

Prepare To Meet Your God (Part Five): Religion And Holiness

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The prophet Amos writes in Amos 4:2, “The Lord GOD has sworn by His holiness.” Although not in the habit of swearing oaths—His Word is sufficient—God sometimes does so to focus on the seriousness of a pronouncement. As the writer of Hebrews says, “For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself” (Hebrews 6:13).

What does God see in Israel that so affronts Him that He has to swear “by His holiness”? Israel had every opportunity the Gentiles did not: His calling, His promises, His Word, His laws. He gave the Israelites these gifts to help them become His sons and daughters, but God sees them as diametrically opposed to Himself. Should not God expect to see some of His characteristics in His sons?

A simple illustration from the experience of this author when visiting a family may help clarify this point. Parents often show their pride by prominently displaying a photograph of their children, and the parents in this family were no different. In this case, three of the four children bore a strong resemblance to their parents, but the fourth child was so noticeably different that she was obviously either an adopted child or the product of adultery.

In effect, God says, “I have children who bear no spiritual resemblance to Me.” He shows the cause to have been spiritual adultery—going after other gods and other ways of life.

“I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me; the ox knows its owner and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, My people do not consider.” Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the LORD, they

have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away backward. (Isaiah 1:2-4)

A dumb ox and donkey show more sense and appreciation to their masters than Israel did to her Father! Instead, she rebelled against Him!

God gave Israel many advantages—His law, His providence, His protection—to allow His people to live His way of life, but they turned their backs on Him and followed the ways of other gods. Paul shows how illogical this is:

For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live. (I Corinthians 8:5-6)

Since we depend entirely on God as our Designer, Life-giver, and Sustainer, He has complete authority over how we should live. Among the multiple pantheons of gods, only one God lives the way a true, good, and faithful Deity ought to live. This particular God—the God of Israel—is holy, that is, He alone is transcendently different, superior, and separate. He has called His people to be holy (I Peter 1:15-16). It follows that a holy person must be different in the way that God is different.

From God's holiness flows His love—outgoing concern for others, His outstanding attribute. When God looked on Israel, however, He saw a whole nation, from her culture to her government to her religion, organized around human *self-concern*. God wanted to see clear evidence of godly living, by which He could verify their claims of being His people. In Israel, He saw no such evidence; instead, He saw a people opposed to Him in every area of life. Spiritual adultery had occurred.

Form But No Substance

God's complaint against Israel's religion is that it had form but no substance. The people made pilgrimages to their shrines, but they did not grieve over their nation's sins (Amos 6:6). They went to church, but they continued to

cheat and steal and lie (Amos 8:5-6). They made a great show of being religious, but their religion caused no changes in their conduct.

God's Word shows that true religion is having concern for and helping the weak, as well as showing hospitality and generosity to those who cannot return the favor (James 1:27). It is sacrificing oneself in service. As Christ said, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (John 15:13). It is speaking the truth and being honest—even swearing to one's own hurt (Psalm 15:4)—not backbiting or gossiping. True religion is not exacting the last cent on a deal, or impatiently watching the sun go down on the Sabbath to do one's business or pleasure. It is not taking usury and so on. To use a cliché, Israel talked the talk but did not walk the walk.

Even after giving them His law, God did not leave the people of Israel without a witness—a right example—of how to live. While they were drifting away, He gave them the Nazirites, people who had consecrated themselves to God (Amos 2:11; see Numbers 6:1-21). A Nazirite, a "separated one," was anyone from a tribe other than Levi who dedicated himself to God for a special period of time. Nazirites were separate because of their holiness, vowing not to drink wine, cut their hair, or touch dead bodies.

God apparently called enough Nazirites within Israel to exemplify pure living before His people. Additionally, He sent prophets to testify against the nation and expose the direction it was going. How did Israel react? Probably through some kind of persecution, the Israelites forced the Nazirites to break their vow and muzzled the prophets (Amos 2:12).

The more holy we become, the greater the contrast between us and the world—and the more likely the world will seek to persecute us. When Jesus Christ, the most holy, moral, and different human being who ever lived, walked this earth, His own people killed Him. They could not tolerate His holiness. Thus, He warned His disciples, "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20).

A Warning to the Church

Like ancient Israel, we can easily fall back into our former ways. The Israelites rejected the law of God and relied on the traditions of Gentile nations. Elijah had to take drastic measures to prevent Baal worship from completely eradicating the worship of the true God (I Kings 18:20-40). Some of Judah's kings spent years tearing down shrines and high places to foreign gods (II Chronicles 34:1-7).

Christ warned the Pharisees: "For laying aside the commandments of God, you hold the traditions of men" (Mark 7:8). For example, Christmas and Easter are traditions of men, but they are lies. What happens if a person, trying to establish a religion, mixes falsehood with the truth of God? Recall God's wrath when Aaron made a golden calf at the urging of the Israelites in the wilderness and proclaimed a feast to the Lord (Exodus 32:1-5). Observing Christmas and Easter in the name of Christ is no different.

Blending the lies of this world with the truth of God produces a foul mixture called *syncretism* (see James 3:10-13). "Christian" religions of this world have mixed the traditions of paganism with some of the truth of God's Word. This admixture of beliefs is no different from what Israel was doing when Amos wrote back in 760 BC. Since their rejection of the house of David under Jeroboam I, the Israelites had practiced a syncretic religion (Amos 5: 21-26; 8:14; I Kings 12:25-33).

Today, the religious problems we face generally reside in the more subtle parts of this world's Christianity. When the apostle John tells us we must come out of the world (I John 2:15-17), he is not talking just about Christmas and Easter, but about attitudes, approaches, ideas, and inclinations that we drag with us and mix with the truth of God. How many of these do we still have? We may not have identified many of them, but as we continue to grow in grace and knowledge, we should become aware of them and repent.

Through human nature, Satan constantly attempts to displace the truth of God with error. The loss is usually subtle and gradual, much like the effect on the proverbial frog in water that is slowly coming to a boil. In a religious organization, the second generation of adherents tends to lack the vigor and dynamism that characterized the founding generation. The church of God has followed the same pattern today, as one of her largest branches adopted one false doctrine after another (see Revelation 2:18-29). Her administration,

ministry, and membership quickly slid back into the world. Syncretism is certainly alive in our day!

Paul warns Timothy, a leader of second-generation Christians:

Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. (II Timothy 1:13-14)

It is the responsibility of God's church to be extremely careful not to drift away from the truth. (For more information on this topic, see our booklet, [*Guard the Truth*](#).) Ancient Israel did not "hold fast" to the truth God had given her, and by the time Amos came on the scene, the people exhibited glaring proof that they were far removed from the way of life revealed to their fathers.

Building Righteous Character

"Hear and testify against the house of Jacob," says the Lord GOD, the God of hosts, "That in the day I punish Israel for their transgressions, I will also visit destruction on the altars of Bethel; and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and fall to the ground." (Amos 3:13-14)

Israel's false religion, represented by the altars of Bethel, is at the root of her problems. The violence and injustice in Israelite society ultimately stemmed from the false teaching proclaimed from the pulpits.

For this reason, God shows that the preacher—not the civil authority—is the most vital part of the community. God set up the Levites within Israel to function as the teachers of His way of life, and He sent the prophets as watchdogs on the Levites and civil leaders. In many cases, when the king or the nation had wandered from the way, the prophets were sent to correct them (e.g., II Samuel 12:1-15; I Kings 18:17-19; II Kings 21:10-15).

At the foundation of every community is a way of life that its people live and teach their children. Does that way of life conform to the God of the Bible,

or does it spring from the minds of men? If it is of men, it will not work very long. So it was in Israel. The religion of Israel began with a man, Jeroboam I, who changed the true worship of God (I Kings 12:26-33).

- » He established a feast in the eighth month to replace the true Feast of Tabernacles in the seventh.
- » He may have replaced the Sabbath with Sunday worship.
- » He replaced the Levitical priesthood with men of his own choosing.
- » Lastly, he replaced God with golden calves in Bethel and Dan.

A religion with such a beginning was doomed to fail, bringing the nation down with it.

When religion is ungodly, its power is destructive, and every institution in the nation suffers. For instance, Amos 2:7 describes a deliberate act of ritual prostitution in a pagan temple: “A man and his father go in to the same girl, to defile My holy name.” What was the rationale behind this perverse, immoral act?

Because Baal was neither alive nor a moral force, his worshippers felt they could communicate with him only by ritual actions that portrayed what they were asking him to do. Since Baal was, like almost all ancient deities, a fertility god, the human act of intercourse demonstrated that they wanted Baal to prosper them. But what was its *real* effect on the participants and the nation? Ritual prostitution only served to erode the family, eventually leading to the destruction of the nation.

Baal was different from his adherents merely in that he was above them. God’s difference from us is that He is holy. He is moral, and we are immoral. After we accept His calling, He commands us to become moral as He is.

The basis of all immorality is selfishness, the exact opposite of what God is. God wants to transform us from people who are bent on pleasing ourselves

to people who show concern for others. This transformation is the crux of our salvation through Jesus Christ. In those God calls out—those who, by faith, will voluntarily yield to Him—He is building character based on outgoing love.

Immorality lies in the desire of men to live self-centered lives independent of God, as when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree (Genesis 3:1-19). To become moral, we must kill our selfish egos through the use and guidance of God's Holy Spirit. When we see that our thoughts and ways are not His, we should repent and reform. By submitting to Him, we take a small step in being transformed into what He is.

This process—building character and becoming holy—takes place in one's judgment period. Judgment is now on the house of God (I Peter 4:17). Eventually, God will convict the whole world of sin (John 16:8-9) and attempt to bring all men to repentance (II Peter 3:9) in the Millennium and general resurrection.

Becoming Holy

When a person swears by a thing greater than himself, it lends weight to what he says. He means that his word is as sure as the existence and power of the one by whom he is swearing. When one takes an oath by God or on the Bible, such as in a court of law, men recognize that God Himself makes the oath binding.

God swore by His holiness. "As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct" (I Peter 1:15; see Leviticus 19:2). We find here that we are to be holy because He is holy. Holiness, like righteousness, is both imputed by God and achieved by us. Just as the vessels of the Tabernacle and Temple were holy, so are we when we are consecrated, set apart, for God's use upon conversion (I Corinthians 3:16; Colossians 1:22). Holiness, however, is more than an imputed state of being. It is a process we must pursue throughout our Christian lives (Hebrews 12:14). That is why God admonishes us to become holy, to be holy in our conduct (Romans 12:1; II Corinthians 7:1; Ephesians 4:24; II Peter 3:11; I John 3:3).

The laws written in Leviticus 19, from which Peter quoted, are injunctions against defiling a person's mind, character, personality, and attitudes through sins like idolatry and breaking the Sabbath. God also speaks of taking care of the poor, of not reaping the corners of the fields, and of being just in judgment. He warns against respecting persons and always siding with the disadvantaged (who may be wrong in his cause). He also mentions not eating anything with blood, practicing divination or soothsaying, and so forth. These and other defilements make one unholy, impure, and defiled.

He wants us to be holy because He is with us and *in* us. He does not want to be contaminated by the impurities of His people. God wants to have close contact with His people. "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God and they shall be My people" (II Corinthians 6:16). If we want to have fellowship with Him, we must start to become holy as He is. As Paul urges in II Corinthians 6:17, "'Come out from among them and be separate,' says the Lord. 'Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.'"

Israelites, God's people, are advised to be separate so they can avoid every possibility of defilement: "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (II Corinthians 7:1). *Flesh and spirit* indicate "physical and spiritual" or "body and mind"—one's total personality—outwardly and inwardly in all relations with God and fellow man. Our sanctification, part of which we do, sets us apart to walk the way of holiness.

God's Holiness

Holiness is what makes God what He is. It is not an attribute of God like love, joy, or omnipotence. Holiness is the ground, basis, and foundation of God. It is His uniqueness and totality, His deity and divinity itself. It is the perfect purity of God.

His holiness is symbolized in the construction of the Tabernacle: "The veil shall be a divider for you between the holy place and the Most Holy" (Exodus 26:33). A curtain separated the two chambers, and only the high priest could pass through the veil—and then only once a year. The phrase *Most Holy* is literally "holiness of holinesses." It represents the height, the

very pinnacle of morality. God was isolated from Israel, not because He was unapproachable, but because He wanted us to see the difference between us and Him. He really is approachable; no one in the universe is more approachable than God. But He is *transcendently superior*.

By the exercise of His will, He kept Himself separate from His people to impress upon them—and us—that the difference is *moral*. He gave His people tables of the law, the code of a perfectly moral God, so that they could become moral like He is. He also gave them the Mercy Seat, upon which blood was sprinkled so that they could be reconciled with Him. Both the Mercy Seat and the tables of stone were kept in the Most Holy.

Adam and Eve hid themselves from God only *after* their sin. Before that, they were not afraid of Him. We tremble before God, not because we fear the Divine Power, but because we know we are sinners. As sinners, we do not belong in the presence of an absolutely moral and pure God. Because of guilt, we feel estranged, fearful, and isolated from God.

We can easily see this in Isaiah's experience with our holy God (Isaiah 6:1-5). The prophet writes that he "saw the Lord sitting on a throne" (verse 1), above which stood an unnamed number of seraphim, each with six wings. One of these angels cried, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" (verse 3).

Isaiah's reaction is instructive. He wails, "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" (verse 5). In the presence of a transcendently holy God, this man of God felt completely shattered! Every cell of his body cried out its corruption!

It is holiness that makes God what He is. No one is holy in the way our God is. He *is* holiness, the God of utter moral perfection. No man or god can claim this. He is utterly unique and different. God swears by what He is, by His very nature. It is the very strongest of oaths.

The Sin of Samaria

Israel, on the other hand, swore by “the sin of Samaria” (Amos 8:14), which actually refers to a name, Ashima, a Canaanite mother-goddess. This Ashima represents the importation of foreign cults and gods. Historically, Israel borrowed gods from the surrounding nations and combined their worship with that of the true God. By changing His nature, they destroyed the true God’s image, thereby altering the source of beliefs, ideals, laws, standards, ethics, and morality. Thus, when a famine of God’s Word comes (Amos 8: 11), immorality swiftly sets in.

Dan was the site of one of the sanctuaries that Jeroboam I set up to imitate the Temple in Jerusalem (I Kings 12:29). His counterfeit sanctuary featured a counterfeit Holy of Holies. Instead of cherubim, it had two golden calves arranged to form the base of a counterfeit mercy seat. Over the years, the calves’ visible presence became familiar to the Israelites, who soon began worshipping them as God. After a little more time, the nature of the calves became the nature of God.

Beersheba, with its false shrine associated with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was in the southern part of Judah. People made pilgrimages to Beersheba, a very long and arduous trip. Over time, they came to believe that righteousness accrued to them simply by going there. They walked “the way of Beersheba” (Amos 8:14), thinking to put God in their debt.

But God owes no one anything! He blesses those who are in the right attitude, following His way, and growing and overcoming.

Amos also warns modern Israel of a future famine of the Word (verse 11), when a powerful movement will arise to syncretize all the religions into one. Already, ecumenical movements, like the “Parliament of the World’s Religions,” held in Chicago in August and September 1993, are working “to promote and encourage religious tolerance and interfaith cooperation.” During the Parliament, 6,000 representatives from all the world’s major religions discussed common ground. They signed “The Global Ethic,” a code that condemns environmental abuses, sexual discrimination, social disarray, and military aggression. Attendees watched or participated in New Age, Baha’i, Buddhist, Confucian, Muslim, Native American, Shinto, Sikh, Taoist, and Christian rituals.

Those who worship these abominations, God warns, “shall fall and never rise again” (verse 14). How final! It truly behooves us to “stock up” on God’s Word now, before this spiritual famine—already in its early stages—reaches its peak, so we will be sustained to endure the hard times just ahead.

Leaven in Religion

“Come to Bethel and transgress, at Gilgal multiply transgressions; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days,” God says in Amos 4:4. *Transgress* means “rebellion,” not just sin. As we have seen, God considered Israel’s syncretistic approach to religion to be an outright rejection of His way of life.

Amos is speaking sarcastically when he suggests that the people sacrifice and tithe more often. “If you bring your tithes every three days instead of every three years,” he says, “maybe your god, Baal, will respond,” which sounds somewhat like Elijah’s sarcastic comments in I Kings 18:27.

“Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven, proclaim and announce the freewill offerings; for this you love, you children of Israel!” says the Lord GOD” (Amos 4:5). Leavening was not allowed to be in any sacrifice: “No grain offering which you bring to the LORD shall be made with leaven, for you shall burn no leaven nor any honey in any offering to the LORD made by fire” (Leviticus 2:11). Only two offerings, the wave loaves on Pentecost (Leviticus 23:17) and the thanksgiving offering (Leviticus 7:11-14), were made with leaven. A sin offering preceded the offering of the wave loaves, the leavening in them representing the sins still in the congregation of Israel.

In Amos 4:5, his sarcasm continues. The Israelites might as well have been making all their sacrifices with leaven because all their traditions, doctrines, customs, and religious duties were nothing but vanity. Even though they were sincere in doing them, they were nevertheless a leaven brought in from the world. In like manner, Jesus tells us to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16:6-12), that is, of their doctrine and their traditions.

Even a glance at modern religious practices reveals how thoughtlessly people accept the doctrines and traditions they have learned—without proving them. Millions of sincere people attend church every week, celebrate the holidays, and send their children to church schools without ever proving their beliefs. They sing in the choir and donate generously when the plate is passed, but they do not really know—have an intimate relationship with—the god they worship. They blindly accept the leaven they were taught growing up.

God Transforms Us

God threatens to send fire, symbolizing divine rejection and purification (Malachi 4:1), upon Israel because of her false religion (Amos 5:6). The Bible, though ultimately written for His spiritual children, focuses on ancient Israel because it is comprised of God's chosen people. We can see our own lives in their examples. Amos proves through the Israelites' disobedience and corruption that they had no relationship with God. They had not allowed their privileged position under the covenant to transform them into godly people. Thus, God must send a purifying destruction upon them.

Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba were places of pilgrimage, places people went to observe the feasts. But God says, "I hate, I despise your feast days" (Amos 5:21)! Verses 22-23 show that the Israelites loved all the rituals and entertainments of the feasts, but they did not leave the feasts better people (verse 24). They returned to their homes unchanged, unrepentant, after what was supposed to be a rededication of their lives to God!

Our attitudes in attending the feasts today tell God just as much as the Israelites' did during Amos' ministry. Do we go to the Feast of Tabernacles to seek God and learn to fear Him, as He says in Deuteronomy 14:23? Our reasons for attending God's feasts are essential. Do we go to *get* love and enjoy *ourselves*? The feasts should be enjoyable, but those who go there to *give* love and *serve others* profit the most from them. Those who go to get love usually become offended and leave the feast, telling anyone who will listen how "cold" others were to them.

From the biblical events that occurred in these places, Bethel pictures *reorientation and hope*; Gilgal, *possession of the promises*; and Beersheba, *fellowship with God*. We can have these things in Christ if we abide under the terms of our covenant with Him. In the example of Israel, we can see that hearing and knowing the way of God intellectually is not enough. The lives of the people of Israel did not match what they knew.

The lesson we can learn from the events in Bethel is particularly illustrative of God's transforming influence. At Bethel, Jacob had a dream of a ladder reaching to heaven, with angels ascending and descending it (Genesis 28:12). When he woke from his dream, Jacob recognized that God was surely in that place and named it "Bethel," or "house of God." The ascending and descending angels, messengers of God, depict God, not man, initiating communication. In other words, the ladder brought God to Bethel. When God arrives on the scene and descends to communicate with an individual, He makes a difference in that person's life.

Indeed, Jacob's life began to change quickly, especially his attitude. He had been fleeing for his life, but when he reached Bethel, his future changed dramatically when God contacted him. To Jacob, God reconfirmed His promises to Abraham and Isaac. A transformation began then that did not end until he died.

On the run from Esau, a man to be feared, Jacob felt that at any moment his brother would appear around the next rock. He arrived at Bethel hopeless, but he left a man with a future—God said that He would be with him. So Jacob arose and made a covenant with God: If He would bless him, then he would give a tenth, a tithe, to God (Genesis 28:18-22).

When Jacob returned to Bethel after serving Laban for some twenty years, God appeared to him again, changing his name to Israel (Genesis 35:1-15). In the biblical record, a name change—typically occurring during a period of crisis in a person's conversion—signifies a change in his heart. Undoubtedly, a significant change occurred here, and another at Peniel, where Jacob wrestled with Christ (Genesis 32:24-30). Peniel was a stepping stone to what happened at his return to Bethel, and between them, we see Jacob's spiritual conversion.

To Israel and Amos, then, Bethel represented reorientation and hope. There, the old life and the old man became new. This idea later finds expression in New Testament teaching on our spiritual transformation into the image of God (II Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:12-15, 20-24; I John 3:2).

Contact with God causes transformation, and Bethel represents this hopeful reorientation. Israelites may have journeyed to Bethel, but Amos shows that *no transformation occurred*. There was no change in holiness or morality. They enjoyed the fellowship and good times of the feasts, but they returned to their homes, and it was “business as usual.” Unlike Jacob, they had not repented.

The illustrations in Amos 5:8-9 picture the process of change and transformation of character that God seeks. The Pleiades and Orion represent the change of seasons when different constellations dominate the sky. Though He does not really change the Pleiades or Orion, God makes them appear to shift around the heavens because of the earth’s revolution around the sun. “The shadow of death into morning” means He turns darkness into light. “The waters of the sea” describes the process of evaporation and condensation that produces rainfall upon the earth.

Notice the changes in these pairs: the Pleiades *to* Orion, shadow of death *to* morning, day *to* night, waters from the sea *to* the earth, ruin *to* the strong, and fury (destruction) *to* the fortress. God is a transforming God; He changes people for the better. When we seek God, He will make a difference in our lives.

True Religion

I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream. (Amos 5:21-24).

Israel's religion was going nowhere. The people were not righteous, moral, or just in their dealings with one another, so their playing at religion, though sincere, was despicable to God.

When Noah offered a sacrifice after the Flood, God was pleased with its fragrance (Genesis 8:20-21). But the Israelites made sacrifices that did not please Him. They offered the same sacrifices, but there was a vast difference between the offerors, between Noah and the Israelites of Amos' day. Ezekiel 14:14 lists Noah as one of the most righteous men who ever lived. But these Israelites were corrupt, unjust, merciless, and hypocritical.

In the list of sacrifices in Amos 5:22, the sin offering is not mentioned, suggesting that the Israelites felt they had committed no sin requiring forgiveness. Its absence shows that they were not in contact with God; they had no relationship with Him. If they had, they would have been aware of where they had fallen short and could have repented.

Amos includes three other offerings that the Israelites gave, but God would not accept. Knowing what they represent gives us insight into how the people were falling short in their spiritual lives.

The **burnt offering** teaches total devotion to the Creator. It was completely burned on the altar, typifying the offeror's complete devotion to God. This offering corresponds to the first four commandments, which show love and devotion toward God.

Similarly, the **grain offering**, also called the cereal offering, meal offering, or meat offering, teaches total dedication and service to man. It was offered in conjunction with the burnt offering. The grain offering typifies the last six commandments, which regulate our relationships and love toward our fellow man.

The **peace offering** represents one's fellowship upward to God and outward to man. It was primarily given in thanks for God's blessing. When this offering was made, God, the priest, the offeror, and his family and friends shared a common meal and fellowship, as all these parties ate part of the sacrificed animal.

But from God's reaction to their offerings, it is apparent that the people of ancient Israel were not devoted to God or to their fellow man. Nor were they in true fellowship with either God or man, and therefore they could not see their sins. They did not see the holiness of God and compare themselves to it. If they had, they would have seen that they needed to make changes in their lives, but in judging themselves solely against other men—an unwise thing to do (II Corinthians 10:12)—they felt no need for repentance.

They did not understand what God really wanted of them. They may have appeased their own consciences with their church attendance, hymn-singing, and sacrifices, but they went home and continued to oppress and cheat and lie.

True religion is

1. *A relationship with God* (Matthew 22:37). Without a relationship with Him, we cannot know Him or understand His purpose for us.
2. *Submission and obedience to God* as our part of the relationship (James 4:7-8). In offering to make the covenant with the children of Israel (Exodus 20-24), He proposed to them. They accepted their obligation—to obey Him—but they were unfaithful in fulfilling it. As the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16) and the future Bride of Christ (Revelation 19:7-9), the church must not fail as ancient Israel did.
3. *Genuine love for God's truth* (II Thessalonians 2:10). Israel neither loved nor sought God's truth.
4. *Moral integrity* (I Peter 3:8-12). Living in righteousness and holiness shows love toward God and man.
5. *Social responsibility* (James 1:27). Israel, as a nation of this world, had a responsibility to ensure that their care of their fellow Israelites was acceptable in God's eyes. The church, a spiritual organism, is not of this world, and as a body, has no responsibility *at this time* to change society—only ourselves. We must take care of our brethren within the church now, and we will have our chance to help this world in God's Kingdom.

These five points will not “buy” us into the presence of God; rather, *they are five proofs that we follow true religion*. Remember Jacob’s dream. God chooses us and meets us at the foot of the ladder, making a difference in our lives. He gives us a way of life to follow, and we pledge to follow it. Thus, true religion is not a way *to* God but a way of living *from* God.

Grace and Law

The giving of the law at Mount Sinai was the climax of a series of events that began at Passover, the moment and the means of the Israelites’ redemption. At Passover, they killed a lamb and put the blood on their doorposts. When the death angel passed through to slay the firstborn, those who had blood on the doorposts were spared. God was saving, redeeming, buying back His people.

Mount Sinai adds the other half of the equation. Though redemption through the blood of a lamb (Christ) freed them from slavery to Pharaoh, the giving of the law at Mount Sinai shows that freeing them is not all that God had in mind. After being redeemed, Israel came to Mount Sinai, heard the law, and assented to keep it. God gave the law to show the pattern of life and the principles of righteousness for the redeemed.

On one side of the coin is grace, and on the other is law and obedience. They are harmonious; they cannot be separated. They are both vital parts of the process of sanctification leading to salvation. Grace is given upon repentance from sin, but after repentance, what is a Christian to do with his life? Obedience to God and living a life of holiness become his priorities, and these work to produce character in the image of God (II Corinthians 3:18).

Amos 5:25 reconfirms that sacrifice, offering, and shedding of blood are foundational necessities for a relationship with God. “Did you offer Me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel?” The answer is, “Yes.” The people were sacrificing, but is that all that they did? He implies that, though they were sacrificing, something was missing: obedience to the law.

God told Israel that He would dwell in the Tabernacle—specifically in the Holy of Holies—symbolism we need to understand. The most crucial piece of furniture inside the Holy of Holies was the Mercy Seat, a wooden chest overlaid with gold. Its lid functioned as the seat. Inside the chest, under the seat, were stored the two tablets of stone, symbolizing God sitting on His law, the basis of His judgment.

When a man sins, he begins to separate himself from fellowship with God (Isaiah 59:1-2). He is no longer permitted, as it were, to come into the Holy of Holies. What means did God provide to heal the broken relationship, to restore the fellowship?

One might think that giving a sin offering would appease God, and He would forgive the sin. However, Hebrews 10:4 is very clear: “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.” Then why did God have the Israelites make these sacrifices? The author answers, “But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year” (verse 3). As Amos does not mention the sin offering in Amos 5:22, it seems that Israel did not even attempt to be reminded of sin.

So, how was fellowship restored? On the Day of Atonement, once a year, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies to sprinkle the Mercy Seat with blood. God’s intent in this ritual was to show people that the blood covered their transgressions of His law. The redeemed were again in fellowship with God.

The blood and the law are essential parts for maintaining the correct relationship with God. The law is permanent and codifies the nature of God in precepts to help us understand Him clearly. Obedience to His law is a perpetual requirement, with blood available to cover any transgression of it.

Application for Today

The New Testament application is found in I John 2:1-2:

My little children, these things I write to you, that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

Propitiation is “an appeasing force.” The law spells out the perpetual requirements of obedience to God, and blood pays for sin.

God desires sacrifice and obedience, not a religious game. It must be emphasized that our obedience is not for the purpose of saving us—salvation is by grace—but to assist us in perfecting holiness (II Corinthians 7:1) and to provide a witness of God working in our lives (Matthew 5:16).

Israel’s purely ceremonial religion could never safeguard the truth because the people were not living it. By being used in the worship of man-made deities rather than the Creator God, the rituals of their shrines were entirely divorced from the truth found in the law. God will not be mocked (Galatians 6:7). The evidence of true religion is that through His correction in mercy and love, it will touch and purify every area of life. If we are truly in contact with the true God, change will occur gradually as we grow.

To determine if our profession and practice of religion is pleasing to God, we must consider two questions: 1) Are we covered by the blood of Jesus Christ? and 2) Are we obeying God to the best of our understanding?

We never obey to the extent of our knowledge because knowledge, knowing what God expects, always outpaces ability. We gather knowledge before we can live it, and that makes us feel guilty because we realize we are not applying what we know. This guilty feeling is not really wrong, for without guilt we would not change. It is good if it makes us change, but when guilt becomes neurotic, it becomes destructive and wrong.

Today, psychologists are trying to remove guilt from our every thought, word, and deed—a sure sign of widespread spiritual poverty and complacency. But God says we can worship Him with a pure conscience because we know we have been cleansed of our past sins through Christ’s

sacrifice and because we know God is faithful to us as we live by faith in Him (Hebrews 10:19-23).

Zeal Without Truth

Amos was conscious of having a message from God. He wanted his message to have the greatest possible impact. He desired to get the entire truth to these people so that they could repent. The apostle Paul had a similar desire:

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. (Romans 10:1-3)

The Israelites were zealously religious. However, they erred in isolating sincerity and ceremony from the truth as revealed in God's Word. Sincerity and ceremony are only parts of what constitute a religion. The people attended services, flocked to the shrines, performed the rituals, and offered the sacrifices. But they did not worship according to knowledge or cultivate the righteousness of God. David writes, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise" (Psalms 51:17). God despised Israel's sacrifices because the people did not offer them in spirit *and* truth (John 4:21-24).

In the United States, people are generally religious as well. American money bears the motto, "In God we trust." Churches seem to rise on almost every corner, and a great deal of talking about religion goes on. Many get caught up in the "spirit of the holidays." Radio stations play Christmas music continuously for weeks leading up to the holiday. Polls indicate that more than three-quarters of Americans consider themselves religious. Fifty-four percent of Americans believe in "God as described in the Bible" (Pew Research Center, *Spirituality Among Americans*, "[Spiritual Beliefs](#)," December 7, 2023). But as a whole, we do not worship God in spirit *and* truth.

Worshipping in truth is knowing and following God's way of life.

Worshipping in spirit can mean two basic things: 1) through and by means of the Spirit of God, and also 2) with sincerity, enthusiasm, and zeal. Jesus intends us to understand His words in John 4 in the same respect. Those who worship God must do so in truth, through His Spirit, with sincerity and zeal. They follow a way of life and practice a religion that pleases God. And their lives reflect the incredible transforming power of God.