

God Brings His People Home

Summary and Goal

God kept His promise to bring His people out of exile and back to the promised land. As God's people gathered in Jerusalem, they made their worship of God their first priority and proclaimed God's faithfulness through their actions. As Christians, we celebrate and give thanks to God for bringing us out of our exile to sin and death. In our worship, we proclaim the goodness of the Lord so that others might taste and see that He is good.

Main Passages

Ezra 1:1-8; 3:1-13

Session Outline

1. God keeps His promise to bring His people home (Ezra 1:1-8).
2. God's people gather to make worship their first priority (Ezra 3:1-7).
3. God's people proclaim the goodness of the Lord (Ezra 3:8-13).

Theological Theme

Worshiping God should be the first priority of His people.

Christ Connection

God kept His promise to bring His people out of exile in Babylon and restore their freedom to worship Him. Since Adam and Eve sinned, all humans have been in exile from the garden and are in need of deliverance. Jesus came to end this exile, bring His people home, and restore our freedom to worship.

Missional Application

God calls us to make worship our first priority so others will see the goodness of the Lord.

Session Plan

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Session 5

? For Further Discussion

Some people say they prefer to worship God in the “thin place” of nature and do not need the church. Why must we never divorce worship from gathering with God’s people?

Why must we never divorce worship from God’s revelation in Scripture?

Pack Item 2: Exile and Return Map

Use the map to help your group members visualize the return of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem from Babylon.

Point 1 Option

Read aloud the “Voices from the Church” quote from Skye Jethani (leader p. 72; PSG p. 57). Then ask the following questions to the group:

- How does the cross relate to God’s ultimate purpose for worship?
- What can happen if we *only* see the cross as a means to rescue us from death?

Introduction

Begin with the idea of “Thin Places” to emphasize the importance of location for Jewish worship for the returning exiles (leader p. 70; PSG p. 55).

- ? Name a place—perhaps a building or a location—where you had a powerful spiritual experience with God. What does that place represent for you today?

Summarize this session by pointing to how God kept His promise to bring His people back to the promised land and how the people prioritized worship of Him (leader p. 70; PSG p. 56).

1. God keeps His promise to bring His people home (Ezra 1:1-8).

Provide an overview of the first six chapters of Ezra (leader p. 71), and then read Ezra 1:1-8. Explain how Cyrus’ decree allowing the Israelites to return to Jerusalem fulfilled Jeremiah’s prophecy. (*Reference Cyrus’ decree on Pack Item 5: Kings of the Exile.*) Comment on the context of Jeremiah 29:10-11 in light of Israel’s return from exile (leader pp. 71-72; PSG pp. 56-57).

- ? Looking at Ezra 1:1-8, how did God orchestrate the events in order to bring about the people’s return from exile?
- ? In what ways have you witnessed God using even non-believers to accomplish His purposes?

Call attention to King Cyrus’ insistence that the people make “freewill” offerings and how this would be the natural, joyful response of God’s people to this occasion (leader p. 72; PSG p. 57). Help your group see the intimate relationship between stewardship and worship (leader p. 72).

- ? How should our stewardship habits change when we acknowledge that everything is the Lord’s and is to be used for His purposes?

2. God's people gather to make worship their first priority (Ezra 3:1-7).

Briefly mention how the Lord had not been worshiped in Jerusalem for about fifty years (leader p. 73). Then ask a volunteer to read Ezra 3:1-7. Clarify the significance of the seventh month in Israel's calendar (leader p. 73). Stress how worshiping according to the law of Moses made Israel distinct from the surrounding nations (leader pp. 73-74; PSG pp. 58-59).

- ❓ What are some aspects of Christian worship that differ from worship in other religions?
- ❓ Why is it important that Christianity not blend in with the surrounding culture?

Comment on the gladness of God's people in giving to the Lord. If we have a hard time incorporating giving into our worship, then we are probably treasuring God's gifts more than God Himself (leader p. 74; PSG p. 59).

- ❓ What does your worship through giving say about your love and devotion to God?
- ❓ How might our traditions of worship overtake our focus on the God we are worshiping?

3. God's people proclaim the goodness of the Lord (Ezra 3:8-13).

Read Ezra 3:8-13. Emphasize the multifaceted nature of worship and how it engages us in different ways (leader pp. 75-76; PSG pp. 60-61).

- ❓ What caricatures have you encountered regarding other worship styles?
- ❓ What do you learn from people who worship differently than you do?

Mention that life circumstances can shape the diversity of worship expression, but all worship of God is mission-focused in nature (leader p. 76; PSG p. 61).

- ❓ What are some ways God has been good to you and your church?

Conclusion

Explain how the Book of Ezra points forward to the cross and Jesus' second coming. Conclude by connecting the "Thin Place" metaphor to Christians, who have the Spirit of God dwelling within (leader p. 77; PSG p. 62). *Apply the truths of this session with "His Mission, Your Mission" (PSG p. 63).*

Point 2 Option

Read the "Essential Christian Doctrine" *Preservation of Scripture* (leader p. 74; PSG p. 59). Then ask groups of 3-4 to discuss the following questions (consider writing them on a board or sheet of paper for groups to have; also available on the DVD in *The Gospel Project for Adults: Leader Pack*):

- If God has revealed Himself by inspiring the Bible, then why is it important for us to consider how He has preserved the biblical text for His people over the centuries?
- How does studying the Scriptures show honor to the One who gave it and preserved it?

Christ Connection: God kept His promise to bring His people out of exile in Babylon and restore their freedom to worship Him. Since Adam and Eve sinned, all humans have been in exile from the garden and are in need of deliverance. Jesus came to end this exile, bring His people home, and restore our freedom to worship.

Missional Application: God calls us to make worship our first priority so others will see the goodness of the Lord.

Expanded Session Content

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Session 5

Voices from the Church

“The primary reason the church gathers is to glorify God. We gather together for corporate worship to ascribe unto God the worship that is due Him.”³


—Matt Boswell

Introduction

In Irish mythology, the Hill of Uisneach in County Westmeath is believed to be the center of Ireland. This hill is settled neatly into the Irish landscape and commands no more attention than the rolling hills that surround it. Irish tour guide Mindie Burgoyne comments that the Hill of Uisneach is easily overlooked if not for the signage, but the views from Uisneach are breathtaking. The hill is also said to be the burial site of the goddess Eriu from which Eire, or Ireland, draws its name.¹

The Hill of Uisneach is designated as a “Thin Place” on the Irish countryside. “Thin Places” are said to be geographic locations where the eternal world and the physical world meet and mingle.² The concept of “Thin Places” finds its origins in the Celtic culture of the fifth century A.D. Mystical travelers come from all over the world to visit this hill, assuming they will encounter a divine presence there.

As Christians, we don’t believe in mystic forces of divinity emanating from a goddess’s burial ground. But we do believe that God draws near to us in worship. There is a sense in which the metaphor of a “thin place” helps us see the beauty of biblical worship—as we become aware of God’s presence and attentive to His Word. In the story of the Jewish people’s return to Jerusalem after a time of exile, we are reminded of how important it was for the Jews of the day to worship in a particular place.

-  Name a place—perhaps a building or a location—where you had a powerful spiritual experience with God. What does that place represent for you today?

Session Summary

In this session, we see how God kept His promise to bring His people out of exile and back to the promised land. As God’s people gathered in Jerusalem, they made their worship of God their first priority and proclaimed God’s faithfulness through their actions. As Christians, we celebrate and give thanks to God for bringing us out of our exile to sin and death. In our worship, we proclaim the goodness of the Lord so that others might taste and see that He is good.

1. God keeps His promise to bring His people home (Ezra 1:1-8).

The first six chapters of Ezra highlight God's sovereignty in the preservation of His people. God brought His chosen people, Israel, back to the land of promise. What's more, He used the ruler of the nation of Persia to accomplish His purposes! God Himself moved in the heart of Cyrus and the hearts of His people that they could and would leave their land of exile and return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (v. 5).⁴ Take a look:

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. ⁶ And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered.

⁷ Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. ⁸ Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.

Jeremiah's prophecy, referred to in verse 1, fulfilled by Cyrus, comes from an often quoted passage: "For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jer. 29:10-11; see also 25:11-14).

In contemporary Christianity, the latter verse is often used to encourage individual believers with the reality that God's sovereign hand holds their future. In context, this passage is far more meaningful than simply a message for the individual because it depicts God's faithfulness to the whole Israelite community.

Further Commentary

"Cyrus seized the opportunity [of civil unrest in Babylon] to propagandize his victory, couching it in terms of Marduk's will...For the Hebrews, Yahweh not Marduk was the one true God and Lord of history. Yahweh not Marduk empowered Cyrus to overthrow Babylon and become the dominant leader of the world. Under Yahweh's direction, Cyrus freed the Hebrews exiled in Babylon, permitting them to return to Judah and to rebuild the temple. For the Jewish people the ascendancy of Cyrus was a fulfillment of prophecy uttered by Isaiah almost two centuries earlier. In Isaiah 44:24-28, the prophet predicted the full restoration of Jerusalem together with the rebuilding of the temple. Yahweh referred to Cyrus as 'My shepherd,' calling for the image of the Hebrews as God's flock. God would tend His sheep through His shepherd Cyrus. The prophecy clearly indicated the Lord would make all these things happen, but He would do so through Cyrus."⁵

—Wayne VanHorn,
Biblical Illustrator

Voices from the Church

“The physical dwelling place of God in their midst was supposed to represent a deeper, personal, intimate dwelling place of God in the lives of each one of them.”⁷

—Michael Williams

Voices from the Church

“It is only when we grasp God’s unyielding desire to be *with* us that we begin to see the ultimate purpose of the cross. It is more than a vehicle to rescue us from death; it transports us into the arms of Life.”⁸

—Skye Jethani

Stewardship

Biblical stewardship, at its core, is always about managing someone else’s stuff. So the key question is “For whom have we been appointed managers?” Scripture tells us that we are God’s managers who have been commissioned as rulers to fulfill God’s purpose in creation and redemption (Gen. 1:26) Although the Creator could have managed His resources for redemptive purposes on His own behalf, He has made us vice-regents and has entrusted that ministry to us.⁹

Ultimately, God’s plan here results in the Messiah, and through His resurrection will come the redemption of all that was lost in the fall of Genesis 3. The same God who kept His promise to Israel is the God who protects our future.

- Looking at Ezra 1:1-8, how did God orchestrate the events in order to bring about the people’s return from exile?
- In what ways have you witnessed God using even non-believers to accomplish His purposes?

Verse 1 culminates with the phrase “put it in writing.” This wording was of special importance in the ancient Near East because anything that was significant, such as laws, receipts, decrees, and covenants, was put into writing on clay tablets.⁶

The significance of God bringing His people back to Jerusalem was not lost on King Cyrus, so much so that Cyrus was aware of the need to rebuild the temple and of the need for building materials. Instead of calling for a compulsory gift, King Cyrus insisted upon a “freewill” or voluntary offering to the Lord (v. 4). Although the king was not one of God’s people, his assumption that God’s faithfulness would create in the people a charitable heart is instructive for us all.

In response to God fulfilling His promise, these verses record that the natural response to God is the cheerful giving of one’s possessions to the Lord (vv. 5-8). The people’s joyful response recorded in Ezra 1 intersects with a larger biblical idea of giving our firstfruits to God. This is a farming illustration that acknowledges an important truth: the land and all it produces belong to God; we are simply stewards. As stewards of what is already His, God’s people joyfully and strategically give of the resources they are called to oversee for the furtherance of God’s kingdom mission.

The intimate relationship between stewardship and worship assumes that money is not the only commodity that believers are to steward. While it is undoubtedly the case that Christians steward their money, God calls His people to leverage their relationships, organizational influence, political power, occupational expertise, and every other area of gifting He has given them to encourage the physical and spiritual flourishing of humanity as a sign of the coming kingdom.

- How should our stewardship habits change when we acknowledge that everything is the Lord’s and is to be used for His purposes?

2. God's people gather to make worship their first priority (Ezra 3:1-7).

Consider the scene as these exiles returned to their land. The Lord had not been worshiped in Jerusalem for about fifty years, since the city's fall in 586 B.C. So it's not surprising to see that the first concern of the community was to lift the Lord's name high, even though the temple had not yet been constructed. Watch what happened:

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. ⁷ So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

The seventh month was perhaps the most significant month of worship throughout the year for Israel. This month (known as Tishri) stretched from September to October. On the first day of the month, they would have celebrated their new year with the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:23-25). On the tenth day was the Day of Atonement (vv. 26-32; although not mentioned here in Ezra). From the fifteenth day to the twenty-first, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths (vv. 33-36). This feast was a time of great rejoicing, and interestingly enough, it was also in the seventh month at Tabernacles that Solomon had gathered the people together to dedicate the first temple (1 Kings 8:2).¹⁰

An easily overlooked detail in verse 2 is that the Israelites worshiped according to the law of Moses. The Law (the first five books of the Bible) gave God's people clear warnings against worshiping Him like the surrounding nations worshiped their gods. Deuteronomy 12:30-31 reads:

Further Commentary

“‘The seventh month’ was September-October 537 B.C. Taking the lead in reviving the proper sacrificial system was Jeshua son of Jozadak... In Haggai he is always referred to as Joshua, an alternative spelling, and nearly always called the high priest, though never in Ezra-Nehemiah. Just as Joshua built an altar to the Lord when the people entered the promised land ‘according to what is written in the book of the law of Moses’ (Josh. 8:30-31), so those returning to the promised land built theirs the same way, with uncut stones that no iron tool had touched (Deut. 27:5-6)...The burnt offerings were part of the consecration of the new altar. Twice before in Israel's history the daily burnt offerings had ceased under godless kings and were reinstated, first by Joash (2 Chron. 24:14) and later by Hezekiah (2 Chron. 29:7,27-29)... As soon as the sacrificial system was in place, the next order of business was the acquisition of building material. Payment was made to the people of Sidon and Tyre who cut down the famous cedars of Lebanon and floated the logs down the coast to Joppa, just south of present day Tel-Aviv, for transit overland to Jerusalem. While stonecutters were also hired, they were not as numerous as Solomon's 80,000 who worked on the first temple (2 Chron. 2:18) since some of the stones from the rubble of the first temple could be reused.”¹¹

—Carl R. Anderson,
HCSB Study Bible

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

8. Preservation of Scripture

God has chosen to reveal Himself to humanity through the text of Scripture, having inspired it and directed it to be free from error. God has also acted providentially throughout the course of history to ensure the biblical text is faithfully preserved for future generations. Our belief in the preservation of Scripture is supported by investigation into how the canon of Scripture was formed and how manuscripts were faithfully transmitted throughout the centuries.

Voices from Church History

“The titles of God are virtually promises. When he is called a sun, a shield, a strong tower, a hiding place, a portion. The titles of Christ, light of the world, bread of life, the way, truth, and life; the titles of the Spirit, the Spirit of truth, of holiness, of glory, of grace, and supplication, the sealing, witnessing Spirit; faith may conclude as much out of these as out of promises.”¹⁴

—David Clarkson (1621-1686)

Take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods?—that I also may do the same.’ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.

One purpose of upholding the law was to make Israel into a community that stood in contrast to those surrounding them. The contrast was not intended to create an unhealthy distance from Israel’s neighbors but to demonstrate the better way of the Lord.

Israel’s distinctiveness included worship practices. One big example involved child sacrifice. The law is replete with the admonition to lovingly teach and instruct children because they are a blessing and ultimately the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; Ex. 22:22-23; Deut. 4:9-10,40; 6:5-7; 12:28; 29:29). Despite Israel’s ups and downs, it is commendable that they were true to the law’s requirements after having been influenced by the Babylonians in exile for so many years.

In the Christian life, the Adversary works incrementally to draw God’s people away from faithfulness to Him. If Christians are not careful, we can slowly begin distorting the values of the kingdom by blending in with the surrounding culture. In order to remain faithful in our worship to God, we must continually renew our minds to His ways and to His plan.

- ❓ What are some aspects of Christian worship that differ from worship in other religions?
- ❓ Why is it important that Christianity not blend in with the surrounding culture?

A theme in Ezra 3:5-7 that is consistent with 1:1-8 is the gladness God’s people had that overflowed into giving to the Lord. The true worshiper is not miserly in their worship of God.¹² The disposition of God’s people in these verses is much like David’s when he declared, “I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing” (2 Sam. 24:24). If we find it hard to incorporate giving as an integral part of worship, it is probably because we are treasuring God’s gifts more than God Himself.

Likewise, we have a tendency to cling to the process or rituals of worship and not to the God whom we worship. A hidden blessing in these verses is that the sacrificial system is reinstated, yet the temple remained unfinished. For nearly four hundred years, Israel connected worship to the temple. In fact, God’s people “had come to rely more on the temple than on the Lord (Jer. 7).”¹³ Since the temple had been destroyed, they rediscovered the ever-present nature of God and the appropriate value of the temple as a means of worship.

- ❓ What does your worship through giving say about your love and devotion to God?
- ❓ How might our traditions of worship overtake our focus on the God we are worshipping?

3. God's people proclaim the goodness of the Lord (Ezra 3:8-13).

Worship is at the center of life in the community of faith. In the case of the Jews returning to Jerusalem, their worship highlighted God's goodness to His people for the reconstruction of the temple (according to His promise [Deut. 30:1-5]). Notice the multifaceted nature of their worship that exalted the Lord.

⁸ Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the LORD. ⁹ And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers.

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." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. 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.

A variety of worship forms can be observed in this scene. We read of God's people declaring His goodness through liturgy (v. 11), playing instruments (v. 10), and shouts of praise (vv. 11-13) and weeping (vv. 12-13).

Further Commentary

"So the crescendo continues, to the strange close of the chapter. Once again, there are conscious echoes of Solomon's celebrations, though there are contrasts too. This time there is no ark, no visible glory, indeed no Temple: only some beginnings, and small beginnings at that. But God is enthroned on the praises of Israel, and these could be as glorious as Solomon's. Perhaps they were more so, for while they matched the earlier occasion, word for word and almost instrument for instrument (2 Chron. 5:13), they were sung in conditions more conducive to humility than to pride, and called for a faith that had few earthly guarantees to bolster it. The last two verses have all the unexpectedness of actuality. The spontaneous cry of disappointment, breaking into the celebrations, was a foretaste of much that was to follow. Haggai would recognize that note and preach against it (Hag. 2:3ff.); Zechariah would have to challenge those who 'despised the day of small things' (Zech. 4:10). But both those prophets did so with such memorable words that we can be grateful that they had to meet this mood and answer it."¹⁵

—Derek Kidner

Voices from the Church

“To be sure, God makes His presence known in a particular way when we are quiet and alone. But God also makes His presence known when His people build houses for the homeless in His name. And God makes His presence known when a Sunday school teacher loves a bunch of rowdy three-year-old boys. And God makes His presence known when somebody extends a word of sympathy to a colleague who is going through hard times. And God makes His presence known when a boss offers grace to somebody who messed up on the job.”¹⁷

—Mark D. Roberts

Voices from Church History



“They rejoiced greatly because they had been freed from captivity and had received the authority to restore the temple, but they wept loudly because they knew that the first temple, whose size and beauty they could in no way equal, had been destroyed on account of their wickedness.”¹⁸

—Bede (circa 673-735)

The worship forms in these verses demonstrate different ways of worshipping that engage various parts of our being as humans. In church life, the tendency is for believers to quarantine themselves from others who participate in biblical worship in different ways. Typically, local church bodies tend toward a certain type of worship expression and have a tendency to caricature those who worship differently.

For example, there is a temptation among those who express their devotion to God through thoughtful liturgy to think that those who shout for joy are mindless in their praises to God. On the other hand, those who worship with a shout tend to wonder if those who worship solemnly have truly experienced the goodness of God.

The beauty is that these differences within the body are present so we can learn to express our love to God more robustly because we have learned from our brothers and sisters.

-  What caricatures have you encountered regarding other worship styles?
-  What do you learn from people who worship differently than you do?

Another catalyst for diversity in worship is that the Lord brings people to Himself from various life circumstances. Verses 12-13 describe the worship event as a gathering of all ages, and the partial construction of the temple provoked unique responses from different age groups.

On the one hand, many of the elders wept aloud because they were able to see the house of God arise once again despite all of the difficulties they had witnessed in their lifetime. There was also a sense in which the older Israelites wept with tears of grief because the new temple would not match the glory of the original edifice.¹⁶ On the other hand, the younger people of Israel shouted for joy because their hopes of a reconstructed temple were being realized.

Together, young people and old lifted praises to God with various expressions and from different stages of life. They produced a unified sound that glorified the Lord and could be heard from far away (v. 13). Worship of God is mission-focused in nature; the sight and sound of God’s people unified in all their diversity, celebrating His faithfulness in distinct ways, impacted the people that surrounded Israel. God’s people united in proclaiming the goodness of God is a powerful witness to the world.

-  What are some ways God has been good to you and your church?

Conclusion

The primary task of these chapters in Ezra is to tell of the reconstruction of the temple, but the significance of this book points forward to the cross and to Jesus' return. God kept His promise to bring His people out of exile in Babylon and restore their freedom to worship Him. Since Adam and Eve sinned, all humans have been in exile from the garden and are in need of deliverance. Jesus came to end this exile, bring His people home, and restore our freedom to worship. This directs our attention to a time when He will ultimately rule and reign unopposed in His kingdom.

As we have seen in these chapters, neither experiencing the presence of God nor the opportunity to worship Him are tethered to a geographical location. This reality is further underscored in the New Testament as Christ-followers are said to be the very temple of God by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in them (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 4:30).

In light of God's revelation in the Book of Ezra, the "Thin Place" metaphor we mentioned at the start of this session is problematic. Still, there is a sense in which we who have the Spirit of God dwelling within us are to be "thin places" through whom God can make known His presence to others. Worship stands at the crossroads of the Christian's twofold calling to love the Lord our God and to love our neighbor via the demonstration of His goodness. God calls the believer to make worship the first priority, no matter where He sends us or what the cost, so that others will see the goodness of the Lord Jesus Christ and join us in the worship of our God.

CHRIST CONNECTION: God kept His promise to bring His people out of exile in Babylon and restore their freedom to worship Him. Since Adam and Eve sinned, all humans have been in exile from the garden and are in need of deliverance. Jesus came to end this exile, bring His people home, and restore our freedom to worship.

Here are some selected promises from God to His people that empower Christians to live out God's mission in the world:

- 1) All of humanity finds protection in the shadow of His wings (Ps. 36:7).
- 2) There is a crown of life waiting for everyone who loves Christ (2 Tim. 4:8).
- 3) God will rescue you from evil and deliver you into His kingdom (2 Tim. 4:18).
- 4) God Himself will be with you always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20).
- 5) The world and its passions will disappear, but those who do God's will abide forever (1 John 2:17).