

Nehemiah 8

A Special Occasion

Do you remember March 15th of this year? It was the last time we at Lilac Road came together to worship God. Previously the NBA had cancelled all games, college basketball came to a screeching halt, restaurants were still open but things were definitely different that Sunday. Then everything changed as businesses were deemed either essential or non-essential and the non-essential were closed down. Congregations cancelled services due to the threat of the virus and out of concern for each other.

On this Sunday, May 17, 2020 we come back together in our building to worship together. This reminds me of the events in Nehemiah 8. Earlier the children of Israel were taken into captivity. Jeremiah foretold the destruction of Jerusalem and the people taken into Babylon. He also said this captivity would last seventy years (Jeremiah 29.10) and then the people would return to Canaan.

For seventy years their worship was different. There was no temple, no daily sacrifices made, and frankly I don't read of the priesthood during this time. Then in 535 BC King Cyrus made a decree allowing the Jews to return to their land. Ezra deals with this remnant and the rebuilding of the temple. "And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD: "For He is good, For His mercy endures forever toward Israel." Then all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid." (Ezra 3:11)

Then in 440 BC Nehemiah returns with more of his brethren to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. It is after completing this task we read of the events in Nehemiah 8. I want to look at five important things for us to consider now.

"Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate" (Nehemiah 8:1) This revival was not called by the leaders or the priests or the scribes but by the people. One thing the last two months has taught us is we need to see each other. Christians

encourage and comfort one another in our assemblies.

“And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel. 2 So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month.” (Nehemiah 8:1b-2)

The center piece of our lives should be the word of God. Too much preaching is of human origin and speculation instead of Biblically based teaching. It is only through the Bible we know who God is and what He wants from us. Not only must our preaching be Bible based it must be understandable. They spoke so “all who could hear with understanding” which means it was plain and simple. Sometimes preaching requires properly defining words, giving the context of a passage and making spiritual application.

“And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. Then all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.” (Nehemiah 8:5-6)

This passage shows us the very definition of worship, it means to bow down before, to pay homage, and adoration toward. Worship requires humility and reverence toward God. I am not advocating a dress code or a particular human posture but our inward reverence toward God will show in our conduct toward Him. Worship is God centered and not man centered. Entertainment, positive mental attitude preaching, and pure emotionalism is designed to appeal to people and leaves God out of the picture. This results in weaker Christians and unacceptable worship toward our Creator.

Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees because their worship was aimed at their fellow man. They made long and pretentious prayers, they dressed with broad phylacteries, they did not shave or change their clothes while fasting. All so as to appear religions to others. If they had concentrated on God and less on others, they might have accepted Jesus.

“So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved." 12 And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them.” (Nehemiah 8:11-12) The ability to worship God is a time to rejoice. It is not a time to bicker, or think of it as tiresome, but as a privilege. We, for our time together, get to bow before God and show our love to Him. We happily share this with our brothers and sisters in Christ. The Psalmist expressed this, “I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of the LORD." (Psalms 122:1.) After, seventy plus years of captivity and a hundred years after the first remnant returned to Canaan, they were rejoicing to worship God. Perhaps some of us took for granted our Sunday services and Wednesday night classes. It was easy to take them for granted as we always had the opportunity, but now we, I, know better.

So, this day, this first day of the week we come together to be in God's presence. Dennis Tucker