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MY DISAPPOINTMENT AT PETCO Genesis 12:4-9

During World War II the British Royal Air Force was concerned about the rate at which their bombers were being shot down by the Nazis. They wanted to add some armor to give the aircraft a better chance to withstand battle damage, but where should they put it? They had to be judicious about the use of armor because the heavier the plane the shorter its range and the less its payload could be. So they asked a well known statistician named Abraham Wald to study the problem and make recommendations. After doing his research on planes returning from missions he recommended adding more armor to areas where the planes had not been hit! That seems at first to make no sense. However, his reasoning, though counterintuitive, was very wise. Obviously some planes had returned from missions and some had been shot down. He could see the battle damage from the planes that returned and reasoned that the places they had been hit clearly were not the most critical for those planes had survived and made it home. Likely the places that weren't hit were the areas where the planes that were shot down did get hit causing them to go down, so those were the areas needing extra protection.

There are lots of counterintuitive ideas in the world. Today I am going to talk about one of them. The Bible actually has quite a number, among them Jesus' claim that the way to find life is to give it up. We will look at another such counterintuitive idea today that runs squarely against the most common of human thoughts, that the way I get the most out of life is to take care of me. We're going to consider the actions of a man who lived nearly 3000 years ago. Some might think this is nothing but ancient history with no relevance for us. But remember this man changed the course of history. Let's look at Genesis 12:4-9 where we will see a different, counterintuitive approach.

WORSHIP IS THE RIGHT STARTING POINT

We saw earlier that Abram was told by God he would bless him and make him great, but that he would have to leave his home and his family. Verse 4 says "Abram went as the Lord told him. He obeyed God's call and headed into the area known as Canaan. Finally at a town called Shechem, which was about 30 miles due north of what is Jerusalem today, God appeared to him and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." In other words, good job, Abram, you've arrived. This is the place.

So Abram built an altar there. What do you do at an altar? You get married, right? Well, yes, you can get married at an altar, but the main purpose of an altar is to be a place where one worships God. Abram could have built a barn or a home or some corrals or at least some sort of rest area, but he didn't. ***The first thing Abram build in the Promised Land was an altar.*** It's important to note that fact.

From there he traveled a little farther south to the area near Bethel. There he pitched a tent. It is likely that Abraham was semi-nomadic. He was not a true nomad, but he moved around within one geographical area with his flocks, thus he and his family primarily resided in tents. But once again near Bethel according to verse 8 he built an altar. Do you get the theme? Abram's priority was to build altars and worship God.

Verse 8 tells us at Bethel he "called on the name of the Lord." Though it is not specifically mentioned he likely had also "called on the name of the Lord" at the first altar. But what does it mean to call on the Lord? It sounds like it means to ask God to do something. If you are in a class in school and the teacher "calls on" you, what is he or she doing? The teacher is asking you a question and requesting that you respond. So we typically think of calling on the Lord as dialing his number and talking to him about some issue in our lives, asking for his assistance. Indeed, the expression is used this way in the Bible. In Psalm 34:6 David wrote, "this poor man called and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles."

But that idea doesn't seem to fit in Genesis 12:7-8. Abram doesn't appear to be having any troubles or be asking God to do anything in particular. So it doesn't look like he's calling on God in that way. There is another use of the expression "call on the Lord" in the Bible. Deuteronomy 32:3 says, "I will proclaim the name of the Lord. Oh praise the greatness of our God." What does that have to do with calling on the Lord? The word translated "proclaim" in that verse is the exact same Hebrew word that is translated "call on" in Genesis 12:8. So it literally says, "I will call on the name of the Lord," but the translators understood that one of the meanings of "call on" is to proclaim. That seems to be the sense of it in our verses. In other words, as a first priority Abram built altars in the places God led him to go and there he proclaimed the greatness of God. He worshiped and praised God.

This will show up in Abram's life on several occasions. It happens in the next chapter of Genesis. Imagine what a profound impact God's revelation of himself had on Abram. That revelation told him that God is real, and it told him who he is. God let him know that he is one good God, not a plethora of powerful beings that are a mixed bag. Then God told him that he had specifically chosen him to play a

special role in God's plan and he was going to bless him. Don't you think that Abram must have frequently wondered, "why me?" Why did God choose him as the key element in his plan to bless the entire world? There was no reason. It was simply God's divine choice. God had told him he would show him when he arrived at the land he would give to his descendants. God had now fulfilled that promise. So Abram responded in the only reasonable way. He praised God. He called on him and worshiped him.

This is the right response to God. In fact, it is the right starting point for everything in life. It is the necessary step for living a healthy, whole life and for being what God has created humans to be and what we all want to be.

It is common for people to believe in God. What is not so common is to truly worship him. I have a number of neighbors who clearly accept the idea that God is real and that he is great. But worshiping him, really worshiping him, is not the primary focus of their lives. In fact, for most it plays little if any role in their lives.

It seems like a radical, almost fanatical thing to say, but Abram was on the right track when he decided that the most important thing he could do when he reached Canaan was to build an altar and worship God. The Bible is quite insistent that this should be the starting point for all of life. Hear that again: Worship should be the starting point for all of life.

In Exodus 20:3 God began giving his list of instructions for how humans should live, the list we call the Ten Commandments. The first one, the starting point, was "you shall have no other gods before me." In other words, nothing should take the place of God in your life. He is before everything else in life. Worshiping him is what defines who you are and how you live. Don't let anything take his place.

Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength." What's left? Nothing! If you are putting all your heart, soul and strength into something, surely it is the most important thing in your life. Note the verse didn't say, "put some heart, soul and strength into it." It is all your heart, soul and strength that is required. That means everything in your life starts with this.

In Romans 1:21 as Paul described the sad state of the human race and how it got here he said, "Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him." That was the key step. That is where every problem in the human race started. They refused to worship God. I cannot stress this enough. Every

problem in human life begins with a refusal or failure to worship God. When you make that choice you set in motion a chain of miserable events. In other words, the first priority in life is to worship God.

Isaiah 43:7 says that we were created for God's glory. In other words, the reason we exist is to bring glory to God. Let me say that again. You and I exist for one reason and one reason only. It is to bring glory to God! Ephesians 1:12 says God chose us in order that we might be "for the praise of his glory." This is a radical idea for most of us to fathom. My default, as is true of every human, is that I exist for my own purposes. My life is about me, about what I want, about me being fulfilled, safe, pleased and comfortable. These verses give us a profoundly different view. They say that the very reason I am alive is to worship and give glory to God.

Sometimes we say that worshiping God should be the highest priority. It certainly should, but that doesn't quite capture the importance of worship. When I think about establishing priorities I think about writing down a list of possible tasks and activities. Setting priorities involves deciding which of those is the most important and making that the number one thing I do, then I decide what is second, third and so on until everything on the list is assigned. If we say worship is the priority we make it one of the things on the list and assign it a level of importance like the other possible tasks.

But that's not quite right. Worship isn't one of the possible tasks or activities on our list. It is bigger than our list. Maybe we should call it a meta-priority. It does beyond being one of our priorities. Worship is the thing that governs how we assign priorities to the activities on our list and it determines how we carry them out. It is at an entirely different level than our priorities.

Like you I have a number of different programs or applications that I use on my computer. The ones I use most are the word processor and the internet web browser, but there's a spread sheet and power point and a calculator and a host of other things. But behind all of those there is an operating system. On Apple computers it is a version of OS X such as Yosemite, on PC's it is some version of Windows. I believe I have Windows 1,263 or something like that. The operating system is what enables all the other programs to run. Without that operating system the apps and programs on your computer would be worthless. My point here is that worship is more like the operating system than an important app. All of our other tasks and activities in life are the applications we run, but worship is the system that puts them all into effect. It is the thing that enables everything else to work.

Which means if you don't have worship in working order in your life then nothing else is really going to work right.

Human nature doesn't want to believe that. To think that I exist purely to bring glory to God, that what my life is all about his worshiping him, feels fanatical to us. Hey, we're good with having some worship in our lives. It's good to believe in God, but come on, let's not get carried away here. Keep it in its proper place. That's what most people think, and that's what comes naturally to us.

However, Scripture confronts us with a difficult choice. We must either believe that Scripture is right and human nature is wrong, or we must believe that human nature is right and Scripture is wrong. The idea then of having some faith as a good thing among many good things we add to our life, but not as the thing that controls everything in our lives, is a denial of Scripture. It says we are here on this planet for one reason – to worship and bring glory to God.

Well that's easy for you to say, Rick. You're a pastor. Your job, your life is all about church stuff. And of course you would say that because you want everybody to make a big deal about church. Your kind of like the NFL team owners who want everybody to have football rule their lives because they make more money that way. Of course bankrupt cities should spend hundreds of millions of dollars to build stadiums for billionaire team owners. And you think everybody should have God ruling over everything in their lives because that makes what you do seem important. All I can say in response is, first I'm not originating this idea. I'm just telling you what the Bible says. Second, while in a way it is easy for me to say this it's not so easy to live it. I see many, many examples of pastors and leaders who say this same thing, but who in fact are pursuing their own agenda for life. They believe worship is important, but they are really pursuing something for self. I'm not immune. I find it is a temptation I must deal with every day of my life.

So I will go back to my illustration. God has thrown down the gauntlet. He has told us unless we have worship as our operating system, the thing that rules everything else in our lives, life will never work properly, just as if your computer doesn't have an operating system nothing will work on it either.

HOW ARE WE TO WORSHIP?

But what do we mean when we talk about worship? Churches have wildly different events they call worship services. Go to an Episcopal church and they have a set bunch of things in their worship service to read, pray and sing. It is all quite formal. Go to a black church and you're going to experience something at the

other end of the spectrum. Then there are churches that resemble a rock concert with head banging music and special effects. Some churches sing hymns and the people dress formally, and some sing mostly contemporary songs with people showing up wearing shorts and maybe even barefoot. Which of those is the right one? How are we supposed to worship? There's a lot of confusion about what that means even in the church today.

Recently I've encountered a number of people and churches talking about "the worship experience." Churches want to do all they can to enhance people's worship experience. There's a huge problem with that. Worship isn't an experience, it is an action. If you have or had kids in school I'd like to ask you if you ever say to them in the evening, "have you had a homework experience today?" Are you concerned that they feel a sense of homework? If you do, you need some help. Who cares if they've had a "homework experience," whatever that is? You only care about one question, "did you do your homework?" No church, and no Christian should ever be concerned about the "worship experience." The only thing that matters is, "did you worship?" Did you act, did you worship God?

The problem is the "worship experience" mindset turns worship on its head. It puts the focus on the "feelings" of the supposed worshipper. It is about creating some sort of setting or mood that will produce some sort of feelings in the person. Worship isn't about how we feel. It is about whether God is honored, regardless of what we feel.

What does it mean to worship? It simply means to proclaim God's worthship, to declare his worth. When we worship we are saying that God is ultimate good, God is the source of all that is good, and he deserves to be praised and served. We declare that God is what all of creation is about, including us!

Yes, but how are we supposed to do that? What form does it take? Is it going through a formal liturgy? Is it taking the Lord's Supper? Is it singing hymns or is it singing more contemporary songs? Wrong question. Do you remember the story of Jesus having a conversation with a Samaritan woman who had a less than stellar moral record while they were getting water from a well? When the conversation got too pointed for the woman she tried to divert it and talk about forms of worship. Do you recall what Jesus said? He said that is not the point any more. It's not about this place or that place, doing it this way or that way. It is about worshiping in spirit and in truth.

In other words, it is about believing and proclaiming the truth and about having your heart and spirit right. Sing hymns, sing rock songs, use whatever form you like, as long as you are proclaiming the truth and your heart is right with God and is fully engaged. 1 Peter 2:9 says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” There again we see the point of life. We were called out of darkness that we might declare his praise. The point is not the form in which you declare his praise. It is that you simply do it, declare the praise of God.

Let’s go back to that thing about what you do at an altar. Remember we said one thing you can do there is get married? Of course, we all know that you get married at an altar. You stand at the altar and say your vows. Everybody knows that. That’s what Laurie and I did. We stood before the altar at First Evangelical Free Church in Fullerton on August 24, 1979 and said our vows. But wait. Toby and Anna didn’t go to a church. They got married standing on a wagon at the flower fields in Carlsbad. Michael and Carissa got married on the beach at Coronado. There wasn’t an altar in sight at either wedding. They didn’t do it according to the proper form, so they’re not married, right? Wrong. They got married in spirit and in truth. It doesn’t matter where they were or what they wore. What matters is that before God and witnesses they vowed to love each other and be faithful to each other for the rest of their lives. Worship in spirit and truth!

We need to be careful not to confine worship to something we do in a church meeting. It is much broader than that. Remember it is the thing that rules all of life. It is the operating system. There is a verse in the Bible that tells us exactly how to worship God. It is Romans 12:1. It says true and proper worship is to present your body as a living sacrifice to God. The Living Translation says, “this is truly the way to worship.”

The correct, real way to worship is to give our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. When Abram and we proclaim God we say he is truly good, he is the focus of all of life, he is worthy not only of our words of praise but of our service. We worship him by using our lives to declare through our actions that he is the focus of life.

One of the people who has cycled through our house was a young man named Micah. He graduated from UCSD and moved up to the Bay Area. We still get occasional pieces of mail for him. We got a number of bills from UCSD claiming that his account wasn't fully paid. He still owed the school 50 cents! Was it really worth it for the school to pursue that 50 cents? They spent way more money by

sending bills and doing the accounting than the 50 cents. It just wasn't worth it. In the end it turned out they were in error anyway. We eventually paid that bill, and now they've corrected the error. They keep sending us notices that he has a credit of 50 cents in his account. Your tax dollars at work.

God is “worth it.” When we present our bodies as living sacrifices we declare the worth of God by saying he is worth everything I have and am, and more. Your actions demonstrate the worth of God. This means your entire life is to be about worship. You are to present your body as a sacrifice to God. What do you do without your body? Nothing! Everything you do involves your body. Even if I am just thinking, that involves my body. It uses my brain, which, in case you didn't know, is part of my body. The motive behind everything I do and the way I do it should be to declare that God is real, that he is great, that he is good and that he is to be trusted, praised and served.

We can worship God at our jobs. We can do them to declare his worth by being honest, kind, patient with others, faithful and diligent. Our contract with our mobile phone company is up, so it is time to sign up again. I have been reluctant to do that because it always seems to turn into such an ordeal. Here's an amazing thought: I can go do battle with a mobile phone company with the goal of declaring God's worth in the process. How does that look? It means what I want most in what is usually for me a trying interaction is that I bring the grace and kindness of God into the situation. I can worship when I drive on the freeway, when I eat a meal, when I talk to friends, when I exercise. No matter what we do, the primary motivation in doing it and the way we do it can be to declare God's worth.

Church worship services have a two-fold purpose. First to declare God's worth together. God is more honored when we gather as a group to honor him. We understand that. If you are going to honor people for making movies, how do you do it? You gather a bunch of people together and declare how marvelous the winners are. But the second purpose of a worship service is to enable us to live our being a living sacrifice day in and day out. It reminds us this is our calling and it encourages us and strengthens us to live it out.

WHY IS WORSHIP SO CRUCIAL?

Because it is good and right

One of the questions that always pops up in a discussion of worship is why would God want to be worshiped. If I want all of life to be about praising me and worshiping me you will consider me to be conceited and egotistical. So is God insecure and in need of affirmation, or does he just have an inflated ego?

Fortunately it is neither. To understand this we must grasp that worship is an unavoidable trait of human nature. In his classic novel *The Brothers Karamozov* Fyodor Dostoevski wrote, “Man, so long as he remains free, has no more constant and agonizing anxiety than to find as quickly as possible someone to worship.”

The late best selling novelist David Foster Wallace said in a famous commencement address, “In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism...Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And pretty much anything you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things...then you will never have enough...Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you...Worship power and you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship intellect...and you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.” We will worship, that’s not an option. So it is absolutely essential that we worship the right thing.

Remember that first of the Ten Commandments. You shall have no other gods before me. We all are going to worship something. We will think and declare and pursue something that is the ultimate good, the source of life. But only God is true, complete, perfect good. If we put anything in his place we instantly introduce evil into the equation. We declare ultimate good that which is not perfectly good, and in so doing we sow seeds of disaster in the universe and in our own lives and the lives of others around us.

We will worship. To not worship is not possible for us. If we worship anything other than God we will unavoidably introduce evil and suffering into the world. So worship of God is important because it is right and good.

Because it is for our good

Start with the idea that this is what we were created to be and do. If we don’t do it, what is going to happen? Every moment of every day we’re going to have a sense, ranging from distant and vague at times to acute at others, that something is just not right. We’ll sense that something is missing, something is wrong with us. That will have another impact on us.

We recently had the frustrating experience of going to Petco Park to watch the Padres play. Frustrating because the Padres up to then had been awful. Not only have they not won any of the games we’ve been to this year, they did not score

even a single run! I want you to imagine that when I went to the ball park I thought that the whole thing was about me. They built this baseball stadium for me and they put this baseball game on just to please me. It's about me. What is the effect of that going to be?

I am going to end up unhappy. First, they don't let me sit where I want. Hey, if this is all about me shouldn't I be able to sit right down next to the field if I like? Second, I'm going to be upset about the fact that they want to charge me money to buy food and something to drink. If this is all about me shouldn't they provide me with food for free? Before the game they have someone throw out the first pitch. Hey, wait a minute! It's not me. This is about me so shouldn't I be the one to do that? The game starts and periodically they put a camera on people in the stands and show them up on the big huge video board. Why don't they put a picture of me up there? After all, it's about me. And do I need to say anything about the game? If this is about me shouldn't they guarantee me that my team, the Padres, will perform much better than they do and that they'll win the game, which they don't?

Do you see what happens? When I put myself at the center it skews my view of everything. And inevitably it will produce disappointment because everything doesn't serve me as I think it ought, and it produces anger and bitterness in me. I feel hurt and confused about why the stadium experience didn't go the way I thought it should. That's no way to enjoy a baseball game.

What do you suppose is going to happen in life when we think it is about us? We're going to have that same thing happen. We're going to be unhappy with the way life treats us because, after all, it's about us isn't it? I should get way more stuff, have what I want and get a lot more notice, acclaim and approval because all of this is about me. Life doesn't go that way and so I end up disappointed, hurt, bitter, cynical, confused about what life hasn't gone the way I think it should.

When I put God at the center, when I see that I am here to serve him and glorify him whatever that requires, then I can be at peace no matter what happens. I can love unlovely people, I can handle the losses and trials of life with grace and peace, I can give to others because what I want is to serve and honor God.

Because of what we become

G. K. Beale has written a book titled *We Become What We Worship*. The title pretty much says it all. In the book he says simply, "what we revere, we resemble."

That which we admire we will imitate. If we have awe of God and worship him we will begin to imitate him. We will become like him. We know this is true. I was in a clothing store with Laurie and noticed some rather pricey jeans for sale. I was astounded as I looked at them because they had several places on the front of them that had frayed holes. They were selling these! For a lot of money! I realize I am showing a lack of fashion sense and maybe a touch of age here, but when my jeans start to look like that I figure it's time to throw them away. Why would you buy a pair of jeans that already look worn out? If you think it's fashionable to wear worn out fraying jeans, why not just keep wearing your old jeans until they wear out?

How does that get started as a fashion fad? Some trend setting person or persons start wearing such things. It started in the 90's with grunge rockers like the late Kurt Cobain. In his book *Understanding Culture* John Fiske says they are an example of "excorporation." They are supposedly an act of resistance, a statement against the dominant capitalistic culture. People who admire the trendsetters then decide they absolutely must have ripped jeans. That which we admire we imitate. This is why it is crucial that we worship God, because what or who we worship will determine what kind of people we will be.

If God is a God of love, patience, mercy, goodness, kindness, power, peace, joy, righteousness and justice, and he is, what kind of people will we become as we worship him? We will become people who love, who are patient, merciful, good, kind, peaceful, joyful, righteous and fair people who are strong because we trust in his power. Isn't that exactly what we want to be and what the world needs?

CONCLUSION

Pastor and author Erwin Lutzer wrote, "If we haven't learned to be worshipers, it doesn't really matter how well we do anything else." He's right. No matter how well we do it, something will be off about it because there's a problem in the operating system. It starts with worship. It starts with desiring to bring glory to God with everything we are and do. It starts with knowing that the only reason we are on the planet, not one of, but the only reason, is to bring glory to God. So we live to praise him. Imagine how it is going to impassion our worship services when we are utterly convinced that nothing, not money, prestige, leisure, job, fame, power, health, sports, hobbies or toys, nothing will bring satisfaction to our aching hearts but knowing God and bringing glory to him in everything we do. But when we worship we experience life and can bring it to others.

Today take some time to confess to God if there are ways you have been focused on serving yourself rather than bringing him glory, and ask him to flood your heart with passion to honor him.

Start your day by taking a moment to pray. Say to the Lord, I give this day to you. I live this day to serve you. Please enable me to live this day as a sacrifice to you.

At least one time during each day intentionally take an opportunity to verbally praise God. Tell a friend or family member about God's love or goodness. Let someone know how thankful you are for God's presence and faithfulness.

Commit to gather next week with all of us to do what we are on the planet to do, and that is to call on the Lord.