

Text: Nehemiah 8-10

Title: “Life Together ... Worshipping”

INTRODUCTION

ILLUSTRATION – I ran across something the other day that reminds me that what we are doing here is really good for us. It was an article that talked about how to stay safe in the world today:

- Avoid riding in automobiles because they are responsible for 20 percent of all fatal accidents.
- Do not stay home because 17 percent of all accidents occur in the home.
- Avoid walking on streets or sidewalks because 14 percent of all accidents occur to pedestrians.
- Avoid traveling by air, rail, or water because 16 percent of all accidents involve these forms of transportation.
- Of the remaining 33 percent, 32 percent of all deaths occur in hospitals. Above all else, avoid hospitals.
- You will be pleased to learn that only .001 percent of all deaths occur in worship services in church. So logic tells us that the safest place for you to be at any given point in time is at church!

So what we’re doing today is vitally important. But not for the reasons I list above. Great things happen when the people of God are together. Our life as believers cannot be lived out separated from other believers in the church.

Hebrews 10:25 - Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Let me just remind you of our target as a church. As we have studied the Scripture we believe God has given us this mission:

Travis Avenue Baptist Church ... Joining God in developing passionate followers of Jesus Christ.

We envision a vibrant church composed of passionate followers of Jesus Christ who, having received the gift of eternal life and being transformed by the love of God, are empowered to live out the following:

- 1. LEARN AND APPLY THE TRUTH OF GOD’S WORD**
- 2. OBEY GOD AND DENY SELF**
- 3. SERVE GOD AND OTHERS**
- 4. SHARE JESUS CHRIST WITH OTHERS**
- 5. LIVE BY FAITH IN GOD**
- 6. SEEK GOD IN WORSHIP**

7. BUILD CHRIST-CENTERED RELATIONSHIPS

What God does in our lives will be done in community with other believers. Over the next few weeks we're going to see how spiritual formation takes place as we are connected to the people of God gathered together.

ILLUSTRATION – Home Depot's slogan used to be, "You can do it; we can help." We it comes to spiritual formation, we can't do it alone. We need each other.

Turn in your Bibles to the OT, to Nehemiah 8. We'll take a break from our study in I Peter and resume it in a few weeks. Over the next few weeks we're going to talk about what happens when the people of God are together. Nehemiah 8-10 gives us a glimpse into one of the great gatherings of the people of God. What did they do? Why did they do it? How did they do it? And it helps us understand what we do, why we do it, and how we do it. Let's start by reading Nehemiah 8:1-6.

What's happening here? The Israelites have been in exile in Babylon due to the discipline of God. But in His mercy He granted them favor with their captors and the Israelites returned to Jerusalem to begin the process of rebuilding the temple and the walls of the city. Nehemiah leads the efforts to rebuild the walls. Ezra has led the reconstruction of the temple, and the spiritual restoration of the people. When the wall was completed then the people of God turned their hearts to seek the Lord.

So there was a great worship gathering. One of the most important things that happen when the people of God gather is worship. Certainly God delights in our private, personal worship. It is hypocritical for us to worship God only when we're with other people. So when we gather for public worship, we bring our private worship with us.

Let's see what these public gatherings were like for the people of God.

1. THE PARTICIPATION

Nehemiah 8:1a (NIV) - all the people assembled as one man...

Note that *everybody* assembled. There would be no thought of someone saying, "I think I'll stay back in my tent." Were there sick people who weren't physically able to attend? Yes. But aside from that the indication here is that "all the people assembled as one man."

And this was to be a habitual participation.

Nehemiah 8:2 (NIV) - So on the first day of the seventh month...

All this happened in the seventh month. In the Law of Moses, the Lord prescribed various feasts and holy days that were to be observed by all the people. And in the seventh month they were to observe the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths). Then, of course, every week the Sabbath came around on the seventh day (Saturday) when the people were to rest from their work and set the day aside to the Lord. It was to be holy to the Lord.

So God calls His people together to give Him worship and glory as a congregation on a regular basis. And it wasn't just an OT thing. The book of Acts tells us ...

Acts 2:46a - Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.

Acts 5:12b - And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade.

Now in the NT church there was a different schedule or routine that was weekly. It all revolved around the Lord's Day, Sunday. And the church began meeting together on that day. What's the big deal about Sunday? It's not that it was the Christian Sabbath, but because it was the day of the Lord's resurrection. The early Christians celebrated the resurrection every week, not just once a year!

The point I'm making here is that for the people of God there was a regular routine of gathering. It would have been inconceivable for a believer not to show up at the assembly of the church every week, unless, of course, they were sick.

So there was participation. We're also told about...

2. THE PLACE

Now scholars estimate that there were between 30,000 and 50,000 people. So the place where they met needed to accommodate a crowd that large. So it says...

Nehemiah 8:1a (NIV) - all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate.

They met in the square before the Water Gate (8:1). They also built a "high wooden platform for the occasion" (8:4) so that the people could see and hear the leaders.

We also see something about...

3. THE PERSONS

Nehemiah 8:1a (NIV) - all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate.

There were persons who led the assembly and all that took place. The main guy leading this is a man called in v.1 "Ezra the scribe," and in v.2 he is called a priest. He was the main spiritual leader for the Israelites. Later we learn that there are other leaders and Levites who are present to assist Ezra and the people in the assembly.

And we learn from v.2 that...

Nehemiah 8:2b (NIV) – “the assembly ... was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.”

It says in v.3 that the Word of God was read...

Nehemiah 8:3 (NIV) – “... in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand.”

These “others who could understand” are more than likely children. This is part of our philosophy that in worship dads, moms and kids should be together in worship. Note: Today happens to be the first day for many children to come to “big church” ... public worship.

Boys and girls, we are so glad to have you. You are a very special part of our worship time. I know it will be hard for you to understand some of the things we do and say, but you'll get some of it ... and more of it as you go along. We're here to worship God.

ILLUSTRATION – Now we know how difficult it is to have a little kindergarten child sitting next to you in church. I say “we” ... actually my wife was the one who had this duty. (When our kids started coming to big church I felt the call to preach! That's easier than sitting with kids in church. Not really!). And funny things happen:

A mom asked her little children, as they were on the way to church service, "And why is it necessary to be quiet in church?" One of them answered, "Because people are sleeping."

There was a brother and sister sitting together in church together. Little brother giggled, sang, and talked out loud. Finally, his big sister had had enough. "You're not supposed to talk out loud in church." "Why? Who's going to stop me?" Little sister pointed to the back of the church and said, "See those two men standing by the door? They're hushers."

Parents, how can you help your children in worship? The goal is not just for them to get through the service without disturbing others around them. If that were the case you could give them a pill and put them to sleep. We want children to get something out of the experience. They learn to worship by watching you ... sing, open your Bible, listen, give, respond ... they are watching you.

So these were the participants. But then we see something about...

4. THE PROGRAM

As we look at this gathering of the people of God, there were three important parts to the program: Proclamation, praise and prayer. Let's just look at those.

- **Proclamation**

We've already seen how the reading and explaining of the Word of God was central to all they had to do.

Nehemiah 8:1b (NIV) - They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

Now the Word of God for the OT people of God was the “Book of the Law of Moses,” the first five books of what we have today as the Old Testament ... sometimes called the Pentateuch, written by Moses.

Notice that the people “told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book...” The people gathered with a hunger for the truth. They knew they needed to hear from God.

So Ezra brings out the Book of the Law and it says...

Nehemiah 8:3 (NIV) - He 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.

The book was read and all the people listened attentively. Today listening to the Word of God being taught and preached is a lost art. Part of this is due to the fact that the entertainment media has bred generations of people who cannot sit and listen for an extended period of time. But study of the Word of God requires extended concentration. So listening to the Word of God is not something that comes naturally to us, but we must discipline ourselves to do it if we are to hear what God has to say to us.

We'll see more about this next week, but just notice that the program included reading and studying the Word of the Lord, but it also included praising the Lord of the Word.

- **Praise**

Nehemiah 8:6a (NIV) - Ezra praised the LORD...

You see this in the Psalms.

Psalms 22:22 - I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you.

Psalms 35:18 - I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among throngs of people I will praise you.

Psalms 68:26 - Praise God in the great congregation; praise the Lord in the assembly of Israel.

And Ezra had the help of other worship leaders. Jump over to Nehemiah 9 and notice...

Nehemiah 9:4 (NIV) - Standing on the stairs were the Levites ... who called with loud voices to the LORD their God.

Nehemiah 9:5a (NIV) - And the Levites ... said: “Stand up and praise the LORD your God...

They are not specifically mentioned here, but in other passages we're told that there were musicians and singers and choirs who assisted the people of God in worship. And we have that in our worship services. We'd like to invite you to join one of these groups.

Note: Let me just stop here and highlight the posture of the people through all of this:

Nehemiah 8:5 (NIV) - Ezra opened the book ... and as he opened it, the people all stood up.

So obviously the people were sitting at one point, then they stood up in response to the reading of the Word of the Lord. And as we read just now, they stood to praise the Lord.

Nehemiah 8:6 (NIV) - Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

So you see more of their posture in worship. They were sitting, then standing, then lifting their hands, then bowing with their faces to the ground. Sometimes you may wonder why we have you stand or sit, or come to the altar or lift your hands or your heads. There are certain postures that are appropriate for us in our worship.

Now Nehemiah 9 contains a magnificent prayer. We're not going to study it today, but I encourage you to read through this prayer and notice the praise that is given to God. Praise is telling God all the good things you know about Him.

So the program includes proclamation, praise and also...

- **Prayer**

Now this great praise that is recited here in Nehemiah 9 concludes with a prayer of petition to the Lord.

Nehemiah 9:32 (NIV) - "Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings and leaders, upon our priests and prophets, upon our fathers and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today.

So they are saying, "Now God in light of who You are, this is what we need You to do in our behalf..." Now we'll talk more about prayer in a couple of weeks, but we need to use our time together to pray together.

So this was the program that guided the people of God in their public worship. But I want you to see ...

5. THE PROMISES

At the climax of their worship, the people of God make commitments and promises to the Lord.

Nehemiah 9:38 (NIV) - “In view of all this (*in view of all we know about who You are*), we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.”

You see, God had established a covenant with His people at Mt. Sinai. And as they came together for this time of worship, they renewed the covenant with and commitment to God.

Again, I encourage you sometime later to read Nehemiah 10 and notice the promises that are made.

The last thing that happens in worship is that commitments are made.

CONCLUSION

What promises, what commitments do you need to make today in light of what you have seen from God’s Word? Make your public profession of faith in Christ? Join the church? Yield your life in service to God?

Now’s the time to do that.