

Worshipping *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 the ancient Israelites recounted over and over 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 worshipers 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, Yury 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."

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Ezra 3:11*

Study Focus: *Nehemiah 12:27–47*

In order to give authority to Jerusalem's priesthood, Nehemiah 12 begins by listing the Levites and priests from Babylonian times to Ezra and Nehemiah's period. Once it was established that the Jews had skilled people for the temple services, the next part of the chapter focuses on the service of dedication for Jerusalem's wall. However, it is not the wall that ensures security but rather the Lord. Thus, the people are not secure unless the Lord protects them. Dedications of objects or buildings were commonly performed by the Israelites in order to acknowledge that power is not in an object but in God (*Ps. 127:1, 2*).

The dedication service for Jerusalem's wall began with two large choirs moving separately through Jerusalem and ultimately joining at the temple. There, "great sacrifices" were performed, and the people rejoiced with "great joy." In fact, the joy of the people was so loud that even their distant enemies heard the celebration of the wall's completion. Afterward, Nehemiah made sure to delegate temple responsibilities so that the provisions were arranged according to the law for all of the Levites and the temple servants. The people were excited to have the temple functioning again. They wanted to make sure that supplies had been secured for those who served the Lord, not just for the present moment but for the future.

Part II: Commentary

Purification

Before performing the wall's dedication, the priests and Levites purified themselves and the people as well as the gates and the wall. The purification rituals common in Israel symbolized cleansing from sin and separation for holiness. The rituals mainly involved washing clothes and bathing (*Exod. 29:4, Exod. 40:12–15, Lev. 16:20–28, Num. 19:7*).

Several purification rituals existed in Israel. The most serious purification ritual was performed for anyone who came in contact with a dead body. Given that death reflects the state of mortality resulting from sin, the person or persons had to undergo special purification, a procedure described in Numbers 19. The priest burned a red heifer without blemish whose ashes were placed in a bowl with water. Someone who was clean took a hyssop and dipped it in the water and then sprinkled it on the items or people who were considered unclean. If the water of

purification was not sprinkled on someone who was unclean, then his uncleanness was still on him (*Num. 19:13*).

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest who performed the cleansing of the sanctuary and performed sacrifices for his sin as well as the people's changed his clothes. Before putting on the "holy garments," he washed his body (*Lev. 16:4*). After the service was completed, the priest once again took off the "holy garments" and washed his body (*Lev. 16:23, 24*). The person who released the scapegoat did the same before coming back into the Israelite camp (*Lev. 16:26*).

Other categories of purification included purification for priests (*Exod. 29:1-9*), who were to wash their hands and bodies (*Exod. 30:17-21, Exod. 40:12-14, 30-32*); purification from leprosy (just as sin leads to death, so leprosy ended in death [*Lev. 13:6, 34*]); bodily discharges (*Lev. 15:1-29, Deut. 23:10, 11*); and cleansing of the Levites (*Num. 8:5-7, Num. 19:7-22*). Because the priests and Levites were involved in the dedication of the wall, they went through purification first by washing their hands and feet and perhaps their bodies. Then they purified the people, who were most likely asked to wash, as well, and maybe even wash their clothes. Additionally, the Bible mentions that the gates and the wall were purified, which means that each would have been sprinkled by water.

The water of purification was not miraculous in itself; rather, it was the Word of God that declared that purification cleansed the people from sin and death. The ritual served as a symbol of purity. Holiness and cleansing from sin were important for approaching God in a dedication ceremony. The ritual cleansing showed that the blood of Christ cleansed and covered the people. The purification service incorporated forgiveness for sins. As people humbled themselves before God and washed, they were acknowledging that they needed help; they needed to be made clean by God. They had to be made whole and holy by God, not by their own actions. Yet, God required the action of washing as a tangible reminder of His transformative power in the lives of His people.

Great Joy

The major part of the dedication ceremony involved music and worship. First, the Levites and singers gathered in Jerusalem; many of them lived beyond Jerusalem and came into the city only when it was their turn to minister. The priests, Levites, and singers led in celebrating God's provision for them through thanksgivings (verbally acknowledging what God had done) and singing praises to Him. Harps, cymbals, and other stringed instruments accompanied two large choirs as they sang and separately walked through Jerusalem, finally joining again at the temple and singing loudly (*Neh. 12:42*). Literally, the phrase states that the singers were heard. Their joy could not be contained or suppressed as was demonstrated

through loud praises. They sang loudly because they were overjoyed over the quick completion of the wall and how God had come through for them.

When the foundation of the temple was laid after their return from Babylonian exile in 537/536 B.C., the people, priests, and Levites praised the Lord (*Ezra 3:10, 11*). The same thing now occurred in Nehemiah's time after the completion of Jerusalem's wall. Everyone praised the Lord, and the two appointed choirs expressed thanks to the Lord for the accomplished work (*Neh. 12:31, 38*).

The people rejoiced greatly. Literally, verse 43 says that God made them *samach* (rejoice) with great *samach* (joy). The word *samach* appears five times in just that one verse. It appears one time in verse 44, as the people also rejoiced over the priests and Levites who ministered in the temple. Then it appears again in verse 27, which introduces the whole account, stating that the people called the Levites in order to celebrate the dedication with gladness (*samach*).

Thus, the word appears in the chapter exactly seven times, which should strike the reader as significant. The number seven in the Bible is a number of fullness, completion, and perfection. Therefore, the *samach* that the people experience is full. God has made them rejoice. Their act of rejoicing demonstrates what true joy in life is, for they rejoice over what God has done. The lesson for us today is to celebrate what God is doing in our lives, not overlooking His benevolent actions, nor taking them for granted. Rather, we should celebrate His providence. Acknowledgment of God's blessing and leadership leads to gratitude and emotional stability. Thankfulness makes us happy and victorious.

Joy is a defining aspect of worship, but so is reverence to God, which can be defined as an experience of awe through a personal encounter with God. The balance between joy and reverence is very important; and yet, unfortunately, it is often overlooked. If a worship service has respect for God but no joy, then it becomes dry and stiff. On the other hand, when only joy is incorporated and reverence is not taken into account, the worship services tend to be filled with emotionalism rather than truth. Therefore, our worship services must include both facets. Reverence and joy work together to create a right, worshipful atmosphere. The Israelites understood the need for this balance, as they rejoiced loudly and with all their hearts while at the same time praising God for what He had done. Their worship was based on truth and the deeds of God, not on emotionalism. Some who jump from worship service to worship service in order to experience a "spiritual high" are missing the point of praising God. Our worship must always be rooted in Jesus, not in our feelings. And yet, the Israelites definitely had a feeling of joy and happiness as they praised God. These joyful feelings were God-given and were based on the truth of who God is and what He has done. Seeking God in life as well as worshiping Him keeps us grounded in His grace and gratitude.

Part III: Life Application

Purification

Purification rituals represent cleansing from sin and are a preparation for coming before God and acknowledging that without Him we are “dirty.” Although we do not participate in purification rituals today, in what way can we apply the principle behind the cleansing? We can come to God as we are but not just in any manner. So, how should we approach God? What must we do to humble ourselves before Him? In what ways can we demonstrate this attitude in our lives today?

Joy

- 1. Read Psalm 136, a psalm full of praise and worship to God. What does this psalm teach us in regard to worship? What different situations are described when approaching God? What kind of things does the psalm praise God for?**

- 2. How can you make sure that your church praises God with a balance of joy and reverence?**

- 3. Singers and musicians in the Old Testament had a prominent role in worship and were important to the temple services. What can we do to make sure that we value musicians in our churches today?**

- a. Think about ways that your church has either uplifted musicians as ministers of God or ways that they have been pushed to the side or perhaps even discouraged. In what meaningful and reverent ways can your church include your pianists and worship groups in the service?

- b. Think of specific ways that, as a church, you can make your musicians and singers understand that their God-given gifts add value and enrich the church service.

4. If you are lacking joy in your own life when praising God, what can you do to get that “first love” back?
