

Today’s message will be giving much attention to our OLD Testament reading from Nehemiah, and in particular, that great priest/scribe **Ezra**. Now I am SURE that for your bedside devotional reading, you pick up these gripping books of Ezra and Nehemiah, RIGHT? WHAT? Why NOT? Because they’re from the OLD Testament? What, if something is ‘OLD’ is it no longer of VALUE? **Of course not**. Now, sure, I know that as Christians, we quite naturally put a lot of emphasis on the ‘RIGHT’ side of the book. The New Testament. BUT, we must not forget the foundational value to our faith from the LEFT side. The Old Testament... the ‘Bible’ that Jesus read. That there is MUCH to be gained in the exchange of ideas between the LEFT and the RIGHT... that they are meant to mutually benefit one another. Hmm... perhaps our *Biblical* conversation might inform our *political* ones...

Now, when I think of that name ‘Ezra,’ my mind does not necessarily go back to the time around 480 BC... but rather, the 1980’s, AD. For back in Baton Rouge, there was a popular band that was a favorite of our son, named “*Better than Ezra*.” Being a fairly devoted reader of Scripture, I was excited to hear of this band that I blindly hoped had been named for a Biblical leader of the Judeo-Christian faith. I was disappointed, not surprisingly, to find out that this was NOT the case; that while there aren’t any clear answers to where the name came from, a popular explanation was that as a fledgling ‘band with no name,’ they were in a band competition with a band named “Ezra.” So, to distinguish themselves from their competition, they wanted to be known as ‘BETTER than Ezra’. Regardless, they went on to truly make a ‘name’ for themselves... a success that wasn’t based merely on their **title**, but on the **substance**, the **excellence** of their music. Music that had a **positive impact** on a lot of young people...

So, as we consider a much more theological subject named ‘Ezra,’ let us yet bear in mind that it’s not the ‘**title**’ of the book from which his words come that’s important... ‘OLD’ or ‘NEW’... but rather, their **substance**. Words of **excellence** that can have a very **positive impact** on our lives. From Ezra, whose name means ‘YHWH Helps’... to Jesus, whose name means ‘YHWH Saves’... may we grow from their timeless truths that ‘help us’ and ‘save us’. **Ancient Words with a Modern Message**.

As I considered these passages from Nehemiah and Luke, there seemed to be two basic themes: the **importance** of the WORD of God TO His people... and the **importance** of the WORSHIP of God BY His people. Both of these passages involve practices by the people, and their teachers, that we can, and do, employ in our present-day **exercises of faith.** **“Ancient Words with a Modern Message.”**

First, these passages speak to the importance of the WORD of God TO His people. In the opening verse of the reading from Ezra, it says that he **“opened the book in the sight of all the people.”** (Neh. 8:5) As respected a man of God as he may have been, the words were NOT his own. GOD’s words. Make no mistake about it. He wanted the people to see just how important it was to proclaim out loud... ‘in front of God and everybody’... what YHWH had to say to His children. Much in the way that THIS ‘priest’ wants the people to focus on GOD’s words, not his...

And those Israelites showed the reading of God’s Holy Word the kind of respect that it deserved. That **“when he opened it, all the people stood up.”** (Neh. 8:5) Much in the same way that you will stand for the reading of the Gospel >>lesson. Of course, there IS one ‘small’ difference: **“He read it... from early morning to midday.”** (Neh. 8:3) We’re ‘talking’ (literally) at least 5-6 HOURS! We’re not even standing 5-6 MINUTES here! Heck, I get enough flack when we break the 11th Commandment... ‘Thou shalt not worship longer than one hour.’ ☺ It also says that **“all the people were attentive to the Book.”** (Neh. 8:3) In our fast-paced, ‘ADD culture,’ attention spans are getting shorter and shorter... we have a hard enough time focusing on a subject for *minutes*, let alone *hours*...

So, in addition to reminding us of how comparatively LITTLE time we spend in hearing God’s Word to us, this passage also ‘speaks’ to the context in which that proclamation of the Word takes place. In the midst of addressing the people on behalf of God, Ezra takes time to address God on behalf of the people. **“Ezra blessed the Lord...”** A few words of praise and gratitude for their ‘commercial sponsor.’ Something we can *never* do too much of... give thanks and praise to God, ‘blessing the Lord’ for all that He has done for us. Including the inspiration of this ‘love letter’ to His children. And the good thing was, Ezra’s congregation didn’t let him do it alone. **“All the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen,’ lifting up their hands.”** (Nehemiah 8:6)

NOW, I know that we are God's 'frozen chosen', and the thought of shouting 'AMEN' and 'lifting up our hands' are a little out of our comfort zone. But let me say that these are not done for the benefit of the 'preacher'... but rather, for the glory of the 'Teacher'... JESUS! That as those who believe that 'God is good'... 'ALL the time'... we should be more willing to SHOW our gratitude for God's 'goodness'... *ALL the time!* For all the ways that God extends his Hands to bless us, it's the least we can do to extend ours up to Him to 'bless the Lord.' AMEN?

After lifting up their hands and voices in praise, however, came a much more solemn expression of their faith. An element of their time as the gathered community that was just as important as their listening or praising. ***"They bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground."*** (Neh. 8:6) As important as it is to lift our eyes to the heavens, which themselves ***'tell the glory of God,'*** we must also bow our heads in reverence before God, worshipping him in our prayers. As we look down at the soil of the earth, ***"with our faces to the ground,"*** we must remember our own mortality... that we are as dust. As in 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust.' And yet, it is from that same soil, that 'clay' of the earth, that God made us. And those same hands of creation hold us close, and love us with a deep, abiding, unconditional love. An 'amazing love' made flesh in Jesus Christ, whose hands also bore witness to the love of the Father for his children...

Which brings us to Jesus. The great High Priest above all others, who certainly showed Himself to be MUCH 'better than Ezra.' ☺ Like His ancient predecessor, Jesus certainly showed the importance of the **Word of God**. One thing that we should take note of is the 'preface' to Jesus' return to his hometown of Nazareth: The temptation of Jesus by Satan in the wilderness. How many times? And do you remember what was the central part of Jesus' rebuke to Satan each time? SCRIPTURE! Jesus used that 'weapon' of God's Word... ***"sharper than any two-edged sword"***... to fight off the attacks of the evil one. A good 'lesson' for us to learn as well.

Between this 'Spirit-empowering' use of God's Word, and His powerful reading of *Isaiah* that clearly pointed to Him as the fulfillment of ancient prophecies of the Messiah, Jesus placed a great value on the Scriptures. But what also struck me was His emphasis on the importance of the **Worship of God BY His people**. From the very beginning of his ministry here in Luke, it

says that ***“he began to teach in the synagogues... (that) he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom.”*** (Luke 4:15-16)

WHY was this his ‘custom?’ Why was it so important for Jesus to go to a place of worship and honor of God... His FATHER? If anyone could stay connected with God, it would be him. People joke about ministers having that ‘direct line’ to God... well Jesus SURE DID! He didn’t need to go to some physical building to speak to His ‘Abba’... His ‘Daddy.’ As Jesus Himself said, ***“I and the Father are one.”*** (John 10:30)

I think that this practice is along the same lines as his baptism. Did Jesus need to be washed in water, symbolically cleansing him from sin? Of course not. It wasn’t for HIM. But for US. In the same way, going to the synagogue to worship God wasn’t as much for HIM as it was for US: as a **validation** of the importance of gathering together as ‘God-followers’... As an **example** of how to live out one’s faith as a member of a worshipping **community**. Jesus LIVED OUT the **importance** of the **WORSHIP of God BY His people...** including His SON!

Now, you may be thinking that this is a ‘no-duh’. ‘Well OF COURSE ‘worship is important.’ If I didn’t think that worship was important, I wouldn’t BE here in the first place! You’re preaching to the choir/praise team, pastor! This part of the message is for those who are NOT here today!’ (Which is certainly the case for many parts of a Sunday message). This being said, yet in Jesus’ validation of the value of going to ‘church,’ we would do well to be mindful of what ‘church’ in His time looked like: There was no bulletin. No choir/musicians/paid staff. No priest/minister. No altar or communion table. As opposed to the formality of the one central temple, services at the many small, intimate synagogue congregations were very informal. They relied on **lay leaders**. (Like Pat/George). ‘**Attenders**’ often also became ‘**participants**... Jesus himself would have been considered a ‘lay leader!’ In lieu of an extensive liturgy, there were basically **FOUR essential elements of worship: Prayer. Scripture Reading. Reflection. Offering.** (Alms for the poor). And, finally, unlike the one-purpose Temple... WORSHIP... the synagogue often also functioned as a school, community center, ‘hall of justice’... a ‘courthouse,’ if you will. One of the earliest ‘multi-purpose facilities’...

Why all this history of our Jewish brethren? Because of its importance to the 'son of a Jewish carpenter'... our Savior, Jesus Christ. That maybe the things that were important to Him **then** still are **today**. **Lay leadership** in the church. Those who simply 'attend' worship are also called to be '**participants**.' That 'places of worship' are to serve **multiple purposes** in the life of the **community**. That for all that is important to US in worship, we must never lose focus on the most essential parts for our LORD: **Prayer.Scripture... Reading, Reflecting. Giving** of ourselves, **for others**. As we consider the 'ancient words' of Scripture, and it's 'modern message' for us, let us be confident that we can live out our faith even 'better than Ezra'... because we are 'better WITH Christ'. Closing with the >>words of Nehemiah, "**Lifting up their hands...All the people answered, 'Amen, Amen!'**" (Nehemiah 8:6)

CHARGE

The last line of our NT reading quoted Jesus as saying, "**Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.**"(Luke 4:21) In Luke's Gospel, "**TODAY**" would be the first public word of Jesus. Which should say to us that the **time of God** is '**TODAY**,' reminding us of the importance of the **present**. Of the need to NOT **dwell** on **Yesterday**... OR **despair** in a vague '**someday**.' But rather, **TODAY may you take to heart the words of Jesus for YOURSELF! Please say them with me:**

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19)

As you and I go forth to "**proclaim the year of the Lord's favor**," let us do so with confidence that we do NOT do this alone. But that the Spirit of the living God is above you to watch over you...

INTRO TO PRAYER TIME

You probably smiled as the Worship Leader **attempted to read** all of those **unfamiliar Hebrew names**. Reason was that this '**great cloud of witnesses**,' as **obscure** as their **names** may have been, "**helped the people to understand the law.**" **The best way to understand God's plan, God's LOVE for us**, is in the **person** of our **fellow man or woman**. That part of the reason God's people must worship and serve together is to help each other understand what God is saying to us; to "**give the sense**", as the Scripture says.

In the same way, as we lift up our prayer concerns before one another, we also help each other understand what God is saying to us in the struggles we go through. And even when we can't 'give the *sense*,' more importantly, we 'give the *support*,' the LOVE, that we all need to make it through another day...