



2019 Q4 Ezra and Nehemiah: Lesson 10 Worshipping the Lord

by Karin Covi

My evolution of understanding of this message started in 1981, as I started med school at LLUSM, then through residency and beyond. I attended Graham Maxwell's SS classes weekly for 10 years, hungry for more understanding of this "larger view" of salvation, WDJHTD [that is, "Why Did Jesus Have To Die?"], etc. Often, Graham spent 5 minutes on the sketch at the top of each SS Lesson in the quarterly. What/Why the author might have been thinking. And here I was, chomping at the bit for meat, and we're chatting about a sketch?

We are so blessed to have Dr. Jennings' energies and abilities as a resource (sometimes an open fire hydrant!) of his material which, I believe, is inspired by the Holy Spirit. And If we have time, I'd like to share with you and to hear from you how we're utilizing the resources from C&R: the SS notes, in particular. Lori last week described the website update, along with all the archived material, regularly updated blogs, stuff you can print (aptly named!). Please take advantage of all the brain power from Tim and Dean and James available there!

SABBATH

Paragraph 3 "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"

Perennial problem of studying historical material in the Bible: The historical material is **Descriptive** - it describes what happened from centuries ago. What Nehemiah, Ezra did. But as inspired Scripture, we ascribe some **prescriptive** aspects to it.

Which are which: Descriptive vs. prescriptive?
Which do we apply to our own lives?

Just because something happened then doesn't mean that it's something you're supposed to replicate in your life.

In my archived material, I find in Q4L8 and L6:

"Remember: The Bible records real people who did real things and is historically accurate, yet those real lives not only record their history, but are object lessons to a larger reality."
"We believe the Bible records real people who did real things—in other words real historical events. But we also believe that Israel was not only real people doing real things, but what is recorded in Scripture serves as lessons for us, teaching us a larger reality."

Sound familiar?



Overview:

- 605BC - Neb takes Israelites into Babylonian captivity for 70 years
- 535 BC - 1st group leaves Babylon for Jerusalem (Zerubabel)
- 515BC - sanctuary rebuilt ?start services? Not able, because not secure, I would think... defending from surrounding enemy tribes
- 70 years later, after Ezra, then 13 years later Nehemiah come with 2nd and 3rd groups from Babylon:
- 445BC, the wall is rebuilt (in 52 DAYS?!?!?! Say what? Wall 9 feet wide... everyone got involved in the building of the wall.)
- Only THEN did worship services begin!

This overview shows that for more than 150 years of no services, no formal worship, no corporate praising of God.

Why not? They thought: How can we? God isn't "here".

Ps 137: 1-4 describes the sentiment of the Babylonian captives:

- 1 By the rivers of Babylon^p we sat and wept^q when we remembered Zion.^r (Zion = Jerusalem)
- 2 There on the poplars^s we hung our harps,^t
- 3 for there our captors^u asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded^v songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"^w
- 4 How can we sing the songs of the Lord^x while in a foreign land?

How do we sing when we're in Babylon? We are slaves of foreign kin in foreign land... in their economy, this means their gods are stronger!

Jeremiah (the prophet left behind, living in Judea) sends a letter to those already in Babylon (captured). I can imagine them gathering in town square and read from scroll; we find it in Jeremiah 29:4:

4This is what the Lord All-Powerful, the God of Israel [He has NOT lost His power, is NOT a weaker god], says to all those people [Why are they there?} I sent away from Jerusalem as captives to Babylon*: 5"**Build** houses and settle in the land. **Plant** gardens and eat the food they grow. 6Get **married** and have sons and daughters. Find wives for your sons, and let your daughters be married so they also may have sons and daughters. Have many children in Babylon; don't become fewer in number. 7Also do good things for the city where I sent you as captives. Pray to the Lord for the city where you are living, because if good things happen in the city, good things will happen to you also." 8The Lord All-Powerful, the God of Israel, says: "Don't let the prophets among you and the people who do magic fool you. Don't listen to their dreams. 9They are prophesying lies to you, saying that their message is from me. But I did not send them," says the Lord.



10 This is what the Lord says: “Babylon will be powerful for seventy years. After that time I will come to you, and I will keep my promise to bring you back to Jerusalem. 11 **I say this because I know what I am planning for you,” says the Lord. “I have good plans for you, not plans to hurt you. I will give you hope and a good future.** 12 Then you will call my name. You will come to me and pray to me, and I will listen to you. 13 You will search for me. And when you search for me with all your heart, you will find me! 14 I will let you find me,” says the Lord. “And I will bring you back from your captivity. I forced you to leave this place, but I will gather you from all the nations, from the places I have sent you as captives,” says the Lord. “And I will bring you back to this place.”

*Why are they in Babylon? Everyone knows why, because Nebuchadnezzar took them there.... No? Jeremiah says, No, the God of the Covenant sent you there.

Why? They did not live up to the covenant!

See Deut. 28 blessing and curses - if you do not obey, you'll go into captivity, lose the promised land. God had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, so they are an alternative community. But they forgot it, turned religion into exclusive club, forgetting about what it's all about; they oppressed widows and orphans, forgot God. They were not faithful to covenant! [keep reading v. 5ff - 11]

Why are they in Babylon? v. 11: Because I have a plan. Not to be evil, but to give you a future and a hope... AND, I want the Babylonians to be INCLUDED in my kingdom! Because they are my people, as well. (They just don't know it yet!) And you are going to be the tools in bringing them.

Back to this week's lesson: Under Ezra and Nehemiah, the Lord is good, and the people are singing - why now? What has changed? Restored back to Holy City!

They had obeyed Jeremiah's instructions to "build/plant/get married" - in Babylon! For 70 years, meaning they're gonna live and some of you are gonna die in Babylon.

Ah, the people thought, but with no temple? No sacrifices? Then, no worship, no singing. No, Jeremiah says, you can worship in Babylon, as well as in Jerusalem!

God is trying to broaden their horizons. God is not local, only residing in Jerusalem. God is the God of the Babylonians as much as Israelites; He is not restricted to one locale

Ultimately, Christ says in Matt 12: "Where 2 or 3 are gathered in My name, I AM in their midst". The Most Holy Place is now everywhere where the community gets together around Jesus, following Jesus' steps (Matt 25):

- feeding those who are hungry, giving drink, visiting those in shackles,
- in ministry of helping people wherever they are!



SUNDAY

Singing the Songs of the Lord

The singers and musicians were a special class of Levites, professionals - paid for their services

Last half of last paragraph:

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.

Hamilton Community Church: 1991. Charter member of this new-fangled concept to target "seekers" and "burnt out SDAs" and not simply other Christians in other denominations.

I was "Worship Leader" for 5 years: developed Themes, created programming, coordination of pastor's sermon with drama, music, Scripture reading; all orchestrated and choreographed; then reviewed with team/pastor for effectiveness between/after services to continuously improve effectiveness of message. Goal was excellence. (Unpaid, to be sure.)

OT model: people were groomed (and paid!) to become the quality through which others might be blessed.

Today's challenge: people wanting to participate in worship service who are not "up to par", and thus a distraction to the listeners/worshippers.

Which one of your favorite songs were they singing?
Amazing Grace? How Great Thou Art? Side by Side?

Longest book of the Bible: filled with hymns! Psalms

Music is 100% culture! Each generation needs to supply their own music

Skipping to Tuesday's Lesson to keep with the topic of music and singing: Two Large Thanksgiving Choirs

Next is a description of responsive singing: praising and giving thanks.

Neh 12:24 - 43 (Class reading) I promise I edited out the funky names, but kept the sentiment of the text!

Nehemiah Dedicates the City Wall

²⁷ When the city wall of Jerusalem was dedicated, the Levites were brought in from wherever they were living, so that they could join in celebrating the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals and harps. ²⁸ The Levite families of singers



gathered from the area where they had settled around Jerusalem... ³⁰ The priests and the Levites performed ritual purification for themselves, the people, the gates, and the city wall.

³¹ I assembled the leaders of Judah on top of the wall and put them in charge of two large groups to march around the city, giving thanks to God.

The first group went to the right on top of the wall... The following priests, blowing trumpets, marched next...—all of whom carried musical instruments of the kind played by King David, the man of God. Ezra the scholar led this group in the procession. ³⁷ At the Fountain Gate they went up the steps that led to David's City, past David's palace, and back to the wall at the Water Gate, on the east side of the city.

³⁸ The other group of those who gave thanks went to the left along the top of the wall, and I followed with half of the people... We ended our march near the gate to the Temple.

⁴⁰ So both the groups that were giving thanks to God reached the Temple area.

In addition to the leaders who were with me, ⁴¹ my group included the following priests, blowing trumpets...; The singers... sang at the top of their voices.

⁴³ That day many sacrifices were offered, and the people were full of joy because God had made them very happy. The women and the children joined in the celebration, and the noise they all made could be heard for miles.

- a. Nehemiah 12:31 The two groups started somewhere on the southwestern part of the city wall and went in opposite directions until they met in front of the Temple in the northeastern part of the city.
- b. Nehemiah 12:39 Ephraim Gate, Jeshanah Gate; or Ephraim Gate (also called the Old Gate). (GNT)

What are we supposed to learn from this historic account? The temple is rebuilt, worship (sacrifices, prayer, singing, etc) has begun. Joy abounds.

Remember: it is through these gates, the Messiah is going to come! One day, the glory of THIS temple is going to be greater than the glory of Solomon's temple!

The people caught the vision...

MONDAY

Purification

Neh 12:20 The priests and the Levites performed ritual purification for themselves, the people, the gates, and the city wall.

How do you purify a wall? Why feel a need to purify the wall and gates, above and beyond the people/themselves?



After 160 years, the people had to relearn laws, history; they realized how far they had gone astray. Babylonian excursion was a result of their forefathers straying from truth. They do NOT want to repeat history, causing God to have to exile us. So they consecrate everything to God... demonstrating that they were serious.

What purification rites do we have now? Baptism; footwashing, the wine in the communion service

Sacrifice of killing a lamb (OT) vs. crushing a grape (wine), footwashing (NT)

Why do we need "purification" (we might use "dedication"?) rites? To commemorate a new chapter? Think Design Law! In this case, the 2nd law of thermodynamics: Entropy; all things tend towards DISorder. Unless you invest in a relationship, it's not going to survive.

God needs to be in the center, constantly pumping the energy into the system in order to defeat entropy.

How do you have a sense of dedication which outwardly expresses an inner reality? Attitude of gratitude, mindfulness, intentionally being aware; given a different perspective, what might seem a negative experience, is not bad -- actually has brought season of growth, of maturity.

God is not the "primary consumer" of our worship; He doesn't need us to tell Him how wonderful He is!

Worship is the intentional turning of the mind to God and seeing and ascribing to God all of the greatness and goodness and glory that belongs to Him. Worship is giving God the place that rightfully belongs to Him. Worship is an atmosphere in which you can learn to live. "I have set the Lord always before me." (Psalm 16:8)

Design law: The law of worship: We are changed neurobiologically and characterologically to become like which we admire, worship, and spend time watching and assimilating.

In contradistinction, a legalist/imposed law perspective: we are changed by trying harder or by divine fiat/decree

And we, whose minds are not veiled by confusion, and who reveal the truth about the Lord's glorious character, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory which comes from the Lord and is applied in us by the Spirit. 2Cor 3:18 (Rem)

One way of describing worship is to say that it is "orientation" or "reorientation," because so many things in life demand our attention, many of which can be quite trivial. If there is nothing to "reorient" us, we may waste a lot of energy and enthusiasm on them, though their significance and impact on our lives and the community is minimal. (Reminds me of what we're learning in this class about Sabbath:



"Remember the Sabbath day keeping yourself holy" or,
"Remember the Sabbath day in order to stay holy."

"The first duty of all created beings is worship. All else flows from our worship, from who God is. The way you worship depends on your picture of God. Worship is **transformation through adoration.**" (Graham Kendrick) "Worship is responding to all that God is with all that we are."

Bottom of Monday's lesson:

"...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?"

Does anyone else bristle when they read this?

Of course, I agree that the cross is the greatest revelation of God character! But honestly, when I read this, I felt myself getting stuck: HOW does someone bear a punishment for someone else? How would heavenly society work if its inhabitants simply had had someone else (even Christ!) simply "bear the punishment" for their sins?

I feel mired back in this legal/penal view. Can you help me make sense of this?

(This is why I'm planning on going to Texas to develop my ability to put on a new pair of glasses, a new perspective on a very old subject.)

In my archived excerpts, I find this – from a document from C&R ministry giving a position on various theological issues:

Punishment for Sin: Punishment is the natural consequence that unremedied sin brings upon the sinner in this life and in the Final Judgment, where each person suffers in the end according to his deeds. Christ, in our place, experienced this **mental agony** (punishment) for sin during the fractured unity with His Father ("... why have you forsaken Me?"), prior to His actual death, when He "became sin who knew no sin."

My response: Christ experienced separation from the Father as one with unremedied sin (selfishness!). Not because the law demanded, but because it showed that even facing certain extinction, Christ did not use His power to save Himself -- He demonstrated perfect Love, emanating from His character which was developed in his humanity.

And from another archived excerpt: What does it mean he bore the **guilt and shame**? Christ bore our guilt and shame—i.e. He was not guilty and He was not ashamed:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
Heb 12:2



Christ scorned or despised the shame of the Cross because He knew who He was and that the shame of the experience was actually upon those who rejected and crucified Him, and not on Him. He said, “Father forgive them they don’t know what they are doing...” they think they are shaming me – but it is actually shame on them.

Christ, when he was lifted up — drew all unto Himself, thus He knew His act was an act of supreme glory and not an act of shame.

THURSDAY

The Priests and Levites as Part of the Worship

First paragraph: “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

As someone who has been asking the question, "Why did Jesus have to die" since she was 8 years old, this is BIG! If Christ's intercession in the heavenly sanctuary is "**as essential**" as the cross, I oughta get brushed up on what is going on up there!

How? Review Heavenly Sanctuary document?

In Summary:

The specifications for worship in the Old Testament are quite unlike the way we worship today. This shows that the specifics are not the most important aspect, but rather it is the intentions and the desire to praise God that should be uppermost when we worship. Many arguments have centered on music, form of service, the right posture for prayer etc.

Looking at what happened in the Old Testament, such as here in Ezra and Nehemiah, should help us not to be dogmatic about worship style. As God repeatedly makes clear, he is looking for the attitude of mind and sincerity, for conviction and dedication, far more than the details.

That said there were rituals to be observed that God himself had instituted, as teaching mechanisms for a people very different to us in their background and experience. In fact God went into great detail as to what needed to be done, so that the worshipers could learn lessons. Tragically it all degenerated into formalism and hypocrisy, much to God’s grief and that of the later prophets.

So what do we learn about how to worship today? Much of the answers will relate to our picture of God, and what we think he “wants” from us. All too often worship is really seen in a similar way as those pagan rituals that sought to appease their deity, to make sure he/she was not offended in any way, and that the requirements of the divine-human contract has been properly observed. So when you look at such practices it’s all about serving a capricious, often malevolent god who takes delight in causing suffering.



We need to take any trace of these ideas out of our worship. We do indeed come to church to worship, but going through the service without thought is not worship.

Additionally, worship is not just a church service. We can worship in our homes when we talk, read the Bible, and sing—and when we’re doing the washing-up if our minds are tuned towards God. Yes, even this SS discussion we’re having right now can be identified as worship as our minds engage with God, as we think of spiritual things and how we relate to our loving Lord.

Most of all our whole lives can be worship, as we put God first and foremost in our daily experience, thinking of all he does and the kind of being he is. By looking at Jesus we see the truth of God, and the way he wins us back to love and trust, to be healed from the damage sin has caused. This too is worship, because we are recognizing the value of God, “worth-ship,” which is the basis for the word worship.