

Sunday 12th July 2026 at 10 am

Uncut stones - Unadorned worship

Welcome to Wycliffe representative

Introduction - Hebrews 12:1-3

Hymn MP 33 And can it be

Scripture Psalm 146 (page 632)

Children's talk translation example

Chorus MP 788 You are beautiful beyond description

Notices

Wycliffe update

Prayer time

Reading Exodus 20:22-26 (Page 78)

Hymn MP 799 All I once held dear, built my life upon

Sermon *Uncut stones - Unadorned worship*

Hymn MP 1072 In Christ alone

Closing prayer starting with Ephesians 1:18,19a

Prayer

A girl tries to please a boy by buying him chocolates, she thinks good quality expensive chocolates will do the trick. She keeps this up for quite a while. But one day a mutual friend tells her, "he doesn't like chocolate". Maybe she should go and find out what he does like!

- With that in mind let me ask you a question about your worship to God. Is the worship you bring pleasing to God? Does the Lord accept what you bring? Do you know what he likes?
- What is the difference between worship that is pleasing to the Lord that that which isn't?

I was musing over our passage this morning and pondering that question as I sat in Westminster Abbey for Monday evening's 'evensong'.

There I was amongst 500 plus others who had filed in for this time of evening worship. In all the beauty of the setting, the singing, the praying I wondered what the Lord thought of it. It was obvious that a good number of people there were tourists. But what of the rest of us?

➤ This passage we are looking at is about worship.

Worship is bound up with sacrifice, for it's through sacrifice and only by sacrifice that anyone can approach God. We see this first back in Genesis 22 where there's the first mention of the word 'worship'. There Abraham is called to go and sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah.

The word next occurs when the Lord appears to Moses at the burning bush saying: **"I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."** Ex 3:12. He then tells Moses to say to Pharaoh: The Lord says: **Let my son go, so that he may worship me.** Ex 4:23

When we arrive at Exodus 20 the rescued nation are before the mountain. The remainder of the book of Exodus is written in the lee of the mountain. It is here they are given instructions about bringing sacrifices.

Let's first start with some background and context.

The Israelites had left Canaan and been in Egypt for 400 years. They had gone there to avoid the famine at the time of Joseph, been taken into slavery and then through Moses and in a remarkable deliverance the Lord God had rescued them. Now they are in the desert and learning to trust God for everything.

Then in Exodus 20 they are given His law. The sign that they are now the Lord's people is that they obey this law. But because of their failure to love God and keep his commandments they wander in the desert for

40 years. When a generation had passed away, they finally cross the Jordan into the promised land, the land of their inheritance. As promised (in Deut 12) the time comes when the Lord directs them to fix their worship in one place. This was to be the Jebusite city of Jerusalem. Here's the place where His Name would dwell. This would be forever the city of the Great King. There the temple would be built on the mount in the centre, that mount Moriah where Isaac was taken all those years before.

Here at that place will be the heavy bronze altar before the Temple as it was before with the tabernacle in the desert.

In our passage this morning that place is still a long way off. So when it says in v24 **Wherever I cause my name to be honoured**, it is referring to a number of places he had previously spoken of, starting with that Mt. Moriah (Gen 22:2). Then Beersheba (Gen 26:23), and Bethel (Gen 35:1) and Rephidim (Ex 17:8,15). When they cross over the Jordan it is at Mt. Ebal (Joshua 8:30) Then later with Gideon (Jdg 6:25,26), Manoah (Jdg.13:16), David (2 Sa. 24:18), Solomon (1 Ki. 3:4,5) and at the time of Elijah (1Ki.18:31ff).

Before the Temple became the permanent place of worship these altars were built in these various places using either earth 24 **Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle.**

Or using local stones, for example at Mt Ebal as we read in Dt. 27:6 **Build the altar of the LORD your God with stones from the field and offer burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God.**

So we have here in our passage 25 **If you make an altar of stones for me,**

The Lord has an important lesson for us to learn here. When this altar is built **do not build it with dressed stones.**

He said the same in telling Moses what to do at mount Ebal Dt. 27:5 **Do not use any iron tool upon them.** And when Joshua built the altar there in Joshua 8, he obeys what the Lord had said **He built it according to what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses** i.e. from our passage in Ex 20:25—**an altar of uncut stones, on which no iron tool had been used.**

So what does it mean to use 'uncut' stones?

When we bring worship shouldn't we bring our best? Doesn't that seem obvious?

- Isn't that what our forefathers were doing when they build churches and cathedrals that were crafted beautifully, magnificent buildings that lifted us to heaven with their lofty spires?
- Are we not to bring our best. I heard of a church in Germany where everyone on one Sunday brought in something they had made with their God given gifts, one a piece of art, another a sculpture, another something special made in the kitchen, a cobbler with a magnificent pair of shoes. Isn't this bringing our best to God?

Should we not have our Sunday best for the Lord? Yes, certainly.

But there is a subtle but profound point here. Our worship can never be accepted if it is based on me. As a fallen sinful man or woman what can you or I bring to a Holy God? The answer is nothing.

The altar is there to hold up the one sacrificed on it. It is the offering, and in those days a perfect unblemished animal. That animal we know speaks of the perfect unblemished lamb given by God, the Lord Jesus, the Holy One who live a pure obedient life and gave it up for my sinful, filthy life.

That is the offering that is accepted, that is the one Sacrifice God will receive. The whole book of Leviticus is basically making that point.

But bring unacceptable fire - and instead of the Lord taking up that life on my behalf, he will take my life. In other words, to approach the Lord in the wrong way, an unacceptable way is to be struck down. That's why no-one could go up the mountain of God except Moses the one like Jesus

That is why no-one could enter the Holy of Holies except a ceremonially clean priest, a picture of Jesus, and that only once a year.

- **So it was not the altar that was important - but the offering on it x2. The problem is that we always try to smarten up to altar.**

But that perfect offering can never be improved. So to try to spruce up the altar, to make the altar impressive steals away from the One sacrificed on it. As we read **for you will defile it if you use a tool on it.** x2

When Jesus died on the cross where is our attention? Is it on the wood? It sounds ridiculous to say such a thing. Did we ask what kind of wood was used? Was it smoothed and planed?, was it polished?, was it varnished? No, no. no. Would the Father better accept Jesus' sacrifice if offered on better wood? Of course not.

The altar is only important to support the One sacrificed on it. The altar itself can never be the central place of worship. Not the earth, not the stones, they are not to draw attention to themselves. 25 **If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it.**

We must never build it up to be imposing, we must not make it impressive, or especially large, or a high structure 26 **And do not go up to my altar on steps, lest your nakedness be exposed on it.**

If it is only the perfect substitute being sacrificed which is the means of my acceptance, how could I wish to add something to it? And yet, naturally speaking this is what we are constantly inclined to do.

We cannot adorn worship. You or I, are not to try to add something as if to make worship 'better' No, God is not impressed with our dressed stone. Or dressed anything.

- I don't know what people were thinking when they sat down for evensong. As mentioned some were clearly tourists but others one assumes had come to bring worship. Why did they come here? Who of them lived nearby? Few if any. Had they come here because of the quality of the singing? The grandness of the organ echoing across this vast place. Or the impressiveness of the building with all Gold inlaid carvings? Maybe others liked the ritualism. Or was evensong better here because this is none other than London's Westminster Abbey, this is the King's Church.

I wonder if you think your worship is better in this church or that church?

If a church is teaching the truth you need look no further to worship. Do not think "I can worship the Lord better there, or over there.

In the same way I wonder if you think there's more kudos in being baptised in the river Jordan than in an ordinary church baptism?

How is our music, is it good enough? Is it too quiet, too loud, too boring? Neither the music, not I nor anyone else can bring worship - for you.

Anyone who thinks these things is, in one way or another whether helping, or hindering worship, making an idol x2. You are trimming the stonework to make the altar impressive. *Actually, if we all went outside the church and stood in the carpark, or across in the recreation ground maybe our worship would be better! Less cluttered, less distracted, more focused.*

Does the church's 'environment', its 'atmosphere'? impress you? Do you prefer a music group, will that 'improve' worship? Do you think the Lord is more pleased if there are coloured lights, an ornate front, flag waving, loud shouts and contorted faces? Some prefer a Roman Catholic service because they say they like it with a bit more ritual and ceremony.

- **To do this is to be merely 'religious', to do this is to use dressed stone.**

Worship is spiritual. Joh 4:24 **God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth."** That can only happen when a man or woman has had a spiritual awakening. This is the work of the Spirit of God in whom and through whom we can now bring spiritual worship. **If you do not have the Holy Spirit indwelling you, then you will never be able to bring spiritual worship.** Christ's Spirit is only given when your sins are forgiven. If you have never turned from them in repentance, if you have never trusted in Christ alone, then you will not have His Spirit. You are still lost, you remain guilty before God and will be found to be guilty on the Day of Judgment. The cross is before you, it was yesterday, and before, you have heard of what Christ did there many times, but it may not be here tomorrow, for you may not be in this world tomorrow. Now is the time. Come now, look to Christ now, what is stopping you?

As Paul said of Christians it is **we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh**— Php 3:3

When you join with the Lord's people, our eyes are on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, the One means, the only means that the Lord will accept and receive worship. **It's only through Christ we can come.**

We are told that **they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks**. John 4:23 True worship is unadorned worship with ‘uncut stones’ that do not syphon off glory towards itself. True worship is Christ centered worship, it is spiritual worship, it can never involve ‘things’.

Although without the Spirit of God no-one can please God, it is possible to have been born again and yet be drawn back to think and live carnally. The Lord speaks in Jeremiah 6 about **bringing disaster on His people** and why? **because they have not listened to my words and have rejected my law**. Were they still bringing worship to God? Yes. But what did God think of it? **What do I care about incense from Sheba or sweet calamus from a distant land?** Was not their worship the best with all that expensive specially imported incense and sweet calamus? The Lord says: **Your burnt offerings are not acceptable; your sacrifices do not please me**. Jer 6:19-20

- Use dressed stone and someone is angered - for it draws away glory from His Son.

Well then, does nothing external matter?

In the context of bringing worship together we read in 1 Cor 11 that **Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head** 1Co 11:4,5

Isn't that saying that externals do matter? Yes, they do. Why? because a man or woman who is born again will not only worship in Spirit but also in truth. As we read **his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth**.

A believer must not worship with anything that counters, contradicts that truth. If the Lord has made you a man, then you must worship as a man, and the same for women. Anything that counters that, counters worship.

- For example: if the Lord tells us to dress modestly, then not to dress modestly wars against honouring the Lord in His worship.

Worship is not only in Spirit but in truth. So externals matter in so much that they must align with that truth and do nothing to counter it. We should come before Him as he has made each of us to be, and as much as possible our attire, our demeanour should reflect that.

- To do this is not in itself worship, - but not to do this counters worship

As we come to the end

The starting scripture you, could say the main scripture, is really the conclusion. 22 **Then the LORD said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites this: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven:**

They didn't see God, they heard him. God is Spirit, He is invisible and therefore cannot be represented by anything visible. And that includes making images in our head.

The pagan set up their shrines full of coloured images and idols. It felt nice to have something visible, something to see and a ritual to do.

But we should never try to enhance worship - for that is idolatry x2.

The Lord introduces this section to show how it is in direct breach of the second commandment. 23 **Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold.**

The command to use uncut stones is to stop us trying to make an idol. Go to most places of worship in the religions of the world and there's something to see, something impressive, an Anglican altar, candles and statues, a Hindu shrine with all its gaudy colourings, sweets and flowers, or a highly illuminated and revered Quran beautifully bound.

No, true worship is spiritual. God did not appear on the mountain, he spoke from the mountain. No-one saw God, no-one has seen God.

But this invisible God does make himself known, he communicates, he speaks, and he is ultimately known through the Word. This Word was made flesh, in Jesus. Worship is words x2. Christ's words are spirit he says and his word is truth. That is how we come, that is worship.

When we sing we fill our minds with him using words:

- When I survey the wondrous cross, On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss, And pour contempt on all my pride.

How is your worship? is it solely centered on the perfect sacrifice of God's Holy Son? Is the cross square and centre in you thinking as you lift your voice in praise? Has anything got into the way?

- **Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, Save in the death of Christ my God!**
All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood.

Beware lest your worship slips into enjoying the music, feeling the atmosphere, being amongst friends. That is not worship. Look to the Son alone - that is worship.

How is the worship you bring? is it acceptable to God? Let us look only to Christ the one sacrifice, the one means of honouring God the father who said: **Wherever I cause my name to be honoured, I will come to you and bless you.** *END*