

Series:	Reference:	Title:	Date:
Nehemiah, Healthy Walls	Nehemiah 8	Worship at the Water Gate	6.25.17
<b>Website Writeup:</b>			

Just two chapters before these people had been enslaving one another & exacting usury over the vulnerable. Now they're unified & gathered at the Water Gate, hungry & thirsty for the Word of God. God has waited patiently for this moment as He has pursued his people through this process! What an encouraging picture chapter 8 of Nehemiah is, let's look together!

## Color Changes in text indicate slide changes

### UPG Prayer of the Day...

The Besemah of Indonesia are an energetic and enthusiastic people of 740,000 with only a handful of believers among them. On the Besemah plateau, there are 26 historical sites that have been considered holy since before 100 A.D. Enormous stones were sculpted into amazing forms such as soldiers riding elephants, a man wrestling with a snake monster, and ocean waves. Although Muslim, the Besemah still use these large statues as places for making sacred pledges, calling out to their ancestors' spirits to give blessings, and for protection from misfortune.

### Sermon...

Today we want to march into one of the most exciting chapters of this book, chapter 8. I got especially excited preparing this, since it's so relevant to our current situation. I hope you do as well. Let's start with verse 1 of Nehemiah 8...

*'all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.*

Construction's finished, re-instruction commences with enthusiasm - a buzz in the crowd. They'd been in captivity, returned to Jerusalem under Ezra's lead, but years had gone by; people daily walking to work, or the neighbors house, past the rubble of the walls & gates in ruin! They'd lost the practice of their communal faith to some extent. But now...they walk by a newly constructed wall or pass through gates repaired! The satisfaction must've been overwhelming - there's something to be said for good hard work & the spirituality of it! They're being renewed by the leadership of a few very godly people. Nehemiah had put Godly men of integrity & passion in places of leadership.

A few years ago, Chilean miners were trapped underground for over two months in a collapse. Imagine the separation they experienced hopelessly sensing their mortality. Starved for the light of day, the touch of their wife or kids, to hear a voice, to be able to embrace someone, to sleep in their own home, to hear their daughters, sons & wives tell them about their day. After the extraction, imagine, every once in a while in their homes, the quiet moments when they just embrace giving thanks for life & relationship.

We watched them being brought up on the news, in a little vehicle designed to fit down a narrow tube. As soon as they emerged...overwhelming joy, hugs, kisses, & questions galore - at first they just wanted to embrace their loved ones & then when home they probably wanted to talk; to hear everything that had happened. In a way, this is the moment the Israelites are experiencing with God now; they're being brought back up into God's presence, just so glad to be in the light again, probably overwhelmed at the brightness, to embrace him once more, to hear his voice. It almost doesn't even matter what's said, just that they can embrace God again. I think it was George Bernard Shaw who said, "*No nation has ever survived the death of its gods.*" But Israel's god wouldn't die! He's the one true God always drawing them back!

One vehicle God used to bring them back up from darkness & into His presence was leadership of passion & integrity. The effect this leadership had on their spiritual lives was evident - they're HUNGRY for God to speak! It's an impromptu gathering - all together, at once, they gather at the Water Gate as one man - remember that Gate's a symbol of God's Word, the Living Water of the Word, which is Jesus; the one who came to fulfill the Word of God! And notice what they do, they gather & THE PEOPLE request a reading of the Law of God! They're hungry to be fed! How encouraging that must be for leadership to have these people starving to hear the Word of the Lord!

We too need to gather to worship at the Water Gate! Asking ourselves, do we worship with such hunger? Desiring to hear God speak & ingest his Word? In one of my quiet times last week I studied Hebrews 5 where it says...

*11-14I have a lot more to say about this, but it is hard to get it across to you since you've picked up this bad habit of not listening. By this time you ought to be teachers yourselves, yet here I find you need someone to sit down with you and go over the basics on God again, starting from square one—baby's milk, when you should have been on solid food long ago!*

Many of us in our walks have picked up this bad habit of *not listening*; we grow stagnant as a result. It's not my intention to make you feel badly if you have, but to encourage you - because even when we're not faithful, God is!

A young child listens to his/her father, they hang on dad's every word. Dad can do no wrong, dad hung the moon, dad's superman. Yet, as a child grows into high school age, stereotypically dad becomes the enemy. They no longer listen - no longer want to spend time with dad, or hang on his every word. But, if dad's smart, he waits patiently, lingering in the background of his child's life, waiting for them to turn once more to their parent; back to the relationship. My father & I were like that. When I had finally come out of my rebellious years, my father was waiting, still full of wisdom, still patient, still wanting & willing to have a relationship with his son. At that point of my life, I really enjoyed the relationship again. I wanted to hear what he had to say. I wanted to tell him what I was going through. I wanted the give & take of a relationship again. And,

I looked back with regret for the time I had forfeited with him. But he'd never left; always there, ready to lead & guide. I'd been the one to walk away.

Listening has been my catchword for a long time now. I want to listen...to hear the voice of the Spirit, the Word of God again ...and in that pursuit, my prayers have changed; I've gone back to studying more deeply - it's exciting! I no longer babble when I pray, sermonizing to the God of the universe, but spend more time in silence, listening, reading, meditating, hearing - and that's how I lead others now. I urge you, listen well, cultivate an insatiable hunger! Gather, read, listen, grow & fall in love with Jesus again!

*<sup>2</sup> So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men & women & all who were able to understand. <sup>3</sup> He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women & others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.*

The result of this call on Nehemiah, others, and this good leadership had brought people to the place of hunger for their god again. Maybe you beat yourself up because you've not grown in your walk, or struggle with things you should've left behind long ago, still drinking milk, not eating solid food - but maybe it's not *all* your fault? Maybe you've not been challenged well, taught well, been instructed & led well? Maybe it's more about the community than you as an individual? A culture of discipleship is important since God works through others. Possibly you've been under a leadership which is lacking? But it also may be that the leadership has been there, but not insatiable in their hunger. Maybe we've picked up the bad habit of not listening. Earthly relationships go both ways, don't they? If I, as Aidan's father, pull away from him, I shouldn't be surprised if he pulls away from me. Yet, Aidan always has the responsibility to engage with me as well. And, God never pulls away from us.

I recently was talking with a person outside of Six:Eight who was asking my opinion on an issue I considered basic to faith. He explained he was on the verge of making a large decision about his life which was clearly contrary to the Scriptures. We talked. I explained the 'why' of not doing it from the stand point of holiness & purity based on the Scriptures. This guy had grown up in the church, he should know this, but at the end of it he said to me, "Man, glad I talked to you. I won't do it, but I have to be honest, no one's ever explained it to me like that before." He needed good leadership. Maybe his past leadership had always glossed over the issues, maybe they assumed he knew, maybe they gave pat answers. However, the Gospel never allows us the luxury of passing blame so easily - yes, community matters, leadership matters, but he had always had access to Jesus, and obviously had not hungered after Christ strongly. Someone who's been around the church, been a Christian for years, has lost the luxury of blaming their issues on bad leadership - they have access to the Holy of holies themselves & know it.

Look at the crowd gathered there...all who could understand, men, women, children gathered asking for the Word of God. They listened attentively...attentively is a strong

word - it means their total attention was given to the Word of God. There are so many things which vie for our attention...but the real question is, are we hungry, and in that hunger, will we listen intently? Do we want transformation? Because hunger focuses itself on true nourishment, when you're hungry nothing else gets in the way!

In a separate quiet time I read, John 5:1-6 about the healing at the well. You remember the story, the crippled man sitting there for 38 years trying to get into the healing waters when it was stirred. The belief was that an angel stirred the waters & the first one in the waters would be healed, but he could never get there fast enough. And Jesus comes along & asks that proverbial question, "Do you want to get well?" Great question. One which haunts us all. Do I want to be well? Do I want to be free, not only from my sin, but the residual power of it? I WANT to WANT to get well, but do I really WANT to get well? Am I looking for healing somewhere else when Jesus is standing their able to do so?

The conclusion, it's Jesus who brings that wonderfully joyous conviction I need him & only him - THE Water Gate, THE Living Water! When he comes along asking that question of me, the only answer I can give when confronted with such love & grace is yes! YES, but I can't get into the waters fast enough ("nothing I've trusted in helps anymore!"), help me Jesus! Heal me! And, he says a word, or touches my heart, and does for me what I can't do for myself! There's nothing else I need to bring me healing other than the Living Word of God, found in the Scriptures, found in the Holy Spirit!

*<sup>4</sup> Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.*

*<sup>5</sup> Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. <sup>6</sup> Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands & responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down & worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.*

When the Chilean Miners had been brought up out of darkness, the light was blinding. Likewise, for the Israelites, God's goodness is blinding as they are brought out of their darkness & back into His presence - they can do nothing but fall face down in worship!

Notice the enthusiasm in worship! They're overjoyed at this rebuilding & the life which is welling up in them as they begin again to practice their relationship with God! Again, the question is, do we worship like this when presented with the Word's of God? Leadership can lead us to the Living Water, but they can't force us to drink. God wants relationship. Cheap Grace does nothing, but take - it's a one-sided relationship. *Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing....Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner.*

*Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man' will gladly go and sell all he has. It's the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It's the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it's the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.<sup>1</sup>*

True Grace is two sided, reciprocal. It responds & engages with worship in relationship with God due to his gracious forgiveness towards us. True Grace draws us to gather at the Water Gate & fall in worship before God's goodness. Do we want to be truly healed, or just want to want to be healed? Do we desire cheap or costly grace?

*The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah— instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. <sup>8</sup> They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.*

What is happening is Ezra reads from the platform & all the Levites span out into the crowd, read & explain & everyone discusses what they're hearing - they're having their community groups meetings right there in the square at the Water Gate! Things aren't so different now!

Imagine with your minds eye this congregation of God's Children standing out in the open, in front of their enemies & the whole community, praising God, giving thanks & being re-instructed! What a feeling that must have been! And, on the shoulders of leadership is the task of making the Word clear. We don't always understand everything we read. We need others with years of immersion in the Gospel to help guide us through what we're hearing. We do this for each other. We need to strive to understand what God's saying to us. Romans 15:14 *Instruct one another!* A discipleship culture.

I watch my kids, growing & changing as a young people. There are thousands of contradictory voices competing for their attention & allegiance, that's why the Word of God is so important - to drown out the negative & wrong, allowing God to speak. The more I read, the more I study, the more God speaks. I don't understand everything, but am strengthened! I was reading a few weeks ago about the temple sacrifice; I was struck by how seriously God took sin & the need for blood sacrifice on the Day of Atonement - if I stayed in just that thought I would've been overwhelmed by my own sin & how it separates me from God. But, I relayed that to my friend Keith on the phone, and he said simply, "*Yes, Jason, God does take our sin seriously, but we must remember those sacrifices were put in place to move us to realizing his grace & forgiveness in Christ!*" I knew that...but needed to hear it. He'd re-instructed me.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://caffinatedthoughts.com/2010/06/dietrich-bonhoeffer-cheap-grace-vs-costly-grace/>

*Let's continue: <sup>9</sup> Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest & scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.*

*<sup>10</sup> Nehemiah said, "Go & enjoy choice food & sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." <sup>11</sup> The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."*

I am sure many of you have seen the [YouTube Double Rainbow video](#). Was the guy stoned, or just moved? He claims he wasn't stoned, but he was moved to shouting & tears. Have you ever sang a worship song & just cried? Have you ever read a passage & just wept? Has the Word of God ever just struck your heart to the point of bringing out all that welled up emotion as he cleans you out of guilt & shame? Have you ever felt the cathartic moving of the Spirit when your heart is pricked by the Living Word? I hope so, because this is what's happening here. There's always this strange, deep, but wonderful, sorrow we feel when coming back to God, having his Word fall fresh on us once more. The joy of the Lord IS our strength when we listen. I remember a friend of mine's father weeping in his oxygen tent in the hospital as he listened to a worship song - knowing Jesus was there with him, even in his pain. But, even in that weird point of realizing our sin, our long distance from God, we see him running down the street to his prodigal son or daughter, hiking his robe & embracing us - what follows the sorrow & weeping is a feast! A celebration of reconciliation! God's always about it, pursuing his children & bringing them back to himself - I can't find joy in my separation from Him, but I do find it in the reconciliation he extends to me.

Again, in another quiet time I read Genesis 3, and how God walked in the forest calling for Adam & Eve, and when he finds them what do they say? I was naked & ashamed, so I hid! Years ago, I had a good friend who confronted me with that passage on their living room floor. They were re-instructing me. I was up to my ears in church work, running a business & other things - but they simply read that to me & asked, "*Jason, are you hiding from God?*" I wept, because even in ministry I was hiding. The tears just flowed out of me, it hurt so GOOD, because at that moment, I realized God was calling me back - HE WANTED ME BACK no matter what! There's no shame & guilt before God, Jesus takes that away; no need for hiding. And that's what's happening to these people here, they're realizing how good God is, how he has never walked away from them.

*<sup>12</sup>Then all the people went away to eat & drink, to send portions of food & to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.*

They rejoiced, because now they understood; they understood how much God loved & pursued them! Notice, just two chapters ago Nehemiah was confronting this same

people about usury & enslaving each other - look at the effect the Word of God has on them - they've been transformed & are now taking care of each other!

So, in conclusion: Will we gather & worship with passion at the Water Gate? What is it in your life you need to do to move towards God, to practice a relationship with Jesus again? He's waiting, patiently, graciously, lovingly, wanting relationship with his children. True grace, not cheap grace...

Do you need to make the decision to give him the first fruits of your time? Do you need to confess something to him? Do you need to come out of the bushes & say, "I was naked & ashamed so I hid"? Because we must remember, our sin doesn't break our relationship with God, but it does clog the pipes.

When I was a teenager, I lived in my father's house, his household had standards. To live in an open trusting relationship with him I had to abide by those things, since they were good for me - his standards actually brought me freedom & prosperity. However, *I chose* not to follow them. It was my choice which clogged our relationship. He didn't kick me out, or stop loving me. He was patient & forgiving, waiting for me to learn the lessons of life & come back into relationship with him again - during that time I always had my home with him. God's the same way. Renewal often means confession & repentance, turning away from those things which clog our relationship & turning back to practicing our relationship with God. He sustains you while he waits for you. Let the Joy of the Lord be our strength!

Are you having a daily quiet time? At one time I'd been doing my quiet times together with a small group of men. It was really helpful & I wanted to take the liberty of buying everyone a Lectio Divina Journal, similar to what I did with those men, so that you may do it as well either by yourself, or with one or more people. This is just one good model of a quiet time you can use.

### **Community Group Leader Questions:**

1. Email your groups ahead of time & prompt them to bring the Lectio Divina Journals with them to group. Hopefully they will arrive in the mail before Sunday. If not, or if someone doesn't have one, I've prepared a few below with directions starting on p8 of this sermon to use in group. Passages are on p9. Make sure everyone is clear on the directions for Lectio Divine - go through them before you start!
2. Do the Lectio Divina Journal passage together for that day, pray & share your thoughts together. If they've already done that day, have them do one I prepared below.
3. Share any other Lectio Divina moments from days prior - prepare them beforehand to come with what they've heard from the Holy Spirit via their devotions in their journals.

## Lectio Divina

This is an effort to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you via the Word of God. It is a quiet, and solemn time. Prayer during this should be more about listening, and reflecting on what the HS reveals to us through the reading. Do your best to follow the directions well even if it feels strange.

- Begin with this opening prayer such as the one below; pray slowly, thinking about what you are asking (**1 Minute**)
  - “Heavenly Father, who caused the Holy Scriptures to be written for my learning, growth, and intimacy with you, grant me now favor as I open your Word. Cause your Holy Spirit to come, fill me, and speak as I willingly listen. Come Holy Spirit, come, reveal your Truth to me, your child. In the name of our Savior and Lord, Jesus, I pray, amen.”
- In an attitude of prayer read slowly the verse or passage, hang on the words, take your time (**1 minute**)
- Still in an attitude of prayer, think about the words or phrases that particularly strike you (**3 minutes**).
- Read the same passage in a different version (you can go to biblegateway.com to get different versions), again slowly, and still in a prayerful attitude (**1 minute**)
- Identify as you think on the passage how it applies or can change your life today - write these thoughts down (**5 minutes**).
- Again, in an attitude of prayer, read the passage a third time again in a different version than the first two (**1 minute**).
- First in thought, then in writing, answer the following question for yourself, *“From what I have heard (and shared if doing this with others), what do I believe God wants me to do or be? Is God inviting me to change in any way?”* (**5-10 minutes**)
- Pray with thanks for what God has said to you for this time and for whatever you think he is telling you to do with it (**5-10 minutes**).
- Close with reciting the Lord’s Prayer, then silence (**3 minutes**).

## 1<sup>st</sup> Choice

### **Genesis 3:8-10 (New International Version)**

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

### **Genesis 3:8-10 (King James Version)**

And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.

### **Genesis 3:8-10 (GOD'S WORD Translation)**

In the cool of the evening, the man and his wife heard the Lord God walking around in the garden. So they hid from the Lord God among the trees in the garden. The Lord God called to the man and asked him, “Where are you?” He answered, “I heard you in the garden. I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.”

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Choice

### **John 5:1-5 (New International Version)**

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

### **John 5:1-6 (King James Version)**

After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had. And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years. When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole?

### **John 5:1-6 (GOD'S WORD Translation)**

Later, Jesus went to Jerusalem for a Jewish festival. Near Sheep Gate in Jerusalem was a pool called *Bethesda* in Hebrew. It had five porches. Under these porches a large number of sick people—people who were blind, lame, or paralyzed—used to lie. One man, who had been sick for 38 years, was lying there. Jesus saw the man lying there and knew that he had been sick for a long time. So Jesus asked the man, “Would you like to get well?”