

“Trust Not *in* Deceptive Words”: The Prophets *and* Worship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Mic. 6:1–8, Isa. 6:1–8, Isa. 1:11–15, Isa. 58:1–10, Isaiah 44, Jer. 7:1–10.*

Memory Text: “‘Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come—yes, let him foretell what will come’ ” (*Isaiah 44:7, NIV*).

Russian author Ivan Turgenev, in his story *Fathers and Sons*, put these words in the mouth of a character: “The life of each of us hangs by a thread, an abyss may gape beneath us any minute, and yet we go out of our way to cook up all sorts of trouble for ourselves and to mess up our lives.”—*Fathers and Sons* (New York: Signet Classics, 2005), p. 131.

Of course, the Lord offers a better way to live. He offers us the opportunity to follow Him, to love Him, to worship Him, and hence to spare ourselves many of the problems that we would otherwise bring upon ourselves.

Yet, merely professing to follow the Lord is not what the Christian life is about. This week, we will look at what a few prophets said about those who thought that their “worship” of the true God, in the true temple on the true Sabbath day, was all that mattered, regardless of how they lived the rest of the week. As the prophets show, this is a deception, a good way to “cook up all sorts of trouble for ourselves.”

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 27.*

A Thousand Rams?

Unlike every other religion, the religion of the Bible (both Testaments) teaches that salvation is by grace alone. Nothing we do can ever make us good enough to be accepted by God. Our good deeds, however well-intended, however Spirit-inspired, can never bridge the gap that sin has caused between God and humanity. If good works could save us, if good works could atone for sin, if good works could pay our debt before God, if good works could reunite fallen humanity with the Creator, then Jesus never would have had to die for us, and the plan of salvation would be something radically different from what it is.

As it stands, only the death of Jesus credited to us by faith, only the righteousness of Christ, which He wrought out in His life, which is then given to all who truly accept it, can save the sinner. Sin is so bad, so contrary to the basic principles of God's government, which is based on love and free choice, that nothing less than the death of Christ could solve the problem created by sin.

All that being said, the Bible is clear that what we say, what we do, and what we think all matter, and these thoughts and actions reveal the reality of our experience with God.

With the above in mind, read Micah 6:1–8. What point is the prophet making here, especially in regard to the question of the sacrifices (part of the worship service in Israel), symbolic of the plan of salvation? How can these words be applied to us today? *See also Deut. 10:12, 13.*

Those who claim to be children of God but who fail to show justice and mercy to their fellow men are acting out the spirit of Satan no matter how piously they may adhere to the forms of worship. On the other hand, those who walk humbly with their God will not neglect the principles of justice and mercy, nor will they scorn the proper forms of worship. God is looking for true worshipers who are willing to demonstrate their love for Him by obedient lives, motivated by humble hearts. What do all the right prayers, all the right styles of worship, and all the right theology mean if the person is nasty, unkind, arrogant, unjust, and unmerciful to others?

What do you think is more important: correct theology or correct actions? Can you have your theology right and yet treat others in a poor manner? What hope can you cling to if, perhaps, you see yourself revealed in the above texts?

The Call of Isaiah

While Hosea, Amos, and Micah were warning Israel of their imminent danger, Judah seemed to be prospering under the reign of several good kings. King Uzziah (also known as Azariah) was known and respected among the nations for his wise leadership and accomplishments (*see 2 Chron. 26:1–15*). But, as often happens, his success became his downfall. Humility was replaced by pride and devotion by presumption (*see vs. 16–21*).

The people of Judah appeared to be prospering spiritually as well. The temple services were well-attended with a formality of religious fervor. Yet, many of the same evils that afflicted the people of Israel were fast corrupting the kingdom of Judah. It is at this time that the Lord calls Isaiah to His special work.

Read Isaiah 6:1–8. Why do you think Isaiah would respond as he did (*vs. 5*) upon seeing a vision of the Lord? What important *theological truth* is revealed here?

Try to imagine Isaiah’s overwhelming reaction to this heavenly revelation of the glory of God. Suddenly, he sees his own sins and the sins of his people stand out in bold relief against the spotless purity and the majestic holiness of Almighty God. No wonder he reacted as he did! It is hard to imagine anyone doing otherwise.

Here we see played out before us a crucial and foundational truth regarding the state of humanity, especially in contrast to the holiness and glory of God. We see an attitude of repentance, of a willingness to acknowledge one’s own sinfulness, one’s own need of grace.

Think for a moment what our worship services would be like were they to elicit in the worshipers a sense that they have been in the presence of our Holy God, which in turn makes them deeply aware of their own sinfulness and need of His saving grace and cleansing power. Imagine if the singing, the liturgy, the prayer, and the preaching worked together in a way to lead us each time to faith, to repentance, to cleansing, and to a willingness to cry out, “Here I am; send me.” That is what worship should be about.

Imagine yourself standing in the physical presence of Jesus. That is, if He were standing in the flesh right before you. What would your reaction be? What would you say? Or do? What about His promise to us in Matthew 28:20? What does that promise mean to us now, on a practical level?

No More Vain Oblations

It is easy to forget that so much of the writing of the Old Testament, especially the writings of the prophets, was written as admonitions and warnings to God's covenant people, to the ones who were His "true church." Most of these people professed to follow the true God, had a basic understanding of biblical truths (at least much more than their heathen neighbors), and knew the right things to say and do in worship. Yet, as becomes very clear to anyone reading the prophets, all this was nowhere near enough.

Read Isaiah 1:11–15. How are we to understand what the Lord, who instituted all these services, is saying to them?

The answer is found, really, in the few verses that follow (*Isa. 1:16–18*), which in many ways is similar to what we saw in Sunday's lesson on Micah. No question, the church is for sinners, and if we had to wait until we were perfect before we could worship the Lord, then none of us would worship Him.

But that is not what the Bible is saying here or what it ever says. It is saying that God is more interested in how we treat others, especially the weak and helpless among us, than He is in all sorts of religious rituals, even the ones He instituted.

Read Isaiah 58:1–10. What is wrong with the fasting described here? How does God say that the people should fast? What point can we take from this for ourselves, whether or not we fast?

Fasting is a form of self-denial of which Jesus had much to say. But some kinds of fasting are nothing but a vain show. It is a symptom of hypocrisy, which covets the privileges of obedience while detesting its responsibilities. Self-denial, motivated by love for God, ministers to those in need. This is the kind of fasting (self-denial) that honors Him; this is the kind of life that leads to the kind of worship that He does not despise, a worship that shows the sinner that, just as he or she has been the recipient of grace and undeserved love, so, too, he must dispense grace and undeserved love to others. That is the kind of self-denial that reveals true faith (*Luke 9:23*), the kind of self-denial at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Profitable for Nothing?

South African writer Laurens van der Post once wrote about what he called “the burden of meaninglessness,” this sense some people have that, when it was all said and done, what, if anything, did their lives mean? Sooner or later, they will be dead, and anyone who knew them will be dead, and before long all memory of them will be forever gone too. In such a scenario, what do our lives mean, what can they mean? How easy it can be to get the sense that so much of what we do has no real meaning, no real lasting importance.

With these thoughts in mind, read Isaiah 44. Then, on the lines below, summarize the essence of those verses, particularly as they relate to the question of worship and what people worship.

However much Isaiah was writing for his time and culture and people, look at how relevant the principles are for us today. The Lord, He alone is the Creator, He alone is our Redeemer, He alone can save us, thus He alone is worthy of our worship and our praise. Isaiah mocks those who create idols with their own hands, gods of their own making, and then bow down and worship them—things that are, indeed, “profitable for nothing.”

And yet, as silly and as foolish as all that seems to us, are we not in danger of doing something similar, of dedicating ourselves, our lives, our time, and our energy into things that, in the end, are “profitable for nothing,” that cannot answer the deepest need of our souls now, and that surely cannot redeem us from the grave at the end of time? How crucial that we watch and pray, that, as Paul said, we examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith (*2 Cor. 13:5*). Sabbath worship, if done right, can remind us in a special way about why we should worship only the Lord. Worship should be a time that especially reminds us of what is important in life, what truly matters, and what is temporal, and even “profitable for nothing.”

We all know the danger of making idols out of money, power, prestige, and so on. What about the danger of making idols out of things such as church, the pastor, our own ministries, or even our own faithfulness or lifestyle or piety? Think this through and bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

“This Is the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord. . . .”

The southern kingdom of Judah had its spiritual ups and downs, times of reform and times of outright apostasy. Yet so often, even during the worst spiritual times, there was an outward show of piety and worship that was not acceptable to the Lord. How careful we need to be not to fall into the same deception ourselves.

Read Jeremiah 7:1–10. What theme do we see repeated here that we have seen all week? How can we take the principles here and apply them to ourselves in our context today?

Look especially at verse 4. In one sense, the speakers were right. This was the “temple of the Lord,” the place where the Lord’s name was to dwell, the place where the sacrificial system—which God Himself had instituted—was performed, the place where the great truths of sacrifice, salvation, cleansing, and judgment were taught. After all, these were the covenant people. Their God was the true God, and they had more light and more truth, corporately, than their pagan neighbors around them had. None of this can be disputed, and yet, the Lord obviously was not pleased with them or their worship. In fact, He called out the words, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord”—what? “Deceptive words?” They were deceptive, not because that was not the temple of the Lord but because the people believed that simply by coming to the temple of the Lord and worshiping there that they were safe, they were saved, they were doing all that was required.

With all the light that we have been given, in what way might we as Seventh-day Adventists be in danger of making the same mistake these people made? Think through possible parallels between them and us and how, if we are not careful, we could fall into a similar deception. What possible “deceptive words” might we be in danger of trusting in, words that on the surface are true (just as that was, indeed, “the temple of the Lord”) and yet could lead us into making the same kind of presumptuous errors?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Call of Isaiah,” pp. 303–310; “Hezekiah,” pp. 331–339; “Deliverance From Assyria,” pp. 349–366; “Manasseh and Josiah,” pp. 381–391; “Jeremiah,” pp. 407–421, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“In Isaiah’s day the spiritual understanding of mankind was dark through misapprehension of God. . . .

“In losing sight of the true character of Jehovah, the Israelites were without excuse. Often had God revealed Himself to them as one ‘full of compassion, and gracious, long-suffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth.’ Psalm 86:15.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 311, 312.

“In the vision that came to Isaiah in the temple court, he was given a clear view of the character of the God of Israel. ‘The high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy,’ had appeared before him in great majesty; yet the prophet was made to understand the compassionate nature of his Lord. . . .”—p. 314.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In class, go over your answer to Wednesday’s final question. What are some “good” things that we can make into idols? How do we know when something has become an idol?
- ❷ Dwell more on the issues touched on in Thursday’s lesson. Look at the things that the people were doing, all the time coming to “the temple of the Lord” and worshiping there (*see Jer. 7:4*), things that were so contrary to the revealed word of God. How can we learn to protect ourselves from falling into the same trap? Why does simple obedience to God’s revealed Word play such an important role in protecting us from all sorts of deception?
- ❸ Think about the worship services in your local church. Do you come away with a sense of the awe and majesty of God in contrast to your own sinfulness and need of grace? If not, what could be changed in order to help the church as a whole have, to some degree, the experience that Isaiah had? (*See Monday’s lesson.*) Why is that so important?
- ❹ How many things do you do in your life that are “profitable for nothing”? How much time do you spend basically “wasting time,” doing things that, in and of themselves, are useless, vain, and basically “profitable for nothing”? How can you learn to make better use of the limited time we all have here in this life?

Cult to Convict to Christian

by HENSLEY DYER

I was lost, physically and spiritually lost. For years I searched for a spiritual anchor. I knew who Jesus was, but I didn't know Him personally. I joined a cult and eventually became possessed by demonic forces from whom I couldn't break free.

I sensed the Holy Spirit telling me to leave the religion I was in, so I did. But leaving the drugs and alcohol was harder. And the demons wouldn't leave me. I tried to sort out my spiritual life, and the Holy Spirit convicted me of my need to surrender to Jesus. But my life was still a mess.

Then my wife told me to leave. I had no money, no home, no car. I prayed, "God, if You carry me through this, I'll serve You the rest of my life." God opened my eyes to my spiritual condition, and He walked through the fire with me. I prayed for forgiveness and forgave everyone who had ever hurt me. Then one day I was arrested and sentenced to prison for crimes I had committed years earlier. It was the best thing that ever happened to me.

I prayed and read the Bible more. God showed me the Ten Commandments. I realized I had been breaking several of them. I knew nothing about the Sabbath, but I wanted to obey. I started looking for an Adventist pastor.

Churches hold meetings on Thursdays, but I didn't want to go. But a fellow prisoner invited me, so I went. I sat down next to a woman who said she was an Adventist. I was so excited! I asked for Bible lessons, and I began spending the Sabbath studying the Bible and the Bible lessons. I discovered so many things I didn't know before. God impressed me to share what I was learning with others.

Then one day, unexpectedly, I was released. I was out of prison with a place to stay and my prison ministry friends to help me. I went to the Adventist Church and met the pastor. He offered to pick me up on Sabbath morning. When I told him I was an ex-prisoner, he said, "It doesn't matter. God loves you, and His people will love you too." And they did.

God has delivered me from my past and my sins. I'm His child now.

God used many people to lead me to Jesus, and I praise Him for their help. Your mission offerings help sponsor outreach such as the prison ministries program that helped build my foundation of faith. I thank you.



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