

They all had been through some pretty tough times together.

Under the leadership of their governor, Nehemiah, the Jews had worked and struggled and fought to put back into place the burnt and crumbled stones that had once been the wall around Jerusalem.

Shortly after the work had begun, however, Sanballat, the Samaritan governor, and Tobiah, a Jew by birth but now an Ammonite official, began their campaign of rumor and innuendo and treachery. These neighbors mocked the Jews for what they saw as a futile, even rebellious activity; they formed a conspiracy with others to disrupt the work by means of armed force; and they repeatedly tried to entice their leader, Nehemiah, to do something foolish by which they could then denounce him to the king.

But through it all, the people kept at it, repairing the walls stone by stone—even working with their weapons strapped to their sides, working with a trowel in one hand and their sword in the other—until finally the wall was restored, and it was time to praise Jehovah for His strengthening hand in the restoration of His city.

And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the

first day of the seventh month. He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah,

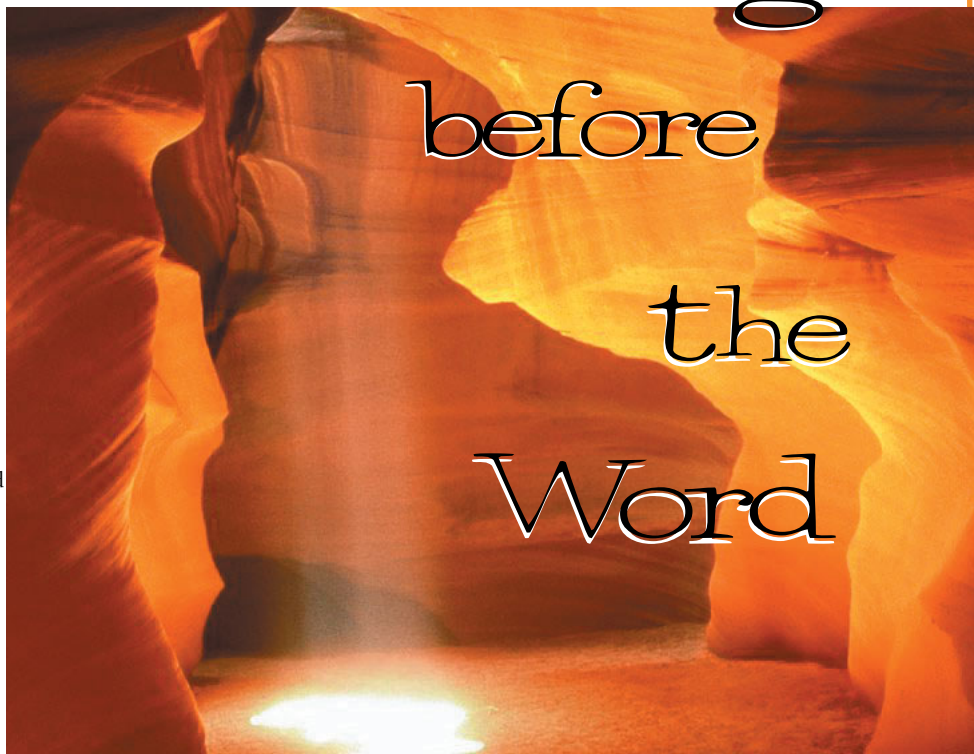
Zechariah and Meshullam on his left hand. Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.
(Nehemiah 8:1-6)

Standing

before

the

Word



Oh, that we would today hold in such reverence and awe the word of God. Sadly, it has become almost commonplace; there is only a short distance from the dust-covered tome holding down the coffee table to the casual, almost impatient, reading in the modern worship service. Somewhere along, as we have passed through our methods and traditions, the evangelical has come to think that to stand in silence at the reading of God's word is too "high church"—too formal. And it has taken only a short time for this to degenerate into the pastor whisking through the text so as to spend more time with *his* words rather than *His* words. In our fear of returning to those pre-reformation days, when the Bible was chained to the pulpit and recited only in Latin, our practices have degenerated into an almost blasphemous tedium when God's word is read, so that now it is even common for people to continue their conversations with pew mates while the Bible is being read. Oh, that we would return to the level of reverence witnessed by Ezra, so that when God's word is read to the people we would all lift up our hands and cry out: "Amen! Amen!" and fall down and worship Him with our faces to the ground.

Thirsting at the Water Gate

They had labored for so long—hard, backbreaking labor, always looking over their shoulders for an attack. Finally, against all odds, the wall had been finished and the new gates set in place. And we would not be surprised if Scripture reported that they took their ease beside the pool of Siloam, or had a picnic out under the shade trees, or at least celebrated by affixing their names to the stones just erected.

Instead, we read that these bone-weary people with scraped and calloused hands gathered before the eastern Water Gate and, as one, called out to Ezra the scribe to read God's word to them. At this dramatic juncture in their lives—after decades of Babylonian captivity, after decades of

having their culture diluted by the infusion of others, after a confused return to the rubble of Jerusalem—they needed to reestablish their connection to the purity of God's law.

And it was *their* idea. No pastor mailed them invitations; no sexton tolled the steeple bells, waking them all from their exhausted slumber; no town crier wandered the city streets and alleyways calling them to assembly. Out of their own need they came to the word of God.

Who were these people that they should be so intent on hearing God's word read

When the heart, on its knees, moves into the awesome Presence and hears with fear and wonder things not lawful to utter, then the mind falls flat, and words, previously its faithful servants, become weak and totally incapable of telling what the heart hears and sees. In that awful moment the worshiper can only cry "Oh!" And that simple exclamation becomes more eloquent than learned speech and, I have no doubt, is dearer to God than any oratory. When God Himself appears before the mind, awesome, vast and incomprehensible, then the mind sinks into silence and the heart cries out "O Lord God!" We Christians should watch lest we lose the "Oh!" from our hearts. There is real danger these days that we shall fall victim to the prophets of poise and the purveyors of tranquility, and our Christianity be reduced to a mere evangelical humanism that is never disturbed about anything nor overcome by any "trances of thought and mountings of the mind." When we become too glib in prayer we are most surely talking to ourselves. (A.W. Tozer)

to them? Were they holy people: priests, preachers, prophets? No, they were just people. They were goldsmiths, perfumers, officials, priests, merchants, gatekeepers, singers, servants and slaves, overseers, warriors, farmers, fathers, mothers, sons and daughters. A mix not unlike that making up the average church today.

The people standing before Ezra had a hunger for God's word. Would that today we would have that same hunger to hear His voice.

"Amen! Amen!"

There is no one, correct way to worship, except to worship honestly. In John 4, Jesus

tells the Samaritan woman at the well that the Father seeks those who will worship Him in Spirit and truth. It is a sorrowful thing to lie to God—and where worse than during His worship.

There are those who restrain the outpouring of the Spirit, because to do else would be to cut against the traditions of the local assembly; there are those who manufacture ecstasies, because to fail to produce in that regard would be an admission that a spirit was not in residence. Both transgress against the instructions of Jesus.

What does it profit us to lie to

God—and if the untruth is not directed to God, what is the motive for our actions in worship? To whom is the worship being directed?

Should we be so casual with a God so holy? Proper reverence does not forget His nearness to us—especially through His Son, our brother, Jesus Christ. The very purpose for which God sacrificed His Son was so that we would be able to draw near to Him, intimately. But He is still God, a most holy God, and, to paraphrase Tozer, when we fail to worship Him honestly, we are most certainly worshipping ourselves.

I am grateful to Governor Nehemiah for recording in his journal the scene that transpired that day inside the Water Gate of the Jerusalem wall. What a beautiful scene of honest, heartfelt worship! What an exquisite

example of a people acknowledging their humble position before an all-powerful, holy God.

Their Spiritual leader, the scribe and priest Ezra, began by praising "the Lord the great God." Then all the people shouted "Yes, we agree! Praise the Lord!" with their hands and hearts uplifted to reach just a bit closer to Jehovah. Then, as if their outstretched hands had made contact with His utter holiness, they immediately dropped to the dust of the earth and worshipped Him with their faces turned away from the blinding brilliance of His holy fire.