

The Return of Exiles

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: God provides freedom for His people to worship and obey Him.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: Ezra 1–3

Worship captivates us like few other things, and worship is a commonality among every person on the planet. We all worship. We offer adoration and praise to the thing, or things, that we love the most. Each act of praise, sacrifice, and exaltation is a form of worship. Unfortunately, too few of us think deeply about our worship. Our worship tends to be reactive rather than proactive. As N. T. Wright makes clear, unless we understand the object of our worship well, our worship will remain vague and unsatisfactory. Put more specifically, the form and content of our worship reveals the object of our worship.



What are some things our worship of God should say about God?

Voices from the Church

“Put it this way: if your idea of God, if your idea of the salvation offered in Christ, is vague or remote, your idea of worship will be fuzzy and ill-formed. The closer you get to the truth, the clearer becomes the beauty, and the more you will find worship welling up within you. That’s why theology and worship belong together. The one isn’t just a head-trip; the other isn’t just emotion.”¹

—N. T. Wright

Group Time

Point 1: God's people return from exile by the Lord's leading (Ezra 1:1-5).

¹ In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:

² “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴ And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”

⁵ Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.

Notice Cyrus's language in verse 2. He was affirming the lordship and sovereignty of God even over his rule. He acknowledged that this movement to restore the Israelite people to their homeland came from God rather than of his own authority and decision-making. Truly, “the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will” (Prov. 21:1).



Why do we often act and feel as if God were not sovereign?

Ezra shows us that Cyrus was not just returning the people to Jerusalem but was also helping them rebuild the temple of God. This call to go, return to Jerusalem, and rebuild the temple was a breath of fresh air for God's exiled people. It would have encouraged them. It is also interesting to note that Cyrus called for volunteers. Those who desired to return were free to go and take part in the building of the temple, but it was those who were stirred up by God who took advantage of this great opportunity.



How have you seen God work around you in unlikely scenarios to accomplish His purposes?

Point 2: God's people worship the Lord by obeying His law (Ezra 3:1-6).

¹ When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. ² Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. ³ They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. ⁴ And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, ⁵ and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD. ⁶ From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.

The Israelites were settling into the promised land, but they wasted little time committing themselves to the reconstruction of the temple and also to the practice of sacrificial worship and festival celebration. In other words, the Lord had restored them to the land, so they were faithful to respond in obedience to God and His commands. As they put their roots back into the ground, they also put aside their various tribal differences and committed themselves to the work of God—together.



How do people commonly measure a successful worship service?

Despite the fears the Israelites had from antagonistic people groups surrounding them, they did not cease to lift up the King. They offered sacrifices out of tradition and obedience to God's commands, but they also began to offer sacrifices abundantly, freely on their own accord, even before the temple foundation had been laid. They were both generous and eager to please the Lord. These sacrifices went past making atonement for their sins; they were an outpouring of joyful worship for what God was doing.

Worship: The aim and focus of worship is _____, giving Him the exact due of praise and adoration that He deserves. _____ worship serves to edify and strengthen other Christians, but it also serves as a witness to non-believers of the _____ of God.

Point 3: God's people worship the Lord by declaring His goodness and faithfulness (Ezra 3:10-13).

¹⁰ And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel.

¹¹ And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD,
“For he is good,

for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

¹² But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³ so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.

Israelites had come from near and far for this moment. With Cyrus's decree, they left their lives of exile throughout the known world with the longing to celebrate the goodness of God and worship Him at home. As the foundation of the temple was laid, they sang God's praises because His love was with Israel forever, despite their sinful ways. They were beyond thankful for His faithful love to them.

How does awareness of your sin typically affect your personal worship?



Paralyzed by Guilt

Grateful for Forgiveness

Motivated to Obedience

The Israelites were split on how they should react to the rebuilding of the temple. Older Israelites remembered the grandeur of the old temple that Solomon had built, and they wept because what they had before them was unimpressive and would not compare with the previous temple. There were plenty of others, however, who could not contain their celebration for the movement of God in restoring them in the promised land. The cacophony of the competing emotions was overwhelming and overheard far away.



How does a church benefit from those who are both young and old in the faith?

Daily Study

Day 1: Read Ezra 1:1-11

“The LORD ... has charged me” is a powerful declaration of praise and an affirmation of God’s authority (v. 2). There may be no greater truth in the universe than the reality that God is in authority over all things. This is not just a truism but is among the most comforting of all thoughts. For those of us who serve God, we are on the side of the One who is in authority over all things. He is God, after all. Nonetheless, the biblical teaching behind this reality is more layered than first thought.

First, God has authority because He is uniquely transcendent and omnipotent: “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases” (Ps. 115:3). Second, God possesses authority over all things simply by virtue of being the Creator and Sustainer of all things: “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev. 4:11; cf. Col. 1:15-17). Third, God sets up and takes down the respective leaders of empires and nations, making all governing authorities subject to His decrees and appointments (Dan. 2:20-21; 4:34-35). Fourth, God the Son, whom we know through the incarnation as Jesus, obtained a special kind of authority over all things as Lord and Messiah, having been raised and exalted after completing the mission given to Him by the Father (Acts 2:36; cf. Phil. 2:5-11; 1 Pet. 3:22). Indeed, before commanding His followers with the Great Commission, Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been *given* to me” (Matt. 28:18).

God’s authority is a deeply comforting truth that gives us confidence to live with extreme optimism and even happiness. The God who is for His people and does whatever He pleases is necessarily in control. This is the case both because of who He is and because of what He has done as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. No realm of life exists outside of God’s regal jurisdiction and His affectionate care. I am confident that a faithful Christian, while he or she might have moments and days of difficulty, should assume a general posture of optimism toward the world and the future.



Are you frightened about the future? How might confidence in God’s authority change your view of the future?

Day 2: Read Ezra 2:1-67

Nearly everyone wants to be remembered. Whether it be something as ubiquitous as a tombstone or something more rare, such as a biography, remembering the lives of those who have gone before us is a significant part of nearly every culture and a desire that most of us wish for in our own lives. We want to know that our lives mattered.

Ezra 2 seems easy to pass over until you realize that this list is God's way of remembering those who had faith in God's promise and were the first to return after exile. This listing, while seemingly insignificant, was a marker for the Israelite people of the faith of those who went before them and, even more importantly, of the promises of God that were fulfilled. When we read passages like this, we should be stirred to remember their lives, and we should be reminded that God knows each one of us, and although history itself may never remember us, God will always remember. This is a picture of God's covenant-keeping love and His affection for His people.



Do you wonder whether you will be remembered in the future? How might your confidence in God's love and His remembrance of you serve to motivate your obedience and your faithfulness?

Day 3: Read Ezra 2:68-70

Did you notice the omission in verse 68? There's something that should be there but isn't. The passage tells us that *some* of the family heads gave freewill offerings to the Lord. This matters because God almost always funds His activity through freewill offerings. This is the picture across Scripture. And yet, in this instance, although God had been faithful to accomplish His promise, and although the Israelites had followed Him in faith, it appears that some had already moved on and were forgetting God's faithfulness. *Some* gave the freewill offering, but not *all*.


It's easy to fall into this mind-set, isn't it? We move along in the business of our lives and we quickly forget about how good God is to us. We are tempted to have confidence in ourselves and forget what God has previously done.



In what ways has God blessed you in the past? Take some time to remember and thank God for His faithfulness in your life.

Day 4: Read Ezra 3:1-7


In verse 1, we see something remarkable for any large group of people, but especially for the Israelites. The passage says that the people “gathered as one man.” This is remarkable unity. So often when groups of people are in proximity to one another—and all the more in our current cultural climate—we too often try to segment people based on our differences instead of uniting around our commonalities. Not so in this moment. The Israelites had experienced the goodness of God, they were working toward the purposes of God, and they united together in that moment. It is true that, among the people of God, there will always exist reasons for us to be divided. Personality conflicts, theological conflicts (within the bounds of orthodoxy), methodological conflicts, and so on, all exist. And yet, the work of God must triumph over those things. We need to unite to see God’s work accomplished.

 What Christians do you find it difficult to partner together with? Could God be calling you to work intentionally with more believers to see the work of God accomplished?

Day 5: Read Ezra 3:8-13

As the people were celebrating and some were experiencing sorrow, their cries were incredibly loud. They were so loud that they were heard from “far away.” There’s a lesson in this, isn’t there? God had been working, keeping His promises, showing them His faithfulness, and now they were celebrating, and their celebration caught the attention of many from far away.

This is exactly how God calls each of His children to be. He works redemptively in our lives, He transforms us by His grace, and our celebration of Him ought to be so clear and so powerful that it catches the attention of many. Yet for too many of us, our celebration is nearly non-existent, or we attempt to keep it to ourselves. Too often we have forgotten just how significant God’s grace is in our lives. God has done much in each of our lives, and our response to His grace, especially in the eye of the public, speaks to our confidence and gratefulness for His grace.

 With whom have you shared the celebration of God’s work in your life? With whom might you need to share?

UNIT 16**SESSION 1**

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2. Joni Eareckson Tada, *A Place of Healing* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010), 70.

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2. Yoiyah Yilpet, "Haggai," in *Africa Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 1102.
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Answers to Learn Truth*

Think about the encouragement people often share to help others through times of adversity. We might hear someone speak of how pressure is required to transform coal into a diamond; thus, pressure can be good for us, transforming us into someone better. Or we might be told of the hatchling that has to work to break through its eggshell, and that struggle is good for this creature—even necessary—so that it grows strong. Likewise, adversity strengthens us and positions us to be who we were meant to be.

While these illustrations might provide encouragement, they reveal something quite important about the world's view of adversity. The world sees adversity as an opportunity for a person to dig deep, gaze within their soul, and discover who he or she truly is. But the gospel tells a different story—a better story. The gospel sees adversity as an opportunity for a person to look high above, gaze upon Christ, and see who He truly is. For it is Christ, not ourselves, who carries us through all trials and suffering. Adversity positions us to rely on Christ's power, not an inner human strength that has been lying dormant.

In this volume we pick up the story of Scripture with the Jews living in bondage in a foreign land, the result of their rebellion against God. But even in the midst of judgment, God's faithful love still shines forth brightly. We will witness God continuing to guide, strengthen, and protect His people in their time of great adversity, not to help them discover who they were but rather to understand who He is. At the same time, we will see God continue to drive the events of history toward the fulfillment of His ancient promise to provide the Rescuer, the One who would free people from an even greater bondage, that of sin and death.