

“A Six Hour Church Service?”—Nehemiah 8:5-6,8

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “A Six Hour Church Service?”, is Nehemiah 8:5-6,8 → *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. 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. . . . They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Over the span of my short life I have heard many people “cry and wail” over the length of sermons and church services. I have heard statements such as, “The mind can only comprehend what the gluteus maximus can endure.” I have been told that a church service is supposed to last only an hour and no longer. Maybe this attitude was fostered by the old hymn, “Sweet Hour of Prayer.” However, the hymn speaks more about what happens during that time of prayer rather than how long it lasts. It seems that the attention span of the average American gets less and less every day and that it’s everyone

else's responsibility to hold my attention and not "lose me" in the interaction.

In reaction to such excuses for not listening to God's Word and responding with unending worship and praise to Him, many comparisons have come forth in an effort to "break" a person's apathy toward God and His Word. While a person may spend hours on a frigid metal bench to watch a football game in an open stadium in below zero weather, he may complain about one hour on a soft pew in a warm church to listen to God's Word. While this may be true for some, the Christian heart should actually weep over the fact that the majority of the people sitting in that stadium probably haven't even "graced" a church recently and have no intention to do so! Worship time is compared to the amount of time we use for all the other activities in our life. While we are given 168 hours a week, how could one complain about giving the LORD one or two hours a week to listen to His Word and respond with thanks and praise for all His blessings? The comparisons go on and on in an effort to guilt a person into wanting to hear His Word, receive His gracious forgiveness and praise His holy name.

In our text we hear about a six hour "church service" taking place in 445 BC in Jerusalem. In fact, many of the practices in our worship service today follow the example of this "church service." The Word of God, specifically the first five books of the Old Testament, were "cared for" by a group of men

called scribes. Ezra was the first recorded member of this special group of scholars of the Law of Moses. Notice in our text that *Ezra opened the book* (referring to Genesis through Deuteronomy) *in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people*, (this is one reason why pulpits and lecterns in many churches are placed above the people) *and as he opened it all the people stood.* (cf. Verse 5) We traditionally stand for the reading of the Gospel lesson which speaks of Jesus Who said in Matthew 5:17 that He came *to fulfill . . . the Law and the Prophets.*

Notice also as *Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God . . . all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands.* (cf. Verse 6) We too respond throughout our worship service with "Amen," stating our agreement to the Word of God proclaimed. Lifting up the hands was a common posture of prayer or praise—standing, face raised to the heavens, arms held out and up with palms upward (cf. Exodus 17:11; Lamentations 2:19; Psalm 28:2; 63:4; 119:48; 134:2; 141:2; 1Timothy 2:8). For prayer, this posture shows the need and expectancy of the one who prays. For praise, it captures both the outer and inner attitudes that accompany a heart-felt devotion to the LORD.

Then the people in our text *bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.* (cf. Verse 6) These actions display humility as the seriousness of our sin becomes evident in the presence of our holy God.

(Could that be why people don't like to come to church . . . because they have to look at their sin?) People constantly experienced this in the presence of Jesus. When Jesus performed His miracle of the great catch of fish, Luke 5:8 tells us that *when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."* Humility, praise, prayer, joy, confession of sins, absolution, hearing the Word of God—they are all combined into worshiping God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit in submission to His Word and Will!

Nehemiah 8:3 prefaced this whole "church service" by stating that Ezra *read from the Book of the Law from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand.* That is six hours straight! During that six hours it says *the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law!* And you know what? They stood the whole time! Of course, it wasn't only reading. Verse 8 of our text tells us that there were others with Ezra who *read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they **gave the sense**, so that the people understood the reading as well.* So . . . this would mean not just one sermon but multiple sermons! What would cause people to stand for six hours listening to men read from the Old Testament and preach?

As difficult as it is for us to do, try to place yourself in their sandals for a

moment. Picture the ruler of another nation overtaking your land, separating you from your family, friends and possessions and transplanting you in a different country. Picture your pain and struggle as you serve that ruler and people as slaves. Picture not having the convenience of your Bible—the Word of God—to open for comfort and strength because they’ve been banned, confiscated and destroyed. After decades of living thus you are allowed back to your own land which is in rubble. The prophet Amos had predicted it some three hundred years earlier in Amos 8:11 → *“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD, “when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.”* The famine had come! Unfortunately it took losing everything to produce the hunger and thirst for *hearing the words of the LORD*.

Those *words of the LORD* are very important because they point you to the One Who has dealt with the guilt which the Law of the LORD produces in your heart—Jesus. When your sins, your excuses, your idolatry and whatever other sins the law reveals in you are laid bare before His cross in confession you are lifted up in His complete and total forgiveness, with a desire to follow His Word and will for your life! Seeing the need for His constant presence and power, you have the desire to “go to church” to hold His Word sacred and gladly hear and learn it! Jesus promises in Matthew 5:6 → *Blessed are those*

who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. God's forgiveness in Jesus satisfies any guilt and any sin, lifting the burden of sin and giving the confidence to move forward.

Thus, human comparisons which strive to guilt people into going to church are not the proper motivation for worship, logical as they may be. You can converse about the benefits of being in worship on the corner of 9th street and 5th avenue in Fargo, ND at 10 am on Sunday mornings or 7 pm on Wednesday evenings. After all, what is the one thing you receive here in this place at those times which you do not receive out in the world? The forgiveness of sins through the Gospel and sacraments! However, it is only the heart that is contrite—humbled because of its sin—that will receive the gracious blessings of God, as it hungers and thirsts for the righteousness before God which only Jesus can give you! The Holy Spirit gives the desire to hear God's Word no matter what the circumstances. The Holy Spirit also moves us to respond with praise, thanks, adoration and obedience! Amen.

Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the Word,

so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation,

if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

(1 Peter 2:2-3 NASB95)

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