



God Brings His People Home

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Worshiping God should be the first priority of His people.


In Irish mythology, the Hill of Uisneach in County Westmeath is believed to be the center of Ireland and is designated as a “Thin Place” on the Irish countryside. “Thin Places” are said to be geographic locations where the eternal world and the physical world meet and mingle.¹ The concept of “Thin Places” finds its origins in the Celtic culture of the fifth century A.D. Mystical travelers come from all over the world to visit this hill, assuming they will encounter a divine presence there.

As Christians, we don’t believe in mystic forces of divinity emanating from a goddess’s burial ground. But we do believe that God draws near to us in worship. There is a sense in which the metaphor of a “thin place” helps us see the beauty of biblical worship—as we become aware of God’s presence and attentive to His Word. In the story of the Jewish people’s return to Jerusalem after a time of exile, we are reminded of how important it was for the Jews of the day to worship in a particular place.

 **Voices from the Church**

“The primary reason the church gathers is to glorify God. We gather together for corporate worship to ascribe unto God the worship that is due Him.”²

–Matt Boswell

 Name a place—perhaps a building or a location—where you had a powerful spiritual experience with God. What does that place represent for you today?

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

1. God keeps His promise to bring His people home (Ezra 1:1-8).

¹ In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:

² “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴ And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”

⁵ Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem. ⁶ And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. ⁷ Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. ⁸ Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.

Jeremiah’s prophecy, referred to in verse 1, fulfilled by Cyrus, comes from an often quoted passage: “For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jer. 29:10-11; see also 25:11-14)

In contemporary Christianity, the latter verse is often used to encourage individual believers with the reality that God’s sovereign hand holds their future. In context, this passage is far more meaningful than simply a message for the individual because it depicts God’s faithfulness to the whole Israelite community.

Ultimately, God’s plan here results in the Messiah, and through His resurrection will come the redemption of all that was lost in the fall of Genesis 3. The same God who kept His promise to Israel is the God who protects our future.

 Looking at Ezra 1:1-8, how did God orchestrate the events in order to bring about the people’s return from exile?

 In what ways have you witnessed God using even non-believers to accomplish His purposes?

In response to God fulfilling His promise, these verses record that the natural response to God is the cheerful giving of one’s possessions to the Lord (vv. 5-8). The people’s joyful response recorded in Ezra 1 intersects with a larger biblical idea of giving our firstfruits to God. This is a farming illustration that acknowledges an important truth: the land and all it produces belong to God; we are simply stewards. As stewards of what is already His, God’s people joyfully and strategically give of the resources they are called to oversee for the furtherance of God’s kingdom mission.

Voices from the Church

“It is only when we grasp God’s unyielding desire to be *with* us that we begin to see the ultimate purpose of the cross. It is more than a vehicle to rescue us from death; it transports us into the arms of Life.”³

–Skye Jethani



How should our stewardship habits change when we acknowledge that everything is the Lord's and is to be used for His purposes?


2. God's people gather to make worship their first priority (Ezra 3:1-7).

¹ When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. ² Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. ³ They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. ⁴ And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, ⁵ and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD. ⁶ From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid. ⁷ So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

An easily overlooked detail in verse 2 is that the Israelites worshiped according to the law of Moses. The Law (the first five books of the Bible) gave God's people clear warnings against worshiping Him like the surrounding nations worshiped their gods (ex. Deut. 12:30-31).

One purpose of upholding the law was to make Israel into a community that stood in contrast to those surrounding them. The contrast was not intended to create an unhealthy distance from Israel's neighbors but to demonstrate the better way of the Lord.

In the Christian life, the Adversary works incrementally to draw God's people away from faithfulness to Him. If Christians are not careful, we can slowly begin distorting the values of the kingdom by blending in with the surrounding culture. In order to remain faithful in our worship to God, we must continually renew our minds to His ways and to His plan.

 What are some aspects of Christian worship that differ from worship in other religions?

 Why is it important that Christianity not blend in with the surrounding culture?

A theme in Ezra 3:5-7 that is consistent with 1:1-8 is the gladness God's people had that overflowed into giving to the Lord. The true worshiper is not miserly in their worship of God.⁴ If we find it hard to incorporate giving as an integral part of worship, it is probably because we are treasuring God's gifts more than God Himself.

Likewise, we have a tendency to cling to the process or rituals of worship and not to the God whom we worship. In these verses, the sacrificial system is reinstated, yet the temple remained unfinished. Since the temple had been destroyed, they rediscovered the ever-present nature of God and the appropriate value of the temple as a means of worship.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

8. Preservation of Scripture

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



What does your worship through giving say about your love and devotion to God?



How might our traditions of worship overtake our focus on the God we are worshiping?

3. God's people proclaim the goodness of the Lord (Ezra 3:8-13).

⁸ Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the LORD. ⁹ And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers.

¹⁰ And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. ¹¹ And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD,

“For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. ¹² But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³ so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.

A variety of worship forms can be observed in this scene. We read of God's people declaring His goodness through liturgy (v. 11), playing instruments (v. 10), and shouts of praise (vv. 11-13) and weeping (vv. 12-13).

The worship forms in these verses demonstrate different ways of worshiping that engage various parts of our being as humans. In church life, the tendency is for believers to quarantine themselves from others who participate in biblical worship in different ways. Typically, local church bodies tend toward a certain type of worship expression and have a tendency to caricature those who worship differently. The beauty is that these differences within the body are present so we can learn to express our love to God more robustly because we have learned from our brothers and sisters.

 What caricatures have you encountered regarding other worship styles?

 What do you learn from people who worship differently than you do?

Another catalyst for diversity in worship is that the Lord brings people to Himself from various life circumstances. Verses 12-13 describe the worship event as a gathering of all ages, and the partial construction of the temple provoked unique responses from different age groups.

Together, young people and old lifted praises to God with various expressions and from different stages of life. They produced a unified sound that glorified the Lord and could be heard from far away (v. 13). Worship of God is mission-focused in nature; the sight and sound of God's people unified in all their diversity, celebrating His faithfulness in distinct ways, impacted the people that surrounded Israel. God's people united in proclaiming the goodness of God is a powerful witness to the world.

 What are some ways God has been good to you and your church?

Conclusion

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

In light of God's revelation in the Book of Ezra, the "Thin Place" metaphor we mentioned at the start of this session is problematic. Still, there is a sense in which we who have the Spirit of God dwelling within us are to be "thin places" through whom God can make known His presence to others. Worship stands at the crossroads of the Christian's twofold calling to love the Lord our God and to love our neighbor via the demonstration of His goodness. God calls the believer to make worship the first priority, no matter where He sends us or what the cost, so that others will see the goodness of the Lord Jesus Christ and join us in the worship of our God.

Voices from the Church

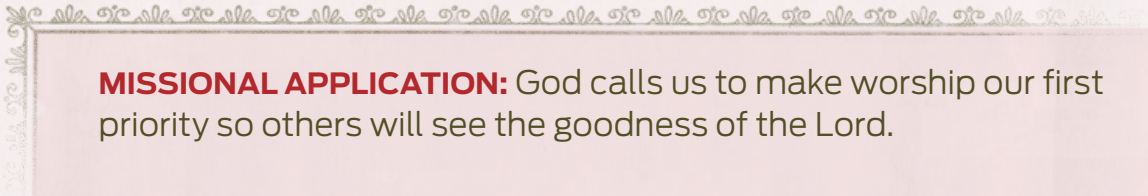
"To be sure, God makes His presence known in a particular way when we are quiet and alone. But God also makes His presence known when His people build houses for the homeless in His name. And God makes His presence known when a Sunday school teacher loves a bunch of rowdy three-year-old boys. And God makes His presence known when somebody extends a word of sympathy to a colleague who is going through hard times. And God makes His presence known when a boss offers grace to somebody who messed up on the job."⁵

—Mark D. Roberts

CHRIST CONNECTION: God kept His promise to bring His people out of exile in Babylon and restore their freedom to worship Him. Since Adam and Eve sinned, all humans have been in exile from the garden and are in need of deliverance. Jesus came to end this exile, bring His people home, and restore our freedom to worship.



HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION



MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to make worship our first priority so others will see the goodness of the Lord.

1. What has God given you to be a steward of, and how can you leverage those resources for God's redemptive mission of making Jesus known?

2. Identify an upcoming situation in which you can testify to someone of the goodness of God. How can your group pray specifically for you in this?

3. How might we as a group incorporate regular times of praise and thanksgiving for God's specific blessings?



God Sustains Us Through Adversity

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God will sustain His people through adversity and is able to change the attitude of His opponents so His will can be accomplished.

Established in 1630, Boston, Massachusetts, was not designed for the automobile. To deal with the traffic congestion in Boston’s tangled streets, planning for the construction of the Central Artery/Tunnel Project (more commonly known as the “Big Dig”) began in 1982. The Big Dig was the most costly freeway project in United States history. Its construction was hindered by a number of setbacks, including rising costs, leaks in tunnels, design flaws, poor project execution, indictments for using substandard materials, criminal arrests, and most tragically, a death. In the end, despite the political, social, and economic difficulties that surrounded the project, the officials kept the goal of unclogging Boston’s roadways as their chief objective, and at great cost, the project was completed.

The “traffic crisis” in metropolitan Boston shows us just how hard it is to work through various avenues to construct something of value. Problems and setbacks occur regularly in this kind of work.

? When have you been involved in building or constructing something—either literally (a building, car, etc.) or metaphorically (a company, a ministry, etc.)? What problems did you encounter in the process?

The exiles had returned to their homeland, but this was only the beginning of the rebuilding process. As they obeyed God in restoring the temple, they faced opposition and adversity. By choosing to listen to God's Word and not the opposition, they were able to complete the work God called them to and celebrate His work through them. As God's people today, we are called to remain faithful to the task God has laid before us and to trust Him to transform hearts and lives, no matter what adversity we encounter.



Voices from Church History

"A good man is neither puffed up by fleeting success nor broken by adversity...The tide of trouble will test, purify, and improve the good, but beat, crush, and wash away the wicked."¹

—Augustine (354-430)

1. Expect opposition when obeying God (Ezra 4:1-7).

¹ *Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, ² they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' houses and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here."³ But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses in Israel said to them, "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us."*

⁴ *Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build⁵ and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.*

⁶ *And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.*

⁷ *In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated.*

The adversaries of the Jews banded together to oppose the people and prevent them from building the temple. It is important to note that these "adversaries" may have first offered their help with good intentions. Their statement "for we worship your God as you do" was true, but their worship was in addition to the false gods in their pantheon. In other words, they claimed to worship God *alongside* all the false gods of the region.

The Jews' exclusive claim to constructing the temple was a declaration that the Lord alone was God and no other "god" would be worshiped within this new structure (Ezra 4:3). This is the same exclusive claim that Christians make when we declare, "Christ is Lord!" (Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11).

In a society where tolerance and openness are seen as absolute values, Christians face the ever-present danger of compromise. We are pressured to minimize the differences between Christianity and other faiths, as if all religious beliefs are basically the same. But this jumbled thinking within society provides an opportunity for us Christians to do two things simultaneously: 1) uphold clear, biblical teaching, and 2) demonstrate our love for those we believe to be in error.



What kind of opposition or adversity comes against obedient Christians today?



What should we learn from the Jews' response to their opposition?

When the Israelites stood for the purity of their religion, they provoked outright opposition from their adversaries (Ezra 4:4-7). Notice the ripple effect as the personal discouragement and fear escalated to systemic oppression—community leaders were bribed into frustrating the work on the temple.

When enduring trials of various kinds, God's people must hold two ideas in tension: 1) this world in its present state is not our ultimate home (1 Pet. 2:11), and 2) we are ambassadors of peace in this world. The guarantee that Christ will ultimately reverse the brokenness of the fall (Gen. 3; Rev. 21:1-2) is not a "green light" to disengage from the world. As Christ's ambassadors, we must faithfully bear witness to God's kingdom.



Voices from Church History

"Our motto must continue to be 'perseverance'; and ultimately I trust the Almighty will crown our efforts with success."²

—William Wilberforce
(1759-1833)



What kind of opposition or adversity do you think is most likely to cause Christians to waver in their beliefs today?

2. Listen to God's Word, not opposing voices (Ezra 5:1-5).

As we pick up the story, we fast forward through history and discover that the rebuilding of the temple had been impeded and stopped for about 16 years.



¹ Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. ² Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

³ At the same time Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus: "Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?" ⁴ They also asked them this: "What are the names of the men who are building this building?" ⁵ But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.

God used two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to rebuke and exhort God's people who were in desperate need of encouragement. The prophets' mission was "to bring about spiritual renewal and to motivate the people to restore proper worship of the Lord."³ (The teaching ministries of both prophets are recorded in the prophetic books that bear their names.)

One stern criticism of the prophets concerned the people's priorities. Haggai admonished the people for their neglect of God's house because their attention had shifted away from the things of God to their own personal well-being. In essence, Haggai lamented that the people lived in fine homes while the temple lay in ruins (Hag. 1:3-6). When spiritual apathy sets in, the pendulum can easily swing from making a God-honoring home to an unhealthy pursuit of acquiring creature comforts that consume God's people more than a passion for His mission.

? What are the signs of spiritual apathy?

? What role does Scripture play in awakening us to God's call on our lives? To reorienting our priorities?

As we see the opposition to the Jews recorded in Ezra 5:3-5, we learn how important it is to be attuned to God's Word when we encounter words of discouragement. We must cultivate disciplines that focus God's people upon His words and not the words of the opposition.

True to His word, God continued to work, even in spite of the danger of sending the builders' names to Darius (v. 5). God even worked through a communication delay to fulfill His purposes (a simple report would have taken 4-5 months to reach King Darius). Although Tattenai could have stopped the work during the correspondence with the king, Ezra highlighted God's intervention that allowed the work to continue.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

4. Inerrancy of Scripture

Inerrancy refers to the belief that the Scripture is completely truthful, without any mixture of error, in all its teachings, no matter what subject it addresses. Believing the Scriptures to be inerrant does not preclude the biblical authors' inclusion of observations from a human observer, the use of round numbers, unusual grammatical constructions, or varying perspectives on a particular event. It does mean, however, that Scripture is an infallible guide to salvation and that it is truthful in all that it affirms (Matt. 5:18; John 10:35; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18).



What are some common forms of opposition to Christians in other parts of the world? What does opposition look like in our culture?



How does Scripture strengthen us to face opposition?

3. Celebrate God's transforming work in others (Ezra 6:13-22).

¹³ Then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered. ¹⁴ And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia; ¹⁵ and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.

¹⁶ And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. ¹⁷ They offered at the dedication of this house of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. ¹⁸ And they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their divisions, for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses.

¹⁹ On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. ²⁰ For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. ²¹ It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel. ²² And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

On March 12, 515 B.C., the celebration began—4 years after the work was renewed (Hag. 1:15), and 20 years after the rebuilding efforts began (Ezra 3:8). The completion of the second temple occurred just over 70 years after Solomon’s temple was destroyed in 586 B.C.

The celebrations that followed the construction of the temple were a vital part of living as the people of God; they were occasions of fellowship, worship, and of glorifying God. These events bound the community together and enabled them to understand the purpose and history of their community.⁴ In essence, these days of celebration helped God’s people remember His saving acts from generation to generation.

Voices from the Church

“What you celebrate, you become...People are drawn to organizations and events that are focused on something that they see as essential.”⁵

—Ed Stetzer

 How have you sought to integrate your Christian faith into life’s celebrations?

 What have you set up as a visible witness to God’s goodness in your life?

The apex of this chapter is the reinstatement of the Passover (Ezra 6:19). One effect of properly worshiping the Lord is that the celebration draws onlookers who may also become worshipers. Verse 21 demonstrates that there were Jews living in Judah who were not exiled. These Jewish people had assimilated into the godless, non-Jewish culture around them. The celebration and the excitement of the returned exiles, however, drew them back to worship the one true God of Israel.

These native Jewish people “separated [themselves] from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land” and began seeking the Lord (v. 21). The returned exiles were able to celebrate not only the completion of the temple but also the divinely instituted change in King Darius and the return of wayward Israelites to the proper worship of God.



What role does celebration have in our evangelism?

Conclusion

Believers can rest on the truth that God will see His plan come to fruition. He will sustain His people during times of adversity.

What's more, we know we have a God who did not exclude Himself from facing opposition and adversity. Christ faced temptation and opposition as He obeyed the Father in all things.

Now, through Christ's example and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to obey God no matter what circumstances or trials we face. God calls believers to continue in obedience despite the words of our opponents and to trust Him to change the hearts and minds of those who oppose Him and our faith.



Voices from Church History

"Suppose a number of persons were to take it into their heads that they had to defend a lion. There he is in the cage, and here come all the soldiers of the army to fight for him. Well, I should suggest to them that they should kindly stand back, open the door, and let the lion out! I believe that would be the best way of defending him. And the best 'apology' for the gospel is to let the gospel out."⁶

—Charles Spurgeon
(1834-1892)

CHRIST CONNECTION: Just as God's people faced opposition as they sought to worship God with their obedience, Jesus faced temptation and opposition as He obeyed His Father in all things. Through Jesus' endurance in ministry, we are empowered to obey God no matter what circumstances or trials we face.



HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to continue in obedience, despite the words of our opponents, and to trust Him to change the hearts and minds of those who oppose our faith.

1. How can we as a group or church support one another in the face of opposition from our community, society, and world?

2. What are some ways we can represent Christ well as we continue in obedience despite opposition (see 1 Pet. 3:8-18)?

3. How can we celebrate benchmarks in God's mission in such a way that draws people to God?
