

When the Heart Is Missing

Dub McClish

When we study the sad history of the cyclical apostasies of the descendants of Jacob, it is difficult not to be harshly critical of their folly. God never did before or ever will again so choose and bless a nation as he did Israel when He, with a mighty hand, brought her out of Egypt and gave her a wonderful land. How disgracefully she began to squander her place of privilege even when she had barely escaped Egypt. For her unbelief, the entire generation of Red-Sea-crossers (with only two notable exceptions) had to perish in the Wilderness.

The generation Joshua led across Jordan and that God enabled to subdue Canaan seemed to be made of better material than its predecessor. However, with the death of this godly leader and his generation, the inspired historian sadly reported:

And there arose another generation after them, that knew not Jehovah, nor yet the work which he had wrought for Israel. And the children of Israel did that which was evil in the sight of Jehovah, and served the Baalim (Jud. 2:10-11).

The faithful-unfaithful cycles continued through the period of the Judges. When God allowed the demands of the people for a king, these circumstances did not improve much. The monarchs of both the United and Divided Kingdoms were a corrupt and sorry lot for the most part (without exception in the Northern Kingdom). The few noble and godly kings in Judah could not overcome the evil influence of the ungodly ones. Consequently, by the latter part of the eighth century B.C., God could no longer tolerate Israel's degeneracy. Thus He allowed Assyria to overwhelm Israel in 722, forever ending its existence as an independent nation.

Just prior to Israel's destruction, God called three men to prophesy. Isaiah was His "city" prophet in Jerusalem, Hosea was His prophet specifically to Israel, while the lesser-known Micah was a man of rural roots from the village of Moresheth in western Judah. Micah's message was directed at both Israel and Judah (Samaria and Jerusalem [1:1]). He announced the doom of Israel, the reasons for it, and then presented these as object lessons to Judah that it might learn better and escape the same fate. The corruption in Israel was beyond repair, and fewer than twenty years following Micah's prophetic graphic description (1:6), the Assyrians leveled the wicked capital.

Jeroboam corrupted the worship of God in Israel from the first day of its nationhood. The corruption was systemic, including golden calves as objects of worship, substitute temples, an unauthorized priesthood, and new feast days. It was an easy step for Ahab and Jezebel to

introduce the worship of Baal later. The moral and religious implosion suffered by Israel sealed its doom. History has shown that no nation, even one chosen of God, can indefinitely survive without strong moral underpinnings. When these are ignored or abandoned, inevitable disintegration sets in and eventual national collapse is certain.

Despite some admixture with idolatry, Judah at least maintained the Levitical priesthood, the sacrificial system, and the feast days—all centered in the temple. It is evident, however, from the prophets of this period, especially Micah, that the religious practices were mere ritual—perfunctory and empty formalities. What they did in religion was not only cold and heartless ceremony, but it was also compartmentalized so that it had no impact on or connection with their daily lives.

The princes, priests, and prophets were all involved in iniquity, but vainly tried to hide behind religion as if it were a talisman protecting them from God's wrath:

They build up Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity. The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet they lean upon Jehovah, and say, Is not Jehovah in the midst of us? no evil shall come upon us (Mic. 3:10-11).

As were the leaders, so were the people who tolerated, supported, and even demanded such scoundrels. The people delighted in false prophets who would justify their drunkenness (2:11). Such prophets made the people to err and took vengeance on those who would not feed them (3:5). Men had grown wealthy by using “wicked” balances and “deceitful” weights, practicing violence, and uttering lies (6:11-12). There were none good or upright left, and even the best of them was as useless and pain-inflicting as a “brier” (7:2-4).

Against this backdrop of iniquity, God challenged the people to explain their rebellion (6:1-5). He condemned them for their ingratitude, reminding them of the many times he had delivered and spared them, thereby demonstrating His righteousness. The people responded by asking, perhaps sarcastically, what it would take to assuage God's wrath. Would sacrifices of animals, or of oil, or even the ultimate sacrifice of one's firstborn satisfy Him (vv. 6-7)?

In contrast to their questions about sacrifices, God's answer through Micah is a clearly enunciated negative:

He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth Jehovah require of thee, but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God? (v. 8).

The same people (including prince, priest, and prophet) who would make their offerings to God would then go out and defraud and kill. Justice, kindness, and humility before God

were completely lacking in their lives. While their sacrifices were wholly insufficient, let none charge God's prophet with minimizing the very sacrificial system God had authorized. The prophet was not implying that God did (does) not desire, command, or accept outward manifestations of devotion. He has required these in every age and still does.

It appears that these people were not so much intent on pleasing Jehovah as they were trying to push back His wrath through their rituals, so as to continue in daily lives of iniquity. The main point of this passage (and to a degree, of Micah's entire book) is that acts of worship, even when outwardly conforming to the law of God, are vain and hypocritical when not accompanied by a sincere heart and a virtuous life. However, this is neither the first nor the last statement of the principle in God's Word.

Over three centuries earlier Samuel sternly chastised King Saul for the same sort of failure:

Hath Jehovah as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of Jehovah? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as idolatry and teraphim. Because thou hast rejected the word of Jehovah, he hath also rejected thee from being king (1 Sam. 15:22-3).

Again, Samuel's outcry was neither against Saul's plan to offer sacrifices nor against God's system of offerings per se. However, to offer those particular sacrifices would have been both vain and abominable. The very sacrificial animals Saul had procured represented his rebellion against an explicit command of God. Both the heart and the life of the king were far from God, and the slaughter and roasting of some animals, though outwardly complying with God's law, could not please Him.

In the midst of David's humble prayer for forgiveness, he emphasized this same principle:

For thou delightest not in sacrifice; else would I give it: Thou hast no pleasure in burnt-offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: A broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise (Psa. 51:16-17).

Instead of the mere show of sorrow over sin, indicated by fasting, weeping, mourning, and the rending of their garments, Joel admonished the nation of Judah on behalf of Jehovah: "Turn ye even to me with all your heart...and rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God" (Joel 2:12-13).

Isaiah accused the residents of Jerusalem of hypocritical worship and praise of God: “This people draw nigh unto me, and with their mouth and with their lips to honor me but have removed their heart far from me” (Isa. 29:13).

The Lord picked this very statement to characterize the utter hypocrisy of Jewish leaders of His time: “This people honoreth me with their lips; But their heart is far from me” (Mat. 15:8). He then added that their worship was vain (v. 9). Who can forget His judgment of worshipers whose hearts were not in their good deeds, but who merely put on a show of piety for the praises of men (6:1–7)?

Jesus told the woman at Jacob’s well that true worshipers — the kind of worshipers God seeks — are those who worship Him in “spirit and truth” (John 4:23–24). Reliable exegetes have long understood *spirit* in this passage to refer to one’s sincerity and the genuineness of His devotion as he engages in worship. Such a worshiper will hardly be found living a reprobate life through the week. To state it another way, worshiping “in spirit” implies not only sincerity of heart in the acts of worship themselves, but also a devoted heart and life that undergirds the momentary devotional acts. *Truth* is a reference to the Bible, God’s revealed Truth — the only source of information any human being has from which to learn what acts of devotion are required of and acceptable to Him.

In this one passage we have God’s perfect “worship formula” for past, present, and future worshipers. Sincerity and Truth balance each other fully. Acts of worship, even when complying with the “letter of the law,” are hollow and vain if done as mere ritual or if offered by a corrupt heart. On the other hand, worship offered by one who is morally upright in every way — and who is sincere in his acts of devotion — fails to please God if he ignores God’s avenues of worship (as Nadab and Abihu learned “the hard way” [Lev. 10:1–2]). It has never been “either-or,” but always “both-and.”

We have rightly tried to teach those in the religious world at large the wrongness of offering unauthorized worship. We must continue to do so, but because of widespread ignorance and many antinomian leaders, we must now teach many of the Lord’s own people this same essential lesson.

Let us never forget that, as essential as it is to offer all of and only those acts of worship that God has authorized, one can do this and still offer vain worship if reverent sincerity and pure daily living do not characterize us. Those who conceive of true religion as attending an

hour of worship once a week, hardly giving God a thought otherwise, have missed it entirely. And what of those who seem to believe that as long as they are present long enough on the Lord's day to nibble some bread and sip some fruit of the vine, they have "done their duty" and may leave and live as they please?

Then there are those who loudly sing "Purer in heart oh God, help me to be..." Sunday mornings but who apparently see no inconsistency in polluting their minds the rest of the week by drinking from various entertainment cesspools. Others will forsake the assembly on the Lord's day morning to go deer hunting or to a child's soccer game, and then slip in on Sunday evening to partake of the Lord's supper. I believe they have wasted their time regarding acceptable worship.

There is no clearer principle in Scripture than that one cannot substitute outward and superficial acts of homage for a heart that is attuned to self and the world. Let us all rededicate ourselves to honoring God and His Son with our hearts and our daily behavior as well as with our lips and our acts of devotion when we assemble for worship.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for my "Editorial Perspective," and it was published in the April 2002 edition of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, of which I was Editor at the time.]

Attribution: From thescripturecache.com; Dub McClish, owner and administrator.