

Worship: From Exile to Restoration



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Ezekiel 8, Daniel 3, Jer. 29:10–14, Haggai 1, Zech. 1:1–6, Nehemiah 1.*

Memory Text: “Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes” (*Haggai 1:6*).

It is very hard from our perspective—removed as we are by more than one thousand nine hundred years from the final destruction of the Jerusalem temple—to understand just how significant the temple was in the Jewish nation’s national and religious life. It was the apex of worship, the center of their ethnic and religious identity. It was where the Lord said He would dwell and rule in the midst of Israel. It was where the follower of YHWH found cleansing, forgiveness, grace, and reconciliation.

Because it was, truly, the Lord’s house, many people disbelieved the prophetic warnings that said it would be destroyed by Babylon. *How could the Lord allow His sacred temple to be obliterated?* We only can guess at the shock when, indeed, as the prophets had warned, the Babylonians razed it. And yet, even amid all the devastation, the Lord promised that the nation would be restored, the temple rebuilt, and Israel given another chance to fulfill her prophetic destiny.

This week we will look at some of the issues regarding worship during the time of the exile and, then, the promised restoration.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 3.*

“Son of Man, Have You Seen . . . ?”

Apostasy does not happen overnight; whole peoples do not fall away in a day, a week, even in a year. The process is much slower; a little change here, a little compromise there; a little less rigidity in order to keep up with the times or to be relevant or to fit better with the trends of society and culture. Bit by bit, step by step, and before long, a whole nation is doing things that, perhaps a generation or two ago, would have been looked upon in horror. Such was the fate of ancient Israel and Judah; such was the fate of early Christianity. Such can be the fate of any church, including ours, which does not carefully and jealously guard the sacred truths and practices given to it by the Lord.

Read Ezekiel 8. As you read, realize that all this was taking place in the sacred temple that the Lord had instituted, the very place where the Lord had promised to place His name. How could the people, the spiritual leaders, have fallen into such apostasy? What lessons can we learn from this?

The secret sins, indulged by priests and elders, were the abominable and repulsive worship practices of their culture. Those who should have been leading God’s people in true worship were adapting that worship to the sinful and corrupt customs of their time and environment, thus bringing the abominations of the surrounding culture into God’s holy sanctuary. How ironic that only the coming of the Babylonian army would bring an end to the desecration of God’s temple, and then only by destroying it.

Carefully read Ezekiel 8:12. What kind of logic and rationale were these elders using to justify their actions? What might have led them to such false conclusions?

These people must have turned so far away from the Lord that they believed that He did not see them or that He did not care about their practices. The Lord, who again and again showed His care, His nearness, and His desire for obedience, now *was deemed to have forsaken the land*? How careful we need to be, because sin will harden our hearts and poison our minds until we rationalize even the most horrific practices.

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Nehemiah 1:5–7*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Explain how the tendency to conform to worldly expectations has been so devastating in the history of God’s people.

Feel: Long for uncompromising faithfulness and allegiance to God, such as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego displayed.

Do: Identify with the sinful condition of God’s people, lifting others into God’s presence through intercessory prayer.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Dangers of Conformity

A What temptations to fit in with local cultural and social expectations did Daniel and his friends face? How is this still a temptation today?

B How did leadership betray their responsibilities to keep Israel focused on true worship?

C Which leaders risked their lives to intercede for Israel and lead their people into repentance and obedience?

II. Feel: Though He Slay Me

A What attitude did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego have when they were faced with Nebuchadnezzar’s demands to bow down to his image?

B What should be our attitude as we respond to similar temptations?

III. Do: We Have Sinned

A How did Daniel and Nehemiah, both godly men and exiles, identify themselves in their prayers with their faithless nation’s sins?

B What similar prayers might we make today, for our families and for our church?

▶ **Summary:** The exiles who returned to Jerusalem were faced with temptations to relax their vigilance in God’s service and conform to worldly customs. Similar temptations face us today. Confession, repentance, and obedience are still requisites for God’s presence among His people.

Worshipping the Image

As we have touched on all throughout this quarter, the final test in the last days deals with the question of worship (*Rev. 14:1–12*). All humanity will be split into two camps: those who worship the Creator, the One who made the heavens and the earth, and those who worship the beast and his image. Even though this sequence in the prophetic picture has yet to unfold, one could argue that, even now, all the world is divided into two camps: those who are faithful to the Lord and those who are not. There is no middle ground: we are on one side or the other.

With this in mind, the story of the three Hebrew boys in the book of Daniel becomes quite relevant. It is not just a dramatic story of a supernatural rescue of those faithful followers of YHWH. It becomes, instead, a symbol, a type, for the test of worship that will come upon the world just before the second coming of Christ.

Read Daniel 3. Compare the worship of the image here with the worship of the image in Revelation 14. What can we learn from this story that can help us to understand the issue regarding the mark of the beast?

The second commandment, the one forbidding idolatry (*Exod. 20:4–6*), was at issue here; the fourth commandment (*Exod. 20:8–11*), the Sabbath commandment, will be the outward issue in the last days. How interesting that these both are commandments that were changed and tampered with by the beast power itself (*see Dan. 7:25*). Both commandments are tied in directly with worship; the second forbids the worship of idols, while the fourth shows why one should not worship idols, and that is because the Lord of nature, not nature itself, is the One who created and redeemed all of humanity (*see also Deut. 5:12–15*).

In both cases, too, there is an earthly political/religious entity that wants the worship and fealty owed only to the Lord, and in both cases this power is willing to resort to violence in order to get that “worship.”

Think through what it means to worship something. Is it always wrong to worship anything other than the Lord? If not, why not? Might there be some things that we can worship without sinning, without violating God’s law? If so, what? If not, how can we make sure we are not worshipping anything other than our Lord?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God achieves the restoration and transformation of human souls, reconciling them to Himself through Christ.

Just for Teachers: Your students will no doubt recognize this story as one that held the media transfixed for many weeks at the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010. The objective here is to examine the issue of restoration in light of one party's repeated failings.

Tiger Woods. The name once synonymous with golf royalty has become a euphemism for marital infidelity. The transformation began with an early morning accident and quickly morphed into one of the fastest falls by a sports icon in modern sports history. Almost overnight, Woods went from being the “perfect” golfer and family man to a social pariah. Why? He had broken his marital vow with a number of other women.

Condemnation was swift and unrelenting. People theorized and philosophized about his emotional and mental health. He lost countless endorsements. Others wondered how he could cheat on such a beautiful woman, to say nothing of the impact on his children. How could a man who seemed to “have it all” make such poor decisions?

Consider This: Lost in the din of Woods' personal failings, few people examined their own lives. Few Christians considered the impact of their own infidelities to a God who has never sinned against them or done them any harm. Why does God yearn to have us back when we have failed Him so mightily?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

Just for Teachers: Deeper than the sinner's sin is God's love for that sinner. This week's commentary section examines God's efforts to bring His wayward loved ones—ancient and present—back into fellowship with Him.

I. The Other Temple (Review Ezekiel 8 and 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20 with your class.)

CONTINUED ►

“Consider Your Ways”

Read Jeremiah 29:10–14. What does this tell us about the character of God? What hope can we, in our own context, take from these verses?

After seventy years, as foretold, the Lord began the restoration of the exiles back to the Promised Land. Israel was to be given another chance to fulfill her prophetic destiny.

Central to that role was, of course, the temple, the sanctuary, the place where the entire plan of salvation was taught through the types and symbols of the service. Here the work and mission of the Messiah, through which the whole world could have salvation, was prefigured (*see John 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:19; Heb. 8:1, 2*).

Yet, the work of rebuilding the temple did not go as smoothly or as quickly as it should have. Forces, internal and external, got in the way, and the work was delayed. This was not as the Lord would have it, and He spoke through Haggai to let the people know of His displeasure.

Read Haggai 1. What happened here? What diverted their attention? Why is that so easy to do?

How easy it is to let worldly toils, worldly desires, even worldly needs get in the way of our spiritual responsibilities. The Lord let them know that they would never have true satisfaction apart from their devotion to Him and the work He had given them to do. All too often we can, in our own way, make the same mistake, getting so caught up in the ways of the world that we neglect what should be first and foremost in our lives: our relationship with God. Maybe the Lord is saying to us, either corporately or individually, “Consider your ways.”

Consider your ways. What do your ways, your actions, the things you do, and don't do—what do they say about your relationship to the Lord? In what ways might you be guilty of the same things as the people depicted here in Haggai?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

The catalog of abominations that God shows Ezekiel must have caused him deep distress. Not only were the Israelites worshiping foreign gods, but they brought those gods into the very presence of the one true God. (To get a sense of how far Judah and Israel had fallen, one need only read Deuteronomy 6:4–9, which enjoined the worship of one God.) Ezekiel 8:16 is particularly troubling. The prophet sees 25 men with their backs turned toward the temple so that they could worship the sun.


If the people of God had filled God’s earthly temple with foreign gods, what about their body temples? The apostle Paul makes it clear that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (*1 Cor. 6:19*) and that we are not our own. Peter reminds us that we “were not redeemed with corruptible things . . . but with the precious blood of Christ” (*1 Pet. 1:18, 19, NKJV*). If the leaders of the nation of Judah practiced such open rebellion against God, what were their inner lives like?

Consider This: Jesus stated, “There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man” (*Mark 7:15, NKJV*). How did the apostasy in Judah begin: with public displays of rebellion or private compromises of faith? Discuss. What cautionary lesson from Judah’s experience can we learn for our own spiritual lives?

II. Our Satan Problem (*Review Haggai 1, Zechariah 1:1–6, and Zechariah 3 with your class.*)

In case you didn’t know it, we humans have a Satan problem. The devil will never let us simply walk into God’s arms. As we’ve been discussing this quarter, Satan wants worship (*Isa. 14:13*), and so does God (*Rev. 12:7*). This is one reason that Satan worked feverishly to delay the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s wall and the Lord’s temple. This is also why he works tirelessly to prevent us from living God’s full destiny for our lives. To do so would mean that he would no longer be the object of our worship.

The prophet Zechariah was given a bird’s-eye view, in Zechariah 3, of the true nature of the adversary of our souls. In the presence of God, Satan stood ready to accuse and oppose Joshua, the high priest. But God interceded: “And the Lord said to Satan, ‘The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?’ ” (*vs. 2, NKJV*). God then directed His angel to remove Joshua’s filthy garments, symbolic of his iniquity, and clothe him in rich robes (*vs. 4*).

CONTINUED 

Your Fathers, Where Are They?

The rebuilding of the temple took approximately twelve years. Ezra 5:1, 2 refers to Zechariah as one of the “prophets of God helping them.” His emphasis, like Haggai’s, was upon the glory that would one day inhabit the temple.

Yet, as often is with prophecy, the promises are not unconditional. Humans, given free will, must make the choice to obey the Lord, to do what He commands, not as a means of salvation but as a means of showing the fruit and the benefits of salvation.

Human freedom is an unspoken assumption all through the Scriptures. People have the option to choose whom they will serve and worship, and the fulfillment of the promises is incumbent upon the choices that people make. The Bible is filled with wonderful promises to any and all who faithfully seek and serve Him.

Read Zechariah 1:1–6. What theme is found here that is repeated, again and again, throughout almost all of the Bible? How is the reality of human free will and free choice revealed in these verses?

Some of the most poignant words in that text are found in verse 5. “Your fathers, where are they?” In other words, learn from the mistakes of those who came before you; do not do what they did; learn from the past, learn from what happened before you.

Here is where the ministry of the pastor in the pulpit can come in. Here is where the pastor can, in the role of the prophets, point the people to the Lord’s leading, to His promises, and to the conditions of those promises. The preaching of the Word should not cause theological confusion or controversy: it should be Christ centered, pointing to what the Lord has done for us, what He offers to do for us, and what He will do for us, all on the condition that we come to Him in faith and repentance. That is essentially what Zechariah is saying to the people here: repent, turn from your evil ways, learn from the past, and put your hope in the Lord and the promises of the Lord for the future. In the same way, today, with the revelation of what the sanctuary service was all about (the life and death and high priestly ministry of Jesus), we should come to the Lord and worship Him in an attitude of faith, repentance, and obedience. Again, though obedience cannot save us (it is way too late for that), there is no such thing as salvation without it, regardless of how flawed our obedience tends to be.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Joshua represented the torn, tattered, chastened people after exile. They weren't much to look at, but God loved them and wanted to restore them. Not coincidentally, Zechariah's vision points forward to the sacrifice of Jesus, which removed our iniquity and clothed us with His righteousness (*Rom. 4:22–25, 1 Cor. 1:30, 2 Cor. 5:12*). This scene reveals the essence of the gospel.

Consider This: The returning exiles were having problems keeping their focus on God and His commands. Haggai makes it clear that they struggled mightily in search of worldly goods that could never take the place of God. What does it mean to be in the world but not of it? How do we live successfully that way (*John 17:16, 17*)?

III. We've Got a Ministry (*Review Nehemiah 1 and 2 Corinthians 5:18–21 with your class.*)

Nehemiah's love for the returning exiles is inspirational. As the lesson notes, he not only feels their pain (*Neh. 1:4*), but he positions himself squarely with their plight. Nehemiah then appeals to God to open a way by which he can go and help them.

Ever since Cain asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (*Gen. 4:9*), the question of our responsibility to our brothers and sisters has echoed throughout time. The answer from God is a resounding, "Yes!" The apostle Paul highlights this reality in 2 Corinthians, as he justifies his apostleship. The God who reconciled us through Christ calls us to help Him reconcile others (*2 Cor. 5:18*). "Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (*vs. 20, NKJV*).

Consider This: Notice here that God is taking the initiative to reconcile humanity back to Himself. Isaiah 59:1, 2 makes it clear that sin has caused a separation, a break, in the natural relationship that should have existed between God and humanity. How does this break affect our worship?

► STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Use the following questions to generate deeper thinking and discussion about God's effort to reconcile fallen human beings. It is a telling fact that many will choose to be lost rather than accept God's offer of forgiveness and restoration.

CONTINUED ►

Nehemiah's Prayer

Despite all the promises of restoration, things were not going well in Jerusalem. The people faced obstacle after obstacle, many of them as a result of their own disobedience. The prophet Nehemiah, while serving the Persian king, received word about the situation there and responded with fasting, mourning, and prayer. His passion and concern for the situation clearly are revealed in the first chapter of the book that bears his name.

Read Nehemiah 1, his prayer in response to what he heard, and then answer the following questions:

1. Why would Nehemiah, who as far as we know was faithful, include himself among those who had sinned against the Lord? *See Dan. 9:5, 6.*

2. What kind of prayer is this, and why is this kind of prayer so important? *See Exod. 32:31–34, James 5:16.*

3. In what ways is the conditionality of prophecy revealed in this prayer?

4. On what basis does he make his appeal to the Lord on behalf of the people? In other words, why should the Lord listen to this appeal? *See Gen. 12:1–3; Exod. 6:4, 5.*

Write a prayer of intercession for the Seventh-day Adventist Church today and bring it to class on Sabbath and compare what you write with the other class members. What do our answers tell us about the way in which we perceive the various spiritual needs of the church? More important, how can we help to bring about whatever reforms we deem necessary?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Thought Questions:**

- 1 Romans 12:2 states, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (*NKJV*). Given the hereditary and cultivated tendencies to sin with which many of us struggle, how does God go about transforming us?
- 2 This week’s study mentioned the miraculous deliverance of the three Hebrew worthies from Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace. When was the last time that you saw God move to save you from some terrible eventuality?

Application Questions:

- 1 Sometimes freedom can pose severe challenges, as was seen in the life of post-exilic Israel. Explain what you think the apostle Paul meant by this statement: “For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (*Gal. 5:13, NKJV*).
- 2 What impact does the contemplation of Jesus Christ have on our mental well-being, our ability to comprehend, appreciate, and obey the dictates of God (*2 Cor. 3:18*)?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: This week’s lesson explores the messages of God’s prophets to the returning Israelite remnant. The activity below is designed to make these messages more real to your class members.

If you were to write a letter addressing a group of people who have backslidden or forgotten their divine calling, what would you say to them? What types of arguments or experiences would you draw on to make your case? Share your response or draft an actual letter, individually or as a class, remembering to be as loving and encouraging as possible.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Return of the Exiles,” pp. 551–566; “The Prophets of God Helping Them,” pp. 567–581; “Ezra, the Priest and Scribe,” pp. 607–617; “A Spiritual Revival,” pp. 618–627; “Instructed in the Law of God,” pp. 661–668; “Reformation,” pp. 669–678, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“The season of distress before God’s people will call for a faith that will not falter. His children must make it manifest that *He is the only object of their worship*.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 512; emphasis supplied.

“There is constant danger that professing Christians will come to think that in order to have influence with [worldly people], they must to a certain extent conform to the world. But though such a course *may appear to afford great advantages, it always ends in spiritual loss*.”—Page 570; emphasis supplied.

“In the work of reform to be carried forward today, there is need of men who, like Ezra and Nehemiah, will not palliate or excuse sin, . . . neither will they cover evil with a cloak of false charity. . . . They will remember also that in the one who rebukes evil the spirit of Christ should ever be revealed.”—Page 675.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Read the prayers of intercession for the Seventh-day Adventist Church that were written in response to Thursday’s lesson. What can we learn from each of these prayers? What do people perceive as the greatest need of the church at the present time?
- ❷ What lessons can we learn from our own church fathers and mothers? That is, what important spiritual lessons can our own Seventh-day Adventist history teach us?
- ❸ What are ways in which we, as a church, in our efforts to reach out to the surrounding culture, are in danger of compromising crucial truths? Why are we so often blind to compromise when it happens?
- ❹ While there is always the danger of compromising ourselves in an attempt to be relevant, there is also the danger of locking ourselves into beliefs or practices that, perhaps, need refining or changing. How can we know what is immutable and unchangeable, in contrast to that which can and should change with the times?