

## In Spirit and in Truth

### The kind of worship God has made possible to us through Jesus Christ

A Samaritan woman in a life-changing conversation with Jesus at Jacob's well heard some things which she probably did not fully understand. Had she done so, her life may well have been changed even more.

Jesus told her that God was seeking to be in relationship with people of a certain kind. Because he himself is Spirit, it would be those who would "worship him in spirit and in truth (**John 4:24**)."

The Samaritan lady, living in a culture which accepted the existence of God and the coming of the Messiah, probably understood what Jesus meant by these words a whole lot better than someone influenced by the modern religious culture in which we have to live. Even though Jesus had yet to be crucified and resurrected, and the message of salvation was still in the future, she knew the story of Israel and its liturgy in which God would only accept being approached in the way that he personally provided. God had made it clear to Israel that they could not worship, approach or in any way come to him with their own expression of belief or method of sacrifice. He gave them specific instructions on the method to be followed and the sacrifices to be given. All other worship was unacceptable (**Leviticus 10:1-3, 2 Chronicles 26:16-21**).

God has not changed in this respect, either. From the time of Cain and Abel (**Genesis 4:3-5**), God still seeks those who will worship him only in the way that he has provided and can accept. What, then, is acceptable to God today?

In many Christian churches, "worship" has become synonymous with "worship songs." Many "worship services" consist mainly of emotional singing and responses in hand waving and in some cases, falling about on the floor. Can this be "worship in spirit and in truth?" Not if it never gets beyond the emotional enjoyment of the "worshipper" for his own sake and satisfaction. How, then, do we respond to God in a way which is closer to what he's seeking?

Well, we have the same initial clue as our Samaritan lady, in that we too can learn from the nature and pattern of worship that God prescribed in his covenant relationship with Israel. When the high priest, for instance, ascends from the holy place to the holy of holies in the annual atoning renewal of the covenant with an offering strictly specified by God, it pointed directly to the role of the future Messiah.

And what was that role? It was to create a new relationship between God and man, and the only way that could be done was by Jesus offering himself, pictured by the high priest's offering in the holy of holies. Jesus, as both Son of God and Son of man, became God's graciously provided and only acceptable form of response of human beings to God. It is only through Jesus, with and in Jesus that we may acceptably draw near to God with our hands of faith filled with nothing other than the offering which Jesus has already made on our behalf and in our place once and for all.

In this new relationship between God and man, then, brought about by God's self-offering in Jesus, all worship and prayer to God became grounded and centred in Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who brings God to man and man to God in total reconciliation. It is Jesus who stands in our place when we respond in prayer and worship to the Father, because we are unable to pray to the Father in any way which is remotely worthy of him. All our prayers and worship outside of Jesus Christ are unclean but Jesus, taking our place, gathers up our faltering prayers and worship into his and presents them to the Father within his own acceptable offering.

We do not, therefore, come before God worshipping him in our own name, or for our own sake, seeking fulfilment for ourselves. We come in the name and significance of Jesus, and for the sake of Jesus alone. Worship and prayer are not ways in which we give expression to our own emotions and seek gratification of our needs. They are ways in which we uphold before the Father his beloved Son and take refuge in his atoning sacrifice. We make that our only plea, realizing that he already knows our needs.

*Nothing in my hands I bring; Simply to Thy cross I cling.  
Naked, come to Thee for dress, helpless, look to Thee for grace.  
Foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me Saviour, or I die.*

When the Father accepts us in Jesus Christ - and there is no other way that he will - he does not distinguish between our offering and Jesus' offering for they are one and the same, wholly ours and wholly his. By the Father's will, Jesus himself becomes humanity's response to God. Our real lives are hidden with Jesus in God and are therefore included and accepted in Christ's offering to the Father. In worship and prayer Jesus acts on our behalf and in our place both as representative and substitute so that what he does in our stead is effected as our very own. Our humanity is not belittled in the process. On the contrary, it is upheld and realized in the humanity of Christ.

So when we are invited to pray and worship through, in and with Jesus to the Father, we can be sure that our sinful, faltering prayer and worship will not fall to the ground, but will be gathered up and presented to the Father in holy and prevailing form. At the same time we have the promise of God to send his Holy Spirit, mediated through the name and humanity of Jesus, into our hearts crying "Abba, Father (**Galatians 4:6**)."

We can rest assured, then, that as we worship and pray in spirit and in truth we shall be caught up with all of our infirmities within the intercession of the eternal Spirit and accepted, in Christ, into God's presence as his beloved children (**Romans 8:26-27**).