

## **Worshiping the Lord**

by Scott Grant

---

### **Oil-soaked sponges**

Think of yourself as a sponge. We are like sponges that have been tossed into a world that is akin to a mud puddle. If we are dry sponges, we'll absorb the mud in the puddle -- we'll absorb all the idolatrous thoughts that the world has to offer. How do we avoid absorbing and adopting all the idolatrous thoughts in the mud puddle of the world? We can try avoiding the mud, but there's no avoiding it, really. We're in the middle of it. The question is what kind of sponge are we? A dry sponge will absorb mud. Ah, but if the sponge is first dipped in oil, it can be thrown in the mud puddle and not absorb anything. That's what worship does for us: It fills us up with the oil of the Lord, so to speak. Once we have absorbed him, we can venture out into the world without fear of absorbing the world's idolatrous notions. Yes, the Lord commands us against idolatry. But the positive command to worship him is what leads us away from idolatry. Thus, we need not be idolatry-conscious; we need to be God-conscious. Worshiping the Lord leads us away from worshiping other gods. And as we worship the Lord, we begin to share his concerns, and we move toward loving others.

Exodus 20:22-23:19 is commonly referred to as the Book of the Covenant. It contains the stipulations of the covenant relationship between the Lord and Israel. These stipulations, or "ordinances" (21:1), can be seen as the practical outworking of the 10 commandments. The 10 commandments -- literally "words" -- are general. The ordinances in the Book of the Covenant are the application of the 10 commandments to specific situations.

Commandments 2 through 10 each stem from the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." The commandment to worship the Lord alone is not only paramount, it is seminal, giving birth to the following nine commandments, and all other biblical commandments. Every other biblical commandment naturally flows from this one.

The literary structure of the Book of the Covenant therefore gives preeminence to commandments to worship the Lord and not to worship other gods:

Exodus 20:23 Prohibition against idolatry

Exodus 20:24-26 Prescription for worship

-----

Exodus 21:1-23:12 Ordinances

-----

Exodus 23:13 Prohibition against idolatry

Exodus 23:14-19 Prescription for worship

The prologue and epilogue, which prohibit idolatry and prescribe worship, form bookends around the 42 ordinances, thereby giving prominence to the commands concerning worship and idolatry. In fact, the epilogue

says that "everything" that has been commanded pertains to being on guard so as to worship the Lord alone (23:13).

The prohibition against idolatry comes first: Don't worship other gods. But it is immediately followed by the prescription for worship: Do worship the Lord. If we do worship the Lord, we won't worship other gods. As can be seen from the chart, the space devoted in the prologue and epilogue to worship is much greater than that devoted to idolatry. This also indicates that the positive command to worship the Lord takes precedence over the negative command to avoid idolatry. Therefore, we do not need to be so much concerned with whether we are worshipping other gods as we do with whether we are worshipping the Lord. If we worship the Lord, idolatry won't be much of a concern. We don't need to be idolatry-obsessed; we need to be God-obsessed. If we are, everything else will more or less take care of itself.

And as we worship the Lord, we will naturally share his concerns.

### **Outworking of worship (21:1-23:12)**

The primary function of the law of God is to reveal God. It's his law; therefore, it tells us about him. It tells us what he cares about. And even a casual look at the 42 commands in this section leaves one with the overwhelming impression that God cares about people. As we worship the Lord, as we draw close to him in adoration, we find that his concerns become our concerns. We begin to think as he thinks. Just as when we adopt the attitude of someone we spend a lot of time with, we begin to adopt the attitude of the Lord, assuming that we're spending time with him in loving adoration. As we worship him, we share his values -- we share his love for people.

What is striking about the Book of the Covenant is the value it places on human life, especially in comparison to other ancient codes. This can be seen in the book's disposition toward the death penalty.

The codes of other Near Eastern peoples exalted property values, imposing the death penalty for theft. The Code of Hammurabi, for example, calls for the death penalty for the theft of the property of a "god or palace," for receiving stolen goods and not being able to prove ownership, for assisting in the escape of a slave and for harboring a fugitive slave. Death is also imposed for a barmaid who cheats her customers on the price of a drink. The Book of the Covenant, on the other hand, never imposes the death penalty for the violation of property rights. Paramount, instead, is the sacredness of human life. Hammurabi demonstrates almost no concern for the poor and disadvantaged; instead, the code is designed to protect the upper class. The Book of the Covenant, on the other hand, values all people and places great emphasis on the poor, the disadvantaged, the slave and the alien.

The law of the goring ox demonstrates the Book of the Covenant's concern for human life (21:28-32). In the case of a culpable owner who has not taken precautions to ensure that his ox doesn't gore anyone, the laws of Hammurabi and Eshnunna are concerned with the compensation to be paid to the family of the victim who was gored but make no provision for the fate of the ox or the punishment of its owner. The Book of the Covenant, on the other hand, commands the death of the ox and prohibits its consumption as food. The owner, too, is deserving of death but in the absence of malicious intent may redeem his life. Thus, human life is exalted over property rights.

The Book of the Covenant forbids charging interest on a loan, and it forbids holding onto one's cloak that has been taken in a pledge (22:25-26). Borrowers were part of the lower class. Uniquely, the borrower is given precedence over the lender, who occupied the upper strata of society.

In the Near East, slaves were treated solely as property, except in Israel. A slave would be branded. Injury to a slave simply required that the owner be recompensed. A slave could be given as a pledge on a loan, and he could be sold or exchanged. The law of God, on the other hand, protects the rights of slaves. Even within the 10 commandments, slaves are given rights: They too are to partake in the sabbath rest (20:10). A man who injures a slave is to be punished (21:20). Slaves are allowed to go free if their masters strike them so as to destroy eyes or knock out teeth (21:26).

From these examples it is clear that the Lord cares about human life -- all human life. He has created each in his image; therefore, each is supremely valuable. As we worship the Lord, we can't help but care about what he cares about. We can't help but care more about people than possessions, and we can't help but care for the disadvantaged, the hurting, the lonely.

"We are a contemplative order," Mother Teresa told a visitor who could not comprehend her commitment to the downtrodden of Calcutta. "First we meditate of Jesus, and then we go out and look for him in disguise." That is a perfect example of the outworking of worship. We draw close to Jesus in worship, his concerns become our concerns, and we move out in love, looking for "him" everywhere.

This is the outworking of worship. But we need to back up a step and ask the question, "What does worship entail?" If worship produces such concern for people, we need to know what's involved in worship. The third commandment prescribes that worship not be empty, meaning that we don't involve the Lord in our idolatrous pursuits. The fourth commandment prescribes the sabbath, which involves remembering what the Lord has done in creation and redemption. The Book of the Covenant, which takes the 10 commandments and applies them, expands upon worship in the prologue and epilogue. In the prologue, worship is to be done simply. In the epilogue, it is to be done thankfully.

### **Simplicity of worship (20:22-26)**

The internal literary structure of the prescription for worship is an example of inverted parallelism:

**A 20:24a** Earthen altar

**B 20:24b** Name of the Lord

**A' 20:25-26** Stone altar

What is most striking about the prescription for worship in 20:24-26 is its simplicity, especially in comparison to the surrounding pagan religions, which involved complex rituals. The Israelites are to make an altar of earth. What? An altar of dirt for the Lord God Almighty?! That's what he says. Just dirt. On the altar they are to offer burnt offerings and peace offerings. Just these two will suffice. Nothing more elaborate. This altar can be built, and these sacrifices offered, in "every place." No special place. Any old place will do. If they want to use stones instead of dirt, that's OK. But they don't need to go to all the trouble of cutting them. In fact, if they cut them and offer sacrifices on an altar of cut stones, they will profane the altar. If they cut the stones, they'll be getting too much of themselves into the picture. They don't need to build any steps, and they don't need to go through the gyrations of stripping like the pagans. If they're intent on doing elaborate things in worship, they're probably trying to find some sense of significance for themselves, which would be worshipping themselves, not the Lord.

The simplicity of worship is most pronounced in the center line, which is the literary climax of the composition: "In every place where I cause my name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you." Now that's something. The Lord will cause his name to be remembered. I don't cause his name to be remembered, or honored or glorified; he does. Jesus said if the people who were hailing his entrance into Jerusalem were silent, the stones would cry out (Luke 19:40). God can raise up stones to worship him! That takes the pressure off us. The Lord can take care of his name.

Nevertheless, there is something we can do. The Lord connects the remembrance of his name with his blessing: In the place that he causes his name to be remembered, he will bless. Remembrance of the Lord and blessing, both initiated by the Lord, go hand in hand. They are inseparable. But with all this initiation by the Lord, how do we get in on the action? The only thing there is for us to do here is be blessed. The Lord blesses us in order that his name might be remembered. His name is known by the way in which he blesses his people. As others see the blessing, they have a chance to see the Lord.

As followers of Jesus, we want to "do things for the Lord" and "live for the Lord" so that his name will be lifted up. There's nothing wrong with this, of course. What isn't good is the burden of guilt we feel, when our

motivation for "living for the Lord" is relieving our guilt. There's something even more important than "living for the Lord," which, if understood, would relieve our burden of guilt and purify our motives for "living for the Lord." More important than "living for the Lord" is being blessed by the Lord. If we are blessed by the Lord, who has lifted the burden of guilt from our shoulders by the blood of his Son, we will live for the Lord because we love him, not because we need to work off our guilt. The best thing we can do to participate in the Lord's name being remembered, then, is to let him bless us. Essentially, the best thing we can do is ... nothing! What could be simpler than nothing?

In light of all this simplicity, what are we to make of the elaborate instructions that will be given regarding the construction of the tabernacle in Exodus 25 through 31? Worship is a simple concept. God is great; he has done great things; we worship him. Whatever happens after that, or whatever structures are built around it, we must never lose sight of these truths. Israel's patriarchs worshiped simply. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob traveled about and worshiped the Lord wherever they went, building simple altars wherever they pitched their tents (Genesis 12:8). In first of all calling the Israelites to worship simply, the Lord is connecting them with their patriarchs and showing them that first and foremost worship is a very simple thing.

Why the tabernacle then? The tabernacle provided numerous symbols that were designed to emphasize the simplicity of worship. They were designed, simply, to point the people to the Lord, and ultimately to Jesus Christ, who became the true tabernacle (John 1:14, 2:19-21). The tabernacle was an aid to worship. But the flesh is resistant to God, and it convinces us to go through a multitude of gyrations, fooling us into thinking that they are part of worship. But in reality, we adopt the gyrations as a distraction from true worship. The gyrations are therefore part of a flight from God, part of our effort to find significance for ourselves and relieve our guilt.

So worship is to be simple. We don't need to build huge cathedrals, nor do we need to follow some elaborate ritual. We don't need to wait a day before approaching the Lord after sinning. We don't have to do a spate of good works before coming to the Lord. We don't have to go through some intermediary to get to the Lord. If we're inclined to build such structures around our worship, too much of ourselves is probably getting in the way. It may be an effort to find significance for ourselves. It may be an effort to relieve guilt, not lift up the name of the Lord. All this "worship" is nothing less than idolatry. It looks spiritual, but it isn't.

Simplicity in worship, then, leads us away from idolatry -- away from the God of Self-significance, away from the God of Guilt Relief.

All of these things may be distractions that we subconsciously devise to push us away from God, not worship him. Paul writes to the Corinthians: "But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3). Simply worship the Lord simply. Any old place will do. Any old prayer will do. Any old song will do.

There was a talented player on my high school basketball team who had some pretty impressive moves. He liked to show them off, too. One day during practice he made a lay-up while incorporating some of his moves. The coach blew the whistle and stopped practice. His ensuing lecture went something like this: "You can take off at the free throw line, touch the ceiling, do a triple lutz with 2 and a half twists, land on the backboard, execute a back flip and dunk the ball while doing a 360 ... and it's still only worth two points!" His point was clear. In adding all these moves, the player was missing the point. He was attracting attention to himself and was jeopardizing his supposed objective of scoring. In making worship complicated, we put the focus on ourselves in efforts to find significance or relieve guilt and take the focus away from the Lord, our supposed objective.

The prologue emphasizes simplicity in worship. The epilogue emphasizes thankfulness.

### **Thankfulness of worship (23:13-19)**

The Lord tells the people to "be on your guard" against worshipping other gods. They are not to "mention the name of other gods." The verb "mention" is the same word that is translated "remember" in 20:24. In that verse, the Lord says he will cause his "name to be remembered." Here, the people are not to "remember" the

names of other gods. The Lord will cause his name to be remembered; we don't have to worry about that. For our part, we are not to "remember," or invoke, the name of other gods; we are not to place other gods before him. We are to guard against this. As we have seen, the best way to guard against worshipping other gods is by worshipping the true God.

Like the prologue, the epilogue also has an internal, though different, literary structure. The first half commands three feasts per year, and the second half details the feasts. It is an example of step parallelism:

**A 23:14** Three times a year

**B 23:15** Feast of Unleavened Bread

**C 23:16a** Feast of Harvest

**D 23:16b** Feast of Ingathering

**A' 23:17** Three times a year

**B' 23:18** Feast of Unleavened Bread

**C' 23:19a** Feast of Harvest

**D' 23:19b** Feast of Ingathering

Each of these three feasts is associated with a harvest: Unleavened Bread, the beginning of the barley harvest; Harvest, during the wheat harvest; Ingathering, at the end of the vine and orchard harvest.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread was to involve sacrifices without leaven, which was a symbol of evil (Matthew 16:6). This feast came right after the Passover Feast, and they were often seen as one feast. This would explain the reference to "the fat of my feast" in connection with the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The fat was the special portion of the Passover lamb. It was not to be left until morning, in which case it would become rancid. The "choice first fruits," which constitute the best produce, are to be offered during the Feast of the Harvest. Because there is such a clear parallel between the first two feasts and the prescribed sacrifices in 23:18-19a, that leads us to believe that the last prescribed sacrifice, in 23:19b, is to be connected with the Feast of the Ingathering. But what are we to make of the command, "You are not to boil a kid in the milk of its mother"? One way to translate this command would be: "You are not to boil a kid while it is still nursing." If this is the case, this is simply a command to offer only weaned animals, not babies.

What do all these feast details have in common? They all call for people to offer up their best stuff to the Lord -- pure sacrifices untainted with evil, the best part of the lamb, the first fruits, mature animals.

Each festival commemorated not only the Lord's provision in harvest but other aspects of the Lord's provision as well. The text here connects the Feast of Unleavened Bread with the Lord's redemption of the nation out of Egypt. The Feast of the Harvest came to be a celebration of the Lord's giving of the law. The Feast of the Ingathering came to be called the Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Booths, and celebrated the Lord's care for Israel on its journey from Egypt to Canaan (Leviticus 23:34, 42-43).

Each festival, in which the people give back to the Lord in remembrance of his provision for them, can be seen as festivals of thanksgiving. The people give their best stuff to give thanks to the Lord for what he has done in all aspects of his provision for them. We see, then, that the people worship thankfully. Paul writes that we should "in everything give thanks, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18); that we should be "always giving thanks for all things" (Ephesians 5:20); and that we should do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, "giving thanks through him to God the Father" (Colossians 3:17). The Psalmist writes, "It is good to give thanks to the Lord" (Psalm 92:1).

What's the big deal about giving thanks? Why is it so good to give thanks? Giving thanks reminds us of who

the Lord is: that he is a giver. And when we don't see a whole lot of obvious things to give thanks for, a personal history of giving thanks will root us in the Lord and enable us to weather the storms of life without growing bitter and resentful. A personal history of thankfulness will also enable us to see things to be thankful for in the midst of the storms. Thankfulness frees our hearts from the prison of resentment for what has happened and lust for what hasn't happened. Thankfulness means we look for those little opportunities throughout the day to give thanks to the Lord. We may not have a harvest for which to give thanks; our harvest may be shopping at the grocery store, where we can be thankful for God's provision, not resentful that we have to "waste" 30 minutes. The Lord is ever active, constantly sending gifts our way. Watch for them, and give thanks for them.

Giving thanks in worship leads us away from worshipping other gods -- the God of Resentfulness, the God of Bitterness and the God of Lust, all of which we in reality create in order to enthrone ourselves. Giving thanks, therefore, leads us away from this idolatry.

A few weeks ago during a fishing trip I was approaching a stream I used to fish years ago. During the previous day and just that morning, I had seen the Lord bless me in surprising ways. I was filled with thanks. As I approached the stream, I wondered what was next. What else did the Lord have in store for me? Also as I approached the stream, I remembered a friend who used to live nearby, who had moved away and who I had lost track of. Mark had a boat, and we used to fish a special nighttime insect hatch downstream. He also had access to a private -- and prime -- stretch of river upstream. I remembered fishing those stretches with my friend, and gave thanks for those times. Wistfully, I thought it would be nice to fish those stretches with Mark again. It was just a thought, not a raging desire. I was content. As I was fishing, several boats motored by me. As one of them approached, I heard a familiar voice, and my name! It was Mark. He had moved away but just happened to return for a brief visit at the same time as I had. That night, we fished together downstream. The next morning, we fished together upstream. After fishing the upstream section, we were invited by the owners to share iced tea. They are believers, it turned out -- and they were absolutely delighted to spend an hour with a pastor. So, what could I do but give thanks? I returned to the Bay Area full of the Lord.

### **Worship him**

So, worship the Lord! It leads us away from sin. Worship him simply, and worship him thanfully. As we do, he shares his heart with us for people, and his concerns become our concerns.

---

[PBC Homepage](#) | [Discovery Publishing](#) | [Scott Grant Library](#)