

<b>Series:</b> Exiles	<b>Reference:</b> Nehemiah 7:1-5; 8:1-8	<b>Title:</b> Worship Again	<b>Date:</b> 11.13.22
<p><b>Website Writeup:</b></p> <p>When Israel returned from exile, they had to relearn how to worship God. Nehemiah had rebuilt the wall in Jerusalem; now it was time to restore worship. In these verses, the exiles are reminded that true worship is both volitional and rooted in deep appreciation of the Scriptures. If we are to worship God as He deserves, then we must consistently open our hearts to hear the Scriptures.</p>			

### Color Changes in text indicate slide changes

Turn with me to the book of Nehemiah, p329 in your pew Bibles. The story of Nehemiah is after Haggai's story we heard a few weeks back of rebuilding the Temple itself. It begins with a dire message from his brother about the state of disrepair in Jerusalem. The effects of the exile had worn down the city & Temple. The walls of Jerusalem had suffered destruction. This left Nehemiah with a broken heart & a clear call which we see in Nehemiah 1:4 when he said...*"When I heard these things, I sat down & wept. For some days I mourned & fasted & prayed before the God of heaven."* They had to rebuild & relearn how to worship God again. So, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem for this purpose. Nehemiah rebuilt the walls & brought the people from despair to a fresh new walk with God by giving them a fresh look at God's Word.

Long before this, King David had been shown Jerusalem to be the place for Temple construction, where God would dwell with His people. A visual reminder of His presence as well as a foreshadowing of the New Testament era when God would dwell in the hearts of people as seen in 1 Corinthians 6:19 which tells us...*your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit...the Church; the living Temple of God.*

After David, and well before Nehemiah, we remember Solomon & the effect of his sin on Israel when the kingdom was split in 931bc; 10 tribes in the north, two in the south [Judah & Benjamin]. These tribes continued in their sin & in 722bc the northern tribes fell to the Assyrians & were assimilated into other cultures. Then in 586bc the tribes in the south fell to the Babylonians. Satan had divided & conquered through the willing sin of Israel. A fulfillment of Deuteronomy chapters 28-30 which speak of the blessings Israel would receive IF she followed God & the curses she'd encounter IF she turned from Him. *Then Deuteronomy 30:1-3 tells us...When all these blessings & curses I have set before you come upon you & you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, <sup>2</sup>and when you & your children return to the LORD your God & obey him with all your heart & with all your soul according to everything I command you today, <sup>3</sup>then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes & have compassion on you & gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you.*

So, due to Israel's stubborn sin & her reluctance to be a witness to these very nations, she'd been scattered among them. Self-focused rather than God-focused. In 539bc when the Medes & Persians conquered Babylon many Jews returned to their homeland, though not all. Then after many years of hardship they succeeded in rebuilding the Temple in 515bc under Zerubbabel. Then in 458bc another group returns to Jerusalem under the lead of Ezra who re-instituted Temple worship reestablishing spiritual life.

Then it was in 444bc when Nehemiah came to Jerusalem to continue this work of rebuilding, particularly the walls & other aspects of the nation of Israel. So, that's where we are, but what's all that tell us?

**It reveals the devastating effect sin has on a community.** Around 500 years of devastation & rebuilding, beginning at least with the sin of one man, Solomon. The scattering of Israel is a visual reminder of a life broken apart by sin - the body separated, unable to support itself, or to heal & minister to its other members. However, God draws people back to Himself & to each other as well - the body of Israel coming together to worship once more is a picture of a person & the Church becoming whole again in Christ.

Before this, in the years 605-562bc, Babylon was at its height of power, and as a result Jerusalem & its Temple were destroyed with its people deported from Judea. The rise of Babylon & the decline of Jerusalem give us a picture of sin poisoning God's kingdom peace. **Under leaders like Nehemiah, the people were called back to God, but...back doesn't mean backward.**

Remember, Eccl 7:10 says...*"Do not say, 'Why were the old days better than these?'"* We tend to look back on history through rose colored glasses disregarding the sin of our past. We say, "We have to get back to God." To return to some *better time*, back to a time we enjoyed, or made us feel comfortable & safe during a particular period. But maybe a time when we *mistakenly assumed* we were following God. But, if we're honest, we emerge from checkered pasts. Some things we may advocate getting back to, aren't things to which we *should* return. Back to God can't mean backwards, rather it's going forward in Him, returning to His original call in a new context, repenting of past sin, allowing Him to purify us for future ministry.

For Israel going back to life before would be going back to the sin which caused dispersion in the first place - what they needed to get back to was truly worshipping God in obedience which comes through faith in His Word, not to what they were before. We must move forward progressing in our understanding of what it truly means to worship. A difficult thing, since in our faltering walk with God, we battle old thoughts & patterns.

We are *Palimpsests*...Palimpsests were Roman waxed tablets on which they'd scratch a message then smooth it out & use it again. But often there was still a remnant of the old writing on the tablet. Likewise, we never come with a blank slate, there's always something about our past, or better said, our fleshly selves bleeding through. God writes a new identity on our hearts in Christ, but there's something written on us from before which needs to be addressed. The old tapes which play in our heads about self & others. "You'll never measure up!" "God can't use you, look how you just acted!" "She'll never change!" Tapes playing silently in our heads holding us back, undermining relationships & impeding worship.

Like Israel, we only see backward; it's difficult to look forward in faith to newness in Christ. Remnant effects of past sin still scribbled on our lives under the surface we

constantly recite to ourselves. Yet, in Christ, we're fully redeemed. God doesn't see the scribble underneath. He sees Christ's Righteousness on us - but we have a hard time seeing ourselves in that way. A hard time acting in faith & giving up fear. So, we hold onto that which comforts us, maybe we don't really believe we've been restored - but in Christ the old has gone, the new has come. You are a child. A son or daughter of God, co-heirs with Christ!

Jesus got frustrated with His disciples, not because they were incapable. If that were so, He'd just recruit capable ones. Rather, He knew they were capable in Him, but they didn't get it. It wasn't their failure per se, it's that they didn't realize who they were in Christ & live out of it. Jesus makes you capable because of His perfect record laid upon you! He chose us, not because we're gifted, better than, or more faithful than the next, rather because He transforms us! But it seems too good to be true, so we seek identity everywhere but in Him, which shuts down worship. We achieve, push, perform, shop, work out & try to accomplish great things, longing to smooth out our broken image & erase the lines of our past. To create identity when it's already been given in Christ - the old self gone, the new self reborn in Christ...I don't have to do, prove, achieve, or accomplish anything. I'm totally accepted & forgiven - nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ! When God the Father looks on me, He sees the perfect record of God the Son & then I can embrace Zephaniah 3:17...*The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.*" The beginning & heart of true worship.

Jerusalem, gates & walls in disrepair, lay bare to her enemies, vulnerable, unprotected, no defense. Open to hurt & misery. We live in a world where people live with broken down walls, exposed to hurt & worship is impeded as we fight unnecessary battles. But God repairs & renews, just as He did with His people then. Writing over all the past scribble, restoring order, peace, unity & worship. The lesson of Nehemiah is this, we need God to do for us what we can't do for ourselves. To repair, bringing recovery & healing - to believe when He says we're a new creation. But it takes recognition & repentance to experience it; a prayerful worshipful heart.

Read along with me in Nehemiah 7:1-5...*After the wall had been rebuilt & I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers, the musicians & the Levites were appointed. <sup>2</sup>I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity & feared God more than most people do. <sup>3</sup>I said to them, "The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors & bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts & some near their own houses."*

*<sup>4</sup>Now the city was large & spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt. <sup>5</sup>So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials & the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return...*

Then go to Nehemiah 8:1-8...*all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. 2So 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. 3He 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.*

*4Ezra the teacher of the Law 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 & Meshullam. 5Ezra 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. 6Ezra 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. 7The 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. 8They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear & giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.*

With the wall rebuilt, it was time to restore worship which for them was both volitional & rooted in a deep appreciation of the Scriptures. If we're to worship God, we must consistently open our hearts to receive Scripture as true for us. He initiates a turn back to the Lord by calling for worship fostered by reading a list of people who'd returned from the exile in 7:6-65, stirring the hearts of the people because it spoke of God's provision & deliverance.

As they prepared to worship, people gave to the work of the Temple so worship could begin again. They gather & are read the Law by Ezra. Each scene in chapters 7-10 captures the essence of a community learning to worship God again as God had moved to rebuild the Temple & walls for protection to foster this. **In Christ our whole self also has been fully restored due to His work on the cross! We reside under His protection with the Holy Spirit as our seal - we're the Temple now. It's a scene of covenant renewal & the beauty of it is, the people called for it - they arrived in unity "as one" to worship.**

A critical part of worship is the willingness of people to come & intentionally listen with open hearts. As the people stood, Ezra read the Law from a platform & the people listened attentively (8:2-4). They were reminded once again of the power of God's Word & His commands. Not some new manifesto, but the foundational articles of faith full of divine authority laid down at Exodus. In our context, when the Gospel, which originated back in Genesis, is spoken over us & it's receive by faith, the Lord declares us righteous in Christ! If you had lived in Medieval England, and the King stepped out of the palace one morning & declared a criminal free, and that all his crimes were absolved, and is under His personal protection. That everyone is to receive this man as totally innocent.

That would be it, everyone would have to treat him that way. The same's true of us, the old has gone, the new has come - owning that, worship flows naturally as God becomes central. Worship flowing in continual prayer & thanksgiving.

Symbolizing God as central now, they met in the heart of the city (8:3). Ezra & other men led the reading of the Law & explained what they were reading. Others moved among the people explaining the meaning of the texts (8:7). We need our teachers & shepherds to remind & encourage. Hebrews 2:1 says...*"We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away."*

"From now on, the Jews would be predominantly 'the people of a book'. At the dedication of Solomon's Temple there'd been glory & beauty, natural & supernatural, to overwhelm the worshippers. Here the focus...was a scroll - or more exactly, what was written in it. Its' opening brought the people to their feet."<sup>1</sup> The people celebrated God by proclaiming His Word as true, then falling facedown to worship flowing from gratitude of God's promises (8:6).

When preaching Scripture is at the heart of community, God moves. In one story, Benjamin Franklin didn't much agree with George Whitefield, an itinerant preacher. But upon hearing him preach Ben Franklin wrote this...*"I happened soon after to attend one of his sermons in the course of which I perceived he intended to finish with the collection. And I silently resolved, 'He should get nothing from me.' I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, 3 or 4 silver dollars, and 5 Spanish gold coins. As he proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that & determined me to give the silver. And he finished so admirably that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collector's dish. Coppers, silver, gold & all."*<sup>2</sup> Franklin was moved by the preaching of God's Word to give all he had that day.

To be open to the worship of which we're called, there must be ongoing soul care. In addressing Luke 10:27...*'Love the Lord your God with all your heart & with all your soul & with all your strength & with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'*, Dallas Willard says, "This commandment doesn't so much tell us what we must do, as what we must cultivate in the care of our souls. This is true for all believers... Our high calling & sacrificial service can find adequate support only in a personality totally saturated with God's kind of love."<sup>3</sup> Willard explains how this process works by focusing on practicing the presence of God. He said, *"The good tree,"* Jesus said, *"bears good fruit"* (Matt. 7:17). *If we tend to the tree, the fruit will take care of itself."*

We can't just act as if we love God with our whole beings & our neighbors as ourselves. Without the love of God indwelling us, that would be an impossible burden making us angry & hopeless. This divine love is, in the words of Jesus, "a well of water springing up

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 116

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/podcasts/5-minutes-in-church-history-with-stephen-nichols/ben-chimes-in-on-george>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/individual/personal-soul-care>

to eternal life” (John 4:14). And from those possessed of divine love there truly flows “rivers of living water” to a thirsty world (7:38). The quality of our souls will indelibly touch others for good or for ill. So we must never forget, the most important thing happening at any moment, in the midst of all we do, is the kind of person we’re becoming in Christ.

God intends our lives to be a seamless manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). A life of worship. He’s made abundant provision for His indwelling our lives in the here & now. Appropriate attention to the care of our souls through His empowerment will yield this rich spiritual fruit & deliver us from the sad list of “deeds of the flesh” (vv. 19-21). We can be channels of the grace of the risen Christ, and through our ministry Jesus can minister to others. But we must attend to the means of His grace in practical & specific ways to experience His life in & through our lives.

The first & most basic thing we do is to keep Christ at the forefront. David knew this...*“I have set the Lord continually before me; because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; my flesh also will dwell securely”* (Ps. 16:8-9). In that state our minds will return to God as the needle of a compass constantly returns to the north. If God is the great longing of our souls, He’ll become the pole star of our inward beings. *As God said to Joshua...“This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day & night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success”* (Josh. 1:8). Meditation on Him & His Word must be integral to life. As the Living & written Word occupy our minds, we naturally come to love God more because we see, clearly & constantly, how lovely He is.

Worship then becomes our constant undertone. The single most powerful force in completing & sustaining restoration of our whole beings to God. Nothing can inform, guide, and sustain pervasive & radiant goodness in a person other than the true vision of God & the worship which arises from it. Then the power of the indwelling Christ flows from us to others. Then, we’re not just *trying* to worship. It’s not another job we do. It’s one aspect of the gift of “living water” which springs “up to eternal life” (John 4:14; 7:38). *Our part is to turn our minds toward God attending to His graceful actions in our souls. Then love & worship flow as we walk constantly with God. Stepping with Him in the flow of His grace we live with spontaneity, loving our neighbors, ministering the Word & power of the gospel.*<sup>4</sup> You won’t fret & grit your teeth to witness to others, He will simply pour out of you!

When people return to worship it can be seen in the way they respond to the Word. The Scriptures hold such an important place in the lives of followers because they point to God’s action among His creation. We must be willing to allow the Scriptures space to run free in our lives. Because when the Scriptures are given that space, then God takes

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/individual/personal-soul-care>

His rightful place on the throne of our hearts where He's worshipped with every fiber of our being.