



**SO NEAR, YET SO FAR**

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The title of this article may remind us of a real-life experience. Perhaps it is the agony felt when witnessing a person approaching the finishing line of life—even during the last few days, minutes, or seconds—without having lived a spiritual life here, thus losing the opportunity for a life with God in eternity.

The scriptures are filled with examples of people who once lived on this same planet earth and journeyed toward salvation just as we are, but they failed. Their lives and their mistakes provide examples for us today.

In the days of Noah, mankind had grown quite wicked, according to the book of Genesis: *“Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”* (**Genesis 6:5**). As a result, God determined to destroy the earth with a great flood. Finding one man, Noah, who was JUST in His eyes, God used him to deliver a message to warn the people.

God told Noah to build an Ark of gopher wood, with specific measurements and finishing materials, as a vessel to save those who listened. Noah, as a preacher of righteousness (**2 Peter 2:5**), preached the message; but no one listened except those of his own household. Only when it rained incessantly did people remember what had been preached. Too late, they all died in the flood.

In another situation, Lot had chosen to dwell on the plains of Jordan, eastward, upon separating from his uncle Abram. This land was near the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose inhabitants were so wicked that God planned to punish them with fire from heaven (**Genesis 13:11-13, 18:20**). Having found favor with God, Lot is told to flee from the destruction to come with his wife, daughters, and sons-

in-law. His wife and daughters oblige, but the sons-in-law take Lot for a joker and laugh at him.

As Lot and those of his household tarry, the angel of the Lord holds them by the hand and leads them out of the city (**Genesis 19:12-26**) with this instruction: *“Escape for your life! Do not look behind you nor stay anywhere in the plain”* (**17**). God rains brimstone and fire on the two cities, and the sons-in-law die in the inferno. In the course of flight, Noah’s wife violates God’s command, looks back, and turns into a pillar of salt. What a sad ending!

Later, God chose Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery. Serving as a guide throughout the journey, he faced criticism but never gave up. As well, he obeyed everything the Lord told him to do except for one time. For a second time, the Israelites had no water to drink in the wilderness. Moses asks for God’s help and receives this instruction: *“Take the rod, you and your brother Aaron gather the congregation together. Speak to the rock...”* (**Numbers 20:8**).

Instead of speaking to the rock as God commanded, he struck it twice. The water came out, but God was not pleased. He said to him *“...you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them”* (**verse 12**). He died a short distance before reaching the promised land.

In the New Testament, Jesus faces death, hanging between two thieves. One of the thieves mocks and scorns Jesus while the other rebukes his colleague and confesses that both of them are worthy of punishment, for they have committed crimes. He then turns to Jesus and asks for mercy: *“Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom”* (**Luke 23:39-43**). The Lord responds, *“Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”* What a precious answer!

Learning from these examples, we can see that we lose a golden opportunity for eternity when we fail to heed the word of God when it is preached. Rather, we should always heed the gospel message

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when we hear it and continue on our journey in Christ until the end, never looking back to our former way of life (**Luke 9:62; Mark 13:13**). If we do look back, the Lord has provided an opportunity for us to make things right with Him again (**2 Corinthians 6:2b**). Then, we will not be in the category of those who are “So Near, Yet So Far.”

### WHAT WOULD MAKE WORSHIP WORTHLESS?

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“Worthless” is a word Christians should never use in describing any of God’s commands, and that includes the command to worship. In fact, it is impossible to over-emphasize the importance of worshiping God scripturally. Our worship to God must be in keeping with the divine traditions just as they were delivered. Paul says, “*Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you*” (**1 Corinthians 11:2**). The King James Version translates the word “traditions” as “ordinances.”



The five items of worship enumerated in scripture are Praying, Singing, Teaching, Communing, and Giving (**Acts 2:42**). To be scriptural, and therefore acceptable to God, faithful Christians must conduct these acts of worship without introducing changes or innovations. Departing from God’s pattern for worship will render it vain and worthless. Jesus says, “*And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men*” (**Mark 7:7**).

Another aspect of worship to consider is our focus. If we perform all the items of worship according to the truth of God’s word but fail to worship in spirit, then we again miss the mark. Jesus tells the woman at Jacob’s well in **John 4:24**, “*God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.*” To worship in spirit means to focus on the activity in which we are involved.

It’s easy to go through the motion of any activity and allow it to become rote repetition. In fact, it is said that repetition is the mother of skill. The more we repeat something, the easier it becomes. When we get really good at something, we might say, ‘I can do that in my sleep.’ We can shut off our brains and still perform the

skill. If such happens in our worship to God, we are not worshipping in spirit.

Here are some practical questions to help us examine whether we are worshipping in spirit.

1. Have I ever reached the end of the song service without having paid attention to the words?
2. Have I ever gone through the communion service without remembering Jesus and the great sacrifice He made for my salvation?
3. Have I participated in any of the five items of worship without concentrating on what I was doing?
4. Have my eyes ever felt heavy during worship, allowing me to nod off? This question is not intended to criticize but to make us aware of a potential problem. (Sometimes the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak; so, we need to make the effort to get sufficient rest before worship. Then we can stay mentally and emotionally alert so that our hearts can be wholly engaged in the worship. Let us remember we are in the presence of Almighty God, praising Him and hearing Him speak through the teaching of His word.)

In the Old Testament, God says to Judah through the prophet Isaiah, “*I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle...*” (**Isaiah 1:11-14**). Again, “*Bring no more futile sacrifices; Incense is an abomination to Me.*” For generations, God commanded worship, sacrifices, offerings, incense, and more, but through Isaiah He says, “*My soul hates [these].*” What would make their worship worthless, futile, and despised? Their heart was not in it!

If worship becomes a formal, ritualistic, rote-performance that lacks the proper attitude and reverence, even if it aligns with the truth, it is unscriptural, worthless, and an abomination to God. It’s like the vain repetitions of the heathen (**Matthew 6:7**), the prayer of the Pharisee that lacked humility (**Luke 18:9-14**), and the whitewashed tombs that “*indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness*” (**Matthew 23:27**).

May our worship always be whole-heartedly “*in spirit and truth.*” And may it never be said of us, “*These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me*” (**Matthew 15:8**). Let us not mindlessly yield worthless worship, but let us offer up praise, adoration, and worship that is worthy of His great name.



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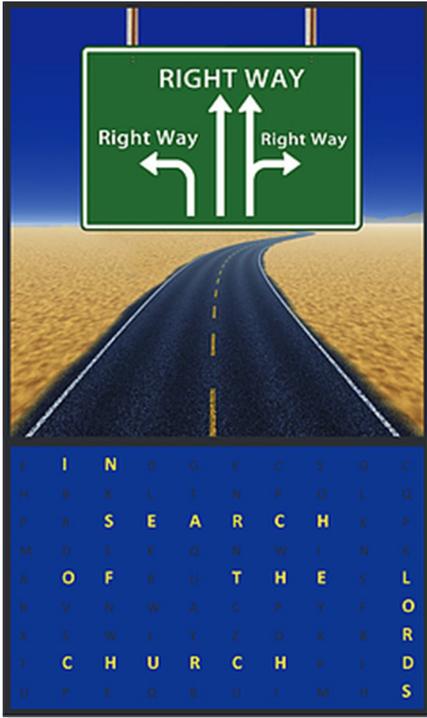
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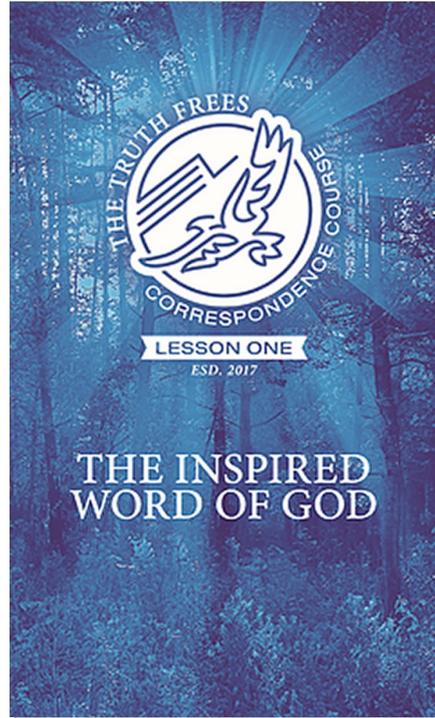
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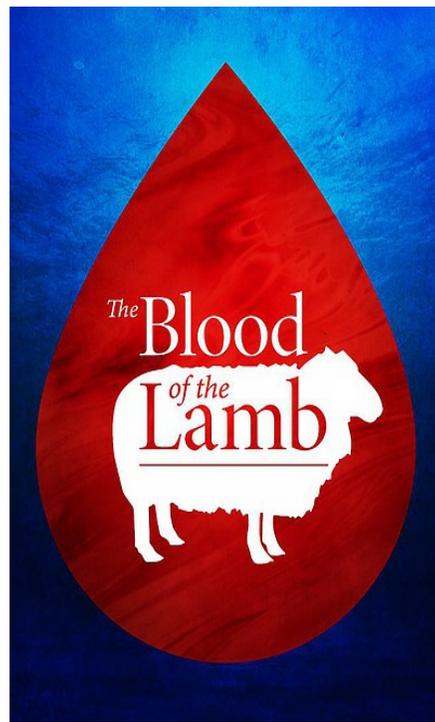
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