

Ezra and Nehemiah

Worshipping the Lord

Lesson #10 for December 7, 2019

Scriptures: Nehemiah 12:27-47; 1 Chronicles 25:6-8; 1 John 1:7-9; John 1:29,36; 1 Corinthians 5:7; Hebrews 9:1-11; Ezra 3:11.

1. In our previous lessons, we learned that under the guidance of Ezra and Nehemiah the temple services were reestablished and the wall around Jerusalem was completed. That led to tremendous rejoicing and celebration.
2. As we know, Ezra and his group returned to Jerusalem in 457 B.C. With a much smaller group but with the protection and authority of the Persian emperor, Nehemiah returned in 444 B.C. After a brief time of gathering the necessary information and preparing himself, Nehemiah announced that they were going to finish rebuilding the wall. The people threw themselves into that work with such vigor and enthusiasm that the wall was completed in only 52 days. It was completed in the month of Elul, the sixth month in the Jewish religious year. The next month, the seventh month, was the normal time for the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and then, the Feast of Tabernacles to take place.
3. Try to imagine how the people felt when the city wall was completed. It may have taken a few days; but, they had to organize themselves into some kind of a massive celebration.

Nehemiah 12:27-29: ²⁷ When the city wall of Jerusalem was dedicated, the Levites were brought in from wherever they were living, so that they could join in **celebrating the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals and harps.** ²⁸The Levite families of singers gathered from the area where they had settled round Jerusalem and from the towns round Netophah, ²⁹and from Bethgilgal, Geba, and Azmaveth.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Nehemiah 12:27–29). New York: American Bible Society.†

4. Read Nehemiah 12:31-42. The kind of walls they built in those days were different from the kind of walls we might be thinking about in our day. The wall was so massive that whole groups of people could march around the city on top of the wall. There were places for watchmen to hide and for people to protect themselves behind outposts on the wall while they fought against any enemy who might be approaching. So, in their celebration, one group—approximately half of the people who were involved—marched with Ezra in one direction around the city on top of the wall while Nehemiah went with the other group the other way around the city on top of the wall. They met at a place near the temple itself and then proceeded into the temple area. Priests blew the trumpets when they reached the courtyard of the temple. The two groups stood facing each other and celebrated with music.
5. Since the days of David and Asaph, his temple musician, it was expected that dedicated musicians—not only singers but also players of instruments—would accompany the worship services at the temple.
6. How were those temple services conducted? Were they conducted in the open court which was originally set up to be a place for Gentiles to go and learn of the religious practices of the Jews? We know that there were no services conducted inside the temple—in the holy place or the most holy place.
7. More than 500 years after the days of David and Asaph and under the careful guidance of Nehemiah and Ezra, people were hoping to reestablish a correct worship of God.
8. So, what information do we have about the musicians in David's day? Speaking about Asaph

it says:

1 Chronicles 25:6-8: ⁶All his sons played cymbals and harps under their father's direction, to accompany the temple worship. And Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman were under orders from the king.

⁷ All these 24 men were experts; and their fellow-Levites were trained musicians. There were 288 men in all.

⁸ To determine the assignment of duties they all drew lots, whether they were young or old, experts or beginners.—*Good News Bible*.*

9. As we know, the Levites were the ones responsible for the temple services. Among them were some who were paid to be professional musicians. In the days of David:

A full-fledged music academy was organized, which he supervised. It had teachers and students, young and old, who worked in shifts in the temple, providing music. Some were instrumentalists, others singers, yet others took care of the instruments and the garments used for the services. What was the purpose of such a professional organization? It served to develop talent and the vision of excellence in worship.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Sunday, December 1.

10. What kind of music, either singing or instrumental, seems most appropriate in your mind for worshipping God? My family and I traveled back and forth between Africa and Loma Linda several times during our 17 years of work in Africa. What an incredible difference in style of music between those two settings. But, in both cases it was given in praise to the Lord. Do you think God accepted both of those types of music? In Ezra's day, did they use drums in worship?
11. There are numerous occasions in the Bible when music was a part of worship. Several of the most important are found in Exodus 15:1; 2 Chronicles 20:21-22; and Revelation 15:1-4. Moses, Miriam, and the people rejoiced after having escaped Egypt. They passed through the Red Sea while their enemies drowned. Jehoshaphat, realizing there was no chance for his small army to face the three armies of different countries that had come up to attack him, asked God for guidance. God's direction included placing the professional musicians wearing their priestly garments out in front of the army, singing praises to the Lord! When they began to sing to the LORD, the invading armies were thrown into a panic, and they destroyed each other.
12. Revelation 15 and 16 discuss the seven last plagues. Before getting into the details, John was reminded that there would be a group of people who survive and will be seen standing on the sea of glass praising God. Think of all that the victorious group standing on the sea of glass will have to celebrate! God will have won the great controversy to everyone's satisfaction!
13. Christians have struggled down through the generations to find the right balance between reverence and joy in worship services. Given what we know about the great controversy, shouldn't a recognition of the truth about God lead to rapturous joy and eternal worship?
14. What do you feel is the role of music in your own church's worship experience?
15. Music preferences have been one of the most contentious issues in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In general, those who have been Christians for a longer period of time tend to prefer the traditional hymns. Young people, on the other hand, prefer a more lively music style. Is it possible to please the different age groups in church with different kinds of music? Or, do we have to agree on the same kind of music? That could be very difficult. Do we appreciate our musicians as we should? When you leave the church each Sabbath, do you feel fulfilled? Rewarded? Blessed? Is part of that blessing a result of the music that has been presented?
16. Those who participated in the temple services were expected to be clean and pure. The cleansing ceremonies were somewhat ritualistic in nature; but, it involved real cleaning.

17. Our pastors do not go through an elaborate, ritualistic cleansing before speaking at our services. Have we lost something in our worship of God? How are we purified in our day?

1 John 1:7-9: ⁷But if we live in the light—just as he is in the light—then we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us. ⁹But if we confess our sins to God, he will keep his promise and do what is right: he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all our wrongdoing.—*Good News Bible*.*

18. One of the fairly time-consuming parts of the worship services in the temple involved purification and the taking of ritual baths. What is a ritual bath? See Exodus 29:4; 40:12-15; and Leviticus 16:20-28. Their lives were to be cleansed and purified. **All of those ceremonies were to impress upon the minds of the people that their sins were gone forever, either into the wilderness with the scapegoat or burned with the remains of the other sacrifices.**

Numbers 19:5-7: ⁵The whole animal, including skin, meat, blood, and intestines, is to be burnt in the presence of the priest. ⁶Then he is to take some cedar wood, a sprig of hyssop, and a red cord and throw them into the fire. ⁷After that, he is to wash his clothes and pour water over himself, and then he may enter the camp; but he remains ritually unclean until evening.—*Good News Bible*.*

19. What does all that mean? If you read through the writings of Moses, especially Leviticus and Numbers, you will observe that there were numerous purification rituals. What was the purpose of all those purification rituals? The most serious purification ritual involved those who had come in contact with a dead body. See that described in detail in Numbers 19. If one refused to go through the regular purification that was supposed to take place after one had contacted a dead body, he was considered to be unclean.

Numbers 19:13: Whoever touches a corpse and does not purify himself remains unclean, because the water for purification has not been thrown over him. He defiles the LORD's Tent, and he will no longer be considered one of God's people.—*Good News Bible*.*

20. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest went through multiple cleansing ceremonies. How much were the people involved in observing or participating in any of those cleansing ceremonies?

Leviticus 16:4,23-24: ⁴ Then the LORD gave the following instructions. Before Aaron goes into the Most Holy Place, he must have a bath and put on the priestly garments: the linen robe and shorts, the belt, and the turban....²³ Then Aaron shall go into the Tent, take off the priestly garments that he had put on before entering the Most Holy Place, and leave them there. ²⁴He must bathe in a holy place and put on his own clothes. After that, he shall go out and offer the burnt offering to remove his own sins and those of the people.—*Good News Bible*.*

21. Do we need to establish some kind of ritual cleansing in connection with our church services? Are we "dirty"? In what way can we prepare ourselves properly for worshipping on the Sabbath?

22. Part of the celebration in those days, of course, was taking animals to sacrifice. It might be hard for us to celebrate, seeing all those animals being sacrificed! So, what can we learn from their experiences so many years ago that might be useful in how we should conduct church services and worship God in our day?

23. Could you quietly watch animals being slaughtered as you are observing or listening worshipfully to music being sung or played? Does that seem like a terrible contradiction in ideas?

24. How would you feel if you had to kill an animal in order to receive forgiveness from God? Why was such a thing ever started? Remember that the sacrifices were to remind the people that sin leads to death! **What do we have to remind us that sin leads to death?**
25. We could raise a lot of questions about why it was necessary to kill innocent animals to somehow deal with the sins of human beings. See Hebrews 9:1-11. Paul himself made it clear that the sacrifice of animals could never make a worshiper's heart perfect. These outward rules and ceremonies were only a temporary measure until the true Sacrifice was made on Calvary's cross.
26. One of the main reasons for celebrating in Christian services has often been the idea that Christ on the cross has borne our punishment for our sins. What is that punishment? So many of our Christian friends think that God the Father is just waiting to punish sinners. But, in their mind, He does not because Christ is there, standing before Him, "pleading His blood"; and that assuages God's wrath. Is that a correct biblical teaching? No!

Romans 6:23: For sin pays its wage—death; but God's free gift is eternal life in union with Christ Jesus our Lord.—*Good News Bible*.*

27. Sin has its own punishment—death! God's free gift is not punishment but eternal life. God does not need to add any punishment to make the results of sin worse; they are bad enough already!
28. We believe that God is forgiveness personified. God forgave even those who were nailing Him to the cross.

Luke 23:34: Jesus said, "Forgive them, Father! They don't know what they are doing."—*Good News Bible*.*

29. If God the Son could forgive those who were nailing Him to the cross, He can and does forgive everyone. **And please note, very clearly, that none of those nailing Him to the cross were asking for forgiveness. And being forgiven certainly did not guarantee their salvation!**

[In the special resurrection just before His second coming,] The men who smote and spit upon the Prince of life now turn from His piercing gaze and seek to flee from the overpowering glory of His presence. **Those who drove the nails through His hands and feet**, the soldier who pierced His side, behold these marks with terror and remorse.—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy** 643.2.^{††}

30. There were many details that went into the worshiping of God in the temple in ancient times. Unfortunately, there were times when the temple was thought to be an end in itself; but, that was never God's intention. **It was God's intention that all the ceremonies would serve to bring people's minds back to a true appreciation and worship of our Almighty God.**
31. To worship in our day, people go to an auditorium where they sit down mostly and listen while someone provides music from the front; or, they stand and sing together. In the ancient temple, there were no auditoriums. As the musicians sang and played their instruments, the people bowed in prayer. That was how they worshiped God. (Consider *DA* 463.)
32. Considering all that God has done for us, especially through the life and death of Jesus, don't we have sufficient reason for celebration and worship?
33. We have the truth established by the life and death of Jesus Himself and, ultimately, by His sacrifice on the cross. See John 1:29,36; and 1 Corinthians 5:7.

Revelation 5:6,12-13: ⁶ Then I saw a Lamb standing in the centre of the throne, surrounded by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb appeared to have been killed. [The Greek word means "brutally slaughtered."] It had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God that have been sent throughout the whole earth...¹² and sang in a loud voice:

“The Lamb who was killed is worthy
to receive power, wealth, wisdom, and strength,
honour, glory, and praise!”

¹³And I heard **every creature in heaven, on earth, in the world below, and in the sea—all living beings in the universe—and they were singing:** [Compare Philippians 2:10-11.]

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb,
be praise and honour, glory and might,
for ever and ever!”

¹⁴The four living creatures answered, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshipped.—*Good News Bible*^{*†‡}

34. It is interesting to notice here in Revelation that every creature in heaven, on earth, in the world below, and in the sea—all living beings in the universe—were singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb, be praise and honor, glory and might, for ever and ever!” These verses need to be compared with Philippians 2:10-11. One day, will even Satan be singing “praise and honor, glory and might, for ever and ever” to God?
35. Do we rejoice after we pray and ask God to forgive our sins? Do we always approach God with reverence as well as rejoicing?

Psalm 95:1,6: Come, let us praise the LORD!

Let us sing for joy to God, who protects us!...

⁶ Come, let us bow down and worship him;

let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!—*Good News Bible*.*

36. Can you name some of the things that God has done for you that are good reasons to sing praises to Him? What stories in the Bible can you think of that would have caused you to want to sing and praise God? Do you think Daniel and his three friends were ready to praise God after Daniel spoke to Nebuchadnezzar and explained to him his dream and its meaning? Later, did they rejoice after they were taken out of the fiery furnace?
37. Are we awed by the idea that the God who created everything in our universe chose to become a human being and die on our behalf?
38. See Nehemiah 12:44-47. Notice that all the people were pleased with the priests and Levites. Those priests and Levites were carefully performing the ceremonies consisting of the purifications and other rituals that God had originally commanded. Were they rejoicing because in the past they were aware of all the times when priests and Levites did not do what they were supposed to and, thus, did not represent God correctly? (Compare Judges 19; Hosea 4:7; 5:1; and Micah 3:11.)
39. So, now **we have seen that, beginning with the reading of God’s Word to the people in a language they could understand, they prayed and worshiped and re-dedicated themselves to God in a marvelous series of worshipful events.**
40. Think about what the cross of Christ has meant to you. Do you understand all the implications of Christ’s death on the cross? We need to remember that **His death on the cross was for the benefit not only of human beings but also for the entire universe.** Do we understand what that means?

The cross of Christ will be the science and the song of the redeemed through all eternity. In Christ glorified they will behold Christ crucified.

Never will it be forgotten that He whose power created and upheld the unnumbered worlds through the vast realms of space, the Beloved of God, the Majesty of heaven, He whom cherub and shining seraph delighted to adore-humbled Himself to uplift fallen man; that He bore the guilt and shame of sin, and the hiding of His Father's face, till the woes of a lost world broke His heart and crushed out His life on Calvary's cross. That the Maker of all worlds, the Arbiter of all destinies, should lay aside His glory and humiliate Himself from love to man will ever excite the wonder and adoration of the universe. As the nations of the saved look upon their Redeemer and behold the eternal glory of the Father shining in His countenance; as they behold His throne, which is from everlasting to everlasting, and know that His kingdom is to have no end, they break forth in rapturous song: "Worthy, worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by His own most precious blood!"—Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*,* vol. 4, 468.2 (1874); *The Great Controversy** 651.2-652.0; *AG** 98.3; *Hvn** 157.1-2; *Mar** 362.4.†

41. What is Christ doing right now for the benefit of the onlooking universe?

Ephesians 1:8b-10: In all his wisdom and insight ⁹God did what he had purposed, and made known to us the secret plan he had already decided to complete by means of Christ. ¹⁰This plan, which God will complete when the time is right, is to **bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth**, with Christ as head.—*Good News Bible*.*†

Ephesians 3:9b-10: God, who is the Creator of all things, kept his secret hidden through all the past ages, ¹⁰in order that at the present time, **by means of the church, the angelic rulers and powers in the heavenly world might learn of his wisdom in all its different forms.**—*Good News Bible*.*†

Colossians 1:19-20: ¹⁹For it was by God's own decision that the Son has in himself the full nature of God. ²⁰Through the Son, then, **God decided to bring the whole universe back to himself. God made peace through his Son's blood on the cross and so brought back to himself all things, both on earth and in heaven.**—*Good News Bible*.*†

42. **We must never make the mistake of limiting the plan of salvation to this one little world!**

43. So, what should we conclude from reading these experiences during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah? First of all, we should recognize—as hopefully they did—that physical walls are not what saves us. Our only ultimate protection is the LORD. (Psalm 127:1-2)

44. What is supposed to be the role of joy in the act of worship? Certainly, there are reasons to rejoice because of what God has done for us. But, is joy nothing more than an emotional high? Is that different from a spiritual high? Do you go to church on a regular basis to experience an emotional or spiritual high?

45. Unfortunately, even in ancient times, people often failed to bring their tithes. So, those who were supposed to be serving the people who came to the temple had to go back to planting their own gardens and supporting themselves. In our day, of course, the same could be true. We are very fortunate to have the tithing system which we have in the Seventh-day Adventist Church to support the ministry.

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