

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.

Nehemiah 8:5

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.

They had labored for so long—hard, backbreaking labor to rebuild the Jerusalem wall, 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 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 had that same hunger to hear His voice.

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 A. W. Tozer, when we fail to worship Him earnestly, 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, heart-felt worship! What an exquisite example of a people acknowledging their humble position before an all-powerful, holy God.

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 8:6

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.

