

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 today—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 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 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, that does not carefully and jealously guard the sacred truths and practices given it by the Lord.

Read Ezekiel 8. As you read, realize 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 for ourselves?

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 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.

Worshipping the Image

As we have touched on all through 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 either: 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 there with the worship of the image in Revelation 14. What can we learn from this story that can help us 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 them (*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?

“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 texts?

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 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?

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, through pretty much all of the Bible? How is the reality of human free will and free choice revealed in these texts?

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.

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. What do our answers tell us about how we perceive the various spiritual needs of the church? More important, how can we help bring about whatever reforms we deem necessary?

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.”—p. 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.”—p. 675.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 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?
- 2 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?
- 3 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 it when it happens?
- 4 While there is always the danger of compromising ourselves in an attempt to be relevant, there is also the danger of locking ourselves in 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?

A Kindness Pays

Julie is a lay evangelist. She and her team partner were sharing God's love in a village near Chennai, India. But no one seemed interested. So they knocked on the door of a house a short distance away. A woman answered and welcomed Julie and her partner inside. They learned that the woman's name was Sujatha, and she and her husband were Christians. But no other Christians lived nearby.

Julie and her partner visited Sujatha's home every day to study the Bible. Sujatha invited other family members, all women, but her husband, Erwin, never attended. Julie learned that Erwin was shy and uncomfortable around strangers. He left the house whenever someone came to visit. Sujatha told Julie that after they left, Erwin would ask what they had talked about. He asked her to ask for prayer for their family. Julie prayed for a way to engage Erwin in the studies.

Julie and her partner had to attend three days of meetings elsewhere and couldn't visit the family, but they left their cell phone number in case the family wanted to contact them. One afternoon they answered a call and were surprised to learn it was Sujatha's husband. "My wife is seriously ill," he told Julie. "Please pray for her."

Julie and her partner prayed for Sujatha. As soon as their meetings ended, they hurried back to visit the family. They found Sujatha seriously ill with a high fever. "We gave Erwin what little money we had and told him to take Sujatha to the hospital. There, doctors discovered that she had typhoid." Julie and her partner stayed at the house and cleaned it thoroughly.

After Sujatha returned home, Erwin stayed and talked with Julie and her partner during their Bible studies. Julie learned that the family had considered ending their lives because they were so poor. But a Christian had offered them a job and a place to live. In time they had joined a Protestant church. They were still poor, but they had hope.

As Sujatha's strength grew, she shared her new faith with a neighbor. Within a few weeks she was bringing her neighbor to the church. Sujatha has been baptized, and Erwin is preparing for baptism. Sujatha is studying with five other families in her neighborhood, and Julie is helping her introduce them to Christ.

A kindness sown in one couple is reaping seeds in six other families. Our mission offerings help support lay evangelists and Global Mission pioneers such as Julie around the world. Thank you for helping to tell the world that Jesus loves them.

Julie is a lay evangelist living in Chennai, India.