

FIVE HOURS AT WATER GATE NEHEMIAH 7:73 - NEHEMIAH 8:1- 12

Phyllis Corbin

The end of Nehemiah 7 and the beginning of Chapter 8 is somewhat reminiscent of the spirit the Pilgrim Fathers must have had when their first harvest was reaped in Jamestown. They and their American Indian friends gathered for a great celebration that since has blossomed into Thanksgiving. They ate of the fruit of the land and roasted huge turkeys to celebrate their first year in their new land of freedom and opportunity. Unfortunately, like so many celebrations "Thanksgiving has created more and more "thank me" people than "thank God" people.

NEHEMIAH 7:73

The priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers and the temple servants, along with certain of the people and the rest of the Israelites, settled in their own towns. When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns.

The Israelites who had returned from captivity settled in their own towns They were back to their roots and happy to be in the land God gave them once more. Work had been completed to secure Jerusalem and in just 52 days the wall had gone up to fortify the city against their enemies. Certain people from the Jewish religious scene had been put in place even though there was no temple. Verse 1 of Chapter 8 continues from Chapter 7 Verse 73:

NEHEMIAH 8:1-2

I 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.
2. So 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.

This was New Year's Day on the civil calendar. It coincided with the Feasts of Trumpets, a time when:

- A trumpet (shofar) sounded an end to work
- meal and burnt offerings were made
- modern Jews celebrate it as Rosh Hashonah
- it was a time of spiritual inventory, and a time to be reconciled to God and each other.
- One custom during it was to throw breadcrumbs into a lake symbolizing the casting away of sins into a sea of forgetfulness.

Can you see a much larger application in this? There will come a day when a trumpet will sound, all labor will forever be ended and the fact that our sins have been removed will herald just not a New Year, but a change like we have never known. It will be too late to try and reconcile matters then, but for the child of God it will be a time of reunion and celebration.

This time Ezra brought the people together before the Water Gate they were to hear the word of God. It brought the nation together as "one man." It was a time of unity. Men, women and children - all were included. Folks, the day is nearing when our Lord Himself will gather His children to Himself. Lets see how long Ezra the scribe preached on this great occasion:

NEHEMIAH *: 3

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. Nehemiah 8:3

The men, women and others that could understand, which were likely children and youth stood and listened for five hours as the book of the Law was read. How would you like five hours of Leviticus on Sunday morning? And it appeared no one fell asleep, but they listened attentively. This is not an uncommon occurrence. We live in a time-regulated culture. We are so conscious of time; it had reached a point where the clock rules our lives. Many cultures knew nothing of this. Even today in some countries in Africa, people have been known to listen to God's word being expounded for five hours or longer.

But perhaps there is another reason we can suggest here. You see, these people could not do their evening devotions. They had been captives in a strange land. Paper had not yet been invented and neither had the printing press. They had been on the wall 52 days. Some had not even taken off their clothes except to bathe. There was joy in their hearts as God's holy word began to be heard again. Seven decades of captivity because of disobedience just might result in a person wanting to know the recipe for freedom.

The Scriptures give us a few word pictures to help explain this amazing service conducted by Ezra . Let's read on in Verse 4:

Nehemiah 8:4-5

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

They not only went to church for five hours in the morning sun, but they stood up for most of it. Jews always stood in reverence for the reading of the word of God. Eastern Orthodox churches still have the congregation stand for the reading of the Scriptures. Jerusalem was still full of rubble and there were no pews or stacking chairs. Thirteen other guests joined Nehemiah on the platform. It must have been quite a sight after the heard work and the memories of captivity. And what about the content of the sermon?

Nehemiah 8:6-8

Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces tot he

ground. 7. The Levites - Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maadiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah - instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. 8. 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.

I don't think Ezra had the benefit of a public address system as he blessed God, the God who keeps His covenant and acts in justice and mercy. A congregation saying Amen goes back to the time of David, but there is more in the word than agreement or assent to what another person has said or prayed. One scholar says "Amen is affirmation, Amen is curse, Amen is making something one's own. When he utters the word 'Amen,' the hearer affirms the wish that God may act, places himself under divine judgment, and joins in praise to God."

After this solemn act the people bowed down and worshipped with their faces to the ground. Of the 15 times "bowed down" is used in the Old Testament, the verb "to worship" is always used after it. The five hours were filled with worship, prayer, and exposition of the Law. After being away from the land for such a long time it was necessary to rehearse the Law of God again to bring the people back to their roots and the lifestyle God had ordered for them. Even the language could have been unfamiliar to some seeing they had been out of the land for some time - many were born in captivity.

What kind of response can you expect from a 5-hour sermon? Yawns? Snores? Scowls/ Whispers/ "Let's go church shopping"

Nehemiah 8:9

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This 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.

Nehemiah is introduced again and this time the others join him with a warning. They recognize the sacredness of the day, but they were careful not to allow remorse of the people to degenerate into hopelessness or despair. Preaching brings CONVICTION so that we are REPENTANT in order to experience the joy in God's FORGIVENESS. There is nothing as sad as a person who is wrapped up in their sin so much they can't let it go. Knowledge of sin is always brought so that deliverance can be experienced.

Well, what do you do after five hours in church and quite a time of that weeping. Here's what these preachers advised.

Nehemiah 8:10-12

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," 11. The Levites called all the people saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve." 12 Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been known to them.

"Dry up your tears and have a party." Is the benediction to this five-hour message? And why

not? When God's word produces conviction and people are reconciled, there is cause for rejoicing, even feasting. "Choices food" comes from the word meaning 'to be fat' It is used in the sense of enjoying your finest or best. "Sweet drinks" is only used before this in the Song of Solomon. The wall is up, to people have met with God and now they are to fellowship. Nobody is to be left out. The rich are to share with the poor.

This was quite an experience for these people who had labored for so long They had faced trials as Nehemiah. Some of them had sold their families and had to redeem them. Some had lost their possessions until Nehemiah intervened. Now at last there is evidence that the nation is getting back on track. The Feast of Trumpets has signaled a new day.

The coming of Christ into our lives has sounded a new day for us. It began with weeping. It continued with hard work. We stayed on the wall. Even in extreme fatigue we picked up the bricks and applied mortar because the Holy Spirit, the man with the trumpet, was by our side. We saw a goal ahead and we persevered. And at the end of the battle there was inexpressible joy. A Hymn writer named W. C. Martin caught the Christian equivalent of how the people must have felt on this occasion,.

To Jesus every day I find my heart is closer drawn;
He's fairer than the glory of the gold and purple dawn;
He's all my fancy pictures in its fairest dreams and more;
Each day He grows still sweeter than He was the day before.

The half cannot be fancied
This sides the golden shore;
Oh, there He'll be still sweeter
Than He ever was before

God bless

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