



COMMUNITY **Nehemiah 12:27-47**

If you have a bible, and I hope you do, I want to invite you to open with me to the Old Testament, the book of Nehemiah 12. I am really excited about this series, “Awaken”—corporate worship. I know that since the inception of this church that worship has been a primary focus of this church. It has been the foundation of this church and that is a good thing. Worship was the reason we were created. We were created to worship God. This church was created for His worship, His glory. So worship is a good thing.

The only thing we have to make sure of is that sometimes we are tempted to get a skewed view of worship. Culture and contemporary fads can cause us to miss out on what Scripture teaches about worship. We are going to revisit what the Word teaches us about worship to make sure that we are worshipping God truly. That is going to be the foundation of who we are as God’s people.

Balancing Worship ...

What I want to do from the very beginning before we even dive into Nehemiah 12 is lay out some foundations, set the stage for this series. We will revisit some of these foundations later on. I want us to think about these foundations in terms of balancing worship. There are different sides, so to speak, of the biblical picture of worship and we need to keep in balance in order to maintain any kind of healthy perspective of biblical worship. I want us to lay out these foundations and then we will dive into Nehemiah 12.

Worship is an honor yet also a command.

The first foundation when it comes to balancing worship is to remember that worship is an honor yet it is also a command. We need to remember this morning as we begin talking about worship that it is only because of the grace and mercy of God that we have the privilege of calling ourselves worshipers of His name. It is only by the Cross of Jesus Christ that we are even at the point where we are in our lives. That is the only way we can be worshipers. As a result worship is an intense and incredible privilege and an honor.

At the same time, all throughout Scripture we see imperatives, commands in the Old Testament and New Testament for God’s people to worship His name. It is something we are commanded to do. It is not an optional thing, a take it or leave it kind of deal. This is something we are commanded to do in Scripture. This is important.

I can't help but think sometimes when I see the numbers of people that gather together for corporate worship. Sometimes it is 3,000 plus, sometimes it is 4000 plus. Last week we had 6,300 people here worshipping on Easter. I know that in that picture there are many people who have not trusted in Christ, who are not followers of Jesus Christ. But I know that a lot of that picture is of people who do know Christ and follow Christ and I can't help but think as I see fluctuations like that that somewhere along the way many of us as Christ-followers have gotten the view that corporate worship is negotiable, that it is an option in our Christianity. It is the crowning joy of Christianity, to gather together with God's people and worship His name. As a result, we are commanded to do it. It is an honor but it is a command and we need to take that command seriously. Worship is an honor yet also a command.

Worship is biblically prescribed yet also culturally flexible.

Second, worship is Biblically prescribed, yet also culturally flexible. Basically, what I mean by that is the first half – worship is Biblically prescribed – if God commands us to worship then it would make sense that He tells us how to do that through His word. That is the whole basis for this series. We are going to dive into God's word to see what He says about worship because what He says is very important.

Just like in the Old Testament there were times when they would get away from the whole point of worship in God's word. God would come down and basically say to them, you can have a worship service that looks really good in your eyes but it can be utterly detestable in mine. So we've got to be careful to make sure that we are worshipping in a way that lines up with God's Word. The determinant of how we worship is not cultural style or contemporary trend. The determinant of how we worship is God's Word. God is much more concerned with our faithfulness to His Word than He is with our creativity and ways we can think of to do worship.

It is Biblically prescribed, but then second, it is culturally flexible. Now here is what I mean by that. When you get to the New Testament, I am convinced that the picture of worship is not quite as explicit or specific. You see the church gathering together but they don't even call those times necessarily in Scripture worship services like we might even call them today. So it looks a lot different in different places. I am convinced it is that way for two main reasons.

Number one, when you get to the New Testament Jesus dies on the cross, rises from the grave. The whole Old Testament picture of worship is turned upside-down not thrown out the window but it is turned upside-down and worship is completely different in light of the Cross. So that doesn't mean we throw the Old Testament out the window but it does mean we need to make sure that any time we look at the Old Testament like we will do this morning, to look at it, especially when it comes to worship in light of the New Testament.

Second reason I think there is more flexibility in any kind of prescription for corporate worship in the New Testament is because the church was advancing in new places and new cultures and new people. As a result there was a lot of flexibility for how that corporate worship looked. Instead of the New Testament being a book of prescriptive forms that every

culture must follow, it is much more flexible. It is a missions book. As the gospel goes to different cultures corporate worship may look different in different places and different ways. It is biblically prescribed; yet there are some non-negotiables at the center. That is going to be the highlight in this series. But it is also culturally flexible.

You do realize that most of what we picture when we think of worship today is more on the cultural side than the biblical side. When we think of worship, the first image that probably comes into our mind is this room and these seats and these screens and these speakers and this particular setup for worship. You realize that all of those things that I just listed are not Biblically necessary for worship. If they were that would be bad news for our brothers and sisters in underground churches in China or the deep jungles of Sudan, persecuted areas of Saudi Arabia.

So what we need to make sure we do is focus on what is biblically necessary. That doesn't mean all of these other things are wrong. But if we focus on those things when we think of worship and we ignore what God says is most important in worship we will miss the whole point of what He desires in our worship. It is biblically prescribed but culturally flexible.

Worship is the fuel yet also the goal of our mission.

Third, worship is the fuel yet also the goal of our mission. I want you to see from the very start of this series how it is intricately linked with everything we have done this year: walking through disciple-making in the life of Christ and disciple-making in the life of Paul. Worship is not over here and disciple-making over here. Worship is the fuel for why we make disciples of all nations.

Why do we go out and sacrifice our lives and sacrifice this church to making disciples of all nations? We do that because we are fueled by the glory of God. We are so captivated by His wonder and His greatness that we are compelled to go and make disciples of all nations. It fuels us. But it is also the goal.

There is going to be a day in the future where we won't be making disciples any more. On that day we will just be worshipping. The whole goal of us giving ourselves to making disciples of all nations is looking forward to the day where people from everywhere and every tribe and every people in every language in every nation will bow around the throne and enjoy His worship forever. That is the goal. That is what we are living for. Worship is the fuel and the goal of this mission.

Worship involves those inside the church yet also affects those outside the church.

Number four, worship involves those inside the church yet also affects those outside the church. What we are going to see over the next five weeks is that worship in Scripture primarily involves the church, believers, those who have trusted in God, trusted in Christ.

Now that doesn't mean unbelievers, if you are here and you have never come to faith in God through Christ that you are out of this thing. Worship involves those inside the church but affects those outside the church. What that means is that the primary purpose of us gathering together in this room is to encourage the body. First Corinthians 14 makes that

very clear, so that the rest of this week we would be compelled to go out through this community and proclaim the greatness of God. We see how worship affects those outside the church but involves those inside the church. And there is also biblical precedent, 1 Corinthians 14, a passage we will look at later in this series, where Paul talks about how unbelievers sometimes come into our worship services, people who may not have faith in God. They observe the worship of God, Christ being exalted and that in and of itself may bring people to faith in Christ. Worship involves those inside the church but affects those outside the church.

Worship is personal yet also corporate.

Finally, worship is personal yet also corporate. There is definitely a picture in Scripture of how worship involves everything we do our thoughts, our actions, our words as day by day we are living in constant worship personally.

At the same time there is also an emphasis in the Old Testament and the New Testament on the church, people of God gathering together for worship. That is going to be the focus of this series. Not to exclude personal worship as unimportant but the goal in this series is for us to look at what happens when we gather together for worship. It is that question that is going to drive us in to the first nonnegotiable of corporate worship which is community. We are going to see that unfold in Nehemiah 12.

We're going to start in verse 27. I want you to get a context before we even start reading this passage. We are going to read from verse 27 all the way to the end. I want you to see a picture. The context is God's people in Jerusalem. At one point, 597 to 586 B.C. Jerusalem had been attacked by the Babylonians. The Babylonians had destroyed the temple of Jerusalem and the walls around the city. They had taken the people of God into exile. It is a very dark time in their history.

Then years later they were brought back together. As soon as they get back together there in Jerusalem, the first thing they do is to rebuild the temple. That is the book of Ezra. Then you get to the book of Nehemiah and they are rebuilding the walls. The first seven chapters of this book, they are rebuilding the walls. Then from chapter 8 on, we see a picture of the people of God being rebuilt in the middle of those walls. This is the climax here in Nehemiah 12 where they praise and worship God for what He has done among them. Look at Nehemiah 12:27. Picture this scene:

At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres. The singers also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem—from the villages of the Netophathites, from Beth Gilgal, and from the area of Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built villages for themselves around Jerusalem. When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.

I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks. One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right, toward the Dung Gate. Hoshaiah and half the leaders of Judah followed them, along with Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah, as well as some priests with trumpets, and also Zechariah son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph, and his associates—Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah and Hanani—with musical instruments prescribed by David the man of God. Ezra the scribe led the procession. At the Fountain Gate they continued directly up the steps of the City of David on the ascent to the wall and passed above the house of David to the Water Gate on the east.

The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. I followed them on top of the wall, together with half the people—past the Tower of the Ovens to the Broad Wall, over the Gate of Ephraim, the Jeshanah Gate, the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate. At the Gate of the Guard they stopped.

The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God; so did I, together with half the officials, as well as the priests—Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah and Hananiah with their trumpets—and also Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malkijah, Elam and Ezer. The choirs sang under the direction of Jezrahiah. And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.

At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, firstfruits and tithes. From the fields around the towns they were to bring into the storerooms the portions required by the Law for the priests and the Levites, for Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites. They performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did also the singers and gatekeepers, according to the commands of David and his son Solomon. For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the singers and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the singers and gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron (Neh. 12:27-47).

I'm guessing that maybe one or two paragraphs in, some of you just tuned out and just enjoyed listening to me try and read some of those names. So, let me recap what we just saw just in case you missed it.

What happens is that this is the dedication of the wall that had been built around Jerusalem. What happens is that Nehemiah and the other officials get together and two choirs, basically set out from one place. They go out on top of the walls and they march around the city on top of the wall singing the praises of God. Then at one point, they are going in different directions, at one point they come down and they come into the middle of the city to where the temple is and that is where they complete their service of worship and praise. That is the picture we have just seen.

When We Gather Together For Worship ...

So what does this text have to teach us today about what it means when we gather together for corporate worship?

We celebrate the glory of God.

First of all, I want you to see the purpose of our gathering together is to celebrate the glory of God. This is what happens when the church gathers together for worship. This is the nonnegotiable. We celebrate the glory of God.

Now in order to get this picture we have to put ourselves in their shoes in the book of Nehemiah, the Old Testament. We have to remember that in that day the temple was not just one place where you might go to worship and you go to another church the next week and you go to another church the next week. The temple was the place where the glory of God dwelled. That is where His name dwelled among His people. So if you were going to worship and encounter the glory of God, the primary place you come is the temple. That is why it is the first thing they rebuilt. They rebuilt this temple that was a picture of the glory of God in the Old Testament.

Now in that day when the walls around the temple were in shambles all around the city and you had all of these pagan nations outside of Jerusalem that worshipped all kind of different gods, polytheistic people. You see the people of God, they are claiming there is only one God, they have this temple that is dedicated to His worship, but all these pagan nations look inside that city, see the temple and then see the walls in shambles all around the temple. What do you think the pagan nations thought about that people's god?

They thought, that god is weak, that god doesn't take care of his people. What happened is the pagan nations around Jerusalem were ridiculing them. They were in much disgrace, Nehemiah 1 says. Not only the people of God, being ridiculed, but the glory of God being ridiculed. That is why God raises up Nehemiah to come over and lead the rebuilding of these walls. Let me show you this.

Turn back to Nehemiah 4. Look at the very beginning of Nehemiah 4. You have to see this. We are going to picture the ridicule that was going on there. It says in Nehemiah 4:1 – this is talking about some of the opposition they faced. It goes over three chapters, them facing opposition. It says,

"When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, 'What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are'" (Neh. 4:1-2)?

Trash talking in the Old Testament. *"Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side..."* (Neh. 4:3). Listen to what Tobiah chimes in and says, said, *"What they are building—if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones"* (Neh. 4:3). They are getting mocked. Tobiah says they can try and build up those walls but if they build them up, you put a fox on top and they all come crumbling down. And so they give their hearts and their lives to rebuilding these walls.

And then when it comes time to celebrate what God has done, what do they do? They don't just come inside the city, they take the choirs and say, you up on that wall and you up on that wall and what they do is they march around on top of the walls. The Bible says three different times in Nehemiah 12 the sound of their rejoicing could be heard far away; all the pagan nations around seeing the people of God celebrating the glory of God. They were declaring what only God could have done among them.

Why don't we gather together for corporate worship? The fundamental reason why we gather together for corporate worship is because our God's glory is worth celebrating. His glory is great and it is worth our celebrations. We celebrate the glory of God. See how that happens in a couple of different ways in this text.

First of all, corporate worship is public enjoyment of who God is. When you go to verse 27 you see Nehemiah begin emphasizing the joy that was all over this picture. You might circle it every time you see "joy" mentioned. Look in verse 27 it says they brought the *"Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs"* (Neh. 12:27). Not just to celebrate but to celebrate joyfully these songs of dedication. You get down to verse 31 where he is talking about the choirs and says, "I assigned", not just two choirs, but two "large choirs". He is going out of his way to talk about what an incredible celebration this is. It is climaxed in verse 43. Look at the intensity of this verse. *"On that day they offered"—not just sacrifices—"they offered great sacrifices"* (Neh. 12:43). Here it is, *"Rejoicing because God had given them,"* not just joy, *"God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away"* (Neh. 12:43). Every phrase in that verse talks about the joy they were experiencing in this picture. It is public enjoyment of who God is.

Now we miss this sometimes. I heard it said even when coming into worship services, particularly traveling, many times a worship leader or maybe even a preacher will stand and say, talking about worship, inviting people to worship, will say something almost with a stern look in their face and say something like, "This is not about you this morning." It is almost as if to say, "Don't expect to have any fun in this place this morning. This is not about you."

In one sense it is not about us. We will look at that next week. But in another sense corporate worship has everything to do with us. This is our celebration of the glory of God. It is our enjoyment of who He is. Don't miss the beauty of biblical worship. Our joy and God's glory come to meet together in corporate worship. When we worship God together, we experience a joy that nothing, absolutely nothing in this world can even compare with. There is great joy in biblical worship. We enjoy publicly who God is.

Secondly, we publicly thank God for what He has done in our lives. You see thanksgiving mentioned over and over. You might circle or underline these instances in verse 27 right after it says they celebrated joyfully the dedication with songs, it says, "They celebrated those songs of thanksgiving" – there is the first time. You get down to verse 31 and it says, "I assigned two large choirs" to do what? "To give thanks." Look down at verse 40, the two choirs, "they gave thanks" – emphasis on thanksgiving. You go over to verse 46 at the very end it says long ago in the days of David and Asaph there had been directors for the singers and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. Public thanksgiving for all that he has done.

Now some of you might be wondering, when you get to Nehemiah 12 and you read through that, it seems to kind of get monotonous and you get lost with the mention of this gate and that gate and this tower and that tower, and you are thinking, "Why do we need all of that information?" That is a good question. I want you to think about why Nehemiah would go out of his way to emphasize the different towers that were involved, that they went to.

In order to answer that question, hold your place here and turn with me back to Nehemiah 2. I want you to see this. This is a great picture. Nehemiah 2:13. When Nehemiah first came to the city of Jerusalem, he went out one night in secret and basically scouted out the situation without telling anybody what his plans were. He went from gate to gate. Look at this,

"By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate" (Neh. 2:13-15).

Imagine the scene. Late at night; you are Nehemiah and you are scouting out these walls. It is a dim scene. Every place you go you see the walls are down. You see the walls in shambles. So then 10 chapters later you get to the time where you celebrate the rebuilding of those walls then you go specifically to this wall and this wall and this wall. You think about what it looked like before and you look at what it looks like now and you thank God for what He has done.

Isn't it good to look back in times in our lives at where we once were in situations that seemed hopeless and things that we faced that we weren't sure how we were going get through – to look back and see the faithfulness of God in the middle of that and to publicly

offer thanksgiving for what He has done. God help us never to forget from where He has brought each of us in this room by His grace and His mercy. Even to look at the trials that you may be facing today and the suffering that you find yourself in the middle of and the valley you find yourself immersed in to know there will be a day when you will be able to look back to this day and see God's faithfulness in the middle of it all as you stand and march around the walls that He has rebuilt in your life. What an incredible picture, public thanksgiving for all He has done. Corporate worship is the celebration of the glory of God.

We participate as the people of God.

Second and this is where we are going to get into this nonnegotiable of community in corporate worship. We celebrate the glory of God and second, we participate as the people of God.

As you read over this text you see there are all kinds of people involved in this thing – huge gathering of people. Everybody gathered together. Before we dive in though and see some of the specifics there, I want us to take the picture we have seen here in Nehemiah 12 and compare it to contemporary forms of corporate worship. Specifically to notice some dangers, traps, problems that we may fall in to that we don't see in Nehemiah 12. I want you to think about two problems/dangers in contemporary worship.

Number one is an individualistic attitude. Are there individuals mentioned in Nehemiah 12? Absolutely and we can't pronounce half of their names, but they are there. There are individuals there but we see how they all come together and this picture of community in Nehemiah 12. They are involved in one unified celebration. We miss this, especially in our individualistic culture but even in the church.

How many times have we heard a worship leader, maybe a pastor, say something along the lines of, "You know over the next few minutes as you sing this song or as we go into prayer, just pretend like it is you and God. Draw a box around yourself, draw a line around yourself and just spend time with you and Him. Pretend like the person next to you is not even there. This is a time to focus just between you and God?"

How does that make the person beside you feel for you to be told to ignore the fact that they are there pretend like they are no where to be found? There is a time for just us and God, a time for personal prayer. It is called our prayer closet. There is a time for that but we need to remember that we are not just a gathering of individual worshippers; we are a community of faith. We are together. We don't pretend like each other are not there. We are here together for a reason. We don't ignore each other. We value each other. This is big, especially in this setting. In a setting this size, this size church, it is very easy to come in and worship in anonymity and not have to engage anybody else. If that is the case in our worship then we are missing out on what corporate worship biblically is all about. We are ignoring each other. The individualistic attitude we must beware of.

Second – the spectator approach. Obviously in Nehemiah 12 worship is a participant's activity not a spectator sport. There is a word here for us. Again, even in this room, that is designed theater style to all be focused on the stage and the people up here, that we

vicariously may worship through. That is not the picture of Biblical worship us sitting back and watching just like we watch a football game. That is not what corporate worship is about. We don't gather together to observe worship. We gather together to engage in worship, to participate together. That is why we sing together and we study together. We read the Word together and we pray together. We participate in the Lord's Supper together. We do these things together because we are a community of faith. There are no spectators. The only spectators in Nehemiah 12 are the pagan nations that are surrounding Jerusalem. That is the only spectators here. All of the people of God are involved in this thing. Verse 43, women and children, everybody, they are all in this thing together.

So we have to avoid those two things. How do we do that in light of our individualistic culture and even the spectator approach, which this room is maybe even set up for? How do we avoid that? We need to be reminded of the point of corporate worship in a few different ways.

First of all, in corporate worship we encourage each other. This is where I want us to really begin to see the parallels between Old Testament and New Testament pictures of worship. We encourage each other. Obviously Nehemiah 12 is a celebration of the glory of God. We have seen that. It is all aimed towards Him. We will talk about that more next week.

But, can you imagine being part of this thing? Do you think it would strengthen and encourage your faith to be a part of this thing? No question. They walked away encouraged by each other, by the celebration that they had participate in. This is exactly what the New Testament emphasizes in worship.

Let me show you an example. Hold your place here in Nehemiah 12 and go with me over to Ephesians 5. I want you to look with me at verse 19. Paul is talking here – the Bible tells us about being filled with the Holy Spirit, what the Holy Spirit does in our lives and look at what verse 19 says. I think this is one of the clearest mandates for some form of corporate worship, not necessarily a certain number of people or a certain building, but some form of corporate worship. Listen to this. Ephesians 5:19, *"Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Eph. 5:19-20).

Did you hear that? Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. You cannot do that in solitude. You cannot do that by yourself. You can sing by yourself, in fact, it is the safest place for me to sing, however, I cannot obey Ephesians 5:18-19 by myself in solitude. We speak to one another this is why we sing together in our worship services. This is why whether we are lead by people singing solos or praise teams or choirs or just one person leading us in song that is the purpose we sing to each other to encourage each other.

Even many of our songs you think about some of the traditional hymns that many of you may be familiar with. They are actually songs that are song to each other as opposed to God. That is a biblical picture here in Ephesians 5. "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name" – that is telling each other to worship Christ for the power of His name. "Crown Him with Many

Crowns" – that is something we sing to each other. Even a song like "Orphans of God," it is not a song directly to God, it is a song to encourage each other about God and His glory. That is a Biblical thing to do.

It is biblically necessary for us in our Christianity to sing to one another, to speak to one another, to encourage each other in our worship. You get over to I Corinthians 14 which we will look at later in this series and you even see Paul emphasizing how we should speak about God's goodness and sing about God's goodness so that we can corporately agree together and say amen together. That is what 1 Corinthians 14:16 says. Did you know it is Biblical to yell out "amen" in a worship service? Can I get an "amen"? Alright! That is entirely biblical to do that. I have people come up to me and they say, "I wanted to say amen at this point but I just didn't feel like it." Well you disobeyed if you didn't say it. It is biblical to say. That promise that truth that we sing or you speak, to say amen. I want to free you up today. Throughout the rest of this series and beyond you now have complete and total freedom to let loose in this worship service. When we come together to worship you just let an amen out whenever you so desire. I am convinced this is where we have a lot to learn from our African American brothers and sisters and their traditions in worship, talk about participation. We need to participate as the people of God together in worship. We encourage each other.

Second, in corporate worship we express our unity. When you come back to Nehemiah 12 there is variation all over this thing. Different people, different choirs, different instruments that are used, all kinds of different stuff – variation – but they all come together in unity. The key word here is we express our unity in corporate worship. That is the key word because I think we have missed this, especially over the last 20 or so years in many churches in the United States.

Instead of looking to worship to express our unity somewhere along the way we have gotten the idea that the design of worship is to create our unity, especially the design of musical worship. So what we have done is that we have looked to our music and worship to be what unites us. The problem when you do that is you have this preference and you have this style, and you come together and the music ends up not uniting you, it ends up dividing you. People start complaining about this style or that style, or this song or that song. You look over the last 20 years and there are so many churches that have argued then divided, even split over this very issue, musical worship. That is dangerous.

Take a step back with me for a second. What unites us? The work of Christ on the cross unites all of us. It is a picture here in Nehemiah 8 even before Christ. You go to Nehemiah 8:1 and they united together in the Word. Chapter 12 is then an expression of their unity around God's Word. What unites us in this place is the salvation God has brought us through His Word. If we are trying to let music do what only the gospel was intended to do then we will miss the whole point of corporate worship. We can spend endless hours debating this preference or that style but we have got to realize that as soon as we start arguing about those kinds of issues then we are undercutting the very purpose of why God brings us together for worship, to express the unity that Christ died to bring us. This is huge.

I'm not saying there are not differences in preferences or styles. But I am saying this – let's let Christ be the unifying factor and let any worship we do be an expression of our unity. I am convinced that if we were as passionate about impacting the world with the glory of Christ as we have been about what song or style that is represented on the stage in front of us then there would be no unreached people groups in the world today. Let's put our focus on what does unite us in His word and let our worship express our unity. Does that make sense?

We encourage each other and we express our unity and third, this is where it gets really interesting, we establish continuity with church throughout history. I want you to notice at three different times in this passage where there is reference to David and the past. Look in verse 36. It lists some of these guys names then it says, "*With musical instruments prescribed by David, the man of God*" (Neh. 12:36). Then you get to verse 45 it says, "*They performed the service of their God and the service of the purification, as did also the singers and gatekeepers, according to the commands of David and his son Solomon*" (Neh. 12:45). The third time is in verse 46, "*For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the singers*" (Neh. 12:46).

Now don't miss this. Three different times in Nehemiah 12 they make reference to how their worship was informed and affected by what David had done 500 years before. First Chronicles 15, 1 Chronicles 25 – 500 years before that – David did this and it's affecting the way they are worshipping now. These people realize that they were in a long line, a history, of worshippers of God Most High. There was a lot of respect and value and honor for the way God had been worshipped all throughout that time.

Now I know that there are very significant differences between us today and this picture in Nehemiah 12 particularly when it comes to the temple and to prescriptive things in the Old Testament for worship. However, I do believe there is a word here for us. What we need to remember is that we are in a long line of people who for thousands of years have given worship and honor and glory to our God. We have to be careful not to have such a desire to be different that we end up blindly or flippantly or disrespectfully throwing out all the traditions of those who worshipped before us like they don't even matter.

I'm not saying that we need to go back to exactly the form of worship that they used 500 years ago, but I am saying this, we need to respect and honor the way our forefathers... Students, the way senior adults have worshipped in the past, and have glorified God in the past. Honor that. Respect that. And to remember – don't miss this – and to remember that how we worship today will affect generations to come. You do realize that the way we are worshipping today is teaching generations who come after us what it means to worship God. God, may it be said when they look back at the worship at this church that they see a reverence for God and an awe for His Word and a joy, a deep abiding joy, in him that causes them to say that is how we want to worship. That is the picture here.

You realize that this is not about what happens in one location one time a week. We are a part of a long line – people who have gone before us, people who come after us. God, help us, that is why we cannot lessen worship in the church today because it is not just about us

it is about generations who will follow after us. We establish continuity with the church throughout history.

Finally, number four, we engage together in spiritual battle. This is a great picture—they marching around these walls. You look back in the Old Testament and you see that at different points, God would send His people to a land to walk over that land, to claim it as theirs, Genesis 13 Abraham walks out on the Promised Land. This is yours by faith. Joshua 1, Joshua walks out on the land, his by faith. Here they are in Nehemiah; they are walking around these walls. It is a picture of them saying God has restored us. He has brought us back from the exile. He has given us this land to glorify His name. They are claiming that. A picture of spiritual battle – victory over the adversary – they are back. This land belongs to the people of God. This is not an isolated incident when it comes to worship, to spiritual battle.

Let me show you a story in 2 Chronicles 20. I want you to see a story that I am guessing many of us, maybe even most of us, have glossed over or never even noticed in Scripture but it is an incredible story. 2 Chronicles 20 starting in verse 18. The context is a guy named Jehoshaphat is leading the army of God out to Ammon and Moab to fight the people of Ammon and Moab and they get word from the prophets of God that they are going to have the victory in the battle so I want you to see what they do right after they get that word in verse 18:

Jehoshaphat bowed with his face to the ground, and all the people of Judah and Jerusalem fell down in worship before the Lord. Then some Levites from the Kohathites and Korahites stood up and praised the Lord, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice. Early in the morning they left for the Desert of Tekoa. As they set out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, 'Listen to me, Judah and people of Jerusalem! Have faith in the Lord your God and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful.' After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: 'Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever' (2 Chron. 20:18-21).

Do you see what is happening here? They are going out to battle and Jehoshaphat is sending out the frontline troops. Who does he send out? Not the charioteers; not the swordsmen. Who does he send out? The praise band! He sends out the worship staff to the frontlines, the singers, the choir. He's going to conquer Ammon and Moab with a choir. That's exactly the picture though.

They go out and they sing and God routes the enemy. They sing, declaring His splendor and His glory and His majesty and His victory. What an incredible picture here – to conquer with the choir. If you are part of the choir, I remind you that you are leading us out in this mission. You sing of the victory we have as we make disciples of all nations you are on the front lines. That will make you want to join the choir, I hope. It's not just here in the Old Testament.

Remember Acts 16, Paul and Silas are beaten in prison, sitting at midnight in a dirty filthy jail cell, the darkness and damp, musty with chains around them, sores all over, not knowing if the next morning they are going to be flogged again or beheaded. In this dark moment in this jail cell, what did they do? They sing hymns. That's weird. You don't sing hymns in the middle of the jail cell. Why would you sing hymns at that point? If you were at a dark point in your life and I were to tell you that you need to just sing hymn you would look at me and say you preachers are so simplistic in your answers. What do you mean sing hymns? Why do you sing hymns? Because of the God that you are singing to. That is the picture there of the victory of God.

As soon as they begin to sing, what happens? Earthquake, chains break off, the jailer and his whole family comes to faith in Christ and the next morning those two guys are gladly escorted out of the prison. Satan does not like it when the church sings of the glory of God. We engage together in spiritual battle even with our singing.

Now you look at all of those things. We encourage each other. We express our unity. We establish continuity and we engage in spiritual battle. If we approach worship with a spectator approach then we will undercut every single one of those things. We won't encourage one another. We will isolate ourselves from each other. We won't express our unity. We will actually delight in our disunity in the safety of our anonymity. We won't establish continuity with the church throughout history. We will disconnect ourselves from the church throughout history. We won't engage together in spiritual battle.

I am convinced that at least part of the reason why the church's influence in our culture today is so weak is because we have grown accustomed to letting our Christianity be lived out vicariously through others instead of participating in His mission in His worship like the Bible tells us to. God help us to realize the power of church will be weak when our participation in worshipping His glory is weak. The power of the church will be strong when we join together and we proclaim His glory and we yell it out in spiritual battle that He is the victor and He has died on the cross, rose from the grave and He is able to penetrate nations with His glory. We participate with the people of God.

We dedicate ourselves to the service of God.

Finally Nehemiah 12 shows us that in corporate worship we dedicate ourselves to the service of God. From the very beginning of this story it is a picture of dedication. They dedicated the walls. Literally, they put the walls into God's hands. "It is yours, God. You own this."

Now I want us to draw the line here from the Old Testament to the New Testament in two ways when we think about dedicating ourselves to God in corporate worship today. First of all we sacrifice our resources for ministry. When you come to the end of Nehemiah 12:44 starts talking about the contributions, first fruits and tithes and then you get down to verse 47 and it says: *"So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the singers and gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron"* (Neh. 12:47).

This is something they have covenanted to do way back in the beginning of the Old Testament that we are going to set aside their resources, a tenth of them. We are going to give to the Levites and to the priests and those who serve in the work of ministry in the temple. We are going to give to that, and they did. It is a covenant they renewed in Nehemiah 10. So they're making good on that and their worship involved them sacrificing their resources for ministry.

Now at this point we don't have time to necessarily dive in to the whole picture of tithe throughout Scripture but suffice to say, especially in the New Testament, the picture is even clearer. In the Old Testament you gave a tenth to support the work of ministry. That was what God commanded to do. In the New Testament we definitely see the people of God, even the poorest of churches, giving to support the work of God among His servants, the work of God in His church.

Even deeper than that, 2 Corinthians, chapters 8 and 9 you see the people not commanded to give 10% but to give abundantly, to give generously, to give cheerfully, to give sacrificially. Why? Because you are so captivated by the glory of God and you want His glory to be made in the church. It only made sense that you sacrifice your resources for ministry through the church. That is the picture of worship. That is why the offering is a very important, very significant part of our corporate worship.

I want to encourage you today, based on Scripture, that if sacrificing your resources for ministry is not a part, a significant part of your corporate worship to make it one, based on the Word of God. Not because you have to, although it is definitely commanded in the Old Testament, but the beauty of the New Testament, the picture of grace that we are seeing there, is we are compelled to give because we know God has entrusted us with much. We want to sacrifice our resources for ministry. God help us to realize that if we all as a church grabbed a hold of this in this room, do you realize the resources God would entrust to us to use to advance His kingdom? When we show ourselves to be stewards of what He has given to us – we sacrifice our resources for ministry.

Second, we surrender our lives for mission. Here is where we must look at Nehemiah 12 through the lens of the New Testament. We come here to this dedication of these walls but if we walk away from Nehemiah 12 and we use this text to lead us to dedicate buildings then we will have missed the whole point of what Scripture is trying to teach us here.

In the Old Testament system God's glory was dwelling in the temple, in that building, in the holy city of Jerusalem. You get to the New Testament and you see Jesus claiming to be the temple, claiming to be the city where you encounter the glory of God. Here is where you encounter His glory. I am the temple. Then He dies on the cross, rises from the grave, ascends into heaven. He sends His Holy Spirit and now who is the temple? We're the temple, the Holy Spirit, the glory of God dwelling in each one of us.

So if we take Nehemiah 12 and we build a building and we dedicate it and we say use this for your glory we will have missed the whole point, we are the buildings. We are the places in this community, not this structure. We, our lives, are the places this week where people

will encounter the glory of God and encounter the goodness of God and encounter the mercy and the grace and the majesty of God. That is why we surrender ourselves to this mission in corporate worship. Because all week long God wants to take His glory to the people in your workplace, in your community, in your home and He wants to do it through us. Corporate worship propels us to do that. That is the picture here we are seeing. So don't just think of this as a building. If all we do is dedicate buildings then all we will get is a skewed picture of worship because that is not the New Testament picture of worship. I'm not saying buildings are bad but we are the visible representation of the glory of Christ in the world and we have got to get our arms around that. We surrender ourselves to His mission.

The Bottom Line ...

The bottom line is God desires to awaken the body of Christ, to awaken us in our worship. Why? So that together we might proclaim the glory of Christ to the world. That is the picture of Nehemiah 12 and that is why community is a nonnegotiable in corporate worship.

As believers spend time reflecting on the reason why we worship. Spend time in confession, having God's forgiveness applied to your life surrendering yourself to the mission He has placed in front of you.

God, we praise you for the opportunity to worship, for the honor and privilege that you have given us as your community of faith. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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