



Small Group Guide – September 24 & 27

The Return – Worship in the Ruins

Date: September 24 & 27, 2026

Focus Passage(s): Ezra 3

Theme: You don't have to wait until everything is fixed to worship God again.

Suggested Schedule (60 minutes total)

Segment	Time	Description
Icebreaker	10 min	Get comfortable, begin connecting
Intro/Recap	5 min	Read the key passages for the week
Group Discussion	25 min	Dive into Scripture and discuss application
Deeper Dive Option	5–10 min	Deeper Bible study or individual challenge
Prayer & Requests	10–15 min	Close in prayer for growth + personal needs

Welcome + Icebreaker (10 min)

When people are unexpectedly coming to your house, are you a calm cleaner or a panic cleaner? What's the funniest thing you've ever done to make the house appear clean?

When something in your life feels out of order, what is usually your first instinct: fix it immediately, make a plan, ask someone for help, ignore it for a while, or something else?

Key Message Recap

When something feels broken, most of us instinctively start with whatever is easiest to see. We try to fix the circumstances, change the behavior, solve the problem, or make everything look better.

Ezra 3 shows God's people taking a different approach. Their city was still in ruins, their future was uncertain, and they were afraid. Yet instead of waiting for everything to be rebuilt, they put worship first.

Discussion Questions (25 min)

Read Ezra 3:1-6

Before God's people rebuild the temple, they rebuild the altar. The altar represented worship, sacrifice, obedience, and a renewed orientation toward God.

The message gives us an important definition: "Worship is what happens when our life is reoriented around God."

Worship, then, is much bigger than singing. Prayer can be worship. Generosity can be worship. Parenting according to God's ways can be worship. Obedience, serving, gratitude, and surrender can all become worship when our lives are being reoriented around God.

Discuss Why do you think rebuilding the altar before rebuilding the temple was significant?

Key Truth - Rebuilding with God begins by putting God back at the center.

Refusing to Rebuild Alone

Read Ezra 3:1

The first thing Ezra tells us is that the people assembled in Jerusalem "with a unified purpose." Before the altar was rebuilt or the temple foundation was laid, God's people gathered together.

The message points out that this was not simply a collection of individuals rebuilding their private spiritual lives. They had been scattered for decades, but now they were rediscovering what it meant to belong to God together.

When life feels broken, isolation can seem safer. We may pull away when we are embarrassed, spiritually dry, disappointed, afraid, or exhausted. Ezra gives us another picture. Sometimes the first step in rebuilding is allowing other people to walk beside us.

Discuss

- Why does isolation sometimes feel easier when life or faith is struggling?
- What do we gain by pursuing God alongside other believers rather than trying to rebuild alone?
- Have you experienced a time when God used another person or Christian community to help you rebuild something in your life?
- Is there an area of your life you have been trying to carry alone?

Key Truth - Sometimes the first act of rebuilding is refusing to rebuild alone.

The Altar Came First

Read Ezra 3:2-6

The people had plenty of visible problems demanding attention. Jerusalem needed rebuilding, the temple was destroyed, and the city was vulnerable. Yet the first thing they rebuilt was the altar.

The message explains that the altar was where worship became tangible for God's people. They brought real sacrifices there, returned to the commands God had given them, and reestablished rhythms of worship that exile had disrupted.

They did not wait until life was stable before worshiping. They worshiped in the middle of the instability.

Discuss

- What do we tend to put ahead of our relationship with God when life becomes busy or difficult?
- Where are you tempted to think, "Once this settles down, then I'll focus on God"?
- What is the difference between rebuilding your life with God nearby and rebuilding your life with God at the center?
- How might putting worship first actually change the way we approach the other things that need rebuilding?

Key Truth - When worship comes first, everything else begins to find its proper place.

Worshiping While Afraid

Ezra 3:3 includes an important detail: the people were afraid of the surrounding people, yet they rebuilt the altar anyway.

Their worship was not evidence that their fear had disappeared. They worshiped while the fear was still real.

Sometimes we assume strong faith means no longer feeling afraid or anxious. Ezra gives us a different picture. Faith can mean choosing to move toward God even while fear remains present. The message says, "**Choosing to worship anyway means fear doesn't get the final word.**"

Discuss

- How can fear keep us from taking steps toward God?
- What is the difference between experiencing fear and allowing fear to control us?
- Is there something fear has been keeping you from surrendering or doing?

Key Truth - Faith does not require the absence of fear. It chooses to trust and worship God in the presence of fear.

Joy and Grief Can Share the Same Room

Read Ezra 3:10-13

When the temple foundation was completed, something remarkable happened. Some people shouted with joy while others wept.

Those who remembered the previous temple were confronted with everything that had been lost. They could celebrate a new beginning while simultaneously grieving what could never be recovered.

Ezra does not criticize either response. The sounds of celebration and grief mingle together.

The message describes this as one of Scripture's most honest pictures of worship. Worship does not require us to deny grief, disguise disappointment, or pretend the ruins are not real. We can praise God while still missing someone. We can be grateful for what God is doing while grieving what has been lost. Joy and sadness are not always opposites.

Discuss

- Why do we sometimes feel pressure to hide sadness when we are around other Christians?
- What does this passage tell us about bringing complicated emotions into worship?
- Have you experienced a season when gratitude and grief existed at the same time?
- How could understanding this change the way we respond to someone who is grieving?

Key Truth - You don't have to wait until everything is fixed to worship God again.

What Are You Trying to Rebuild Without Worship?

"Where have I been trying to rebuild without worship?"

Maybe it is your schedule. You are managing every responsibility, but God receives whatever time is left. Maybe it is your marriage or another relationship. You are working hard to keep things functioning, but there is little prayer, grace, or consideration of what God wants. Maybe it is anxiety, finances, parenting, work, or another part of life you are trying to manage primarily on your own.

Remember the definition from earlier: worship happens when our lives are reoriented around God.

Discuss

- What area of your life are you most tempted to manage without intentionally involving God? What would it practically look like to put God back at the center of that area?

Key Truth - God does not simply want to be nearby while we rebuild. He wants to be at the center of what we are rebuilding.

More Truth From the Gospels (10 min)

Ezra shows God's people worshiping before everything around them has been restored. We see that same kind of worship and trust in the life and teaching of Jesus.

Jesus never taught that we have to get our lives cleaned up before coming to God. Instead, He repeatedly met people in their brokenness and invited them to trust Him there.

Jesus Invites the Weary to Come

Read Matthew 11:28-30

Jesus does not say, "Fix your burdens and then come to Me." He invites people who are already weary and carrying heavy burdens to come to Him.

That is an important foundation for worship in the ruins. We do not worship because everything has been repaired. We come to Jesus carrying what is still heavy.

Foundational Truth - Jesus invites us to come as we are and learn to carry life with Him at the center.

Discuss What burden are you tempted to solve before bringing it to Jesus?

Jesus Shows Us Worship in Sorrow

Read Matthew 26:36-39

In Gethsemane, Jesus does not hide His distress. He tells His disciples that He is deeply grieved, and then He brings that grief honestly to His Father.

Yet within that honest prayer is surrender. Jesus expresses what He desires while ultimately entrusting Himself to the Father's will.

Foundational Truth - Biblical worship can include both honest emotion and genuine surrender.

Discuss

- What does Jesus' prayer teach us about being honest with God?
- Why is surrender different from pretending that something does not hurt?

Jesus Puts God's Kingdom First

Read Matthew 6:31-33

Jesus speaks to people worried about everyday necessities and redirects their attention toward seeking God's kingdom first. That does not mean their needs are unimportant. It means those needs are put in the proper order when God is at the center.

That fits the pattern of Ezra 3. The people had plenty of practical concerns, but the altar came first.

Foundational Truth - Putting God first does not make every problem disappear. It changes the center from which we face our problems.

Discuss Where in your life would seeking God's kingdom first change your priorities or decisions?

Jesus Made the Way Back to God

The altar in Ezra was a place of sacrifice. It reminded God's people that sin was real and that approaching a holy God required sacrifice.

The message ultimately points beyond Ezra's altar to Jesus:

"But the sacrificial system was never meant to be the final plan. Jesus BECAME the sacrifice. **Jesus** made the way."

Jesus took our sin and shame upon Himself through the cross and rose again. Our relationship with God is therefore not restored because we finally become impressive enough or get our lives organized enough.

Foundational Truth - We do not come back because we are enough. We come back because Jesus is enough.

Ezra tells the story of God's people returning from exile. Centuries later, Jesus tells another story about returning home. It gives us an incredible picture of God's heart toward people who have wandered.

Real-life Application (5 min)

Maybe you have already taken steps back toward God, but parts of your life still feel like ruins. Ezra 3 reminds us that God does not ask us to pretend those ruins are gone.

You can worship while you are rebuilding. You can pray while you are anxious. You can trust while you still have questions. You can experience joy while you are grieving. You can bring your whole life, including the parts that are unfinished, to God.

The question is not whether everything is fixed. It is whether God is at the center.

Reflection Question Where have you been trying to rebuild something in your life without putting God at the center of it?

Next Steps Challenge (5 min)

The message ends with three questions that give us a practical way to respond.

Where have I been trying to rebuild without worship?

Identify one area where you have been primarily relying on yourself. Instead of immediately trying harder to fix it, begin by intentionally bringing that area before God.

What fear is keeping me from putting God back at the center?

Name the fear honestly. Naming fear does not automatically remove it, but it can help us recognize when fear has been controlling our decisions.

What rhythm of worship do I need to reorient?

Do not attempt to overhaul your entire spiritual life this week. Choose one sustainable rhythm. It might involve prayer, Scripture, generosity, serving, Sabbath, gratitude, gathering with other believers, or simply approaching something you already do with a renewed desire to honor God.

Personal Challenge

What is one worshipful rhythm you will intentionally begin, restore, or reorient this week?

Prayer Time (10 min)

Worship and Rebuilding Prayer

Begin by thanking God that He meets us before everything in our lives has been repaired. Ask Him to reveal where you have been trying to rebuild without Him at the center and where fear may be influencing your choices.

Pray for those who are carrying grief, anxiety, disappointment, or uncertainty. Ask God to help the group understand that worship does not require pretending those emotions are absent. Pray for courage to trust God while fear is still present and for wisdom to establish healthy rhythms that continually reorient life around Him.

Finally, thank Jesus that our ability to return to God does not depend upon our ability to make ourselves worthy. Thank Him for making the way through His death and resurrection.

Quiet Prayer

"God, what have I been trying to rebuild without You at the center?"

"What rhythm of worship are You inviting me to begin again?"

(continued)

Deeper Dive - Character Study

David: Worship When Life Is Not Fixed

Primary Scripture: 1 Samuel 21-24; Psalm 34; Psalm 57

Overview

David is remembered as a king, but some of his most meaningful worship came before he ever sat securely on the throne.

David knew what it was like to live in uncertainty. Saul wanted him dead, so David fled from place to place. He left familiar surroundings, hid in caves, depended upon others for help, and lived with an uncertain future.

Yet some of the Psalms connected with these seasons are filled with worship.

David did not wait until Saul stopped pursuing him or until his circumstances became safe before turning his attention toward God. Like the returning exiles in Ezra 3, David learned to worship while his surroundings still looked like ruins.

Key Moment 1: David Worships While Afraid

Read Psalm 34:1-8

Psalm 34 comes from a season when David was in serious danger. His praise does not come from an easy or comfortable chapter of his life.

David acknowledges his fears while also describing how he sought God in the middle of them. His worship does not deny the danger. Instead, worship redirects his attention toward the character of God.

Discuss

- What do you notice about David's worship when you consider the circumstances surrounding it?
- What is the difference between saying "I'm not afraid" and saying "I'm afraid, but I'm choosing to trust God"?

Key Moment 2: David Worships From a Cave

Read Psalm 57:1-5

The introduction to Psalm 57 connects it to David fleeing from Saul into a cave. The cave was not the fulfillment of God's promises for David. It was a hiding place in the middle of the story.

Yet David speaks about God's mercy, protection, faithfulness, and glory while he is still there.

Discuss

- Why is it tempting to postpone worship until circumstances improve?
- What does David seem to know about God that allows him to worship before his situation changes?
- Where might you currently be waiting for circumstances to improve before fully trusting God?

Key Truth - Worship does not require us to be at the end of the story.

Key Moment 3: David Refuses to Let Fear Determine His Actions

Read 1 Samuel 24:1-7

David has an opportunity to kill Saul and potentially end the threat against his life. Instead, David refuses to take control through an action he believes would dishonor God.

This is worship beyond music. David reorients his decision around what honors God rather than simply doing what would make his life easier.

Discuss

- How does David's decision fit the message's definition of worship?
- Where are we most tempted to compromise God's ways when doing so appears to solve an immediate problem?

Key Moment 4: David Brings His Whole Heart to God

David's Psalms include praise, confidence, fear, grief, frustration, questions, and hope. He does not appear to believe that worship requires presenting God with only the pleasant parts of his emotional life.

That connects directly with Ezra 3. The joyful shouting and the weeping both become part of the sound rising from God's people.

Discuss

1. Why do you think God included prayers containing such strong emotions in Scripture?
 2. Are there emotions you find difficult to bring honestly to God?
 3. Where do you currently have joy and grief existing at the same time?
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Key Takeaways

David's life reminds us that worship is not reserved for seasons when everything makes sense. We can bring fear, grief, uncertainty, and unanswered questions into God's presence rather than waiting for those emotions to disappear.

His story also reinforces the message's larger definition of worship. Worship happens when we orient our lives around God, including our decisions, reactions, priorities, and fears. David's circumstances were often outside his control, but he could still choose what would occupy the center of his life.

Additional Scriptures for Further Study

Psalm 13

David moves honestly through questions and grief toward trust in God's faithful love.

Psalm 42:1-11

The writer openly acknowledges discouragement while continuing to place hope in God.

Habakkuk 3:17-19

Habakkuk chooses to rejoice in God even while describing devastating circumstances.

Romans 12:1-2

Paul expands worship beyond a particular place or song and describes offering our entire lives to God.

Hebrews 13:15-16

Praise, doing good, and sharing with others are all described in the language of sacrifice.