

**WORSHIP UNPLUGGED**

NEHEMIAH 8:1, 4-6 | And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel...<sup>4</sup> And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand.<sup>5</sup> And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood.<sup>6</sup> And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.



hat preacher wouldn't envy Ezra? All the people gather as *one man* before the Water

Gate and invite him to bring the Word. But this is not as spontaneous as it looks. There is careful planning and preparation. Thirteen men, apparently lay leaders, stand by Ezra in support. The people had already built a stage for this purpose. The Hebrew text says they made a platform for the *word*.

The moment of Truth arrives. *In the sight of all the people*, Ezra opens the Book—hard copy! All the people rise in reverent anticipation. Ezra blesses the LORD. All the people say, *Amen, Amen*. They lift their hands. They bow their heads. They fall on their faces and worship the LORD. They do all this even before Ezra reads the Book. They don't waste the moment. They do all they can to prepare their hearts to encounter God in his Word. Waiting for the Word is worship. Not entertainment.

Have you ever seen a congregation so ready, so responsive, so reverent, and so receptive to the pure Word of God stripped of all adornments and enticements? If only it were so in all our churches today! That we would recognise God himself, present in

his Word. That we would conscientiously prepare our hearts to hear and obey as Ezra's congregation did. That we would treasure God's Word more than our daily food, as Job did (JOB 23:12). If only!

When a congregation so loves and longs for God's Word, they virtually siphon it out of the pastor's heart. The preacher can feel it. The sermon preaches itself. But alas! When people take the Word for granted and think about other things, the sermon bounces back like a racquetball. And the preacher sighs. A pastor once lamented: *On Sundays, I feel like a wind-up toy placed in front of an audience to do my song-and-dance routine before they get on with their lives!* (A.T. TROUTMAN)

The Water Gate Revival in Nehemiah 8 invites us to evaluate our corporate worship practices and especially our attitude toward the ministry of God's Word. Everything in this chapter revolves around the Word of God as planets orbit the sun. Everyone has a role to play. Every task contributes to the whole. An experience of genuine community. All are edified. God is glorified. Ecclesiology at its best!

**WALL OF DUTY**

■ Stop and think. Remember church pre-pandemic: A community of faith with a common purpose and a sense of belonging. What will church be like post-pandemic? More individual agenda? Less communal? The choice is ours. God created us for community. We thrive in community. Will you choose to do the right thing? Reject individualism. Stay true to discipleship in community. When all restrictions are lifted, do not neglect meeting together as one. Draw near in faith. Hold fast to hope (HEB 10:22-25). Exalt God as one. Hear his Word. Treasure his Word more than our daily food. Practise his Word. Grow strong in his Word. As one community of faith, love God by keeping his commandments (JOHN 14:15).

■ Search within. What is our attitude towards the ministry of the Word? Reverent and expectant for whatever God has in store? Receptive and responsive, regardless who preaches, and how long? Do we take steps to prepare ourselves to encounter God

during the proclamation of his Word? *It may seem like a small thing, but practical steps to enhance one's ability to focus on listening to God's word are important. The way the people of God treat the reading and teaching of God's word speaks volumes about their spiritual condition* (T.J. BETTS).

Today, turn over a new leaf. Cultivate the discipline of preparing yourself mentally, physically, and spiritually to receive life-giving Truth from God's Word proclaimed. Exhausted bodies and stuffed bellies affect our mood and attention span. Set a healthy rhythm: Sleep early. Awake refreshed. Fast breakfast. Come hungry. Ask God for a teachable spirit, listening ears, and a soft heart. Good soil for the seed of his Word to take root and bear fruit (MATT 13:23).

■ Scrutinise carefully. Where are we heading? Has 'contemporary worship' mutated into image branding? Does the community of worshippers have a part, know their part, and play their part? Or have we fostered a cult around stage performers and star preachers? Has the public reading of the Word become an afterthought (1 TIM 4:13)? Is congregational prayer more monologue than participatory? Do we prioritise the Word? Or do we major in non-essentials to entertain spectators and satisfy consumers? *The forms of worship we adopt aren't neutral; they will mould the next generation of worshippers* (MATT MERKER). For better or for worse. Watch and pray.

■ Sing and pray: *Speak, O Lord, as we come to you. To receive the food of your Holy Word. Take your truth, plant it deep in us. Shape and fashion us in your likeness... Teach us Lord, full obedience, holy reverence, true humility. Test our thoughts and our attitudes in the radiance of your purity... Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds. Help us grasp the heights of your plans for us. Truths unchanged from the dawn of time that will echo down through eternity* (KEITH & KRISTYN GETTY).