

Worshiping *the* Lord



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Neh. 12:27–47; 1 Chron. 25:6–8; 1 John 1:7–9; John 1:29, 36; 1 Cor. 5:7; Heb. 9:1–11.*

Memory Text: “And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD: ‘For He is good, for His mercy endures forever toward Israel’ ” (*Ezra 3:11, NKJV*).

This week's memory text gives us insight into the Hebrews' worship practices and how their gratitude toward God had overflowed in praise to Him. In 515 B.C. they celebrated the dedication of the new temple (*Ezra 6:15–18*), and then, about 60 years later, the people celebrated the dedication of Jerusalem's completed wall (*Neh. 6:15–7:3; 12:27 onward*).

Following the listing of genealogies in Nehemiah 11 and 12, the author transitions to the time they celebrated the dedication of the city wall. It was customary for the nation to dedicate things to God: the temple, a city wall, or even houses and public buildings. Such a dedication was thoughtfully prepared and was accompanied with singing, music, feasting, sacrifices, rejoicing, merriment, and the purification of the people. David established the practice of sacrifices during a dedication, and afterward Israel's leaders followed his example, starting with Solomon when he brought the ark into the temple (*1 Kings 8:5*).

This week we will look at how they worshiped the Lord during this time and see things that we, who worship the same Lord, can apply to ourselves.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 7.

Singing the Songs of the Lord

Read Nehemiah 12:27–29. Notice some of the key words that reveal what their worship and praise was like. How would you describe it?

The Israelite nation had commissioned a specific class of the Levites to be singers and musicians for the temple services. God directed the practice and gave instructions for the service, as the temple worship was to be beautiful and professionally performed.

King David had organized this practice into a more elaborate and magnificent system than had previously been done. Therefore, the descendants of Asaph, whom David had appointed as the leader of worship in the temple, were still designated as “the singers in charge of the service of the house of God” (*Neh. 11:22, NKJV*).

Look up 1 Chronicles 25:6–8. What does this teach us about how central and important music was to their worship and their singing “the songs of the LORD”?

The singers were Levites and, therefore, officially assigned to the temple. Thus, providing music for the temple services was their paid job. During the time of King 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. Excellence must always be a goal in worship. Praises must come from the heart and be expressed in the best way so that people will be spiritually uplifted. One can assume that those musicians and singers who served in the temple were carefully selected to lead the worship service.

What are ways that you have experienced the joy of worship through music? In what ways is this important to you?

Purification

After the Scriptures talk about the dedication of the wall, and then the gathering of the singers, the next verse, Nehemiah 12:30, talks about purification. “Then the priests and Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, the gates, and the wall” (*NKJV*).

The Hebrew root word for “purified,” *thr*, means “to be clean, to be pure,” and it is used in many contexts in the Old Testament, including those with the idea of being morally pure and clean before God.

Consider this: “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (*1 John 1:7–9, NIV*). What does this text teach us about (1) human nature, (2) God’s forgiveness, and (3) God’s power in our lives?

The temple and its services were crucial components of the religion of ancient Israel. But the temple and its services were a means to an end, not an end in and of themselves. And that end, of course, was to lead the people into a saving relationship with their covenant God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and to know His cleansing power in their lives. And it’s the knowledge of what God has done, what the Lord has saved us from, that leads us to love Him and to worship Him. That’s one reason, over and over, the ancient Israelites recounted what God had done in their past. It helped them to know the goodness and love of the Lord, which was central to the joy and thanksgiving that was to permeate their worship experience.

For us today, the experience and appreciation of forgiveness for sin should come out of gratitude to God and lasting joy. Then it is easy to praise the Lord and express appreciation for the beauty of His character. And what greater revelation of God’s character can we have than seeing Jesus on the cross, bearing the punishment for our sins so we don’t have to bear that punishment ourselves?

Regardless of your past sins or your present character, at the cross you can have complete forgiveness—and right at this very moment, too. Why not claim the forgiveness that Jesus offers you right now?

Two Large Thanksgiving Choirs

Read Nehemiah 12:31–42. Why was music such an important part of this celebration?

Part of the worship service in Nehemiah's time was creating two thanksgiving choirs that walked around Jerusalem singing, accompanied by instruments. They started in the same place and then split off, each going in a different direction around the walls of the city. One group was led by Ezra, who was at the front, and the other group had Nehemiah at the back. The two choirs met up once again at the Valley Gate and from there proceeded into the temple. Priests who blew the trumpets complemented each procession. Once the choirs entered the temple, they stood facing each other. It was an excellently organized procession and worship service.

To answer why music is such an important part of the celebration and worship service, we have to look at its meaning in the context of the temple. Music in the temple was not a concert that people came to enjoy, like going to listen to Beethoven's fourth symphony being performed at a concert hall. Rather, as the musicians sang and played the instruments, the people bowed in prayer. It was part of their worship.

The central act of the temple and worship concerned sacrifices, itself a rather unpleasant action. After all, what were they doing but slicing the throats of innocent animals? The playing of such beautiful music, in many ways, besides just lifting the people's thoughts heavenward, helped make the whole worship experience more pleasant.

Look up instances in the Bible in which music was an important aspect of worship. Reflect especially on Exodus 15:1; 2 Chronicles 20:21, 22; and Revelation 15:2–4.

Both on earth and in heaven, music is part of the worship experience. Notice that in the above verses the singing is all about what the Lord has done for His people, including giving them victory “over the beast” (after all, how else would they have gotten that victory?). It's praise to God for His acts of salvation.

Name some of the things that God has done for you that are good reasons to sing praises to Him.

Sacrifices as Part of Worship

Read Nehemiah 12:43. What was special about offering “great sacrifices” as part of their worship celebration?

Sacrifices were the most essential aspect of worship during the time of the temple. Several different sacrifices were used, either for the promise of forgiveness or to express the joy of fellowship and gratitude to God. Sacrifices provided the substance for worship, as they reminded the worshippers of the truth of God and who He is, and pointed to the Promised Seed, the Messiah, who would sacrifice His life for them, because He is the Lamb of God.

Read John 1:29, 36; 1 Corinthians 5:7; and Revelation 5:6, 12, 13. What do they teach us about what the sacrifices ultimately pointed to? If the ancient Israelites could rejoice over a dead farm animal, a death that could reveal only so much truth, how much more reason do we have to rejoice than they had?

Notice, too, how many times the idea of joy and rejoicing appears in Nehemiah 12:43 alone. That is, amid the reverence, and perhaps the godly fear that the people experienced in their worship service (after all, the killing of an animal for their sins was a solemn thing), there was joy and rejoicing, as well. When we approach God, it must be in awe and reverence, as well as with rejoicing. Psalm 95 demonstrates that a true act of adoration involves a summons to sing, shout joyfully, and make music to celebrate God (*Ps. 95:1*), as well as to bow down and kneel before the Lord (*Ps. 95:6*). Striving to achieve a balance between joy and reverence is crucial for adoring, praising, and worshiping our Creator.

When we think that, at the cross, the Creator of all that is created (see John 1:1–3) hung there, dying for the sins of His creation, what emotion do we first experience? What role also can, and should, joy play in our experience of the Cross?

Priests and Levites as Part of Worship

Read Nehemiah 12:44–47. Why did Judah rejoice “over the priests and Levites who ministered”? Why were they important?

What did the work of the priests (who were Levites) symbolize? See Hebrews 9:1–11.

“The intercession of Christ in man’s behalf in the sanctuary above is as essential to the plan of salvation as was His death upon the cross. By His death He began that work which after His resurrection He ascended to complete in heaven. We must by faith enter within the veil, ‘whither the forerunner is for us entered.’ Hebrews 6:20.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 489.

Again, though the people back then certainly didn’t have the light that we have today, they understood enough to know that the work of the Levites, who alone could minister in the temple, was so important. They were excited that the work of God would be done through them.

The nation had been spending time with God in reading His Word, praying, worshiping, and rededicating themselves to Him. Amid all this they realized that the ministries of the temple had been neglected and needed to be restored. Now that these were established again, the people rejoiced over the important work the Levites would be doing on their behalf. God impressed the nation that the ministries of the temple were part of His design for worship.

Unfortunately, ministers, teachers of the Word, and musicians are often taken for granted. Even during the time of Nehemiah, the support of the Levites was sometimes strong and sometimes very weak. The Levites had to go back to other work many times in order to provide for their families, because the people stopped giving tithes and offerings.

Without tithes and offerings, there is no organized worldwide church. If we want our ministries to continue, we must be committed to supporting our ministers by monetary contributions as well as verbal appreciation. The church may never be perfect, but that shouldn’t undermine our giving to God so that His work can continue around the world.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Growing Up Into Christ,” pp. 67–75, in *Steps to Christ*.

“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, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 651, 652.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, talk about finding the right balance in worship between reverence and joy. Or, work through this question: *Are reverence and joy mutually exclusive anyway?*
- 2 The Israelites placed the wall of Jerusalem under divine protection through the dedication ceremony and thus acknowledged that a wall is useless unless God defends it. Solomon expressed it well: “Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain” (*Ps. 127:1, NIV*). What should this tell us about any of our endeavors for the Lord?
- 3 What is the role of music in your own church’s worship experience?
- 4 Scripture is clear: Jesus is our High Priest in the sanctuary in heaven. What, exactly, is He doing for us there? What can the ministry of the priests in the earthly temple teach us about what Jesus is doing for us in the heavenly one?

Three Warnings in Abkhazia

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Valentina Dmitrienko, intent on finding corn to bake *lepyoshka* flatbread for her family, hurried to the outdoor market in Abkhazia, a breakaway region in the former Soviet republic of Georgia.

She didn't have much money, and a months-long armed struggle in her hometown, Sukhumi, had caused a severe food shortage.

Valentina found a woman selling dried corn kernels from a cloth bag, but she didn't have enough money. Valentina stood silently and thought, *How can I feed my family?*

Suddenly, she felt someone tap her left shoulder and address her with a friendly but firm voice, "Valya, get out now!"

Startled, she spun around. No one was there.

Valentina stood puzzled for a moment, but her thoughts quickly returned to her husband, Pavel, who worked as a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, and their 16-year-old daughter, Natasha. She looked at the woman with the precious corn.

Again, she felt a tap on her shoulder. "Valya, get out now!"

Realizing something was wrong, Valentina rushed toward the exit but stopped to greet two neighbors, Yuri and Taisia. Then she saw a woman selling straw brooms and asked, "How much?"

She felt a tap on her shoulder for the third time. "Valya, get out now!"

Valentina fled. Two minutes later, she heard the terrifying whistle of an artillery shell flying over her head. Two more shells followed in quick succession.

Valentina stopped dead in her tracks as a loud boom reverberated across the city center. Valentina saw a huge cloud of smoke and dust rising from the market. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she ran home, praying, "God, thank You for saving me! But who am I? Why did You protect me?"

Later, Valentina returned to the market and saw craters left by the blasts. Two craters marked the exact spots where she had stood and looked longingly at the corn and brooms.

Recalling that day in 1993, Valentina often thinks about Isaiah 43:2, where the Lord says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you" (*NKJV*).



"The artillery shell is like the fire that scorches people, but God promises, 'I will be with you,' " said Valentina, left. "We gave God the right to protect us by walking with Him and living with Him. Our whole life has been a life of service. Why did Christ come into this world? To serve, as Ellen White says. This has been the goal of our life—to serve."