

Lord of the Sabbath

Program #7

Godly Group Worship

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Welcome to the Lord of the Sabbath weekly program. I hope you remembered this Sabbath day of the LORD and kept it holy. If not, I pray you will look into why Jesus, who proclaimed Himself to be Lord of the Sabbath, customarily kept it holy every week of His life. Perhaps it would be good to follow Him in His example?

Last week, in discussing the holy convocations to be proclaimed for Israel on the Sabbath days, we found one scripture that suggested that the people of God were to gather for worship during the Feasts of the LORD. Those Feasts include the seventh-day, weekly Sabbaths.

I asked just what kind of worship did God desire? Was there worship that God detested? Today, I want to look into the word of God to see what it reveals about group worship. Please note, if you consider prayer, fasting, Bible reading, meditation, or humming sacred music to yourself, to be worship; that is fine. I would call that individual worship.

My primary consideration today is group worship. Worship with others as a group, in a meeting, assembly or convocation. In trying to understand what God prefers in group worship, I want to start with the first examples of group worship commanded by God in the Bible. Do you know when and where the first use of group worship occurs in Scripture? I was a bit surprised.

It is found in Gen. 22: 5. The worship involves Abraham with his son Isaac. Here is what Abraham said:

And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you."

The Hebrew word, expressed in English, that Abraham used was shachah (shaw-khaw), Strong's #7812. Now, what was it that Abraham was to do that he believed was worship?

Let's get the picture straight from the word of God starting in Gen. 22: 1-2:

Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. Then on the

third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off.

There are several noteworthy points we can discern from this first Biblical example about group worship. God gave Abraham specific instruction of what he was to do. Worship was not something Abraham decided to do on his own. Worship was not done how and when it pleased Abraham. In fact, the offering God told Abraham to make was extremely onerous: to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, whom we know was a miraculous gift from God to Abraham and Sarah who was well beyond child bearing age.

So, to obey God in this prescribed worship tested Abraham's faith in God. It was God's will and not Abraham's that needed to be done. As we see, Abraham passed the test. He would put God ahead of even his precious only son. Abraham had a fear of the awesomeness of God. The Angel of the LORD, who many believe was the word of God, the pre-incarnate Jesus, spoke to Abraham from heaven and recognized Abraham's fear and obedience in Gen 22: 12.

Notice too that God also specified a place where Abraham's sacrificial offering would be presented before God. And, last there was a time element of when Abraham should rise and go to the place that God had specified. In fact, it took Abraham a couple days of travel BEFORE he even saw the PLACE. It was a specific mountain in the land of Moriah. It wasn't until the third day that Abraham finally saw the mountain designated by God still far off. It may have been the same Mount Moriah where King Solomon would eventually build the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, the same PLACE that the LORD had appeared to Solomon's father King David. David actually purchased the very land where the Temple of God on earth would be built.

Do these events with the people of God, so intricately woven together by God over time, amaze you like they amaze me? It makes me shiver to think of the majesty of God and His ways and His plans for all His people. Praise God Almighty!

I can't emphasize enough the complete obedience of Abraham to God's command for worship. Abraham didn't say to God he would pick a day when he found some spare time to head out to the mountain. Abraham didn't say, "Why that place, there is a nice hill just an hour away?" And, Abraham did not object and say to God, "Why would you want me to make an offering to you of my only son? That is ridiculous!" No. Abraham obeyed God in every detail BY FAITH when God commanded worship.

We know there was a wonderful result from Abraham's proper worship of God. God provided a ram as a substitute sacrifice for Isaac. As we worship God as He commanded on His Sabbath day, we also see how, in the future, God also provided His only Son as a substitute sacrifice offering for the death that we as sinful sons of God deserve. It is a lovely story to meditate upon and discuss at a holy convocation on the Sabbath as we too worship at the time and place that God proclaimed as holy.

As we follow the concept of group worship pleasing to God in Scripture, we see it commanded also to Moses and the elders of Israel in Ex. 24: 1:

Now He said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar.”

And, here, as with Abraham, Moses also obeyed God in every detail. And, again, miraculous and glorious things transpired when Moses and the people obeyed God and worshipped Him just as He commanded.

As with Abraham, the time, the place and what the worshippers were to do to, in order to worship and please God, was specified in detail. The time was the very next day and Moses, like Abraham, rose early in the morning to get started. The place was at the foot of Mt. Sinai. The purpose was worship, including making an alter for a sacrificial offering before the God of Israel. It was culminated with the making of the marriage Covenant with Israel, sealed with blood. The account is in Ex. 24: 3-8:

So Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the judgments. And, all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words which the LORD has said we will do.” And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD. And he rose early in the morning, and built an alter at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Then he sent young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the alter.

Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient.” And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, “This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words.”

Unless you have never read the New Testament, and the words of Jesus concerning the New Covenant in His blood, you cannot help but be overwhelmed by the similarity with how God works with His people. It is truly awesome. The God of Abraham, the God of Moses, and our God, is awesome and is to be worshipped properly! Amen!

I am sorry to have gotten off track. But these words excite me! They fill my heart with joy! I need to return to the examples God has given us in terms of what they suggest about the kind of worship that pleases Him.

Back to Mount Sinai and what God asked Moses and the people of Israel to do. I pick back up with the account in Ex. 24: 9-12:

Then Moses went up, also Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel and they saw the God of Israel. And there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity. But, on the nobles of the children of Israel He did not lay His hand. So they saw God,

and they ate and drank.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Come up to Me on the mountain and be there; and I will give you tablets of stone, and the law and commandments which I have written, that you may teach them."

Can you even imagine this scene my friends? Seeing some of God's power and glory with Him standing on what looked like a pavement of sapphire stone, as clear as the deepest blue sky which God had made for His creatures. Even the nobles of Israel were not worthy to raise their eyes to see more than what their God was standing upon. In most examples of worship, one bows their head or even prostrates themselves on the ground. Apparently this is why the nobles of Israel could not look up to see above the ground under God's feet.

There was also a cloud that covered the mountain. Scripture teaches that no man could see God's face and live. We see Moses going up to God, on the very top of the mountain, and we are told of another fascinating event in Ex. 24: 16:

Now the glory of the LORD rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day He called Moses out of the midst of the cloud.

Moses and the people of God were covered by a cloud over Mount Sinai for six days. It hid the glory of the LORD from them. Then, on the seventh day, the LORD called to Moses from out of the cloud. Now the children of Israel could see the glory of the LORD. It is told in Ex. 24: 17:

The sight of the glory of the LORD was like a consuming fire on the top of the mountain in the eyes of the children of Israel. So Moses went into the midst of the cloud and went up into the mountain.

Perhaps you have to be a Sabbath keeper to catch the significance of what took place that day. For six days the people of God were not in God's visible presence. But, when the seventh day came, it was time to come before the LORD and behold His glory. What a wonderful thing to do after working six days, to come before the LORD on the seventh day, on His Sabbath day. Oh, praise the God of glory, our Creator of the heavens, the earth and all things, even His Sabbath day!

Worship of God is a requirement for the people of God. Worship must be done at the time, place and for the purpose and in the manner God instructs. The first four Commandments deal with how the people of God are to relate to Him, including proper worship. The next six Commandments deal with how God's people are to relate to each other. All the Ten Commandments applied to the Old (marriage) Covenant made with Israel through Moses and sealed with the blood of animals.

I believe that all Ten Commandments also apply to the New Covenant made with all people of any nation or tribe on the earth (even those not of Israel) who would believe in

Jesus as the Christ. This New (or perhaps better translated a Renewed) Covenant is sealed with His blood. The Ten Commandments are an expression of the eternal moral law of God for man, the jewel of His creation. Whoever will obey the Ten Commandments in Christ will be brought to glory and will see God as He is. Amen!

When we look at the first four commandments of the original marriage covenant with God, we see many truths necessary for worship that pleases God. The First Commandment was to have no other gods before the LORD who brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt. He is a jealous God and says so in the Second Commandment in Ex. 20: 5. God repeats this warning in Ex. 34: 12-14 as he promises to miraculously give them a land flowing with milk and honey taken from its Godless inhabitants, if they would keep the marriage covenant they made with Him:

Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst. But you shall destroy their alters, break their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God),

Here we see the sensitivity of God to worshipping Him, and actually Him ALONE. We see the warnings against adopting the worship of the gods of other peoples or using the manner of their worship to worship the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses and the God of Jesus. We see the warning of God that the people of Israel are not to allow their children to marry the children of these Godless, pagan peoples.

And, God goes on to command Israel not to make molded gods for themselves. This is the Second Commandment. They were not to make carved wooden images of gods like the pagans did for worship. These were most likely the Asherah poles, made by the Canaanite people, representing their goddess of fertility, Asherah. The sacred pillars most likely refer to the carved pillars and poles that would stand by the alters of Baal.

God also warns Israel not to swear falsely by His name or profane His name. We can expand upon the Third Commandment of Ex. 20: 7, by reading Lev. 18: 21, 19: 12 and Deut. 5: 11 where we are not to take the name of the LORD in vain.

But, my main purpose now is to focus on the Fourth Commandment concerning the time, place, means and purpose of worship during the holy convocations commanded by God on His Sabbath days.

We see this clearly as we continue in Ex. 24: 18:

The Feast of Unleavened Bread you shall keep. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, in the appointed time of the month of Abib; for in the month of Abib you came out from Egypt.

Are you getting this picture of worship that is pleasing to God? He gives an appointed

time (the month of Abib), the place is in the promised land of Israel, and what His worshipper is to do for seven days (eat only unleavened bread). There are two Feast convocations with group worship for Israel to remember the God who brought them out of Egypt from slavery into freedom in Him in the land He gave to them.

The LORD God, goes on to give other times for worship in a group holy convocation. He mentions the weekly seventh day Sabbath of the LORD in Verse 21. The LORD goes on to mention two other Feasts appointed for travel to the mountain of God for worship. They are called in Verse 22 the Feast of Weeks, dealing with the firstfruits of the wheat harvest in the summer of each sacred year of God, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year's ending harvest of fruit and grain.

The LORD, the God of Israel, is firm about His requirement for worship before Him as indicated in Ex. 24: 23:

Three times in the year all your men shall appear before the Lord, the LORD God of Israel.

The details of these holy convocations of worship before the LORD are found in Leviticus 23 but are also described in Deuteronomy, Numbers and in numerous places in the New Testament. They are the appointed times for worship which Jesus observed, as well as the Apostle Paul long after Jesus had died, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven to sit down at the right hand of God, His Father.

We do not have the time left in this Program to go into them in any depth. But, next week we will look at how God meticulously gives us His appointed days for group worship, including the appropriate place and the purpose of the observations and what we are to do. They are God's days for holy convocations and worship throughout the year.

Though fascinating in and of themselves for Israel, what is perhaps of greater interest is their relevance to the disciples of Jesus. What role do these commanded Feasts of the LORD play in the worship life of a follower of Christ? Are they required for Christians? Are they something profitable for Christians to observe? Have they been changed by the coming of the Savior, Jesus, the Christ, the long promised Messiah of and to Israel? Or, have they been completely abolished in this age and the age to come?

One thing is very clear to me. There were, and still are, worship practices that seem right to a man which most likely do not please God. Such man-ordained worship is in vain. Jesus made this clear in Mat. 15: 7-9 when he rebuked the Pharisees for criticizing Him for not keeping the traditions of the elders:

Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you saying: These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines, the commandments of men.

The words of Jesus must have stung them. Here we see the strict, law-keeping Pharisees fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah concerning vain worship by teaching their own commandments of their elders and not doing what God commanded.

Should we too not take this warning to heart? Could we too be worshipping God in vain? Are we keeping the traditions of men rather than the commandments of God from our heart? Are we mixing up the worship of pagan gods with the worship of the God of Israel?

And, God Himself makes another form of vain worship clear to Isaiah. These people look like they are worshipping God in a pleasing way. They go through the motions holding holy convocations, keeping the Sabbaths and the proclaimed Feasts of the LORD. But, like the Pharisees, their hearts were far from God. God knows and reads the heart. He is not impressed with outside appearance or vain repetition. He seeks true worshippers as described in John 4: 23. We will discuss this teaching of Jesus more next week.

But, in closing today, let us look at what God told Isaiah, as found in Isaiah 1: 10-15 about how He reacts to false or insincere worship of Himself:

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah: "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?" says the LORD. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who has requested this from your hand, to trample My courts?"

Here, the LORD is rebuking His own people Israel for being like those in the pagan Canaanite cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which God destroyed in anger for their evil ways. Appearing before God while being evil at heart negated the very reason God gave His commands for worship and holy convocations to Israel.

The LORD goes on to warn Israel about how they were keeping Gods Sabbaths and Feasts. It pleased Him not as we read in Isaiah 1: 13-15:

Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies---I cannot endure inequity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me.

When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood.

The LORD was not pleased with ritual worship by evil people full of inequities, even on His appointed days. God did not change His mind about His worship commands. But, if

done by evil people, with hearts far from Him, even their many prayers would NOT be heard.

Until next Sabbath, work hard the next six days, and be prepared to rest on the seventh day when we will continue to learn about the time, place and purpose for worship that pleases God. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus, the Christ. Amen.