

Worship Is Restored After Exiles Return

Lesson Scripture: Ezra 3:1-13

Focus Scripture: Ezra 3: 1-6, 10-13

Key Verse: All the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord had been laid. Ezra 3:11b

EZRA 3:1-6, 10-13 (NRSV UE)

Ezra 3:1-6

1 When the seventh month came and the Israelites were in their towns, the people gathered together as one in Jerusalem.

2 Then Jeshua son of Jozadak with his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel with his kin set out to build the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as prescribed in the law of Moses the man of God.

3 They set up the altar on its foundation because they were in dread of the people of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings upon it to the Lord, morning and evening.

4 And they kept the Festival of Booths, as prescribed, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the ordinance, as required for each day,

5 and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the sacred festivals 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.

10-13

10 When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel;

EZRA 3:1-6, 10-13 (KJV)

Ezra 3:1-6

1 And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem.

2 Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God.

3 And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the Lord, even burnt offerings morning and evening.

4 They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required;

5 And afterward offered the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the Lord that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the Lord.

6 From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the Lord. But the foundation of the temple of the Lord was not yet laid.

10-13

10 And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the Lord,

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 responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord had been laid.

12 But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, 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 so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

after the ordinance of David king of Israel.


11 And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord; because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever 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 chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy:

13 So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off.

KEY TERMS

- **Cyrus, King of Persia** – Freed Hebrew captives that were forcibly taken to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar and his armies.
- **Jeshua or Joshua (Hebrew: Yahweh Is Salvation)** – High priest who was taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 586 B.C.
- **Nebuchadnezzar** – King of Babylon from 605-562 B.C.; he destroyed Jerusalem and defeated Israel's southern kingdom of Judah; captured and carried more than 20,000 Hebrews into Babylon as captives.



Who was Ezra? He was a Jewish priest, scribe, and great leader, whose name in Hebrew means "help."

- **Nehemiah (Hebrew: Yahweh comforts or encourages)** – Cupbearer for Persian King Artaxerxes; leader of Jewish volunteers who rebuilt Jerusalem's walls;

he also became governor of Judah.

- **Zerubbabel (Hebrew: The One Sown in Babylon)** – A descendant of King David who was born in Babylon during the Judean exile.

INTRODUCTION

Today's lesson comes from the book of Ezra. Most scholars believe Ezra wrote the book.

Who was Ezra? He was

a Jewish priest, scribe, and great leader, whose name in Hebrew means "help." Ezra is noted for having devoted his whole life to

serving God and God's people. The purpose of this book is to highlight God's faithfulness in restoring his people to their homeland and the phenomenal way in which he brought about their restoration.

Israel's story in the book of Ezra began in the year of 538 B.C, the year in which Zerubbabel led the first group of exiles back to Jerusalem. This was 48 years after King Nebuchadnezzar pillaged Jerusalem and forcibly took Hebrew captives from the Southern Kingdom of Judah to live in Babylon. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was conquered and exiled by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. As the captives from Judah built communities and families during their seventy years of captivity, their numbers increased significantly. The number that eventually returned to Jerusalem is estimated by Bible scholars to have been about 50,000.

Of course, these captivities occurred after God repeatedly warned both Israel and Judah about consequences for disobeying him. As today's story unfolds, King Nebuchadnezzar has died, and the nation of Babylon has been overthrown by King Cyrus and the nation of Persia. Although King Cyrus is not believed to have known or followed God,

God used him in powerful ways to fulfill long-standing prophecies about his plans to return his people to their homeland (Isaiah 39:6-7; Jeremiah 25:8-11; Jeremiah 27:6-7). Ezra 1:1-3 tells us that King Cyrus, in his first year on the throne of Persia, issued a proclamation that called for volunteers to return to Jerusalem to "build God a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah."

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

This lesson begins with volunteers returning to Jerusalem and beginning the work to rebuild their spiritual and physical lives. Thanks to Nehemiah and his followers, the restored walls of the city were now providing physical protection and security. Ezra and his volunteers were focused on rebuilding the temple to provide the spiritual walls of protection for God's people, who were returning home.

Of course, these captivities occurred after God repeatedly warned both Israel and Judah about consequences for disobeying him.

Worship Is Restored, Ezra 3:1-6

The serious commitments of the volunteers are evident in the priorities they set. Under the leadership of Jeshua (or Joshua), the high priest, and Zerubbabel, the governor, they built the altar and set it up first. Worship was first priority! The altar, as prescribed by Moses, was necessary

for offering burnt offerings to the Lord. Ezra noted that the people were afraid (v. 3). To allay their fears, they offered burnt offerings to the Lord twice a day: Morning and evening. They also observed sacred festivals and made special offerings, including freewill offerings from the people. We can see that the people quickly prepared to reestablish their worship traditions and relationships with God in Jerusalem. Ezra called attention, however, to the fact that “the foundation of the temple of the Lord was not laid” (Ezra 3:6b).

**The Temple’s
Foundation Is Laid
and the People React,
Ezra 3:10-13**

It was in the second year after the volunteers arrived “at the house of God in Jerusalem” (3:8) before the volunteers could lay the foundation for a new temple. The leaders and workers for this construction

are identified in verses 8-9. A ceremonial celebration followed! The priests, in their vestments, praised the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites joined them with cymbals, following King David’s instructions. In summary, music, praise, and various instruments were employed to make this a grand celebration!

The people’s reactions varied! Everyone praised the Lord for the completion of the foundation. But many of the priests, Levites, and older people who remembered the first temple wept when they saw (or compared) the new temple with the original. Nevertheless, the mixed responses were loud – joyfulness was indistinguishable from the weeping. Either way, there were strong emotions, contingent upon the perspectives and experiences of the celebrants. Isn’t it

interesting that what we see in a situation or event, such as this, is dependent upon who we are, our prior experiences, and personal perspectives?

SANKOFA

For many people, the night before the dawning of each New Year’s Day is a time for much revelry, punctuated by lively parties, fireworks, and resolutions for the incoming year and so

forth. Disciples, however, are more likely to be found attending “Watch Night Services,” a religious tradition that is passed on from one generation to the next. This is a joyous commemorative service that focuses on our collective freedoms, God’s love, and faithfulness. It is also filled with worship that includes personal and congregational

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expressions of gratitude, music, songs, prayers, testimonials, and so forth.

Initially, "Watch Night Services" were intended to welcome emancipation and encourage reflection on the history of slavery and its impact upon people of African descent. Also, the freedoms and protections which God had provided throughout the prior year were celebrated. However, reflecting on the first Watch Night Service is impactful and justifies the need for disciples to continue celebrating this annual tradition.


The first Watch Night Service was held on December 31, 1862. Members of the African diaspora gathered (secretly in many cases) to greet the New Year and to await news on whether then President Abraham Lincoln had issued the executive order that declared enslaved people in Confederate states to be free. He had promised to do so in September of 1862. However, the decree would not be effective until midnight, immediately preceding the start of 1863. As news of President Lincoln's faithfulness with signing the decree was circulated among the people, unprecedented levels of joy and enthusiasm exploded as many people

had faithfully prayed and waited to hear this news for many, many years.

CASE STUDY

Freedom Day in Southern Africa is another tradition that is treasured by members of the African diaspora. Freedom Day is celebrated in South Africa annually on April 27. It is a day for recalling, as we have in the United States, the many sacrifices made

by individuals as well as many nations to destroy the chains of injustice that were perpetrated by a select few upon Africans, who actually comprised the nation's majority population. Freedom Day also commemorates the first post-apartheid election, which was held on April 27, 1994. Similar to Jim Crow laws in the United States, apartheid was a legalized system of racial segregation that discriminated against



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black people in South Africa. Freedom Day ushered in a new era that began with new voting rights and a new constitution wherein everyone, regardless of race, who was over the age of 18 could vote.

The annual event is a joyful occasion, wherein democracy, unity, and diversity are celebrated. Various festivities typically

include special meals, local parades, and street parties. Of course, people in power do not easily relinquish it. So, as in the United States, many people struggled and died before this victory was won. However, many continued to carry the torch until apartheid and its proponents were defeated. One of the most celebrated heroes in this long-standing fight for freedom was the Honorable Nelson Mandela. Apartheid is reported to have lasted from 1948 to 1994. Imagine the joy that must have prevailed on that first Freedom Day!!

LIFE APPLICATION

Reflecting and meditating on God's faithfulness as reflected throughout this lesson should strengthen beliefs that we can rely on him to deliver and protect us. Our bondages and adversities are likely different from those referenced in the lesson. However, our God still prevails as being omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. Because of his faithfulness, we can believe he will never leave us nor forsake us.

As with Israel and Judah, however, we must remember that he expects obedience and sincere reverence for him as our Father. There are many people and things in our lives that we may value and allow to distract

us, but we can't afford to allow anything or anyone to take precedence over our love for God and total allegiance to his sovereignty. So, let us learn from Israel and Judah's mistakes as we also reverence God and his faithfulness.

QUESTIONS

1. What new ideas do you have about God's faithfulness?


2. What parallels can you draw between New Year's Day, Freedom Day in Africa, and the Jews' celebration of the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple?

3. Why do you think the Jews valued rebuilding the temple so highly?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Song: "Bless the Lord, O My Soul" (AME Hymnal #594)

Closing Prayer: Father God, we adore you! We glorify you, and we bless your holy name! Please forgive all of our sins and transgressions and bless us to live and represent you in ways that are pleasing to you and will cause others to accept you as the Lord of their lives as well. Please lead us to deeper insights and understandings about your expectations of us. In the name of Jesus, we pray and thank you. Amen.



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HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**May 19-May 25**

Monday	Jeremiah 31:27-34 (A New Covenant)
Tuesday	Ephesians 2:1-10 (Saved by Grace)
Wednesday	Luke 22:7-20 (A New Covenant)
Thursday	Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-12 (Hear the Word of the Lord)
Friday	Nehemiah 9:2-3, 6-17, 32 (Remember God's Salvation)
Saturday	Hebrews 8 (A Better Covenant)
Sunday	Nehemiah 10:28-39 (Revitalized Worship)