

Gather to Worship

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There are many things during this pandemic which have been difficult for me, but at the top of the list has been not gathering with my church family for worship. That's been so hard. I'm not sure I would have guessed that it meant so much to me, that it is so nourishing and encouraging to me. But it is. There is something mystical about corporate worship—God does something special when we gather.

Today, as we study Nehemiah, we're going to consider why this is the case. We're going to look at an ancient worship gathering to see how God used it to bless and nourish his people.

Nehemiah 8

¹ 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.

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. 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.

⁴ Ezra 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 and Meshullam.

⁵ 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. ⁶ 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.

⁷ The 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. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law

of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is holy 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.

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

¹¹ The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a holy 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 made known to them.

¹³ On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law. ¹⁴ They found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month ¹⁵ and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters”—as it is written.

¹⁶ So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷ The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

¹⁸ Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

This morning I'm *not* going to lay out an outline like I normally do each week. Rather, we're going to ask and answer four questions. So, let's begin.

1. Why do we gather (vv. 1, 5-11)?

The short answer is God. We gather because of God. He calls and commands for his people to gather together in corporate worship. This is a consistent command throughout Scripture. It's God's calling in the Old Testament.

Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns—so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess (Deuteronomy 31:12-13).

And, it's still God's calling in the New Testament. So, inspired by the Lord, the author of Hebrews issues this command to the church.

...let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another...(Hebrews 10:24-25).

Friends, one simple and foundational reason that we as believers should gather for corporate worship on a regular basis is because our God commands us to do so. We gather in obedience; we gather because he's the Lord—because he calls the shots and we do not. Thus, in one sense, it's as simple as that: We gather because our God commands us to gather. We worship in a corporate relationship with other believers because our God commands us to worship him in that way.

Yet, in another sense, there's way more to it than that. The Lord commands it because God uses corporate worship gatherings in a special way. He literally gets us on the same page. As a local body, we are called to meditate upon the same passage. We discuss it, and we share our thoughts about it. By the Spirit's work in community, we see details in the text which we would never have seen on our own.

Moreover, we're encouraged by worshiping and learning shoulder to shoulder with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are knit together as we listen communally and stand and sing and pray as one body—as one people. That's what we see here

in Nehemiah (vv. 5-7). The people are blessed when they come together in worship. The people are encouraged and rebuked and trained as one. They are knit together in unity through this worship gathering.

I like what Brian Croft has to say about corporate worship. He writes this.

When the church gathers, the Holy Spirit works in unique and powerful ways that are missing in private gatherings (1 Cor. 14). When a congregation collectively sits under the preached Word, a level of accountability is established and nourished among the hearers to urge each other to go and apply that sermon. A greater obligation to “do something” with the Word preached and to rely on one another for help and strength to obey it exists in this kind of community life that is not present when we listen in isolation or hop churches depending upon who is preaching that week.¹

I wonder if you believe this. I wonder if we were able to gather safely together for worship tomorrow—if this pandemic were over, if social distancing were a thing of the past—would you eagerly rush back to these gatherings longing to worship alongside your church family? Longing to participate in the life of this local church? Friends, ask yourself if you truly believe this.

2. Who should gather (v. 3)?

This is a great question. And, in short, here’s the answer. Who should gather? All those who can understand. It’s that simple. Look at the text with me.

He [that’s Ezra] 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 (v. 3).

Now, while the answer is simple, the practice is just a little more complicated than that, because we have a calling to make the gospel understandable to everyone. We’re to teach it to our children in ways they can understand. We’re to communicate in ways those who have never set foot in church can understand. And, this isn’t easy. It takes hard work and sacrifice.

So, for example with our children, we want them to participate in all the parts of our worship gatherings which they can. So, many of them will stay for the singing

¹ Brian Croft, *Ligonier Ministries*: “Five Essential Reasons for Christians to Gather in Public Worship,” May 5, 2017.

and then go away to receive a gospel lesson at their age level. (And, just let me say how thankful I am for all the men and women who volunteer to teach those children. Your ministry is incredibly valuable. It is not babysitting. It is not a lesser ministry. It is nothing less than leading these little humans from death to life in Jesus Christ. God is so pleased with your service. It is the highest kind of calling.)

And, believe it or not, I spend around twenty hours each week trying to make whatever passage I'm preaching understandable and edifying for those who've been in church for fifty or sixty years or those who've been in it for fifty or sixty minutes. That's a big part of my calling—to make the gospel understandable and clear to all. We see that being done here in Nehemiah; don't we?

[The Levites] read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read (v. 8).

This is shepherding 101. This is another reason it's important to be a member of a local church. God has called your pastoral staff and the elders of this local body to prayer for you and the ministry of his word (Acts 6:4). In other words, we're called as shepherds to make the word of the Lord clear and understandable.

Church family, please pray for us in this as we pray for you.

3. How should we gather (v. 1)?

If you've been here over the last few weeks, then you'll remember me saying that, in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, there is a move away from hero leaders and a move toward a corporate ownership of the promises of God. That's the shift. The people begin to own the pursuit of God. This is, perhaps, seen most clearly here in chapter eight of Nehemiah. Look at verse one again.

...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 (v. 1).

Who told Ezra to open the Bible and read? It's the Israelites in unity as one. They come eagerly and expectantly to hear and learn from the holy laws of the Lord. The people demand it. They command Ezra and the Levites to read and teach them. Talk about a domineering congregation!

But, what are they demanding? Not great sermons that keep them entertained! Not a flashy worship service which is well produced and polished and professional! No! They want God’s word. They want to understand the calling of the Lord to them. They want to hear from God. That’s their emphasis. That’s how they come to Ezra. That’s how they come to worship—*expecting to encounter the living God!*

How do you come to worship? What do you expect when we gather?

Friends, I don’t think we come with expectations that are too high on Sundays. I think we come with expectations that are too low. I think we come looking for help and practical advice. I think we come looking for a pick-me-up—a little motivation. I think we often come wanting to hear someone say exactly what we want to hear; we want someone to tell us that we are right. We want somebody to fix our children or our marriage or our self-esteem. But, these expectations must always be submitted to the primary reason we gather. *Above all else, we must come together to hear from and meet our Creator and Savior.*

Friends, our gatherings are “revelatory” events where (as one theologian says) “God discloses himself afresh,” where “the people of God know that they have met with the living God.”² Do you come expecting that? Do you come longing for that as the Israelites in this passage do? If not, pray and work to raise your expectations.

Settle for nothing less than an encounter with the living God!

4. What should happen after we gather (vv. 12, 16-18)?

Brothers and sisters, nothing less than a progressively transformed lifestyle. Just look at what happens to the Israelites here.

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 made known to them (v. 12).

The Israelites move from despair and weeping, at having neglected God’s law for so long, to repentance and celebration, in reestablishing and living out those laws. They heard and understood the word of God and were transformed. They changed. Israel was reformed and renewed by meeting with the Lord.

² D. A. Carson, “Challenges for the 21st Century Pulpit” in *Preach the Word*, 176-177.

Friends, this is how it is with us too; hearing from the Lord must transform us and the way we live. It's not always perceptible to us as it happens. It is often slow. It's often subtle; but, it's there.

In my last church, our staff liked to describe our habit of opening up the word of God each week to preparing healthy balanced meals each day. One healthy meal doesn't make the difference. If, however, you eat them consistently over the course of a year or two, they make a tremendous difference. *They make you healthy!*

Your word is a lamp for my feet, / a light on my path (Psalm 119:105).

Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4).

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).