

MEANINGLESS WORSHIPBible Background • Isaiah 29Printed Text • Isaiah 29:9-16a | Devotional Reading • Luke 8:9-14**Aim for Change**

By the end of the lesson, we will: KNOW that God expects worship from the heart; UNDERSTAND that God is worthy to be praised; and PRAISE God from the heart.

In Focus

Have you ever heard the old English idiom about the person who can't see the forest for the trees? This proverb generally describes a person who gets so caught up in the details of a situation or life itself that he or she fails to see the complete picture. Details serve as distractions that cause us to focus our attention on the smaller, less important things in life rather than living life to its fullest.

This idiom can also apply to our relationship with God. It is so easy to get caught up in the daily burdens and blessings of life that we forget about the Life Giver. We fail to consult God about our daily decisions or even spend time with Him on a daily basis. Then, even though we faithfully attend church, our worship can become hollow. We lift our voices and sing songs without meaning, we say "Amen" to teachings we have no intention of honoring, and we fulfill our religious regulations without any thought to our righteous relationship.

Today's lesson focuses on the nation of Judea during a time when the nation's prosperity and the people's pleasures caused them to forget about God and serves as a reminder that God is always to be worshiped in spirit and in truth.

Keep in Mind

"Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men" (Isaiah 29:13).

Focal Verses

^{KJV} Isaiah 29:9 Stay yourselves, and wonder; cry ye out, and cry: they are drunken, but not with wine; they stagger, but not with strong drink. 10 For the Lord hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and hath closed your eyes: the prophets and your rulers, the seers hath he covered. 11 And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed: 12 And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned. 13 Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men: 14 Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid. 15 Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the Lord, and their works are in the dark, and they say, Who seeth us? and who knoweth us? 16a Surely your turning of things upside down shall be esteemed as the potter's clay:

^{NLT} Isaiah 29:9 Are you amazed and incredulous? Don't you believe it? Then go ahead and be blind. You are stupid, but not from wine! You stagger, but not from liquor! 10 For the LORD has poured out on you a spirit of deep sleep. He has closed the eyes of your prophets and visionaries. 11 All the future events in this vision are like a sealed book to them. When you give it to those who can read, they will say, "We can't read it because it is sealed." 12 When you give it to those who cannot read, they will say, "We don't know how to read." 13 And so the Lord says, "These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote. 14 Because of this, I will once again astound these hypocrites with amazing wonders. The wisdom of the wise will pass away, and the intelligence of the intelligent will disappear." 15 What sorrow awaits those who try to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their evil deeds in the dark! "The LORD can't see us," they say. "He doesn't know what's going on!" 16a How foolish can you be? He is the Potter, and he is certainly greater than you, the clay!

The People, Places, and Times

Worship. The first clear mention of a worship act is found in Genesis 4:2-7. Previously, Adam and Eve recognized that God had given them “every herb . . . and every beast” (1:29-30), so their children Cain and Abel brought simple offerings to Him. We do not know precisely where or how the offerings were made. But we are told they brought two types of offerings, and Cain’s was rejected while Abel’s was accepted.

The brief account in Genesis 4 tells us two very important things about worship: First, God acknowledges worship. We do not know whether God had spoken to the brothers at this particular site prior to this point. But on this day, God spoke (4:6) and acted as they were worshipping (vv. 4-5). God made this time holy for them. Second, God is the focal point of worship. Scripture does not mention an altar or any words spoken by these men. We do not know what prayers they might have offered. But we are told what God did; His action was a vital part of worship.

In the same way, God is very much involved in our worship and delights in the inner love and devotion of our hearts.

Background

Only God would dare to recruit a person for ministry by telling him he would be ineffective, but that’s exactly what happened to Isaiah. When God called Isaiah into the prophetic ministry, He told him that as a result of his message, the people would harden their hearts, plug their ears, shut their eyes and not understand with their hearts (Isaiah 6:10). Given the hopelessness of the situation, the perplexed prophet asked God, “Lord, how long will this go on?” And [God] replied, ‘Until their towns are empty, their houses are deserted, and the whole country is a wasteland; until the LORD has sent everyone away, and the entire land of Israel lies deserted’” (vv. 11-12, NLT).

Years later, Isaiah told the northern kingdom of Israel—whose capital was Samaria—that its fate was set. “For the Lord will send a mighty army against it. Like a mighty hailstorm and a torrential rain, they will burst upon it like a surging flood and smash it to the ground” (28:2, NLT). The Assyrians would utterly destroy Israel and take her inhabitants into captivity.

The destruction of Israel should have encouraged Judah, rightfully afraid of the Assyrians, to repent. However, instead of trusting the Lord to protect them, they entered into an alliance with Egypt. God told them, “I will cancel the bargain you made to cheat death and overturn your deal to dodge the grave” (v. 18, NLT). He refers to Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, as Ariel (29:1). This was a symbolic name that meant, “altar of burnt offering” referring to the altar located at the entrance to the temple. The name implied the fate of the city: “Jerusalem will become what Ariel means—an altar covered with blood” (v. 2, NLT).

The prophet foretold that the Assyrian army would surround the city and besiege it. The situation would appear to be hopeless; then suddenly, their ruthless enemies would be driven away. God Himself, not the Egyptians, would strike the Assyrians and deliver the wayward people from complete destruction. In spite of this miraculous intervention, the Judeans would still not turn their hearts to God. The people would remain rebellious, their worship would remain superficial and their leaders would continue to place their trust in things other than God.

At-A-Glance

1. Warning to the Rebellious (Isaiah 29:9-12)
2. Warning to the Religious (vv. 13-14)
3. Warning to Rulers (vv. 15-16a)

In Depth

1. Warning to the Rebellious (Isaiah 29:9-12) During the time of Isaiah’s ministry, many of Judah’s citizens were drunk—not from the cup of wine but rather the cup of rebellion. God had given them Levites as priests to teach them, prophets to warn them and seers who foretold their destruction if they continued their sinful ways. However, just as alcohol dulls the physical senses to reason, the nation’s prosperity and the people’s pleasures had dulled their spiritual sensitivity to God. Again and again, God reached out and called out to His wayward people, and again and again they rejected Him. A few years earlier, God had raised up the Assyrians to invade and destroy the northern nation of Israel. Now Isaiah was prophesying that God would use the Assyrians to besiege Jerusalem (Isaiah 29:1-

4). Unlike Israel, God would not allow the Assyrians to destroy Judea, but His purpose was to warn them and to demonstrate His awesome power to preserve and protect them. When things appeared at their worst, God would intervene and destroy their enemies.

This dire prophecy should have driven the people to their knees. They should have cried out to God, but instead of crying out, they rejected Him. The nation was too strong, and things were going too well, to listen to what it viewed as a tired old prophet who was too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.

This was the final straw. Instead of using the Holy Spirit to soften the people's heart to His Word, God sent "the spirit of deep sleep" (v. 10) to make them even more insensitive to His calling. The people who had closed their spiritual eyes would become spiritually blind. The prophets would continue to speak, but the people would not understand. The political and religious rulers would continue to govern, but no one would seek God's direction. God's judgment against these rebellious people was to turn them over to their own hearts. There are consequences for rejecting God. That is why our Lord warns us: "Don't harden your hearts as Israel did at Meribah" (Psalm 95:8, NLT).

2. Warning to the Religious (vv. 13-14)

A lot of what serves as worship is nothing more than lip service. This situation is not new; it was also true of the ancient Judeans who worshiped in the temple. "These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote" (Isaiah 29:13, NLT).

The Judeans claimed to be children of God, but they lived their lives in disobedience. Their religious ceremonies are just going through the motions. They prayed with their mouths and sang with their lips, but their hearts were far from God. They were "temple-fied." They knew how to conduct themselves in the temple. Like some of us, they knew when to sing, when to sit, when to stand, and the appropriate time to cut loose with a hearty "Amen." But this was nothing but learned robotic behavior.

Hundreds of years later, Jesus would quote this passage from Isaiah to rebuke the people of His day (Mark 7:6-7), and it still holds true for many people today. We go to church and go through the motions. There is no passion in our praise and no warmth in our worship, because during the week there has been no obedience in our observance.

According to Jesus, "A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart" (Luke 6:45, NLT). Even though the people of Judah were faithful in their religious practices, their everyday lives revealed the emptiness of their worship. They were spiritually superficial, their worship was worthless and God passed judgment on them. The wisdom of heaven ceased to flow (see James 3:15-17), and God withheld spiritual understanding.

It is so very easy to allow our personal relationship with Christ to degenerate into righteous ritual. We find ourselves going to church and going through the motions. True heartfelt worship begins with obedience, is sustained by daily communion, and bursts forth in an outpouring of public praise.

3. Warning to Rulers (vv. 15-16a)

The leaders of Judea sought advice from everyone but God. In their arrogance, they refused to accept God's protection and instead trusted in a secret alliance with Egypt (2 Kings 18:21). They thought they were scheming in secret, but Isaiah revealed to them that God was well aware of their plans. In truth, they were not revolting against Assyria; they were rebelling against God, who was using the Assyrians to accomplish His will. How could they possibly think they knew better than God or that their plans were superior to His? They were dumber than a lump of clay. Clay does not question the hands that shape it nor does the created thing think of itself as higher than its creator. However, that's exactly what the Judean rulers did. They doubted God's ability and trusted their plans over His. Their arrogance would bring them to the brink of disaster before God intervened to save them (2 Kings 18:13-19:37).

The three greatest threats to our spiritual health are rebellion, empty religion and arrogance. When we truly worship God, we submit our lives to His truth, cultivate a vibrant relationship with Him, and humble ourselves to the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Search the Scriptures

1. What was God's reaction to the people who resisted His prophets and rejected Him (Isaiah 29:10)?
2. How did Isaiah describe the empty worship the people offered up to God (v. 13)?

Discuss the Meaning

What are some “holy habits” we can build into our lives to ensure that we don’t lose sight of God in our daily lives? Think of your own relationship with a holy God.

Lesson in Our Society

Unbroken fellowship with God is vital to our existence and peace of mind. Our praise and worship brings us into God’s presence and protection. However, continual disobedience stirs God’s wrath and puts us in a position to lose our greatest possession—a personal relationship with God.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Isaiah 29:9-16a

9 Stay yourselves, and wonder; cry ye out, and cry: they are drunken, but not with wine; they stagger, but not with strong drink.

In the book of “Second Isaiah” (as [Isaiah 13-55](#) is noted), the prophet’s denunciation came because of Israel’s prevalent hypocrisy and arrogance. As God’s “seer” and “mouthpiece,” Isaiah was given an important responsibility to cry against the nation’s disobedience and false worship. Why was God angry with them? They had rejected the word of the Lord.

George Buttrick, et. al., believe that [Isaiah 29:9-16a](#) was an oracle not specifically connected to the preceding or following prophecies but a stand-alone rebuke. Though the hearers would not perceive the message’s meaning, the word declared indicates that willful disobedience to God’s moral and spiritual demands always destroys one’s capacity to hear and respond to truth. Also, the Clarke commentary suggests that these verses literally describe the “stupidity and hypocrisy of the Jews” in the face of impending truth (Clarke, 586).

God gave Isaiah a specific command to pass on to the people: “Stay yourselves and wonder.” The Hebrew word for the phrase “stay yourselves” is *mahahh* (**maw-HAH**), and it gives the idea of questioning oneself, or to be hesitant to do what is right; to be reluctant to obey what has been commanded; to linger or delay in complying with God’s word. The NKJV uses the phrase “pause and wonder” and makes clear that the people were unwilling to follow God because their worship life was unhealthy.

Why did they have an unhealthy worship life? According to [Isaiah 29:9](#), they would “cry . . . out, and cry” (complacency), become blind (calloused hearts), and stagger with drunkenness (full of pleasures), but not in the physical sense. *Strong’s Concordance* describes “blindness” (Heb. *carver*, **san-VARE**) in the plural form. In relation to today’s Scripture text, this kind of blindness is spiritual and always occurs when we deviate from biblical truth and our hearts become desensitized to God’s divine commands.

Spiritual blindness is worse than physical blindness because it always comes with deception and guile, specifically for the one who is blind. Jesus taught this principle to the Pharisees when He healed a blind man in the temple and used the event to castigate the “blind” Pharisees, who were more concerned with religious traditions than the power of God (see [John 9:1-41](#)).

Drunkenness (Heb. *raveh*, **raw-VEH**) literally means, “one who is satiated (completely satisfied and full to the brim) with intoxicating liquor.” Solomon used this same image to indicate how out of control and “poisonous” one can become when he/ she is under the influence of another “spirit” (see [Proverbs 23:29-35](#)). In like manner, Israel had become so totally influenced by the “spirit” of religion and tradition that their praise and worship of God had become toxic and dead to God.

10 For the LORD hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and hath closed your eyes: the prophets and your rulers, the seers hath he covered. 11 And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed: 12 And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned.

Because Israel rejected truth and chose intoxication and spiritual blindness, God “accommodated” them two ways: (a) the spirit of deep sleep; and (b) spiritual ignorance. The text states that God “poured out . . .” upon Israel (v. 10). The Hebrew word *nacak* (**naw-SAK**), is quite stunning in that it has several ideas, including “to pour out like a drink offering, to appoint, as for destruction, or to ratify like one would do a covenant.” Notice the text does not say the people sought “deep sleep”; instead, it was God who initiated the sleep.

The phrase “the spirit of deep sleep” (Heb. *tardemah ruwach*, **tar-day-MAW ROO-akh**) gives the idea of the “winds of lethargy,” where stupor, laziness, and slothfulness is the order of the day among God’s people, including their leaders, elders and prophets. The Hebrew words for “prophets” (*nabiy’*, **naw-BEE**, meaning inspired man or woman), “rulers” (*ro’sh*, **roshe**, meaning priest, or chief priest), and “seers” (*chozeh*, **kho-ZEH**, meaning prophet or gazer) indicate the influential of the nation. In short, those who were responsible to lead people into the presence of the Lord were themselves being turned from the Lord because of their own rebellion and spiritual lethargy. Jesus shared this same principle when He offended the Pharisees and accused them of being blind leaders who also lead blind followers (see Matthew 15:14). Israel’s leaders had become a stumbling block, causing God’s people to forsake true worship and turn to false and insincere worship.

Godly examples are so needed in the body of Christ. Today, the church has no shortage of sin and rebellion—even in the pulpits and among leaders. How imperative it is for those who lead the church to be irreproachable in both conduct and thought? Or should all Christians be irreproachable in both conduct and thought?

God’s displeasure was clearly evident in that He closed or sealed the “book” of divine counsel so that Israel no longer had a vision of His purposes and plans. The Hebrew feminine word for “vision” is *chazuwth* (**khaw-ZOOTH**), and here the idea is a revelation or insight from God. But in this instance, the impartation of “vision” is described in the manner of one who has been handed a book and told to read it, but the words and understanding are so indistinct that it cannot be read. Raymond Brown points out that the one who could read the book refused, and the uneducated or blind in heart and spirit were unable to read it. Thus, the “meaning of the vision is sealed in impenetrable mystery; the people were spiritually illiterate” (Brown, 278), and the stupor was self-induced by those who were being addressed.

13 Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:

Isaiah continued his biting condemnation for God on Israel, and rebuked the people for their hypocritical and insincere worship. They were deceived to think that their religious acts and half-hearted worship was acceptable to the Lord.

One specific denunciation against Israel was that it “(drew) near to God” with mouths and lips but not with their hearts. The phrase “draw near” in Hebrew (*nagash*, **naw-GASH**) gives the idea of coming close to God but not in an intimate posture. Another meaning is to be in proximity to a person or object without ever making contact with them or it. It’s tragic that our churches today are filled with people who attend every Sunday and never make intimate contact with the Lord Jesus because their worship and intimacy is extremely staid, garnered mostly by the “tradition learned by rote” (Isaiah 29:13, NASB). Jesus quoted from this same passage in Isaiah when, once again, He castigated the Pharisees for their religious “show” (see Matthew 15:7-9). Yet, Jesus knew that the religious leaders were nothing more than “smoke and mirrors,” and their teaching kept Israel in spiritual ignorance and darkness. In the same manner, we should be careful not to fall prey to spiritual charlatans who substitute the Word of God with their own form of doctrine.

In Isaiah 29:13, the phrase “precept of men” in Hebrew is *mitsvah o ’enowsh* (**mits-VAW oh en-OSHE**), and the idea is a spiritual or moral law given by mortals, rather than the precise and concrete word of God. Unfortunately, churches today can be guilty of this same principle. Lest we point fingers, we need to examine our own worship and see whether we have fallen victim to following people instead of God.

14 Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid.

In verse 14, the prophet came to the centerpiece of his condemnation against Israel. God would bring judgment on Israel in an extraordinary manner. The phrase used is “a marvellous work” (Heb. *pala’*, **paw-LAW**), and the idea is to be astonished, hard to fathom, and a wonder that is beyond human comprehension. *Pala’* is used primarily with God as the subject, as God does things that are beyond the bounds of human powers or reasoning. It is not the unusual act, or even the degree of astonishment that is described, but

the clear-cut exhibition of God's miraculous power that is clearly evident as He brings forth His work or judgment (also see [Numbers 16:1-35](#)).

Some scholars believe that the marvelous work described by Isaiah was the judgment God would bring on the people by the hand of Sennacherib, the king of Syria (see [Isaiah 36:1-22](#)). However, another way to look at this "marvellous work" is that God would bring spiritual revival upon the "religious dead" in the form of King Hezekiah who wholly followed the Lord and sought spiritual reform for Judah (see [2 Kings 18:1-7](#); also see [Isaiah 32:1-8](#)). God's prerogative was to bring the people out of their spiritual lethargy into true worship. However, God would not hesitate to cleanse the land of the religious half hearted, who thought they were wise (also see [Romans 1:21-22](#)), even if they perished in the process (see [Numbers 16:1-35](#)).

15 Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the LORD, and their works are in the dark, and they say, Who seeth us? and who knoweth us?

Isn't it interesting that human beings try to "hide" from God? How foolish can people be to try to veil their hypocritical religious practices from God, who is omniscient (knows all), omnipresent (is present everywhere), and omnipotent (all powerful)? Yet, Israel's sham and deceit were so deep that it truly believed it could bring God false worship and that He would not be the wiser.

The Bible is clear that nothing can be hidden from God (see [Exodus 3:7](#); [Psalm 33:13-14](#); [Hebrews 4:13](#)). However, Israel was so determined to keep its religious hypocrisy that self-deception destroyed the people. Imagine the people saying to themselves: "Who sees me? Who knows me?" It is also interesting that God delivered "woe" to the people. It gives the idea of a warning that impending judgment and destruction would come upon Israel because they chose to "hide their counsel from the LORD" ([Isaiah 29:15](#)). The Hebrew word for "counsel" is *etsah* (**ay-TSAW**), and this feminine word gives the idea of consultation, purpose, plans, designs, and wisdom. Israel had made up its mind; the people planned to give meaningless worship to God. They were self-deluded to believe that it would be justified; however, they did not fully realize that as far as God was concerned, their worship was completely absent of faithfulness.

16a Surely your turning of things upside down shall be esteemed as the potter's clay:

The final address by God in our Scripture text reminds us of [Jeremiah 18](#), where God told that prophet to go to the potter's house to determine how God would "reshape" Israel in the same manner the potter reshaped the vessel on the wheel. In this text, God wanted the people of Israel to know that He is God. Through their false and insincere worship, they seemed to have forgotten who called the shots in their lives. Israel's idea was to make God in its image rather than allow God to remold and shape the people in His image. However, God would teach them a very stern lesson to humble His people and bring them back to true worship.

Today, we must constantly be reminded that meaningless worship is offensive to God, and those who offer it to Him must correct it. The truest way to bring our lives in line is repentance. If we find ourselves "going through the motions," we must ask God for forgiveness so we don't fall into the same trap as Israel.

Say It Correctly

Assyrians. uh-SIHR-ee-uhnz.

Judea. joo-DEE-uh, -DAY-uh.

Genesis. JEN-uh-sis

Samaria. suh-MER-ee-uh.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY	Fruitless Worship	(Isaiah 1:10-17)
TUESDAY	Worshipping Our Own Achievements	(Isaiah 2:5-17)
WEDNESDAY	Lives Untouched by Religious Observances	(Isaiah 58:1-7)
THURSDAY	Refusing to Listen	(Jeremiah 13:1-11)
FRIDAY	Tuning Out God	(Zechariah 7:8-14)
SATURDAY	Receiving the Word	(Luke 8:9-15)
SUNDAY	Hearts Far from God	(Isaiah 29:9-16a)