



05

SESSION FIVE

God Brings His People Home

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we see how God kept His promise to bring His people out of exile and back to the promised land. As God's people gathered in Jerusalem, they made worshiping God their first priority and proclaimed God's faithfulness through their actions. As Christians, we celebrate and give thanks to God for bringing us out of our exile to sin and death. In our worship, we proclaim the goodness of the Lord so that others might taste and see that He is good.

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:1-8; 3:1-13

THE POINT

Worshiping God should be the first priority of His people.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Ask the students to talk about some ways they commonly celebrate victories with their teams, friends, families, or individually. We may celebrate by going out to dinner, taking a trip to a theme park, buying ice cream, or with tickets to see a concert or movie. We may have a celebratory dance or song. We all celebrate milestones and victories in different ways.

- **What are your favorite activities or places to go to celebrate?**

Worship is also a celebration of sorts—a celebration of who God is and what He has done for us. The Israelites got into trouble by celebrating the wrong things and making their own gods; that’s why they ended up in exile. But when God fulfilled His promise to bring them home, their first act was one of worship. True worship of the one true God.

- **In what situations is your first response to worship God? How is this a celebration of who God is or what He has done?**

Option 2

The first time you’re away from home can be scary, whether you’re on a beach trip with your best friend, heading out to camp for the summer, or spending a week on the mission field with your student ministry. No matter where you go, though, there is always the promise of home at the end of the week, the trip, or the summer.

- **What was the first trip you took without your parents? Where did you go? What did you do while you were there?**
- **Did you feel homesick or were you happy to have a break from “normal” life? How did you respond when it came time to return home?**

Though the Israelites’ exile certainly wasn’t like a vacation or summer camp, they anxiously awaited the day when God would fulfill His promise to bring them out of exile, to bring them home. Like we often do at the end of a long trip, they celebrated being home. But they celebrated differently—they celebrated by worshiping God.

- **How do you think you would react to returning home if you were an Israelite coming out of exile?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Worshiping God should be the first priority of His people.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

PLOT

God made a promise to His people that one day they would leave their exile and return to the land of promise. In this session, we read about their return, as well as the long road to rebuilding what was destroyed.

TIMELINE

THE JOURNEY HOME

God keeps His promise to bring His people home.

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

Despite immense opposition the temple is rebuilt.

ESTHER RISKS IT ALL

God's providential work in the life of Esther.

GOD SENT THE ISRAELITES HOME

The first six chapters of Ezra highlight God's sovereignty in the preservation of His people. God brought His chosen people, Israel, back into the land of promise. What's more, He used the ruler of the nation to accomplish His purposes.

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem." Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem. And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. (Ezra 1:1-8)

After years of living in exile, the people of God were sovereignly given free passage to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. God moved within the heart of the king to not only allow His people to return and rebuild the temple, but to also provide the finances for their mission. The king encouraged people to give a voluntary gift to the Israelites as they returned, much like the type of offerings we are called to give today.

- **When have you witnessed God using unlikely people, like the pagan king here, to provide for His people? Explain.** (p. 40, PSG)

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

Jeremiah's prophecy, referred to and fulfilled in these verses, is an often quoted passage from Jeremiah 29:10-11, "For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

In contemporary Christianity, these verses are often used to encourage individual believers with the reality that God's sovereign hand holds their future. In its context, this passage is far more meaningful than a message for the individual because it depicts God's faithfulness to the whole Israelite community. God's plan would ultimately result in the Messiah's coming, and through His resurrection would come the redemption of all that was lost in the fall of Genesis 3. The same God who kept His promise to Israel is the God who protects our future.

THE PEOPLE JOURNEYED BACK TO JERUSALEM AND WORSHIPED GOD

Consider the scene as these exiles returned to their land. The Lord had not been worshiped in Jerusalem in fifty years, since the city's fall. So, it's not surprising that the first concern of the community was to lift up name of the Lord, even though the temple was not fully constructed. Watch what happened:

When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD. 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. So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia. (Ezra 3:1-7)

While the people of God fully intended to rebuild the temple, they knew a physical temple wasn't a requirement to worship God. Before the temple's grand re-opening, even before all of the once familiar things were restored in Jerusalem, the people simply worshiped God with a cheerful heart.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE BEGAN

Worship is at the center of life in the community of faith. In the Jews' return to Jerusalem, their worship highlighted God's goodness to His people for allowing them to return and reconstruct the temple. Notice the multifaceted nature of their worship and how it exalted the Lord.

Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the LORD. And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers. And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. 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 shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, 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 with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away. (Ezra 3:8-13)

The people gathered together to celebrate the new foundation that was in place for the temple. However, the primary purpose of their gathering was to worship God, the One the temple points to.

It would be easy to think that those who wept were doing so for nostalgic reasons—they remembered the original temple in all of its glory and were sad over the fact that it no longer stood. However, the way the passage reads points to another way of looking at these tears—tears of gladness. Yes, there may be some sadness in their hearts because of their affiliation with the first temple. But the tears they cried when they saw the new foundation were tears of joy; in light of all

TIMELINE

HAMAN'S DOWNFALL

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews backfires.

NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

God works through the prayers of His people.

THE WALL IS REBUILT

God restores the surrounding wall.

that had happened to them, God was faithful during all of the years in exile. God kept His promise to bring them back home. And they stood at the site of the new temple foundation, seeing with their own eyes the real and tangible grace of God in their lives.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Preservation of Scripture (p. 42, PSG)

God has chosen to reveal Himself to humanity through the text of Scripture, having inspired it and directed it to be free from error. God has also acted providentially throughout the course of history to ensure the biblical text is faithfully preserved for future generations. Our belief in the preservation of Scripture is supported by investigation into how the canon of Scripture was formed, and how manuscripts were faithfully transmitted throughout the centuries.

CHRIST CONNECTION

The primary task of these chapters in Ezra is to tell of the reconstruction of the temple, but the significance of this book points forward to the cross and to Jesus' return. God kept His promise to bring His people out of exile in Babylon and restore their freedom to worship Him. Since Adam and Eve sinned, all humans have been in exile from the garden and are in need of deliverance. Jesus came to end this exile, bring His people home, and restore our freedom to worship. This directs our attention to a time when He will ultimately rule and reign unopposed in His kingdom.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **God's promise of return was fulfilled under His sovereign direction after 50 years of exile. What does this say about the importance of waiting on the Lord and relying on His timing?** *God's timetable for fulfilling His promises may be different from our own. Where our view of what He is doing is limited, God sees the big picture and is working all things together according to His good and perfect plan.*
- **The people voluntarily gave of their resources for the construction of the temple. How is the giving of our resources an act of worship?** *The giving of our resources can show what or who it is we truly value. A good parent who gives good gifts to his children does so because he values them. Likewise, when we give to the church or when we give to those on the mission field, we are communicating that we value the work that is being done for the Kingdom. And in that sense, giving becomes worship.*
- **What does this account teach us about worshiping God?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What does this account teach us about outward displays of worship?** *While worship is primarily a thing of the heart, true worship will manifest itself in some way outwardly, from an act of tithing to persistently living differently from the world.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

In this account, it can be easy to overlook the fact that the Israelites worshiped according to the Law of Moses. The Law (the first five books of the Bible) gave God's people clear warnings about worshipping Him in the same way the surrounding nations worshiped their gods. The purpose of this warning was to not only redirect Israel toward distinct and holy living, but also for the simple purpose of demonstrating the better way of the God of Israel.

- **Why is it important that Christianity not blend in with the surrounding culture?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some ways Christians can communicate living a better way to our surrounding culture today?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

As these chapters showed, neither experiencing the presence of God nor the opportunity to worship Him are attached to a geographical location. This reality is further emphasized in the New Testament as Christ followers are said to be the very temple of God by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in them (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 4:30). Worship is first and foremost an issue of the heart—an internal joy and satisfaction in who God is and what He has done. Because of that, all of life is worship, offering us moments to take joy in God even in the smallest tasks of our day.

- **What are the dangers in thinking that worship is something that only takes place during a church service?** *Answers will vary.*
- **If worship is primarily of the heart, how has your worship been lately? Are you currently finding satisfaction and joy in God? If not, why do you think that is the case?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

We learn from these chapters that both young and old people lifted praises to God with various expressions and from different stages of life. Not only that, but those praises produced a unified sound that glorified the Lord and could be heard from far away. Thus, far from being an event designed for only one generation, we see all of God's people united in proclaiming the goodness of God to those around them. Such demonstration is a powerful witness to the world.

- **Have you built relationships with older people in your church? Why or why not?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is it important for younger Christians to build relationships with older Christians? What are the dangers of never having older Christians who speak into your life?** *It is important because without those relationships, you won't be able to benefit from the collective wisdom from the church as a whole.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack items #7 and #8. The first one contains an informational poster on several of God's promises found in Scripture. Feel free to use this as a talking point with your students, asking them which of God's promises found on this poster, or elsewhere throughout Scripture, has been particularly encouraging for them personally. The second pack item contains an exile and return map that can be used in this session (and others that follow) to chart the geographical path of the Israelites on their journey home.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject