

Back to the Heart of Worship

Nehemiah 8

At the racetrack, a man saw a priest make the sign of the cross over a horse. That horse went on to win the first race. So, he watched each time the priest made the sign, and he placed his bets accordingly.

By the last race, the man had won \$20,000. He bet the whole bundle on the horse the priest approached. The gates opened, the horse took three steps and dropped dead.

The man asked the priest what happened. The priest said, "That's the trouble with you Protestants: You don't know the difference between a simple blessing and last rites."

We all know how the true meaning of worship can get lost in an avalanche of old rituals and new technologies. Matt Redman addresses all of this in a pretty song entitled *The Heart of Worship*. "When the music fades, and all is stripped away, and I simply come ..." There is more to worship than the trappings, and Redman ultimately concludes that the heart of worship is "all about You, Jesus." I like the song. We use it. And, I agree that worship is all about God in three Persons, one of which is Jesus. But, I also have to add that in this current era of Christianity, the song leaves a few questions unanswered. That's okay. It is not the mission of a songwriter to anticipate every nit-picky question that runs through my tormented brain. But, one question is "What Jesus?"

Conceivably, two worshippers side by side could sing this song and sway to the rhythm and have two completely different ideas of Who Jesus is. One may be singing to the Jesus of Scripture, Who made the Father known in His complete righteousness and holiness and Who died in our place for our sins and Who was raised from the dead so as to call us into and empower us for our pursuit of righteousness and holiness. The other worshipper may be singing to the popular Jesus of the age who died for our sins because He's a nice guy Who never condemns or disapproves of anything we might do. One is the Jesus of revelation. One is the Jesus of wishful thinking.

As sinful human beings, we depend upon revelation, not wishful thinking. Jesus revealed the Father, which is why John calls Him, "the Word." He is the Father's self-disclosure to us. God in Three Persons is indeed the heart of worship, but I would have to add that the Bible, which is from God and reveals Jesus to us, must always be AT the heart of worship. Otherwise, worship is not all about Jesus. It becomes all about our idolatrous notions of what we want Jesus to be like.

The Word of God is always central to our worship because it reveals the truth about God. In our study of *Nehemiah*, we see a great revival take place not because hundreds of people brought their personal notions of God to a service, but because they came together with hungry hearts, longing to have them filled with the revealed truth of God. The Heart of Worship demands ...

I. Reverence for God's Word (7:73b-8:1-8)

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, ¹all 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.

²So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and 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 and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

A. God's Word Is Always at the Heart of Authentic Spiritual Renewal

The temple had been restored back in the days of the first governor after the exile. Ezra, a priest, reestablished the practices of the temple. Under Nehemiah, the city walls had been restored. The priesthood was in place as were the Levites assigned as gatekeepers, singers and temple staff. On the surface, it appeared that all systems were "Go!" in regard to getting this people back up and running as a holy nation. But, simply having the machinery and personnel of worship in place could not insure that authentic heart worship could occur. The blessings of covenant were still elusive.

The people were ignorant of God's Word, but they strongly suspected that God's Word was the key to the spiritual renewal of the community. And so, "all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate" in order to hear the reading of the Word of God. Ezra, the revered old priest in the city, was called on to read the ancient words of the sacred scrolls.

It was the first day of the seventh month, the Sabbath month and the fullest months of the Jewish calendar in terms of religious observances. On this first day, the Feast of Trumpets was observed. From morning to evening, trumpets were sounded, no one worked and a sacred assembly was held. On this day, the people were going to give full attention to the reading of God's Law.

B. Leaders Must Never Be Ashamed of God's Word

An elevated platform was assembled for the occasion. The Word of God was to be high and lifted up above the assembly. Throughout the history of church architecture, pulpits appear on elevated surfaces, not because it's theatrical to have an elevated stage, but in keeping with the practice of revering the Word of God. This platform was big enough to hold Ezra and 13 leaders of the people. The program was pretty simple. They started reading at dawn and continued for five to six hours. I would have hated to read the comment cards on that particular day.

But, this is how leaders even today must regard the Bible. In this video and sound byte age, when we obsess over attention spans and presentation techniques, I fear we have forgotten that there is a convicting power to the Bible that has nothing to do with us. Paul often found himself in the midst of the tension between Gentiles who wanted him to present his case for Christ in terms of their notion of wisdom and Jews who wanted him to prove his case for Christ with miraculous signs. He actually did a little of each, but at the end of the day he said to the Romans:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. – Romans 1:16

C. No Congregant Can Be Indifferent towards God's Word

One woman called her pastor after a particularly somber Palm Sunday service. She said, "I go to church two Sundays a year - Palm Sunday and Easter. I expect it to be a pleasant experience."

The people of Jerusalem showed up hungry at the square before the Water Gate. They were men, women and kiddos old enough to understand. They respected the Word by standing for the duration of the half-day-long reading. They were receptive. They lifted their hands with their palms facing upward, an expression of openness and emptiness. They said, "Amen! Amen!" affirming whatever was read, even if it was to place themselves under the judgment of the Law.

D. God Gifts Some Servants to Clarify God's Word

One hospital's entire staff of doctors went on strike. They were picketing out front of the hospital and everything, but the whole protest was lost on management. Finally, the administration had no choice but to bring in a busload of pharmacists to decode their picket signs.

A number of Levites were standing by to clarify what Ezra was reading. We do not know what format was followed. Perhaps, they broke into smaller discussion groups. Perhaps, each Levite in turn, spoke to the entire assembly at various breaks in the reading of the Word by Ezra with some relevant application of the passage at hand. Perhaps, the ancient tongue in which the scrolls were penned seemed odd and hard to follow for that current generation of Jews.

We are blessed with many versions of the Bible ranging from stiff, literal translations to picture books. Still, God provides to His church individuals gifted in rightly dividing His Word. Without persons so gifted, we are prone to read into God's Word every fanciful thing that pops into our heads, and believers do that often, especially those who feel they can study by themselves and live independently of any Christian community. Our objective together is not to hammer out every difficult question so that our doctrine is flawless. That will never happen. Our objective is to determine, "What does the Bible say to a holy people? What does it call us to do and to be?"

II. Repentance by God's Word (9-12)

A. God's Word Has the Power to Break our Hearts verse 9

⁹Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and 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.

I suspect the reasons the people wept were manifold. Some may have been reflecting on bygone eras of obedience and lamenting all the lost national blessings. Others may have been weeping over personal disobedience or indifference to the things of God. Still others may have realized for the very first time how avoidable the years of captivity could have been had only their ancestors loved God more. Whatever caused them to weep specifically they were sorrowful, individually and corporately, that for so many years, God had not been first in their lives.

B. Only God's Word Can Wed Godly Sorrow to Godly Joy verses 10-12

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and 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."

Nehemiah's challenge, which was reinforced by the Levites, was interesting. The people were sobbing their hearts out with every word Ezra uttered, but Nehemiah and the Levites were telling them to stop. Why shouldn't they grieve? They had been awful. Perhaps, we need to better grasp how anxious God is to restore joy to His people. Godly sorrow is not the end God has in mind.

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret ... - 2 Corinthians 7:10

Repentance is not sorrow. Sorrow is sorrow, but repentance is marked by the resolve to turn to God, knowing that He will repair matters and restore us. He works healing in our lives by taking our regrets and guilt and replacing them with the joy of the assurance of divine forgiveness.

We struggle to balance guilt and joy. We tend to go through seasons of one or the other, failing to understand how sorrow and joy can abide side by side. Repentance is the middle ground. Repentance is not self-absorbed remorse. There is no trust of a forgiving God in that extreme. But, neither is repentance a frivolous dismissal of the times we have dishonored God. There is no hatred of sin in that extreme. Repentance understands sin and hates it, but the hope of repentance rests on the trustworthiness of a gracious God Who abounds in love for His children. How can sorrow and joy abide side by side? These Jews could celebrate their rediscovery of God's truths with joy, because they had rediscovered the key to restoring a covenant relationship with Him.

III. Rituals of God's Word (13-18)

A. God Establishes Certain Rituals to Reenact His Story

It is said that we develop an appetite for whatever we feast on. Indulging in candy will only make a sweet tooth harder to manage. After six hours of standing as Ezra read the Law, the people come back for more the next day. They were reminded that coming up in less than two weeks was the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast had been restored in part some years earlier under Ezra, but it seems they only now discovered that there was a more complete way to celebrate the festival. Back in the old days, the people had actually resided in little booths for a week.

The Feast of Tabernacles was a joyous festival that celebrated the finished harvest, but according to *Leviticus 23:43*, it was also to commemorate how the children of Israel had lived in booths after the LORD led them out of Egypt. It sounds fun; making your own little lean-to and living on the roof or the patio for a week. In the courtyards facing the city gates, out-of-towners would erect their little booths. Evidently, they had not been doing that part in recent years and they had missed out on much joy and laughter. Years later, a rabbinical saying emerged: "He who has not seen Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles does not know what rejoicing means."

B. We Dismiss Such Rituals to Our Own Detriment

Families have rituals they observe around certain holidays. Sometimes, the younger generation creates new rituals as older ones fall by the wayside. Parents try to understand and be supportive, but not without a degree of nostalgic angst. On the other hand, there are occasions when the children grow to regret that they have done away with the rituals of the past. When God establishes a ritual, it can never lose its relevance in any generation. It may take on a slightly different look as the generations roll by, but the essential practice and the essential meanings behind the practice need to be carefully guarded. We don't have the option of dismissing it.

C. God's Rituals Bring Communities Together in Unity and Joy

A young rabbi found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the service, half the congregation stood for prayer and half remained seated. Each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said solved the impasse. In desperation, he tracked down the synagogue's 99-year-old founder in a nursing home and pleaded, "Tell me, was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Ah," said the younger man, "then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Well," said the younger, "what we have is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream."

"Ah," said the old man, "THAT was the tradition."

Unity and joy are at the heart of God's rituals. Verse 17 says that everyone participated by erecting a booth, adding, "And their joy was very great." I cannot help but to think of the two rituals or ordinances of the church, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both reenact the atoning sacrifice of Jesus for the individual while at the very same time emphasizing the greater community that we know as "the Body of Christ."

The Lord's Supper was celebrated during a shared meal in the first century. Later, everyone broke a piece of bread from the same loaf and sipped from the same cup. Later, they passed trays with teeny-weeny pieces of bread and other trays with tiny individual glasses of juice. Then, we became germ-conscious and went to plastic cups. In the past year, we have experimented with different breads because what we had crumbled and we were throwing too much away. One that did not crumble was too little for arthritic fingers. We tried one called "soft bread" which was easy to grab and would not crumble, but some of you thought chewy was just too weird.

But, even as the quest goes on for the perfect communion bread, we continue to observe the Lord's Supper because of what is depicted; the body of Christ broken for our sins and His blood poured out for our redemption, all coupled with an expression of the unity of the Body of Christ. And, even if we can never determine how the Apostles felt about official church baptisteries as opposed to rivers, farm ponds and swimming pools, we baptize because of what is depicted; identification with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, a spiritual circumcision from the fleshly nature, a garbing of a believer in the garments of Jesus' righteousness – all coupled with a powerful expression of the union of a believer into the greater community of the church.

An Observation about Inspiring Worship Services

I continue to be on the outlook through Nehemiah to see if the eight characteristics of church health that certain researchers suggest are crucial will continue to manifest themselves in this ancient community. Clearly, inspiring worship is included. Of course, we must be cautious as we define "inspiring." The researchers found that whether or not worship inspires is quite independent of the obvious places we might tend to look such as music selection or style.

Our sense of community is key to what we draw from worship. Do we enjoy one another? Do we laugh together? Do we effectively keep the meaning of our rituals out in front of the mechanics, or do the meanings get lost? Is there an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to move in the worshipper? This is not measured by spontaneity. It is measured by whether or not choices are presented for the worshipper to act and respond in his private life to the truth of God that he has heard.

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