

The Glory of the Lord

Leviticus 9:1-24

What makes a worship service a GOOD worship service? From God's perspective, surely the answer to that question would be that all that we do is done in obedience to his regulations with glad and contrite hearts. But I want to consider that question from our perspective this afternoon. What is it about a worship service that should stick in our minds as something really good.

For some people in our day, it would be excitement. A good measure of energy and enthusiasm. And that's part of it. For others, it would be aesthetics--everything was beautiful. Especially in terms of decorations, in terms of ceremonies and liturgical elements. Others would simply point to the preaching. Others, the familiarity and even sentimental attraction to that which is traditional. But all of those things fall short.

I believe Leviticus 9 tells us exactly what we should be looking for in a worship service, the best measure of what really is a GOOD worship service. And this is going to seem a little bit impractical, because this is not something you can measure. This is not a tangible evaluation that falls into neat and well defined human categories.

But this is what makes worship GOOD. The presence of the Lord. In the Old Covenant, there was a tangible, observable demonstration of God's presence. And the people were daily led by that revelation.

Ex. 40:36 "Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would go onward in all their journeys. 37 But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not journey till the day that it was taken up. 38 For the cloud of the

LORD was above the tabernacle by day, and fire was over it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys."

Now, in Leviticus, the people are building a permanent tabernacle. A permanent place for the worship of God to take place, a permanent meeting place. And this idea is repeated. The temple priests knew what was happening.

v.4 "...for today the LORD will appear to you."

That's what worship is! The Lord appears to his people, and dwells among them. Leviticus 9 repeats this idea of,

I. THE APPEARANCE OF GOD IN WORSHIP.

v.6

And, v.23

This must be our foundational understanding of what worship is all about.

A. God graciously meets with his people.

Turn with me to,

Ex. 29:42 "This shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the Lord, where I will meet you to speak with you. 43 And there I will meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by My glory. 44 So I will consecrate the tabernacle of meeting and the altar. I will also consecrate both Aaron and his sons to minister to Me as priests. 45 I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their God. 46 And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them up out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them. I am the Lord their God."

Notice the great encouragement of that passage. God meets with his people in worship, as the guarantee of his covenant promise. "I will be your God."

This is worthy of our emphasis, because it is such a determining factor in our understanding of what worship is. Before any discussion of the actual elements of worship, before any debate about what we are actually supposed to do, this idea must come first. We gather together so that God will keep his promise to meet with us.

And we have a great advantage in the New Covenant. Worship is not nearly so hard for us to arrange, because all the outward ceremonial regulations and restrictions are gone. Gone is the necessity to have the appointed temple. Instead, the place where we meet is set apart and made holy not according to outward ceremonies, but according to the purpose. We worship in spirit and in truth, not on a particularly assigned mountain! Instead, Jesus declares,

Mat. 18:20 "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

But the fundamental idea of worship remains the same. God's people meet with their God. And when we do,

B. God graciously reveals his glory to his people.

v.6 "The glory of the LORD will appear to you."

v.23 "Then the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people."

It's the same idea as I read in,

Ex.29:43 "And there I will meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by My glory."

And with Moses, more personally, we read,

Ex. 34 Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. 35 And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle."

I can't emphasize it enough, that this is the chief measure of our experiences of worship. In worship, we receive a revelation of the glory of God! When we worship, we ought to become conscious of his glory!

There is a great example of this in the book of 1 Kings. It was the occasion of the ark of the covenant being brought into the temple built by King Solomon. In many ways this was the highlight of all Old Testament worship.

1 King 8:4 "Then they brought up the ark of the LORD, the tabernacle of meeting, and all the holy furnishings that were in the tabernacle. The priests and the Levites brought them up. 5 Also King Solomon, and all the congregation of Israel who were assembled with him, were with him before the ark, sacrificing sheep and oxen that could not be counted or numbered for multitude. 6 Then the priests brought in the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, into the inner sanctuary of the temple, to the Most Holy Place, under the wings of the cherubim. 7 For the cherubim spread their two wings over the place of the ark, and the cherubim overshadowed the ark and its poles. 8 The poles extended so that the ends of the poles could be seen from the holy place, in front of the inner sanctuary; but they could not be seen from outside. And they are there to this day. 9 Nothing was in the ark except the two tablets of stone which Moses put there at Horeb, when the LORD made a covenant with the children of Israel, when they came out of the land of Egypt. 10 And it came to pass, when the priests came out of the holy place, that the cloud

filled the house of the LORD, 11 so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD. 12 Then Solomon spoke: “The LORD said He would dwell in the dark cloud. 13 I have surely built You an exalted house, And a place for You to dwell in forever.”

That’s what worship is! “The glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.”

But how does that apply to us? The underlying principles are unchanged. This building is a sanctuary because it is sanctified by the presence of God’s glory! And that is what makes corporate worship special. We believe it to be so, we believe that as we gather together, the presence of God’s glory is among us.

And yet, I am not referring merely to our own emotions or experiences. The presence of God’s glory is not something we can feel or see, or touch or hear. It is not something that we stir up, by creating a particular mood or atmosphere. Rather, the presence of God is something we believe by faith for we worship in spirit and in truth. We worship with these great truths embedded in our souls. That God is with us. That he reveals his glory to us.

And how? Through his word! The written word. As it is read and preached. And through the sacraments, as they are rightly administered.

Something happens every time we gather for worship, when the service begins with that call to worship I read. God invites us to enter his presence, and if you believe that that is exactly what is happening, then you know, by faith, of the presence of his glory! And if you know it, it will sink down into the level of your

own experiences. And it does become subjective, a deep and mysterious occasion, in which you really and truly know that God is among us!

The reading of that call to worship corresponds to that pillar of cloud descending upon the door of the tabernacle, “when the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.”

And we end our worship service in a very particular way, also, with a blessing. A benediction. We see that here in Leviticus 9.

C. God graciously pronounces his blessing upon his people.

v.22-23

Notice what was happening. Aaron lifted his hand toward the people. That was to pronounce a blessing upon them. He blessed them. That is, he spoke for God a pronouncement of God’s blessing. He probably used the very same blessing I often pronounce upon you at the conclusion of our worship service,

Num. 6:24 “The LORD bless you and keep you; 25 the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; 26 the LORD turn his face towards you and give you peace.”

The blessing is not a prayer! Our benediction is not a prayer. So don’t close your eyes as if it were! I don’t raise up my hands to offer prayer to God. Rather, I lift up my hands toward you, not toward God, in order to speak to you from God! I pronounce the benediction. So look up, and some will even want to hold out your hands, as if to give evidence of receiving the blessing! It is a glorious moment, one which you should savor throughout the week. It is an authoritative pronouncement of God’s blessing, the

greatest blessing our souls could possibly receive.

So, with the appearance of God, what do we do? What are,

II. THE OFFERINGS OF SACRIFICES IN WORSHIP.

Here, obviously, I'm reviewing all that we have studied, and I'll review those sacrifices very briefly and quickly. Four of the five types of sacrifices we studied are actually mentioned in this chapter beginning the priestly ministry of Aaron and his sons.

Let me remind you, first of all, that,

A. Blood atonement must be provided for worshippers to be able to stand before the Lord.

I won't go through the details again, but note,
v.7-9

There Aaron had to make atonement for his own sins, and note that the prescribed sacrifice was a calf. No doubt, that sacrifice would show forth to Aaron his own sin and guilt in the occasion I described last week from Exodus 32, the worship offered to that golden calf.

The principle, repeated so frequently in Leviticus, quoted in the New Testament, is so simple. "Without shedding of blood there is no remission."

We, of course, don't continue to shed blood in our sacrifices today, because Jesus has done that once and for all, fulfilling exactly what is pictured by these Old Testament blood sacrifices.

Notice that Aaron also had to sacrifice a blood offering for the sins of the people.

v.15-16

The priest offered the animal for sin. The animal, in that sense, was made to be the sin, and made to endure the curse of that sin. And I won't pass over the opportunity to tell you that that is exactly what Jesus Christ accomplished, once and for all.

2 Cor. 5:21 "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

Only through the blood can a sinful creature stand before a holy God. And notice that position. We are standing.
v.5

Standing implies confidence of being found acceptable. Standing implies a boldness and a certainty, that we have a right to be there in the first place. And we have all those things, because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on our behalf. We can actually stand before God. Because sacrifices have been offered.

B. Sacrifices are necessary for worshippers to be able to stand before the Lord.

To continue bringing this up to our own experiences, this is why I often ask you to stand. When we worship, we do, in fact, stand before God. And our posture, though not the crucial element, is a representation of what is actually happening.

We ought not to sit casually! We stand in honor and respect, just as we would stand in the presence of a great dignitary, such as our President, or anyone of higher rank or importance. If you are in the military, and enter the office of your commanding officer, you stand in his presence. In fact, in the military, you stand at attention, until you are given permission to stand at ease! And all that formality has it's place.

So think about that as you worship. Think about why you are

asked to stand. And if you are able to stand, do so with honor and respect, knowing that the sacrifice for your sins has already been offered.

But just to add a little to that,

C. Sacrifices must be accepted for worshipers to be able to stand before the Lord.

Not only offered, but actually accepted by God. And Leviticus 9 gives us a great sign of that acceptance.

v.24

Let me encourage you to think about these things as you offer your sacrifices, even this afternoon. Consider the singing of a psalm or hymn as your sacrifice. Now imagine, in faith, that God will accept what you offer. Use this comparison in your mind, that your sacrifices are compared to an animal, and God comes down as a fire and consumes them!

Consider the great example of Elijah upon Mt. Carmel.

1 Kings 18:36 “And it came to pass, at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near and said, “LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. 37 “Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again.” 38 Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench.”

May God come down as a fire and consume our offerings today!

Now, if you are thinking in that way, I would expect you to sing more exuberantly and enthusiastically! If you want your sacrifices to be accepted by God, I would expect you to offer your best!

Your best singing! Your best concentration in corporate prayer, when someone else is actually speaking for the whole congregation. Your best offerings of money, in our offerings. Your best. So that God would come down with fire and consume it, with pleasure!

That leads to what I would call a response to this idea of the presence of God’s glory. Here is where I really want to think long and hard about what many people today say and teach about worship, and the need for worship to be comfortable and casual.

If our focus is upon the glory of God, our response will not be comfortable and casual! Rather, I believe it will be,

III. REVERENCE AND AWE IN WORSHIP.

Remember how the people at Mt. Carmel responded to God’s glory!

1 Kings 18:39 “Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!”

Let me go to the New Testament for another reference to this proper response to God’s glory. It’s a verse we’ve seen before.

Heb. 12:28 “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. 29 For our God is a consuming fire.”

So above all else, we are to worship with reverence and godly fear, or awe! We are to be consumed with the awesome revelation of the greatness of God's eternal glory. We are to fix our minds upon his glory, and upon the desire to please him and honor him. And we can learn from the people of Israel in Leviticus 9.

v.24

They shouted! It was,

A. A response of reverent praise.

The actual word shout implies the shouts of praise. For example,

Ezra 3:10 "When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the ordinance of David king of Israel. 11 And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD: "For He is good, For His mercy endures forever toward Israel." Then all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid."

And as well,

Ps. 95:1 "Oh come, let us sing to the LORD! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation. 2 Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving; Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms."

So the presence of God is greeted with a shout, not silence! I hope you see where I'm going, and what application I am going to draw from this. Unless God has restricted your ability to sing, then you ought to do so with great exuberance! We are not

passive in worship, listening to others shout. We are not the audience. We are the performers! We are not silent. Rather, we ought to shout together, all as priests, singing to God with one voice with reverent praise!

But notice something else from verse 24. "They fell on their faces."

With an outward expression of the most severe experience of humility and contrition, they fell on their faces. It was,

B. A response of awestruck humility.

This is not a seeker sensitive service, to use the lingo of our own day! This was not an attempt to make people feel comfortable, as I've heard people describe their reasons for what they do or don't do in worship services. This was a demonstration of God's glory that left the people face down upon the floor, so great is He!

Remember the occasion when Isaiah saw the Lord? We can learn much about worship from that passage as well, for we read this,

Is. 6:1 "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. 2 Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!" 4 And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts."

Woe is me! That's our response before a holy and righteous God. And then that gracious God speaks to us of the forgiveness of sins.

Is. 6:6 "Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth with it, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, And your sin purged."

We seldom have the fullness of this experience of reverence and awe in God's presence, I fear, and even when we do, I expect that we are unsure how to express it. To be practical, it ought to be the attitude of your heart when you read that corporate confession of sin we often use in the morning worship service. It ought to be a part of your experience as you hear the word of God read and preached!

Personally, I am not at all opposed to kneeling in prayer, either, for that position at least attempts to express the heart-attitude shown forth by those who fell on their faces!

There must be this humility in us, when we are confronted with the glory of God. Combined with this marvelous confidence that, in Christ, we are made acceptable to him. And if you can rightly balance those two things, you are well on your way to understanding what worship is all about.

v.23b-24 "Then the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people, 24 and fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces."

Let me end with words I often use as a call to worship, words

which express well the presence of the glory of God and our response to it. Please stand before the Lord as I read these words from Psalm 95, as God calls you to acknowledge the presence of his glory.

Ps. 95:1 "Oh come, let us sing to the LORD! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation. 2 Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving; Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms. 3 For the LORD is the great God, And the great King above all gods. 4 In His hand are the deep places of the earth; The heights of the hills are His also. 5 The sea is His, for He made it; And His hands formed the dry land. 6 Oh come, let us worship and bow down; Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. 7 For He is our God, And we are the people of His pasture, And the sheep of His hand."