

Worship

Lesson 5: "Happy Are You, O Israel"

What makes people happy? There are as many different answers to that question as there are people. Probably the list would include both frivolous and thoughtful things, but one of the last things for many would be "worship." Yet, properly understood, it is the only thing that can bring real happiness and contentment. When David was trying to find something that brought true joy to his heart, he compared dwelling together in unity of the Spirit with the happiness brought by the oil of dedication that ran lavishly down Aaron's beard, even to the hem of his garments. Notice, the unity was because the Holy Spirit was present and allowed to participate in the worship service of the temple dedication (see Psalm 133).

This week's lesson takes its title from Deuteronomy 33:29: "Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord, the shield of your help and the sword of your majesty! Your enemies shall submit to you, and you shall tread down their high places" (NKJV). Notice what is to make Israel happy: they are a people saved by the Lord, and good things flow from that.

Obviously the concept of worship involved here is different from putting in time once a week at church. All worship involves communication with God. Notice that Moses reminds Israel of what God has already done for them (saved them) and what He will do for them in the future (shield them), and what the result will be (enemies submit, and Israel will destroy false worship). That last point is interesting. Israel kept falling into the worship styles of people around them. Usually, this involved intimate physical acts in groves built in high places. Apparently, God knew this kind of worship would not bring them happiness and they needed to destroy the places where it occurred.

It might seem obvious that God prohibited this kind of worship because it was focused on heathen gods, not Jehovah. Certainly that was part of it, but maybe we can learn more. Generally in pagan worship the affection and allegiance to the deity is expressed by actions of sacrifice, the bigger the better. Since the god is not expected to be able to read the mind, it is not expected that the heart and mind be humbled in submission. It is enough that the act is performed. Whether the god is actually thought of during the act of "worship" is immaterial.

For centuries, Israel had performed the rituals of the sanctuary service in the most exacting manner. So caught up in the details of the ritual, they had forgotten the real purpose of the service. God told them that they were to build Him a sanctuary so He "may dwell among them" (Ex. 25:8), but they had come to consider that what really counted was the doing of the various rituals. This same mind-set can be our peril. God does not live in the rituals. Unless aided by the Holy Spirit, the human mind is incapable of recognizing God. Humans can perform the rituals of worship without ever submitting the heart to God and never recognize it.

God gave the services of the sanctuary because of the sin problem. God and sin could not abide together. The Lord made the sanctuary plan to explain this and provided that even the illiterate could understand. Different kinds of offerings were ordained, each with a specific application to the overall plan which was designed to demonstrate what it would take for God to restore the original Edenic face-to-face communication. The services were to impress minds that the ultimate conclusion of sin is to kill their Life Giver.

Most pagan worship is manipulative, that is, intended to induce the god to provide something beyond the capability of the worshiper(s). If the crops were dying because of drought, the sacrifices were to induce the god to bring rain. In addition to daily necessities, gods were also asked to protect worshipers in the afterlife. Israel had reduced the rituals of the sanctuary to a manipulative pagan level. When Christ, the great antitype, was born in Israel, they were so invested in the virtue of their rituals, they failed to recognize Him.

But there was one, a Boy of 12, who understood. Even at this early age, it dawned on Him that all these lambs and sacrifices "cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience" (Heb. 9:9). He reasoned that it was all a type of things to come, and eventually Someone sinless, innocent, holy and undefiled must die as the Lamb of God if lost human hearts were ever be reached! His youthful soul surged with a mighty resolve to fulfill His destiny to be that Lamb. He resolved to fulfill Isaiah's prediction that "His own arm brought salvation for Him; and His own righteousness, and it sustained Him" (Isa. 59:15, 16). This 12-year-old Boy chose to go to the cross.

All worship is centered on the sacrifice of Christ which He ministers to us from the heavenly sanctuary. Worship that falls short of being cross-centered is counterfeit worship. The sacrifice of Christ effected an atonement for the world as He "taste[d] death for every man" (Heb. 2:9). Now the race stands as it were neutral before the law of God since Christ received the penalty of eternal death on their behalf. Thus Christ has given a "blessing" of temporal life, unmerited grace, forgiveness of sin, and all good things that follow. All of this was taught by the sacrificial tabernacle services of ancient Israel.

When the love (agape) of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, we choose the way of the cross as readily as the Son of God chose it. By identifying with His death, we also identify with His resurrection. "He who hates his life in this world will keep it for life eternal" (John 12:25).

His church, God's house-tabernacle, comprises humble, submissive people who understand their great need for communion with God to cleanse their heart-tabernacle. This house remains the object of God's interest, and the ultimate purpose of the entire sanctuary service now continuing in heaven is the final cleansing. In this final work, the whole universe is to see the power of the gospel displayed.

The 1888 message brings a special understanding of the final work of the Holy Spirit at the end of time. Rituals are only useful if we allow them to point the mind to God and the cross of Christ. We must understand our true condition of even unknown sin. At the end, the church on earth will begin to understand the whole truth in seeing not only conscious but unconscious sin. The old covenant dealt with the external rituals and ceremonial cleansing, but the new must deal with internal cleansing, having the law put in the mind and written on the heart.

Those who have allowed the Holy Spirit to do His work in their hearts are those who are waiting for the second coming of Christ. The power of His word in their hearts will demonstrate that power so fully that their message will "lighten the earth with glory." The message itself, not their personalities nor any goodness in themselves, will call believers to "come out of Babylon, My people," and honest-hearted people will respond to the "voice" from heaven (see Rev. 18:1-4). Nothing will be able to hold them back from stepping out boldly to honor Christ in the closing work of the gospel.

--Arlene Hill