptable manner before God. Also, God appointed priests unto Himself, to minister to Him, to represent the people before Him, and to assist the people to worship Him acceptably. Under the terms of the covenant God cut with Israel, the priests and Levites were to devote themselves exclusively to minister to Him, and teach the people how to worship Him, as well as expound the meaning and import of His laws. The priests and Levites were to be taken care of by the people, so that they (the priests and the Levites) could devote themselves exclusively to God and to the ministry of the sanctuary. The truth is, everything that God put in place under the covenant He cut with

Israel at Sinai, was to bring the people to the place of acceptable worship! And as a result, God bound Himself to provide for, protect, and prosper His people, as well as keep His relationship with them and with their children forever! Unfortunately, there were problems with the observance of the covenant by the people; who conveniently forgot God when things were okay for them, but turned to Him again, only when things were sour. Eventually, the people became hardened in their hearts, and turned aside from, and despised everything that God had put in place to help them worship Him acceptably, These idolatrous acts not only led to Israel being held captive in their own land (the Promised Land) over and over again; but eventually, they were taken away from the Promised Land, and scattered all over the face of the earth by heathen nations that God sent to conquer them.

After decades in exile, God brought some of the people back to the Promised Land, and again, the focus was on the worship of God. As with the time before they went into exile, God again affirms the importance of His people living by His standards, as documented in the Law of Moses. In spite of all that the people had gone through in captivity, a few years after their return, they again forgot God, and He sent them civil and spiritual leaders like Nehemiah and Ezra, respectively, and prophets like, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, to bring the people back to God. The civil and spiritual leaders taught the people the meaning of the Law of Moses, and got them to make restitution as part of their act of repentance. For all the efforts of the civil and spiritual leaders, revival was short-lived, and so God again spoke to them through the prophets to call them back to the right path. The last recorded message in the Old Testament of the Bible, was that given by Malachi, about 400B.C. Malachi's prophecy was God's message to a people who were again turning away from the worship of God by their conduct, for they brought animals that God had said should not be presented as sacrifices to Him, they engaged in adulterous conduct through divorce and remarriage, and did not take care of the priests, the Levites, and the needy in their midst, as God had asked them to (for they were not faithful in the payment of their tithes and giving of their voluntary offerings). On their part, the priests did not teach nor correct the people who were acting contrary to the law of God, neither did they consecrate (fully devote) themselves to God. This resulted in God bringing a complaint against them through Malachi, in the hope that they would change.

Some 400 years later, God sent another messenger to Israel as He had promised (**Malachi 3:1**), who called the people to repentance and to wash themselves from sin, in preparation for the coming of the Messiah (**Luke 1:8-17**). This was John the Baptist, and he told the people that the way to the true worship of God was to turn away from a life of sin, and to turn to God's way for living (**Luke 3:1-16**). His baptism was one that prepared the hearts of the people to be able to receive the Messiah when He appeared on the scene. A few years later, the Messiah, who was all the while in their midst, was revealed at His baptism by John the Baptist. When the Messiah appeared on the scene, His message again, was to call the people to return to God, and to turn away from their sinful ways.

Many Centuries earlier, God had spoken through Jeremiah, the prophet, that He was going to cut a new covenant with His people (**Jeremiah 31:31-34; 32:38-40**); meaning that the covenant He cut with them in the wilderness would be made obsolete (**Hebrews 8:7-13**). At the core of the need for a new covenant was the state of the heart of the people who were under the first (old) covenant. They were unable to live by the provisions of the old covenant, because their heart was hardened against God, and so God promised that in establishing a new covenant, He was going to change their heart and put His Spirit within them so that they would be able to obey Him and keep His word (**Ezekiel 36:16-38**). Thus, the singular most

significant difficulty with the covenant God cut with Israel at Sinai, was the hardness of the hearts of the people. No wonder, Moses, before his demise, had prophetically hinted at what God would do for them after they had returned from exile; “*And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.*” (**Deuteronomy 30:1-10**). Stephen, in his sermon to the Sanhedrin (**Acts 7:1-53**), said in part, “*Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ear, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost, as your fathers did, so do ye.*” This was the crux of the failure of the old covenant worshippers: they were hard-hearted, refused to listen to God, and were disobedient to His word; and as a result, they resisted, rebelled, and worked against the Holy Spirit. The Old Covenant Era therefore, was characterised by the inability of man to worship God acceptably, because of the condition of his heart, in spite of the best intentions of the covenant cut at Sinai, and the Law!

### **EXERCISE**

Please state true or false to the statements below:

1. God accepts worship within the context of a right relationship with Him.
2. The fundamental problem with the old covenant was that there were too many rules to obey.
3. Another fundamental problem with the old covenant was the difficulty in understanding the Law.
4. A new covenant became necessary to enable man live apart from the Law which was the problem with the first covenant.
5. The old covenant did not frown at divorce and remarriage, since many of those God showered praises on were polygamous.
6. John the Baptist’s message was one of fire and brimstone, so the people did not repent.
7. When the Messiah came on the scene, He did not ask the people to repent, He just told them to receive salvation.
8. The failure of the Old Covenant Era worshipper was his inability to bring all the sacrifices required by God.