

# Preparing to Teach the Lesson

People sometimes speak of going to church as “going to worship.” Some also apply the word “worship” to many activities, such as worship in song, worship in giving, or worship in serving. Much of what goes on in a church service may actually militate against worship, since it can be man-centered, works-centered, or people-centered rather than God-centered. A church service may have other distractions, such as certain types of music, chitchat, and other activities that can disrupt our prayer and our focus on the worship of God.

This week we look at one of the most significant passages about true worship. Remember that the Word of God is the only reliable source of instruction we have on spiritual matters such as worship.

## TODAY'S AIM

**Facts:** to discover what is happening in this account of an actual event of true worship in heaven.

**Principle:** to adjust our mental awareness and the attitude of our hearts to make this biblical type of worship our standard or norm.

**Application:** to implement this understanding to inform all our worship, whether in private or in our corporate gatherings.

## INTRODUCING THE LESSON

Many, if not all, of us have experienced multiple forms of worship in church services. These experiences might range from a less formal small-group gathering to the highly developed and traditional forms that some might call High Church. There have been and continue to be strong opinions as to what worship is and how it should be done.

In Isaiah 6, the Prophet Isaiah is given a rare glimpse of worship in heaven.

When giving the model prayer in Matthew 6:10, Jesus said, “Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” Certainly, God is worshipped in heaven according to His will. We may conclude from Jesus’ words that we are to pray that worship would be done on earth as it is done in heaven. In light of this, this week’s lesson should be highly relevant to our worship.

## DEVELOPING THE LESSON

**1. The vision of worship around the throne of God (Isa. 6:1-4).** The death of King Uzziah brought in a time of uncertainty for everyone, including the Prophet Isaiah. God’s answer to the stressful situation was this vision for Isaiah. Under different circumstances, God gave a similar vision to the beloved disciple John (Rev. 4:2-8). There we are given the additional information that the four seraphim are full of eyes in front and in back. They have the gift of spiritual insight into, or understanding of, the holiness of God. This is so overwhelming that they do not cease from praising God day and night. In the Apostle John’s day, some seven hundred years later, they are still praising God in the same manner. We get a sense of their awe and wonder at the holiness of God.

God has many attributes that are as beautiful as His holiness for which He could be praised. Were we able to clearly see these attributes as they are revealed in God’s Word, we too would ceaselessly praise Him. What are some attributes of God with which you are particularly impressed? For which might you praise Him?

**2. The reaction of Isaiah to his vision (Isa. 6:5).** Seeing and hearing others worship God for His holiness brought Isaiah a sense of his own sinfulness and unworthiness. His re-

sponse, “Woe is me! for I am undone,” might be compared with the modern-day slang expression “I’ve had it; I’m toast!” Now that he saw how completely holy God is, he expressed his own sinfulness in speech.

Isaiah also saw the sinfulness of the people around him. He had seen something of God’s holiness and majesty as the King, the Lord of Hosts, and was convicted at the deepest level of the sinfulness of his own attitudes and actions and those of others.

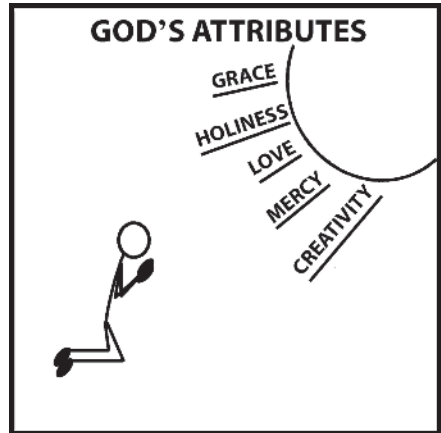
**3. The provision of God for the prophet’s sin (Isa. 6:6-7).** Nothing Isaiah could do would remedy his situation, and God did not expect him to arrange for his own cleansing. It is likely that Isaiah was a godly man with insight into spiritual things, but he had no hope of solving his own problem. He was ready to accept God’s provision for his cleansing from sin. This came in the form of a live coal from the altar of intercession before God’s throne (cf. Rev. 8:3). This action cleansed the offending lips of their sin.

**4. The natural outflow from the vision and interaction with the Lord (Isa. 6:8).** Now that Isaiah had been prepared by the impact of the vision and by the cleansing from sin by the Lord, he was ready to hear and respond to the Lord’s call for service. Notice how gently the Lord called to Isaiah with a broad question seemingly aimed at the whole world. Isaiah did not suggest another suitable candidate for the job but immediately volunteered. God asked, “Who will go for us?” The word “us” perhaps indicates the Trinity, the seraphim, and the whole heavenly host.

There would be those who would listen and those who would not. Isaiah was simply to carry God’s message to the people (Isa. 6:9-12). God would be responsible for the outcome.

## ILLUSTRATING THE LESSON

We worship God because of what and who He is. Can you think of some additional characteristics of God?



## CONCLUDING THE LESSON

During times of uncertainty, we often seek the answers to life’s questions. We seek to catch a glimpse of God, His glory, His holiness, His omnipotence, and many of His other attributes or characteristics. We can learn of these great elements of His Person from His Word and praise Him for them. It is primary and essential to thank and worship Him for who He is rather than to do so in response to what He does for us. We must leave it in His hands as to what He does to us or for us. He may then give us the opportunity to do something spiritually significant. He may even give us individual insights into His glory that will transform our thinking for the rest of our lives.

## ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Our next lesson calls on us to praise and rejoice in the Lord because He has saved us and given us the joy of salvation. We are called to sing and shout His praises and to make Him known throughout the whole earth.

—Brian D. Doud.

# Preparing to Teach the Lesson

God's prophecies have been and will continue to be fulfilled. Isaiah 12 looks ahead to that day when the millennial kingdom, with Jesus Christ as its Head, will be established. There will be singing for joy and shouting of praise to God for all that He has done. This is so sure that Isaiah wrote, "In that day thou shalt say, O Lord, I will praise thee" (vs. 1).

God's promise of salvation to all who trust in Him and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, is so sure that we can sing and shout now in worship and praise of His marvelous grace for saving us. By His grace, we are as surely children of God now as we will be in heaven. Therefore, praise is just as appropriate and called for now as it will be then. When we are in heaven, we will certainly praise Him for His marvelous grace in saving us and keeping us through all the trials of life. Let us also praise Him now, even in the midst of trials.

## TODAY'S AIM

**Facts:** to see what God has said through Isaiah that will cause us to praise Him for our salvation.

**Principle:** to praise God for His great character and for saving us.

**Application:** to learn to fill our daily lives with a spirit of praise, song, and thankfulness to God for His work on our behalf.

## INTRODUCING THE LESSON

In our lesson text this week, the prophet looked forward to "that day" (Isa. 12:1), meaning the millennial kingdom of Christ, when God's people will be praising Him. This is so certain that Isaiah used the phrase "thou shalt say" to introduce the very words with which the people will praise God. We can learn from this to praise God in a similar way with similar words. The words

should not be in some special language but rather in our own native tongue. The words we use and the expressions of our hearts should not be rote and ritualistic but rather a genuine outflow of grateful hearts and minds.

## DEVELOPING THE LESSON

**1. We praise God for saving us (Isa. 12:1-2a).** One of the themes of the Bible is God's anger toward mankind because of our sin. When we do things we should not, it is called transgression. When we fail to do what we should do, it is called disobedience. We have done these things knowingly, and we cannot save ourselves from our sin. Knowing this, God has turned away His anger and has saved us through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Isaiah used the words, "thou comfortedst me" (Isa. 12:1). This implies that those speaking to God were upset and needed to be comforted after God had intervened and saved them. While we are not saved by feeling a certain way, such as being sorrowful for sin, we should feel conviction for our sin and our sinful condition. Once we are saved, we should feel comforted and thankful for having received God's salvation.

**2. We sing and are joyous because we have His salvation (Isa. 12:2b-3).** It is not that we hope to be saved someday by our good works or that we cannot know whether we are saved. These two verses say that "God is my salvation," that He has "become my salvation." This was made possible by the Son of God coming in human flesh and dying for us.

God literally became our salvation in Jesus Christ. The original Hebrew in which this was written says "God my salvation." The translators supplied the "is" to make better sense of the phrase. Said

as one word, it is *Yehoshua*, which translates as “Jesus” in the New Testament, meaning “God my salvation.” Just as there is a world of difference between saying a wife and *my* wife, so there is an eternity of difference between saying *the* Saviour and *my* Saviour.

We can rejoice in that salvation and in our Saviour and continually draw the water of life and strength from Him. Salvation is depicted as a well of water, just as the Lord Jesus taught the woman at the well (John 4:10-14). If you keep your conscience clean by confessing your sin to your Saviour the instant it comes up, you will have this joy of salvation constantly drawn up within you.

If God grants you the privilege of leading someone to trust in the Lord Jesus to be saved, perhaps it would be better not to immediately lay upon that person the duties of tithing, church attendance, witnessing, intercessory prayer, and so on. Perhaps it would be better to instruct him to just thank the Lord Jesus for saving him every time it comes to mind over the next few weeks. See whether that causes him to grow and flourish spiritually.

**3. We should encourage others to sing and praise the Lord because of His presence with us (Isa. 12:4-6).** The experience of the greatness of God in your personal life will flow out in telling others. This is not an institutional thing but rather a relationship with the Lord Jesus whereby the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within you as part of your new birth. It is His presence with you that is the source of your joy and praise. You then can speak of His greatness and the excellent things He has done. Your testimony should come naturally.

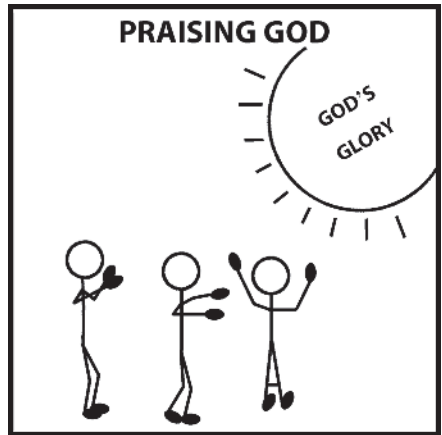
We are to declare among the people that His name is exalted and to be proclaimed to all the earth. Our bragging point should not be our local church, for where you have people, you will always have flaws. Our praise and our bragging should be in God, the excellent things He

has done, and the greatness of His name and character. He is not flawed.

It is because of His presence with us that we live as saved people with the hope of heaven and all sins forgiven. Colossians 1:27 says it is “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

### ILLUSTRATING THE LESSON

Let us sing and shout praise to God because of His presence.



### CONCLUDING THE LESSON

We will sing and shout in praise of God continually throughout eternity. It will be the most natural thing to do—and the most joyous. Now, it may not seem that would be exciting or fulfilling, for we are caught for the moment in the spiritual darkness and hindrances of this world system. We also still wrestle with the weakness of the flesh. But He will change that. Since we know that He will, we can praise Him now and continually thank Him for saving us.

### ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

People sometimes attempt to worship God in meaningless ways. In our next lesson, we explore what God will do when we invent false ways of trying to honor Him.

—Brian D. Doud.

# Preparing to Teach the Lesson

We have been looking at the subject of worship in this unit, and we now come to one of its most puzzling aspects—namely, that the most meaningful activity we can pursue on earth can become meaningless. The cause of this problem and its solution should be so available to our thinking that we are able to avoid meaningless worship. Obviously, meaningless worship is a spiritual problem stemming from wrong spiritual teachings, attitudes, and behaviors.

The penalty for it is not just that God withdraws from meeting us in our worship. He also sends spiritual blindness to those involved and even to their leaders. They (and we as followers) may not find an adequate answer even from the Scriptures. When we pay only lip service and do not worship from the heart, the Lord withdraws the instruction and comfort of His Word from us. As this is an alarming state to be in, it is best to be prepared on this subject before it arises. If we should find ourselves in the circumstance of a meaningless worship experience, then may God give us insight from His Word to do what we can to correct the situation. Only then can God meet us and do a mighty work for us and for His glory.

## TODAY'S AIM

**Facts:** to examine the Scriptures to see what constitutes meaningless worship and what causes it.

**Principle:** to find scriptural answers to this problem and implement the solutions.

**Application:** to maintain awareness of this problem and to prevent it from entering our personal and church lives.

## INTRODUCING THE LESSON

Many of us have been in attendance at various worship services in churches

other than our own. We may have observed at least the outward expression of people at worship. We usually assume that they are sincere and may well be making some kind of connection with the Lord. Yet in this week's lesson we learn that to God our worship may be meaningless. Even when people feel that they are being sincere in their worship of God and have had some sought-after emotion while worshipping, they may not have really met with God at all.

We certainly want to avoid this personally! We want our fellowship as a body of believers to foster real worship and a deep honoring of the Lord. We want it to be real. We hope that we are worshipping God in the way He expects us to.

## DEVELOPING THE LESSON

**1. The unobserved problem (Isa. 29:9-10).** Verse 9 says, "Stay yourselves, and wonder." In a modern vernacular, we might say, "Come on now; don't you get it?" Something was drastically wrong with the people and the way they were worshipping. It was so "off" that it seemed they were drunk. They were just continually going through the same motions and prescribed ceremonies. It was all meaningless, but they did not realize it.

This unseen problem was bringing the judgment of God down on the people. They had withdrawn their love from God and were instead pursuing their own agendas.

**2. The difficulty with the problem (Isa. 29:11-12).** No one could see the problem or the way out of it. No one could find the answer in the Scriptures. Whether you asked a scholar or an ignorant man, there was no insight to be had from the Scriptures. God's Word always has the answers to spiritual sit-

uations of every kind; but if one's heart is not right with God, no correct answers will be found.

**3. The root cause of the problem (Isa. 29:13-16).** The underlying cause of the meaningless worship was that the love of the people was not toward God. They were following advice from men rather than the Lord. They had changed their thinking from "God is always with us" to "He does not see us or know what we are doing." They had removed God from first place in their minds and affections. They were trying to hide their plans and conventional wisdom from the Lord.

They had also become proud and even arrogant, for they thought they were equal to God in some way. They had turned things upside down to the point that they thought they had formed themselves and were not responsible to God. They were questioning His place of authority over them. This is the root cause of the problems in our society today and also in our churches. We have allowed the humanists, with their theory of evolution, to fill our minds with the idea that since we were not created by an almighty God, we are not responsible to Him or His laws. "Truth," "honesty," and "integrity" then become relative terms whose standards are set by man, not God. The precepts of man, when substituted for the precepts of God, will always bring error, confusion, and an upside-down relationship with God.

God always meets His people where they are, as He does individuals. God can always do a marvelous work among His people. Sometimes it comes in the form of judgment, and sometimes it comes as revival. Whatever He does, it is always meant to restore His people to a right relationship with Him. This is made plain in Isaiah 29:24: "They also that erred in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine."

God corrects His people and heals their error. He only awaits willing hearts.

### ILLUSTRATING THE LESSON

We look lost and confused to God when we engage in meaningless, heartless worship.



### CONCLUDING THE LESSON

Whether done individually or within a church, we always have a choice either to worship God sincerely from the heart or to hide in our own selfishness and error. Satan does not need to come at us with a whole new approach. He just steers us off course. It is not easy to maintain current accounts with the Lord, with sin forsaken and confessed immediately. But it is far more difficult to forsake the Lord and worship meaninglessly and endure the consequences of a barren spiritual life. How much better it is to worship Him in spirit and in truth!

### ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

In our next lesson we look at the blessing the Lord will bring to His people in the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. We can have great hope because the Lord will cause His church to be victorious.

—Brian D. Doud.

# Preparing to Teach the Lesson

Many years ago there was a TV commercial that urged viewers to grab for all the gusto they could get (meaning their product, of course). What a shallow and ungodly approach to life! For the unsaved person, this life is as good as it will ever get; and after this life it will get much, much worse for him. For the saved person, this life is as bad as it will ever get; and after this it will get far better.

The difference is really whether one obeys the Lord. Even on the subject of being saved, Scripture speaks of salvation as obeying the Lord (Acts 6:7). A life of obedience to the Lord will be rewarded here and now, and the reward will be much greater in the hereafter. The reward of the Lord follows the principle of sowing and reaping. We reap what we sow; we reap it later, and we reap it multiplied. We should not view obedience from the viewpoint of what we can get out of it. His reward for our obedience will far exceed anything we can imagine.

## TODAY'S AIM

**Facts:** to discover what God has said about our obedience in life and worship and His response to it.

**Principle:** to show how compliance with God's wishes and directions will lead to His approval now and His blessing later.

**Application:** to adjust our thinking to the principles revealed here so that we can have a life of joy in Him and a future of blessing.

## INTRODUCING THE LESSON

It is common to see the ungodly rewarded in this life while the godly are often put down. We see those who disregard God prosper while godly people seem slighted and persecuted as they endure all kinds of struggles. Only God

can see the spiritual truth of what is going on, and only He can sort it all out and make sense of it.

## DEVELOPING THE LESSON

It is apparent from Isaiah 65:12-15 that the call of God comes to everyone. No one can claim that God never gave him an opportunity to be saved. Some respond to the call, and some do not. In all our evangelistic efforts, we must remember that we cannot save anyone of ourselves; we can only share the gospel message. We have the glorious privilege of telling people of the love and forgiveness that can be found in Christ. They have the duty to respond positively and receive Him as Saviour.

God had called out to His people, and they had not responded (Isa. 65:12-15). Instead, they did things with which God was not pleased. They were attributing worth to the wrong things and the wrong people. This sounds a lot like what is going on around us today, both inside and outside the church. God's response to Israel was that those who served Him would have food and drink while those who did not honor Him would hunger and thirst. His servants would rejoice and have joy while the others would experience shame and frustration. The unresponsive would leave a reputation as cursed by God, but His servants would have a good name.

**1. The blessings of the Lord on His servants (Isa. 65:17-21).** Although it may not always seem apparent, God does bless His people on earth. Not all the rewards are kept for heaven. We receive just enough blessing in this life to understand that He is the God of truth. We can trust Him to work all things together for good to those who love Him (Rom. 8:28). He has called us for His purposes, and if we have responded, then

He is at work in our lives to school us and refine us in His own way and time. Though we may face challenges in our lives similar to those of the unsaved, there can be a good and beneficial purpose in our experiences. We can rejoice that we know Him and are His servants.

As we read Isaiah 65:17, we see that God is going to prepare new heavens and a new earth where the past things that were negative will never come to mind.

God rejoices over His people. They will have lives in the new heavens and new earth that we can only imagine. Can we even imagine what it will be like to live without the constant reminder of our mortality or the threat of crime?

We cannot change the clear teaching of Scripture so as to forgive the unrepentant and usher everyone into heaven, thinking that God is too kind to send anyone to hell. He does not send them to hell; they decided not to respond to God's promptings. In His good providence, the former things will not come to mind.

**2. The Lord's provision for and intimate relationship with His servants (Isa. 65:23-25).** The frustrations of the believer's life will one day be over. We do not labor in vain in the Lord. Part of God's response to our obeying Him is that He will answer our requests of Him before we even make them! When we pray earnestly, He is very actively listening. He is far more eager to bless us than we are to pray for blessing.

We look forward to the blessings that will be present in the millennial kingdom, where violence will turn to love and companionship and all pain and anguish will be put away. At present the earth is under the curse, but it still has great beauty through which we can see that God reigns supreme (Rom. 1:20).

Much more than is contemplated in the earthly concepts, love, home, belonging, togetherness, and rest will be abundant in heaven. By faith we can

get only a glimmer of the delights of heaven that God has already prepared for those who love Him.

## ILLUSTRATING THE LESSON

God speaks to us all in many ways. We can and must choose how we respond to His call.



## CONCLUDING THE LESSON

We cannot always tell what is really going on spiritually by what appears on the surface of the circumstances of life. We may see godly people suffer while ungodly people prosper. The fruit of our responses to God may never appear in this life; but it does not end in this life. We will have to wait until we are in the afterlife to see clearly what we have to accept by faith now.

Taking things by faith is really seeing beforehand what we know will happen because of what God has spoken. We have the word of One who cannot lie.

## ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

In our previous lessons on worship, you may have been wondering how proper worship is to be done. Our next unit on renewal of worship will give us some good, solid answers.

—Brian D. Doud.



# Preparing to Teach the Lesson

We have seen in previous lessons that our worship can be worthless to God. It can also be less than worthwhile to people; it may even seem boring to some. Many people today attend services and perform acts of worship out of a sense of duty or obligation. They may hope to gain favor with God through their worship activities. We may rightly conclude that if our worship is worthless to God, it will also be worthless to us.

People often begin again to worship God from the heart out of desperation. Israel was desperate, as seen in this week's lesson. They had been allowed to come back to the Promised Land from captivity in Persia. They were under great stress from their enemies who lived in the land. They had the challenge of establishing a city and sustaining themselves agriculturally and financially. When they began to honor the Lord by restoring the prescribed worship, they moved from desperation to joyful worship.

## TODAY'S AIM

**Facts:** to see similarities and differences in the experience of Israel and our situation today.

**Principle:** to find the timeless spiritual principles that apply to us today.

**Application:** to restore the joy of the Lord to our worship by applying these principles as we obey and honor Him.

## INTRODUCING THE LESSON

God had moved the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia, to send the Israelite captives back to Jerusalem to rebuild the house of God. Over forty-two thousand of them walked some nine hundred miles, taking with them whatever they could. They had not been able to worship God as He had ordained, since they had had no altar or temple. Once they returned to Jerusalem, they

had to build houses, raise crops, and start a new life in the Promised Land. When it came time to rebuild the house of the Lord, they gave a freewill offering. God provided the leadership and the workers to begin their work.

It was also time to resume the sacrifices and feasts God had prescribed for Israel. The joyful worship they had missed for seventy years was to be restored to them.

## DEVELOPING THE LESSON

**1. Unity is required for worship (Ezra 3:1).** By the time a person reaches his teen years in a local church, he is generally aware of friction, cliques, or even active conflicts within the church. Even if no one is aware of these problems, the Lord is always aware. In times of stress and uncertainty, these things can destroy the harmony and unity of our worship.

This week's text records for our instruction that the people gathered themselves together as one. Their unity was complete and purposeful. They had gathered to worship the God of their forefathers.

**2. Godly leaders and any necessary facilities for worship are supplied by the Lord (Ezra 3:2-3).** Jeshua and others who are named "stood up" and built the altar. Certainly they had convictions, but those convictions would have been useless without their action. They acted in response to the instruction of Moses, the man of God.

In every group the Lord calls together, He establishes a leader who sees what must be done and does it. God always has His plan; so it is of no use to ask, "Why doesn't God do something?" When we begin to respond to the clear command of the Lord, He moves so that whatever lack we might have is supplied.

The altar was already there; it had only been torn down. All that was needed was a leader and enough people following him to restore it for use. It may be that in our worship, our devotion and our commitment to the Lord need to be restored so that the joy of serving Him will once again be known by God's people. The Israelites offered the sacrifices God had appointed, not forms of worship they personally might have favored.

**3. The ongoing practices of worship follow the order given by the Lord (Ezra 3:4-6).** Once they had returned to the land and committed to worship, Israel had a whole yearly calendar of feasts and sacrifices to uphold. The Lord had reasons for all these observances: they reminded Israel continually of God's presence with them and His blessing on them. As long as they had the altar, they could offer sacrifices, even though the temple was still in ruins.

They had given a freewill offering to the Lord preparatory to whatever He wanted them to do next. When we give to the Lord, it all belongs to Him and is no longer ours. If we say it must be used for something specific that we personally want to see done, then it is really not given freely. The Macedonian Christians apparently got it right. They first gave themselves to the Lord and then they gave their resources (II Cor. 8:5). Giving is part of worship; it shows our gratitude to the Lord for what He has done for us.

**4. The freewill offerings of God's people are sufficient to continue the work of the Lord (Ezra 3:7).** The people followed the pattern of Solomon in building the first temple by hiring the people of Tyre and Sidon to bring materials. They did not have the cedars that were found in Lebanon, but they could buy them. We may not have an airline to take a missionary to the field, but we can hire an airplane to do it. There is an old saying that "God's work done in God's way will never lack God's support." It was

God's will to bring His people back from captivity in Persia. Although they had been captive there, He had honored them with enough resources to accomplish what He had set out for them to do. When we find what the Lord wants us to do and begin to do it, we will find that He has already given us the leaders, workers, and money necessary for the work.

### ILLUSTRATING THE LESSON

It brings us great joy to worship the Lord and to give to Him of ourselves and our resources.



### CONCLUDING THE LESSON

When God calls us to work and to worship, He will supply everything we need. He will lead us in the way He wants both activities done as each step unfolds before us. It is our duty to humbly embrace Him as our God and Saviour. We will experience great joy and a worshipful heart as we follow Him in the experience. We should "present [our] bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God" (Rom. 12:1).

### ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week we will see the people's joy as they honored the Lord by starting construction of the temple.

—Brian D. Doud.

# Preparing to Teach the Lesson

In preparing a lesson from historical material, we must remember that the Scriptures were written for our instruction (Rom. 15:4; II Tim. 3:16). As God's people, we are much the same today as were His people in our lesson text. God's manner of dealing with them and His instructions to them are therefore of great practical value to us as well.

A note of caution here: we must not "spiritualize" the Scriptures. We must not say "What this *really* means is" and supply some related idea. What we are trying to do here is discern the timeless principles God is teaching us just as He taught the Israelites in their day and situation.

## TODAY'S AIM

**Facts:** to observe the Lord's leading and the principles of His dealing with the situation of Israel.

**Principle:** to see that the timeless principles the Lord used with Israel of old will be much the same as the principles He uses with us today.

**Application:** to follow these principles and receive the direction and blessing of the Lord on our church and on our individual lives.

## INTRODUCING THE LESSON

The captives had been back in the Promised Land for just over a year. They had experienced the seasons of planting and harvest and had seen the faithfulness of the Lord in providing for them. Now it was time to begin the real reason for their return to the land: rebuilding the temple and restoring the worship of Almighty God, the God of the Jews. The joy of the Lord was to be their strength. But how could they experience it without a temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices, and all that God had ordained through Moses? All these things needed to be es-

tablished and set in motion. It was time to return to the basics, time to start rebuilding the temple.

In the life of a Christian or in the life of a church, it is sometimes necessary to start over. Just as the Jews had been carried away into captivity because of their sin, so too a Christian may experience a period of isolation, a time when God seems far away and His joy in our lives is not present.

There is always a starting point. For the Jews in our text, it was necessary to rebuild the temple. For a Christian or congregation today, revival may be necessary. We must go back to the basics—back to the Cross—and start over.

## DEVELOPING THE LESSON

**1. Preparing for the work of restoration (Ezra 3:8-9).** As with almost all work that is to be done, leaders must be appointed and recognized. The same Jeshua who had stood up to build the altar of God now stood up to set forward the workmen and establish the work on the house of God. Take note that those appointed were from twenty years old upward. Maturity is a necessary qualification for the work of God. We all love our young people and long for their spiritual and practical prosperity; however, putting them in a place of spiritual responsibility before they are ready may damage them rather than encourage them. It can also damage the work of the congregation.

The priests and Levites were recognized and set forward for the work. We recognize and respect our spiritual leaders as those who can instruct us and ensure that we are heading in the right direction. God usually leads His people through men He appoints for His reasons. It is not necessary that we

know or approve of His reasons, but we must acknowledge His right to establish our leaders.

**2. Praising the Lord for the success granted and the work begun (Ezra 3:10-11).** When physical work is to be done, it is always appropriate for others who are not involved in the physical work to praise God for the progress being made. The priests had on the proper apparel, and the musicians played their instruments. They sang by course, which signifies organized singing in praise of God. They apparently used Psalm 136, which can be used antiphonally. One group would say, "Give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good," and the other group would respond, "For his mercy endureth for ever" (vs. 1).

Psalm 136 reviews God's beautiful character, His actions in Creation, and His activities in defending and blessing His people. These are all basic to restoring our faith in who God is and what He has done for us. It is always appropriate to recall what God has done in saving us and bringing us safely through life's circumstances. Work done in gratitude and obedience to God is sweet, fulfilling, and enriching. Our lives take on the significance of being His people and the works of His hands.

**3. Perspective on the progress of the work (Ezra 3:12-13).** The older captives had seen the previous temple built by Solomon, and it had been glorious, one of the great wonders of its time. It was magnificent both in design and execution. When they saw the new foundation laid and realized it would not come close to the same glory, they wept aloud. The younger people were glad to see the restoration of the temple begun, and they were joyous. At least it was a beginning!

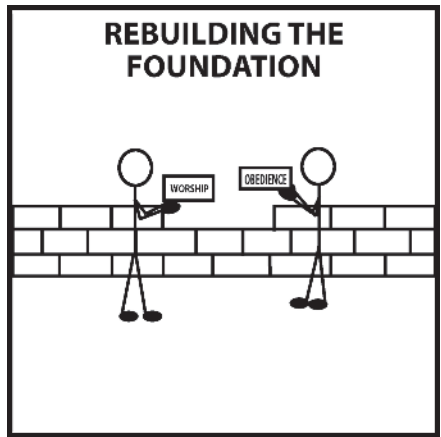
The church has had a great influence on our world. But today the world scoffs at the church for its moral lax-

ness. The sin of the church has brought it into judgment.

There should be no doubt in the mind of any Christian that a new beginning, a revival of the proper worship of God and respect for His Word, is needed. We too need to rebuild the foundation and restore proper worship of the Lord, both personally and corporately. It must begin in His time and in His way.

## ILLUSTRATING THE LESSON

Restoring the temple was an act of obedience and worship.



## CONCLUDING THE LESSON

The rebuilding of the temple was an amazing accomplishment in and of itself. But without the ultimate goal of reestablishing the worship of God and the obedience He deserved, it would have been of very limited value. It was a joyous event, done with praise and dedication of heart.

## ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

We have looked briefly at the initial stages of the rebuilding of the temple. In the next lesson we will see the temple completed and the joyous celebration that honoring the Lord brought to the Israelites.

—Brian D. Doud.

# Preparing to Teach the Lesson

It often seems to us that the whole world is in chaos. Wars, injustices, bad rulers, and natural and man-made disasters are widespread. Looking at the surface events, one could conclude that there is no one in control or even influencing the course of history, unless that influence is all downward.

In our lesson this week we see the hand of God at work, as He always is, in the unfolding of His gracious divine plan for mankind. God had given His servants the prophecy that the children of Israel would go into captivity for seventy years because of their sin. As we see in our lesson, God had now moved the hearts of secular rulers and of His own people to get them back to the Promised Land and out of captivity. They were to reestablish the temple and the prescribed worship at Jerusalem. Out of the chaos and defeat of captivity, He was restoring worship and great joy to His people.

## TODAY'S AIM

**Facts:** to discover the spiritual principles involved in the history of God's work with His people.

**Principle:** to seek the Lord in purity is to be rewarded by the Lord with joy and success in worship.

**Application:** to purify our lives and separate ourselves from the spiritual filthiness around us, so that we will be able to worship the Lord in purity. We will then receive the joy of the Lord.

## INTRODUCING THE LESSON

It is probably not often in our experience that we can with certainty observe and discern the hand of God at work in human history. The forces of evil and darkness seem so eager, so capable of oppressing and destroying good people and good intentions.

God can and often does intervene

and change the minds of ungodly people so that they carry out His will. He coordinates this with His leading of His own people, so that all history can be viewed as "His-story," if we know and understand what is really happening and where it is all headed.

When God is at work and we cooperate with Him, God will be glorified, and we will experience the joy that He alone can give. Seeking joy in and of itself will result in the same frustration as all other entirely human endeavors. Seeking God's will and unreservedly following Him will result in a right relationship with Him and the benefits He alone can design and accomplish.

## DEVELOPING THE LESSON

**1. God causes secular rulers to cooperate with His appointed leaders to accomplish His will (Ezra 6:13-15).** We are not too surprised when God raises up spiritual leaders for His people and uses them to show His people the way He wants them to go. It is truly remarkable that God changed the minds of a series of the rulers of Persia to let the captive Jews go free and return to the Promised Land. God also caused those secular rulers to give the Jews money and the gold and silver items for temple worship.

We may sometimes be offended by the conduct and character of our secular leaders. Understand that they have been put in place by the Lord and that their actions may be a judgment upon society or a benefit to it. In His way and time, God uses leaders to accomplish His purposes.

**2. God establishes His house by His order and blesses His people with joy (Ezra 6:16-18).** As God had prescribed through Moses, after the completion of the temple, the people followed through

by offering the proper sacrifices. As they worshipped God, He blessed them with joy. They had been slaves in a foreign land, but now they were free to live as God's people in the Land of Promise. It is to their great credit that they used their freedom of time and resources to honor the Lord. What are some of the ways we can follow this principle and honor the Lord ourselves? How can we honor the Lord with our time and money? How can we honor Him by the way we conduct our public worship services?

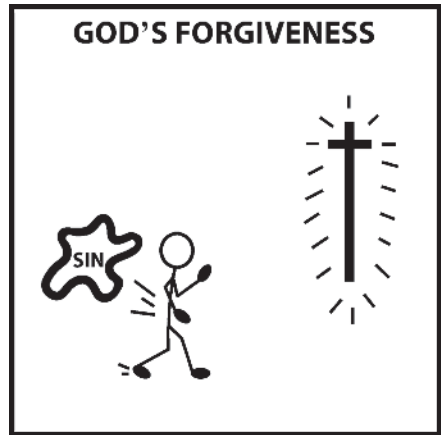
**3. God blesses His people as they purify themselves and seek Him (Ezra 6:19-22).** Twice in these four verses we see that the priests and Levites and then the people at large purified themselves from "the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel" (vs. 21). Seeking the Lord meant they wanted to enter into a right relationship with Him. They wanted to make contact with Him and live under His headship rather than be free to do their own will. When they had cleansed themselves and had sought the Lord, they were prepared to offer worship.

Our text says the Lord made them joyful. Joy given by the Lord is vastly superior to any joy of human origin. This joy is not found by seeking it; it is found by seeking the Lord.

The children of Israel had been surrounded by heathen practices of all kinds. Today we find ourselves increasingly surrounded by ungodly attitudes and activities. We too must purify ourselves of these spiritually unclean thoughts and enjoyments if we are to worship the Lord as He desires. We can see the application of this principle in the instructions concerning the Lord's Table, or communion, found in I Corinthians 11:23-34. We are to cleanse ourselves through confession. Then we can come to the Lord's Table in a worthy manner. We can have the double blessing of the joy of a clean conscience and the testimony of the Lord's sacrifice for our sin.

## ILLUSTRATING THE LESSON

Cleansing ourselves from sin and seeking the Lord can never be the wrong thing to do.



## CONCLUDING THE LESSON

There is not much joy in going through the motions of what one might describe as worship. If joyful worship is to be restored, it must begin with the restoration of God's people to a right relationship with Him. This involves the confessing and forsaking of sins, especially the unseen sins of the ways of the people around us. It also means we will have to seek Him not just for what He can give us but to know the true worship of owning Him as our Creator and Sustainer. We must seek Him because He is the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, the supreme Judge of all the earth. We seek Him because He alone is worthy of praise and obedience. We will leave the joy and blessings up to Him since He knows us and how to best manage our lives.

## ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Our next lesson focuses on the physical and spiritual activity of fasting and praying. We will observe God's response to this incident in Israel's history.

—Brian D. Doud.

# Preparing to Teach the Lesson

Have you ever fasted and prayed? Our lesson this week is about an incident in which it worked out well. It is the account of Ezra calling Israel to fast and seek the Lord for His guidance and protection. It was a call to get serious about obeying God's command, which in this case meant making the long and hazardous journey on foot from Persia to Jerusalem. It was also about putting faith into action as a demonstration of God's power.

## TODAY'S AIM

**Facts:** to see how God's people fasted and sought Him and how He answered them.

**Principle:** to realize that an activity done on God's order and done His way will receive His support.

**Application:** to determine whether this activity is part of what we should be doing today.

## INTRODUCING THE LESSON

Our passage recounts an incident in the history of Israel. We can expect to find spiritual principles at work that will be helpful and instructive to us, not as an everyday activity but at certain times. We are not the children of Israel, and we have not been told to return to the Promised Land from which we have been exiled. But we sometimes have decisions to make that will have far-reaching implications. We may have to take a stand on some of the issues of our day that involves our stating what God's Word says or what God will do about some subject.

Fasting and praying is a subject on which people differ. Fasting is a physical activity that, it is hoped, will have a spiritual result. It is always dangerous for us to assume that God can be persuaded to act by some action on our part. Certainly He is aware of our actions, our thoughts, and our prayers. He can and

does show us His will in many ways.

As we examine this bit of Israel's history, let us remember that God does some things once and will never do them again (for example, Christ's death on the cross). However, He does do some things over and over again, such as respond to a sinner's prayer for mercy and forgiveness. We must be careful not to presume and jump to the wrong conclusions. Let us instead pray for holy discernment.

## DEVELOPING THE LESSON

**1. Israel fasted and prayed for God's guidance (Ezra 8:21-23a).** Israel was now set on a course of returning to the Promised Land en masse. The temple had been rebuilt, and God had made it plain they were to return to the land. The king of Persia had issued a decree enabling them to go. This was a crucial juncture for them, requiring God's leading and blessing for them to succeed on their journey. While Ezra was their God-appointed leader, it was necessary for him to find God's leading in this huge undertaking. So he proclaimed a fast to seek God and His right way for them to proceed.

Generally speaking, most of us think of food when we feel hunger. One of the ideas behind fasting is to think of God when you feel hunger and to look to Him for the answers to life's questions. Behind all this is the idea of getting serious about finding and doing God's will. We now have the completed Bible filled with all the guidance from God that we need to deal with the issues of life. Believers today have the indwelling Holy Spirit. As the Lord Jesus said, "He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13).

Fasting and praying to find God's will would usually involve a decision as to which way to go, which course of action

to pursue. This time that course of action was clear. The exiles were to leave Persia and go back to Jerusalem. There were difficulties they would face during the four-month journey: finding water to drink and food to eat, and dealing with the danger that outlaw bands might attack them. There could even be forces loyal to the king who might not have heard of his decree allowing them to pass and the requirement to help the exiles.

The problem was that Ezra had already spoken to the king and told him that God would protect them from the enemies along the way because they were honoring Him. He was ashamed to ask for a military escort for protection since God was supposed to be protecting them. Ezra had put himself on the line in the most practical sense, trusting the Lord for daily protection. Ezra had also said that God's power and anger were against all who forsake Him. In putting himself in this box, Ezra had also put his people, and their faith all in the same box.

Can you think of ways in which professing Christians put themselves in the same kind of box today? Can we really give testimony about anything concerning the Lord without putting ourselves on the line as believing it ourselves? What will happen if we do not follow through and live as those who believe? What happens to the testimony of people who say God told them to do something if it all goes wrong? Does this mean we should never say anything about God and His Word?

**2. Fasting honored by the Lord (Ezra 8:23b, 31-32).** It would probably be somewhat less than accurate to say that God always honors every fast called for by a spiritual leader. We do see that in this instance, though, Ezra wrote that "he was entreated of us" (vs. 23). Ezra was plainly saying that God answered their fasting and prayer. Whether he was giving a sense of certainty at the time of the fast or, in looking back, was saying that God must have been entreated be-

cause He had brought them safely through the journey, we are not told. In any case, after they had fasted and sought the Lord, they started walking. Since the fasting and prayer was about God's protection of those who honored Him, they had to start walking to demonstrate to all involved that God was taking care of them as they said He would. The testimony as to what God would do was thus kept intact.

It would have taken four months to go from Persia to Jerusalem. Ezra's written testimony is that God's hand was upon them the whole time. They were kept safe from those who would have harmed them.

## ILLUSTRATING THE LESSON

Whether we fast and pray or just pray, we must put into action what we believe.



## CONCLUDING THE LESSON

Fasting and praying is not necessarily part of the daily ongoing work of the church or of individual lives. It may be called for in special circumstances.

## ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

In our next lesson we will examine the gifts given to the Lord.

—Brian D. Doud.



# Preparing to Teach the Lesson

This historical record of how God handled the return of Israel to the Holy Land is full of spiritual lessons we need. God had prepared the temple, which had been rebuilt earlier. Now He was sending a portion of His people who were still in captivity in Persia back to the land. They were to carry the precious metal temple equipment back with them so that worship could again go forward. The sacrifices and feasts He had prescribed would be reestablished, all to the praise of the God of Israel.

## TODAY'S AIM

**Facts:** to see how God led His people through Ezra in returning to the Land of Promise.

**Principle:** to show that the timeless principles seen here can inform our lives today.

**Application:** to know that we see God's enabling and blessing on us when we employ these principles in our lives.

## INTRODUCING THE LESSON

The temple had been rebuilt in Jerusalem by a small contingent of exiles, and now it was time for another contingent of the people to return there as well. This time the exiles would bring with them the vessels necessary for proper temple worship. These were heavy and very costly. The responsibility for this was large, and Ezra appointed twenty-four men to this responsibility. Their qualifications and their appointed task are instructive to us and to our churches.

## DEVELOPING THE LESSON

**1. Holy people separated to the Lord (Ezra 8:24).** Ezra had been given permission by the king of Persia and had been commissioned to take the people of Israel back to the Promised Land. He also had the responsibility to take back

the gold, silver, and bronze implements prescribed for use in the temple worship. The latter was a big task involving a huge amount of work to transport tons of material a great distance. The exiles would have to use a great number of beasts of burden—camels, horses, donkeys, and oxen—and whatever wagons and equipment were necessary to carry the treasure.

But the greater need was reliable, trustworthy people to manage the treasure and all this equipment. It would be a long and difficult job. The people involved would have to care for themselves while they carried out the task. Probably very few of us have ever been asked to shoulder a responsibility this big. It was necessary to choose individuals who had demonstrated through their lives that they were already holy men. They had already set themselves apart to be God's alone. Ezra, no doubt under the leading of the Lord, pointed this out and set them apart from everybody else for this work. All had to understand what this meant; these men were set apart, or holy, to the Lord.

Just before He went back to glory, the Lord Jesus told His followers that they were His witnesses. It was not an option; they simply were. Every one of us who has trusted the Lord Jesus is in the same category. We are witnesses. We are also counseled in Romans 12:1, "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." No true service for God is possible without this.

**2. The responsibility of separated people (Ezra 8:25-27).** The people thus set apart for God's use had to understand what was expected of them. Ezra weighed out the silver, gold, and bronze ("fine copper" in the King James Version) so that each man knew what he

was responsible for. He could then figure out what he had to have to complete his task (number of horses or camels needed, and such). He also knew that once he arrived at the temple, those objects would be weighed again. Everyone would know whether he had safely transported all that had been entrusted to him. He would have to give an account for his actions or lack thereof. The entire shipment of gold, silver, and utensils for the temple made up a great fortune. Beyond that, it had all been given and dedicated to the Lord. It was really God's possession; so the responsibility of the bearers was not simply to Ezra and the nation of Israel but ultimately to God Himself.

**3. Holy safeguarding by holy people (Ezra 8:28-29).** The whole responsibility was carefully spelled out. The men were set apart as holy to the Lord, as were the vessels and the treasure. They were told to watch and keep these things until they were again weighed out before the authorities. There could be no side trips to see other sights. There could be no days off to rest. This was not a hobby or something they did just on the Sabbath. Some would have to keep watch while others slept or performed other tasks of daily necessity. We are reminded of Paul's admonition to Timothy to "keep that which is committed to thy trust" (I Tim. 6:20).

**4. Holy responsibility fulfilled by holy people (Ezra 8:30).** The goal was for the holy men to bring the gold, silver, and temple utensils to the temple in Jerusalem. It was not said how long they were to be responsible for these treasures but only where they were to be delivered.

### ILLUSTRATING THE LESSON

Holy people carry God's treasure for the Holy God. He determines what it is and where it must go.



### CONCLUDING THE LESSON

When we set apart deacons to assist the pastor in the work of the church, it is not a popularity contest or a political arrangement. Each must have been observed acting like a person who is set apart to the Lord. This person can then be set apart in the congregation.

The responsibility we have as we carry the gospel in our hearts and minds is huge. It is God's eternal Word, speaking of His grace in saving us through the death and resurrection of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. This responsibility can be carried forward only when we first give ourselves to the Lord as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1).

Our task is to carry out the Great Commission—to preach the gospel to all people until we finally carry it home to our Father in heaven. It is the greatest of all privileges to have this calling and responsibility. We have the Scriptures as our guide. May we be found as faithful as were those holy men of Israel.

### ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week we will see how Israel began to enter into the full worship of God with the Feast of Tabernacles, also called the Festival of Booths. It is a fascinating study of beautiful spiritual truths.

—Brian D. Doud.

# Preparing to Teach the Lesson

The Feast of Booths was a memorial that the Lord had delivered Israel from slavery and set them apart as His holy people. It was also a prophecy of the millennial kingdom of Christ, where every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree.

## TODAY'S AIM

**Facts:** to see how God worked in the hearts of His people to prepare them for His blessing.

**Principle:** to realize that God works in similar ways to bring the blessing of revival to individuals and congregations.

**Application:** to begin again to love the Lord and His people in a fresh and vital way.

## INTRODUCING THE LESSON

We might not at first think of this passage of Scripture as an example of God's people in revival. They had returned to the Promised Land after seventy years in captivity. They had rebuilt the temple and reinstated the sacrifices and temple worship. These had brought them joy. Now they read the Law publicly and began to obey the Lord in yet another facet of His commands for their instruction and for their good.

## DEVELOPING THE LESSON

**1. Revival started with the leadership understanding the Word of God (Neh. 8:13).** At this point in Israel's history, very few people could read and write, and books were very expensive. So the common person had little knowledge of the Word of God. Priests and scribes had access to the Scriptures, but there were no schools for the common person. There was also a language barrier, for the people now ordinarily spoke Aramaic, not Hebrew, and

the Scriptures were written in Hebrew. Therefore, it was necessary for those who could read to read the Word of God aloud in Hebrew and translate it into Aramaic for the people to understand. The history and explanation of this is found in Nehemiah 8:1-12.

This is very similar to our expository preaching today. The preacher is elevated and probably amplified so that all can hear. He reads the Scripture and comments on its meaning so that all can understand. It is important that the preacher or teacher give the sense and not add or subtract from the meaning of the text.

## 2. Leadership then spread the word to all the people (Neh. 8:14-15).

As they were instructed in the Scriptures, those who heard the Word went out and told it to all Israel. They were apparently successful in telling it accurately, as everyone seems to have heard the same thing.

The Feast of the Seventh Month was a memorial to the way God had delivered the people from slavery and formed them into the nation of Israel. Their ancestors had lived in booths in the wilderness then, and they were to remember this each year in the seventh month as a memorial. There was a fullness of content in the spreading of the Word; and as we shall see, each person did what he was supposed to do.

This points out that we too need to have consistency in doctrine, from the pulpit to the classroom to our daily witness. It needs to be firmly rooted in the Word of God, nothing less and nothing more. If elements are brought in or left out, we then will have a mixed group of believers who are not in agreement on what to believe or how to properly practice the Christian faith.

The parallel for the Christian is clearly seen in the memorial of the Lord's

Supper, or communion. We are to do this often as a memorial or reminder of the death of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He atoned for our sins and brought us His righteousness on the cross. So that we would never forget, He instituted the memorial of the Lord's Supper. Scripture instructs us on how to prepare and partake in a worthy manner (I Cor. 11:26-29).

**3. The people responded and began to do what the Lord requires (Neh. 8:16-17).** The people went out and gathered the branches of trees to make the booths. It was a simple thing to do. It would also be simple not to do it or maybe to argue that it was not relevant and would fulfill no need. It may not even have seemed a particularly spiritual thing to do; but it was the Lord's way of reminding them of their relationship with Him.

Each one had to make his own booth. By building a replica of the first booths made by the freed slaves, each family would know and pass on to the younger generation the story of the Lord's deliverance from slavery. They had to enter the booth and live in it for an entire week. This was the first time in many years that the whole congregation had participated in the Feast of Booths.

At the Lord's Table, each person has to look to the Lord for cleansing. Each person has to remember the Lord's death for himself. As each takes the elements, he or she can say, "The Lord Jesus shed His blood for me, and I claim it. I take it to myself. The Lord allowed His body to be broken for me, and I claim it. I take it to myself." Just as the Israelite had great gladness at the Feast of Booths, so we today should experience great joy when we partake of the Lord's Table.

**4. Remembering the Lord's deliverance and feast through the Word of God (Neh. 8:18).** Each day of the Feast of Booths, the Word of God was read to

the people. They took the time to be there hearing the proclaiming of the Word. The combination of obeying the Lord by building the booths, living in them, and hearing the Word of God brought the people "very great gladness" (vs. 17).

### ILLUSTRATING THE LESSON

We are well counseled to remember every day the Lord's death and His deliverance of us from our sins.



### CONCLUDING THE LESSON

This is a simple and direct example from history of the way to respond to the Word of God and enter into a place of blessing. The people gladly did as they were taught by the Scripture and honored the Lord in remembering His goodness to their ancestors. We need to concentrate on honoring the Lord and letting Him give us His joy. Attempts to gain joy by human means will be counterproductive to any true spiritual blessing.

### ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

In our next lesson we will see a history of corporate confession of the sins of the people. This is not a public confession of an individual's sin but rather instruction about confession of sin of any kind.

—Brian D. Doud.

# Preparing to Teach the Lesson

Confession is primarily an acknowledgment that something is true or to view something in the same way as someone else. In a spiritual application, it is agreement that any action or thought that God calls sin, we must also call sin. In confession, one admits guilt for one's sin. We should not try to make an excuse or plead that some other person or circumstance forced us to sin. When we confess sin to God, we admit that His Word and actions are right and that ours are wrong and an offense to Him. We acknowledge that punishment for our wrongdoing is just, and we plead for God's mercy and forgiveness.

## TODAY'S AIM

**Facts:** to observe a corporate confession of sin that was godly and done commendably.

**Principle:** to understand that there is a valid corporate confession of sin that is acceptable to and desired by God.

**Application:** to apply scriptural principles in any corporate confession of sin.

## INTRODUCING THE LESSON

Confession of sin is a most serious subject. It has been carried out by mankind in many different ways. What we study here is a record of God's people, the children of Israel, in a state of revival and mourning about their sin, draped in sackcloth and covered with ashes (Neh. 9:1). Their confession, drawn out from them by the Lord, has much to teach us. While as a body they all publicly confessed their sin to God, they did not confess it to another human being.

## DEVELOPING THE LESSON

**1. Separating God's people from everyone else (Neh. 9:2).** Not only might non-Israelites fail to understand what

they were doing, but they also might detract from the corporate confession. This can happen in any corporate spiritual activity. Those who do not share belief in the Lord and do not know His ways and teaching may be disruptive, skeptical, or even offended by our confession of sin. They may think it is a personal attack on their character to be included in a corporate confession of sin.

They may also fail to understand the holiness of God. They may not agree that an activity is sinful or that they have anything to confess for which they should be held responsible.

**2. Acknowledging God as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe (Neh. 9:6-7).** Israel began with the acknowledgment that God created everything and therefore owns it all. He sustains every force of nature and factor in our existence, such as gravity, heat, light, and time. We owe Him everything and are responsible to Him. Until we come to this realization and confession, we cannot proceed with any spiritual activity.

The people also confessed that God called Abram and gave him the name "Abraham." This was the basic establishment of the household of faith, the beginning of the people of Israel. It all was initiated and carried forward by God Himself.

**3. Acknowledging God as the Worker of miracles and the Owner of all sovereignty (Neh. 9:9-10).** In establishing who God is and who they were in relationship with Him, they confessed that God knew all about the circumstances of His people and took miraculous action to make a huge difference. God defeated Pharaoh, the greatest ruler of his time. God performed many miracles in bringing His people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. God was sovereign in all these circumstances. History is a great

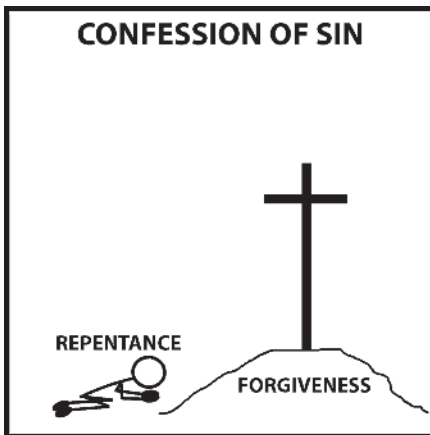
witness to the sovereignty and gracious character of God. He remains the same and can be trusted to fulfill His Word.

**4. Confessing to God His righteousness and our sinfulness (Neh. 9:30-36).** God's patience with His people when they were wayward and His mercy in dealing with them were confessed back to Him. God had sent prophets to speak to the people to inform them of His displeasure with their sin. He had displayed His graciousness in blessing them even when they were in sin. Although they had been chastened for their waywardness, God had not allowed them to be totally defeated and dispersed, as many ancient peoples had been. They confessed that God had been just and righteous in all that He had done.

Corporate confession of sin has its parallel in our private lives, although it involves our own personal sin, not the sins of others. This is done alone in our hearts with the Lord, even if we are surrounded by many worshippers or in a hostile setting.

#### ILLUSTRATING THE LESSON

We win God's approval and His cleansing when we confess our sin to Him.



#### CONCLUDING THE LESSON

In many church services there are unsaved people. One could be the spouse of a believer who goes to church in confession or for companionship with his spouse. There are children who are brought up in the church but have never entered into a personal relationship with the Lord. There may be sincere seekers who have not yet made a commitment to the Lord. If there is to be any confession of the sins of the congregation, it must be done in a way that is correct before God. The expression of a corporate confession of sin may have to wait for a strong spirit of revival.

More and more we are seeing people stand up to express hatred for God and His rule over mankind. They passionately protest having any reminder of their responsibility to God, such as a display of the Ten Commandments. We must not be pressured by them to change our doctrine or our practice of the faith once delivered to the saints.

We must remember that when the circumstances of life seem at their worst, God is at work to rescue His people and bring glory to His name. His people are sometimes persecuted and killed. Sometimes it is necessary for His people to stand up and be counted even if it does mean persecution. Corporate confession of sin may still be called for and followed.

God still works miracles. It need not be as spectacular as parting the Red Sea to still be considered a miracle. Our part is to remember His justice, mercy, grace, and forgiveness. We must respond to His love with confession and forsaking of our sin. He blesses us as He sees fit. He brings joy to His people as they follow Him.

#### ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

In our next lesson we will explore what can be learned from the experience of Israel as they dedicated the newly finished wall around Jerusalem.

—Brian D. Doud.

# Preparing to Teach the Lesson

The ordinary happenings in our lives hold great promise as objects of praise and rejoicing in the Lord. A wedding, the birth of a child, even a beautiful sunset can draw us out in joy, wonder, and praise to God. We first have to decide that we will set our hearts on finding these occasions and using them to thank and praise God. Then we have to keep reminding ourselves until it becomes a habit, a norm of life. Each of us could become a leader of others in this area—sort of a cheerleader for God.

The building of the protecting wall around the city of Jerusalem furnished just such an occasion in Israel's history. The wall was needed to protect the people of Jerusalem. Building the wall involved a lot of long, hard work. God had blessed them in enabling them to complete the task. Ezra and Nehemiah had led the people in the work, and it now was time to lead them in honoring the Lord with a dedication celebration.

## TODAY'S AIM

**Facts:** to see the unfolding events and the actions of Israel in revival.

**Principle:** to learn from Israel's celebration of God's blessing and copy the principle.

**Application:** to use the events of life as triggering points to praise and celebrate the goodness and blessings of the Lord.

## INTRODUCING THE LESSON

The temple had been built, the worship of the Lord reestablished, and many (though not all) of the people of Israel had returned from captivity in Persia. Now the wall around Jerusalem had been completed, and it was time to mark the occasion with sacrifices, a dedication of the wall, and a feast.

Ezra, Nehemiah, and all the people set out to create a memory, and God took part by giving them rejoicing hearts.

## DEVELOPING THE LESSON

**1. Gathering everybody for the dedication of the wall (Neh. 12:27-36).** Just who did the organizing is not completely clear, but Ezra and Nehemiah were the leaders of this dedication of the completed wall around Jerusalem. All the people had worked together building the wall, and they could hardly be blamed for rejoicing in the security and protection it afforded. But in a larger sense, while it was good and commendable to build the wall, everyone recognized that God was ultimately their protection. Building the wall did not indicate that they did not trust the Lord's protection. They were simply doing a prudent and sensible thing.

Now they chose to dedicate the wall to the protection of the people and the glory of God. As we follow the narrative, we realize that this part of their lives was an opportunity to praise and thank the Lord for His protection and blessing. They recognized and appointed to their places singers, instrumentalists, and choirs of people. It appears that there was a procession and a certain amount of ceremony and formality. They wanted to praise the Lord to the best of their ability. They were also creating a memory that would encourage their faith and the faith of successive generations in future days and years.

**2. Positioning everyone for praise (Neh. 12:38).** It is part of God's great plan that each person has certain talents and God-given gifts. A person may be talented at singing, but it is not the same as the gift of ministering through song. Two talented men may stand up and give the same speech,

but the one with the gift of evangelism will lead far more people to the Lord, even though he uses the same words. Ezra and Nehemiah knew this; so they recognized and appointed the singers, the priests and Levites, the princes of Judah, and those who played instruments. Nehemiah and Ezra had places as well.

The people were divided into two companies. When the procession ended, the two companies were facing each other. They may have sung and played antiphonally. They may have used Psalm 136, with one group saying, “O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good,” and the other group responding, “For his mercy endureth for ever” (vs. 1). The psalm progressed with more statements of praiseworthy things God had done, and they would have used the same answer as a refrain on each.

**3. The beautiful result of orderly praise (Neh. 12:43).** A large number of sacrifices were offered. These were burnt offerings, which did not totally consume the animal offered but left plenty of meat for any who wanted to enter into the sacrifice by eating some of it. Eating meat offered to God was an act of worship. This is the reason the apostles and elders told the new Gentile Christians that they should not eat meat offered to idols (Acts 15:28-29). Eating the meat offered to God was a statement of faith, much as taking the elements of communion is a statement of belief that Christ’s broken body and shed blood were on our behalf.

The sacrifices provided for a feast that gave the people great joy and rejoicing. Ordinarily, sacrifices and most acts of worship were carried out by the men, the heads of the households. So it is very special to note here that the women and children entered into the joy as well. It was such a great and loud celebration that it could be heard from a long way off.

## ILLUSTRATING THE LESSON

Even practical events that do not seem spiritual can be used to rejoice in the Lord and praise Him.



## CONCLUDING THE LESSON

When we have a thankful and worshipful heart, the occasions of life will furnish us with ample opportunities to praise the Lord and thank Him for anything and everything that is good. It is best to praise and thank Him even when a matter does not turn out well; perhaps it is a lesson to be learned. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (I Thess. 5:18).

We thank Him for the blessings that bring us joy. We also thank Him for the trials that make us strong in our faith. We do not rejoice because of our great accomplishments but because of the goodness of God. He protects us and provides our daily needs just as He did for those who had returned to Jerusalem.

## ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

What does it mean to sanctify a day? How should we sanctify the Lord’s Day? Our next lesson will be about sanctifying the Lord’s Day.

—Brian D. Doud.



# Preparing to Teach the Lesson

One would think that with a recent revival involving all the people, a reestablishment of temple worship, and the completion of a wall around the city of Jerusalem that brought life back to normal, all would have been well. But since the creation of the world, God had set aside the seventh day of the week, or Sabbath Day, as a needed rest for mankind and a memorial that God was their Creator and Sustainer.

Now that the Israelites were no longer slaves and were free to pursue life as they wished, they were not observing the Sabbath. They were working, buying, and selling in violation of the Sabbath rules. Israel had gone into captivity because they did not let the land observe the Sabbaths established for it, and now the people were violating the Sabbath again. There is often a consequence for sin in this life, as Scripture says, “because of our iniquities” (Isa. 64:7). Nehemiah the administrator was upset and took action.

## TODAY’S AIM

**Facts:** to show how God’s people violated the Sabbath.

**Principle:** to see whether there is a parallel in our experience today where the same principle could apply.

**Application:** to govern our lives by whatever we can establish as the “Christian Sabbath.”

## INTRODUCING THE LESSON

Reestablishing the temple and worship as prescribed by God was a wonderful thing. Celebrating the goodness of the Lord in enabling them to build the wall was a good and spiritual thing to do. But this did not completely change the pattern of thinking of the people. They were still thinking like slaves in a foreign land instead of like

God’s people in a place of blessing.

Part of God’s plan for Israel was to observe the Sabbath. Maybe they could not do so while in a foreign land; but now that they had returned to the Promised Land, they were in control of their situation. The Sabbath Day of rest was to remind the people that God was their Creator and that He had created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. This was to be a memorial forever. Their failure to observe the Sabbath went deeper than not resting on that day. It meant they were also not honoring the Lord as they should. They were ignoring Him and His commandment in this regard.

## DEVELOPING THE LESSON

**1. Nehemiah observed two problems (Neh. 13:15-16).** Nehemiah saw people working instead of resting on the Sabbath. They were doing their usual work in the vineyards and fields. They were loading up their beasts of burden, which they were supposed to rest as well. They were even transporting their produce into the holy city of Jerusalem on the Sabbath Day and selling it.

One could argue that if the grain was ready to harvest and the grapes were ready for winemaking, then they had to sell these items. It might be true that setting aside one day to honor the Lord would cost them something. The timeless principle here is that one does not sacrifice to God that which costs one nothing (II Sam. 24:24). One is expected to give God of his firstfruits, not his leftovers or freebies. The same would be true of the Sabbath observance; God comes first, and the outcome is left up to Him.

They were also allowing the heathen people around them to sell them their

wares on the Sabbath in Jerusalem. They were allowing unbelievers to profane the Sabbath in their midst.

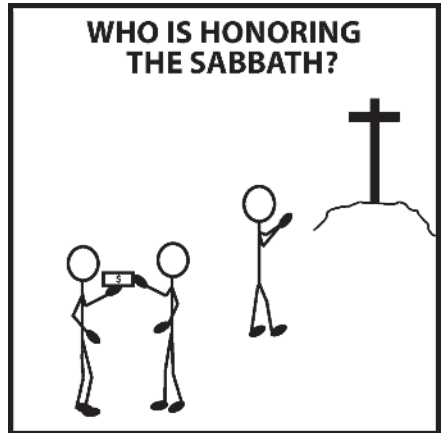
**2. Nehemiah brought the problems to the attention of those who needed to do something about them (Neh. 13:17-18).** God has ordered His world so that in every situation, someone is responsible to Him and to the people around him. Nehemiah appealed first to the secular leadership. These were the nobles of Judah whom Nehemiah charged with doing this wrong. They were in control, but they were not doing anything about this sin; so they were just as guilty as if they had done it themselves. Nehemiah reminded them that their ancestors had done the same things, and it had brought God's judgment upon them. It had caused them to be taken captive to Persia for seventy years. Did they want to have that happen again?

**3. Nehemiah did what he could to gain compliance with the law (Neh. 13:19-21).** Whether any of the nobles got the message and tried to stop the wrongdoing, we are not told. But Nehemiah had people who worked for him whom he ordered to shut the gates of the city and thus stop the commerce on the Sabbath. Those who had previously sold their wares in the city on the Sabbath were kept outside the city, but they remained outside the walls. Their presence might have enticed the citizens of Jerusalem to go outside the city to buy and bring their wares back inside, thus continuing to violate the Sabbath. Nehemiah put a stop to all this.

**4. Nehemiah positioned the spiritual leaders to do their part (Neh. 13:22).** It was not necessary for Nehemiah to be continually involved in the situation. There were responsible people who could be entrusted with the task. Nehemiah set them apart to cleanse themselves ceremonially and keep the gates closed at the right times.

## ILLUSTRATING THE LESSON

We should honor the Lord, even if we are alone in doing so, and leave the consequences to Him.



## CONCLUDING THE LESSON

On the matter of the Sabbath, we must remember that the early church set aside Sunday, the first day of the week, as a special day to gather to worship the Lord Jesus because He rose from the dead on the first day of the week. This came to be the day Christians set aside as the Christian day of rest.

In a larger sense, we do well to observe that the Christian who is saved by grace and ceases from his own works enters into God's rest. Then every day becomes a day of rest, a Sabbath (Heb. 4:9-11). To insist on doing good works to save oneself by works would be to fail to enter into God's rest. It would thus be impossible to truly keep the Christian Sabbath, or day of rest, without first receiving the gift of salvation through faith in Christ.

## ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next quarter's study on "First Things" begins with the praises of God as Creator of all.

—Brian D. Doud.