

Rejoicing Before *the* Lord: The Sanctuary *and* Worship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Exod. 25:1–9; Exodus 35; 29:38, 39; 25:10–22; Deut. 12:5–7, 12, 18; 16:13–16.*

Memory Text: “And ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God, ye, and your sons, and your daughters, and your menservants, and your maidservants, and the Levite that is within your gates; forasmuch as he hath no part nor inheritance with you” (*Deuteronomy 12:12*).

Russian writer Leo Tolstoy wrote about a friend who, nearing death, explained his own loss of faith. The man said that from his childhood he had prayed, his own act of private devotion and worship before going to sleep. One day, after a hunting trip with his brother, they were getting ready for bed in the same room, and he knelt down to pray. His brother looked at him and said, “You still doing that?” From that moment on, the man never prayed again, never worshiped again, never exercised any faith. The words “You still doing that?” revealed just how empty and meaningless this ritual had been to him all these years, and thus he stopped.

This story illustrates the danger of mere ritual. Worship needs to come from the heart, from the soul, from a true relationship with God. That is why this week we will look at the ancient Israelite sanctuary service, the center of Israelite worship, and derive what lessons we can from it about how we can have a deeper worship experience.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 23.*

“That I May Dwell Among Them”

“ ‘You will bring them in and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance, in the place, O Lord, which You have made for Your own dwelling, the sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established’ ”
(Exod. 15:17, NKJV).

This is the first mention in Scripture of a sanctuary. It was sung as part of the song of deliverance by the children of Israel after their escape from Egypt. The verse talks not just about the sanctuary but implies that it will be God’s dwelling on earth. The Hebrew word translated “dwelling” comes from a root that means, literally, “to sit.” Was the Lord really going to dwell, “to sit,” among His people here on earth?

Read Exodus 25:1–9. What are the two main points that we learn from the verses, and why are they amazing? (As you think about the answer, think about who God is, His power, His might and majesty.)

The God who delivered Israel was now going to dwell among them. The same God who was able to perform so many incredible “signs and wonders” (*Deut. 6:22*), the God who created the heavens and the earth, would now live among His people. Talk about the presence of God being near!

On top of that, He was going to live in a building that fallen human beings had made. He, who spoke the world into existence, could have spoken the word and created a magnificent structure. Instead, He had His people intimately and intricately involved in the creation of the place not only for His dwelling but the place that would be the center of all Israelite worship.

The Israelites didn’t make the sanctuary according to human standards but “ ‘according to . . . the pattern, . . . just so you shall make it’ ” (*Exod. 25:9, NKJV*). Every aspect of the earthly tabernacle was to represent a holy God properly and be worthy of His presence.

Everything about it was to inspire a sense of awe and reverence. After all, this was the dwelling place of the Creator of the universe.

Imagine standing outside a building and knowing that inside that very structure, Yahweh, the Creator God, the Lord of the heavens and earth, was dwelling. What kind of attitude would you have, and why? What should your answer tell you about the attitude you should have during worship?

Willing Hearts

As we saw yesterday, not only did the Lord choose to dwell among His people, He did so in a building that they were to make themselves, as opposed to something He created supernaturally. That is, He got them directly involved, an act that ideally would have drawn them closer to Him. Along with that, He didn't miraculously create the material that would be used for the structure.

Read Exodus 35. What is happening here, and what important lessons can we take from this for ourselves in regard to the whole question of worship?

Notice the emphasis on the word *willing*. God said, “whoever is of a willing heart” (*Exod. 35:5, NKJV*), and everyone “whose heart was stirred” (*Exod. 35:21, NKJV*) responded. This means that there was no fire and thunder and loud voice from Sinai commanding them to give these offerings. Instead, here we see the working of the Holy Spirit, who never forces Himself on anyone. Their willingness to give revealed a sense of thanksgiving and gratefulness. After all, look what the Lord had done for them.

Also, notice that the people were not only willing to give to the work of building a sanctuary, but they did so with a spirit of joy and energy. They willingly gave material gifts, their time, their talents, and the work of their creative abilities: “All the women whose hearts stirred with wisdom . . .” (*vs. 26, NKJV*); “everyone whose heart was stirred, to come and do the work” (*Exod. 36:2, NKJV*).

By giving as they were, what were the Israelites also doing, even before the sanctuary was made?

We often tend to think of worship as a group of people coming together to sing, pray, and listen to a sermon. And while that is true, worship is not limited to that. What the children of Israel were doing here was worshiping. Every act of self-denial in giving up their own material goods, or their own time, or their own talents for the cause of their Lord was an act of worship.

Think about your own acts of giving—tithes, offerings, time, talent. How have you experienced what it means to worship through these acts? By giving of yourself, how are you enriched in return?

The Continual Burnt Offering

“Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs of the first year, day by day continually. One lamb . . . in the morning, and the other lamb . . . at twilight” (*Exod. 29:38, 39, NKJV*).

The daily offering of lambs, the “continual burnt offering” (*vs. 42*), was to teach the people their constant need of God and their dependence on Him for forgiveness and acceptance. The fire on the altar was to be kept burning day and night (*Lev. 6:8–13*). This fire could serve as a perpetual reminder of their need of a Savior.

God never intended the daily offering of a lamb to be simply a ritual or routine act. It was to be a time of “intense interest to the worshippers,” a time of preparation for worship, in silent prayer and “with earnest heart searching and confession of sin.” Their faith was to grasp the promises of a Savior to come, the true Lamb of God who would spill His blood for the sins of the whole world (see Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 353).

How do the following texts link the death of Christ to animal sacrifices in the Old Testament system? *Heb. 10:1–4; 1 Pet. 1:18, 19.*

In Hebrews 10:5–10, Paul quotes Psalm 40:6–8, showing that Christ fulfilled the true meaning of the sacrificial offerings. He suggests that God had no pleasure in these sacrifices but that they were intended to be a time of sorrow for sin, of repentance, and of turning away from sin. Likewise, the giving of His Son as the ultimate sacrifice would be a time of terrible agony and heartrending sorrow for both the Father and the Son. Paul also emphasized that true worship must always flow from a forgiven, cleansed, and sanctified heart that delights in obeying the One who has made it all possible. “Therefore, I urge you brethren, . . . to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship” (*Rom. 12:1, NASB*).

Worship means, first and foremost, giving ourselves wholly and completely to God as a living sacrifice. When we give ourselves first, then our gifts, our praise, and our hearts will follow. This attitude is a sure protection against meaningless and empty rituals.

Ask yourself these questions: Have I given everything over to Christ, who died for my sins? Or is there some corner of my heart or life that I refuse to let go of? If so, what is it, and how can I be willing to give it up?

Communion With God

One of the key aspects of being a Christian, of having a saving relationship with Christ, is that of knowing the Lord. Jesus Himself said, “ ‘And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent’ ” (*John 17:3*). As in any kind of relationship, communication is the key.

Read Exodus 25:10–22. What are the people being told to make, and what promises are they given?

Above the sacred ark, which contained God’s holy law, and enshrined on the mercy seat dwelt the very presence of God in the Shekinah glory. There, “mercy and truth [were] met together; righteousness and peace . . . kissed each other” (*Ps. 85:10*). There, from the altar of incense in the Holy Place, the smoke ascended, representing the prayers of God’s people mingled with the merits and intercession of Christ.

Amid all this is the promise: “And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel” (*Exod. 25:22*).

God promised the people not just His presence; He promised to communicate with His people, to talk to them, to guide them in the ways that they should go.

What do these texts promise us? *Pss. 37:23, 48:14, Prov. 3:6, John 16:13.*

Today, of course, we do not have an earthly sanctuary, but we do have the promises of God’s guidance and presence in our lives if we surrender to Him. What believer has not seen the leading of the Lord at some point in his or her life?

Here, too, is where worship comes in. We must worship the Lord in an attitude of submission, of surrender, of willingness to be led. A heart yielded to the Lord in prayer, submission, reverence, and surrender, a heart sensing its own need of salvation, of grace, of repentance, is a heart that—full of worshipful praise to God—will be guided in the way that the Lord would desire. In the end, true worship should help you be more open to God’s leading because it should help you learn an attitude of faith and submission. There is nothing empty in this kind of worship.

Rejoicing Before the Lord

A substantial part of the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers centers on the sanctuary service—its construction, its services, the sacrifices and offerings presented there, and the ministration of the priests. It was a very sacred and holy place. After all, it was not only the place where God Himself dwelt, it was the place where Israel came to be forgiven and cleansed of sin. It was the place where Israel learned and experienced the gospel.

At the same time, we must not come away with the idea that Israelite worship was cold, sterile, and formal. The Lord had set very strict guidelines on what was to be done, but these guidelines were not ends in themselves. Rather, they were means to an end, and the end was that His people would be a holy, joyful, and faithful covenant nation that would teach the world about the true God (*Exod. 19:6, Deut. 4:5–7, Zech. 8:23*).

What do these texts tell us about Israelite worship at the sanctuary?
Lev. 23:39–44; Deut. 12:5–7, 12, 18; 16:13–16.

One of the great struggles facing the church in our time today has to do with worship and worship styles. On one end, church services can be cold, formal, stale, and definitely without joy. The other danger is that emotions become the dominant factor: all people want to do is have a good time, “rejoicing” in the Lord at the expense of any kind of strict adherence to biblical truths.

An important point to remember, a lesson that we can learn from the sanctuary model, is that all true worship, which should lead to rejoicing, must do so in the context of biblical truth. God gave the Israelites very clear, strict, and formal instructions regarding the construction of the sanctuary and its ministry and services, all of which were meant to teach them the truths of salvation, Redemption, mediation, and judgment. And yet, at the same time, they were to rejoice before the Lord in their worship. This theme appears again and again. It should be clear, then, that one can be very strong in biblical teaching and at the same time have a joyous worship experience. After all, if the truths of salvation, Redemption, mediation, and judgment are not worth rejoicing over, what is?

What is your own experience in rejoicing before the Lord? What does this mean to you? How can you have a more joyful worship experience? How can you make sure your worship experience is not similar to the man in this week’s introduction that Tolstoy told about?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Tabernacle and Its Services,” pp. 343–358; “The Sin of Nadab and Abihu,” pp. 359–362; “The Law and the Covenants,” pp. 367–373, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “The Lord’s Vineyard,” pp. 288–290, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*; “Ellen G. White Comments,” in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, pp. 1139, 1140.

From the Holy Shekinah, “God made known His will. Divine messages were sometimes communicated to the high priest by a voice from the cloud. Sometimes a light fell upon the angel at the right, to signify approval or acceptance, or a shadow or cloud rested upon the one at the left to reveal disapproval or rejection.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 349.

“In them [His people] the Lord designed to dwell in His fulness in this world; not only in a general way by dwelling in a tent; but by so completely taking possession of their lives, as to show them, and through them the world, how the Messiah would be the dwelling-place of God.”—F. C. Gilbert, *Practical Lessons From the Experience of Israel for the Church of Today* (Concord, Mass.: Good Tidings Press, 1902), p. 351.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How can you help others see that the giving of tithes and offerings is truly an act of worship? What are we compromising when we do not tithe and do not give offerings?
- 2 Look at your own church services. Do they lean more toward the cold, formal, sterile, and joyless? Or do they lean more toward the emotional, toward excitement, and feeling? Or is there a good balance between the extremes? Discuss.
- 3 In an attempt to reach out to the nonchurched, some congregations radically have altered their worship services. While this could be a very good thing, what dangers should they be aware of, such as that of compromise and of watering down crucial biblical truths?
- 4 In some worship services, rituals have been performed a certain way for many years, and that is the reason given for not wanting to make any changes. How would you respond to the answer, “This is how we have always done it” when change is suggested and rejected?
- 5 The earthly sanctuary was a very sacred and holy place, the place where God Himself dwelt. At the same time, the children of Israel were to rejoice before the Lord there. What lessons can we draw from these important truths about worship?

Reluctant Witness

Galina and Nadia have been friends since their childhood in a small city in Bulgaria. Galina sometimes attended the Seventh-day Adventist Church with her grandmother and later with her mother. When she was 17 she was baptized. But she wasn't sure how to explain her faith to her friend Nadia.

Then one day Nadia invited Galina to her birthday party in a nearby disco. Galina convinced herself that by going she was showing respect to her friend. At first the music was soft, and the young people chatted. Then the dancing began. While everyone else danced, Galina remained at the table.

A boy sitting at the table noticed Galina and asked, "Why aren't you dancing? Don't you know how?" Galina told him that she could dance, but she chose not to dance socially. She mentioned God in her explanation.

The boy started asking Galina questions about her faith. People came and went from the table, but Galina and her new friend kept talking. At 1:00 A.M., the young people were asked to leave because the disco was closing. The last of the young people lived in an apartment block near the club, so they walked home together.

Galina and her new friend continued talking as they walked home. The others noticed and listened. The 30-minute walk home took more than an hour. As they approached their apartments, they sat down and continued talking about God, His love, His expectations, and their response to God. They talked for three more hours. Finally, they arranged to meet another day and continue the conversation.

A few days later, the group met at Nadia's apartment. Galina took her boyfriend to help her answer questions. The other four young people were burning with questions. Galina and her boyfriend gave them some books to read. Nadia and her brother, Stoyen, continued asking questions, and eventually they visited the church.

Stoyen was the first to show serious interest in God, and a few months later he was baptized. His parents opposed his new faith, for they had been communists. Nadia took more time to make a decision for Christ, but she eventually was baptized as well.

Today Stoyen and Nadia are active in church. And Galina has learned an important lesson. "We must not be ashamed to share our faith," she says. "My best friend and her brother are Christians today because I reluctantly shared my faith."

Our mission offerings help train young people and adults alike to share their faith with others. Thank you!

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