

A Story of New Beginnings: 2. Better Together
Nehemiah 2:11-18; Ephesians 4:11-12, 15-16
July 10, 2022
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This past Thursday, Jerry and I celebrated our 38th wedding anniversary. As we reflected on our 38 years of marriage this week, all of the ups and downs, we couldn't help but recall some of our most challenging moments, home improvement projects. But over time, we've learned to lean into our strengths and work together as a team. Now this didn't just happen naturally or overnight. Oh, the stories I could tell you about some of our attempts at wallpapering! And when it comes to painting, I am still not allowed to hold a brush. Painting is just not one of my gifts. But over time, and some growing pains, we've learned to lean into our strength areas and work together. Here's what we've learned. I am the idea person, the visionary, if you will. Jerry is the talent and the muscle. When I get an idea, I first must cast my vision and get Jerry onboard. Once he is onboard, we sit down and come up with a strategy. We make a scope of work, a timeline and a list of the needed supplies. Once this is all complete, I step back and wait to assist. Jerry, being raised on a farm by an exceptionally mechanically gifted father, has the skills to actually do the work. We have different gifts but by working together, we get the job done. We are better together and the Church, the body of Christ, is no different. That's the main idea that we're going to dig into today.

We're in week two of our series, *A Story of New Beginnings*, but before we jump in, let's start with a quick recap of what we covered last week. Last week we were introduced to Nehemiah, a trusted advisor to the King of Persia. Nehemiah was a descendant of the nation of Israel, but Israel had been attacked and taken into exile. Eventually, God worked in the king's heart to start allowing the Jewish people to return to their homeland. This is when Nehemiah learned from his brother that God's people, his ancestors living in Jerusalem, were basically sitting ducks because their city wall had been broken down. They had lost their identity as the people of God, and they weren't even trying to rebuild. They had lost hope. This is when God placed a specific call on Nehemiah's heart to go back and rebuild the wall around the city. After praying about this for 4 months, Nehemiah made his request to go and shockingly, the king was willing to let him go. He even sent him with a royal escort (technically a travel visa allowing him to move freely from land to land) and papers giving him permission to cut down timber in Judah's Forest to rebuild the gates of the temple.

This is where today's scripture picks up. After three months of travel, Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and over the course of three days, by night, he quietly inspected the state of the city and the wall. He inspected at night because many of Israel's neighboring enemies did not want the city rebuilt. During his midnight inspections, he quickly discovered that what was reported to him was true; the walls and gates in Jerusalem had been torn down and destroyed by fire. So, after receiving a vision from God and first praying about it for four months, then after three months of travel and three days on the ground in Jerusalem, Nehemiah was finally ready to share his vision with the people. *"Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.' And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, 'Let us rise up and build.' So, they strengthened their hands for the good work."* (Nehemiah 2:17-18: 17) Nehemiah and the people working together for the good work that God had put into their hearts. Although the call of God may be personal and singular, the work of God is almost always accomplished when we work together. It is only with unity of vision and direction that we can build up or edify the body of Christ.

Edify is a word found in the New Testament. It means “when the individual parts of the body work together to comprise the whole”. If we dig a little deeper into the origin of this word, we find that it comes from the word “symphero”, like a symphony. You play an instrument, and you play an instrument and I play an instrument. And we all have separate, important and different parts to play, but the music is not complete until we all play our individual parts together. We can’t do it alone. Or think about this worship service. This worship service could not take place if our tech booth team, musicians, preachers, ushers, and office and support staff and weren’t playing their part to make up the whole. That’s what is meant to build up or edify the body of Christ.

As the story continues to unfold, the opposition to Nehemiah’s rebuilding the wall is relentless but he didn’t give up. There’s a quote attributed to Alexander the Great that says, “I am not afraid of an army of lions led by a sheep. I’m afraid of an army of sheep led by a lion.” Nehemiah was like a lion as he pressed forward. When all the naysayers were trying hard to stop him, or tear him down, he kept moving forward. He was as bold as a lion. He had a job to do, to rebuild this wall. By staying focused, on point, locked into something greater than himself, he was able to complete the mission. God had reached into his heart and compelled him to action.

Let me show you what Nehemiah did to share the vision and get the people onboard. First, he identified himself with the problem. *“You see the trouble that **we’re** in: Jerusalem is in ruins, and its gates are destroyed by fire! Come, let **us** rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that **we** won’t continue to be in disgrace.”* Notice that he said “we” and “us”. It would have been very easy for him to say, “You guys let this place go. What were you thinking? This is your problem, not mine.” But instead, he said, “This is God’s place, and **we** have a problem. **We** need to work together to get this job done.” And he was willing to work alongside the people to get it done. He did not ask them to do something he himself was not willing to do. And then secondly, he didn’t plead or bargain, he was willing to let the Lord do the work of changing the heart of the people. He didn’t force or guilt people into working. By taking this approach, he was able to form 42 work crews and they worked all over the city with all kinds of issues and challenges but with the people organized and serving side by side, they got the job done in just 52 days.

Each individual member played their part. No one’s work was insignificant, everyone’s work was profoundly important, and every member of the community was critical because God rebuilds through each of our hands. So, what might it be that God is calling you to do? What cause or concern has God placed on your heart? Another way to ask this question is, “what keeps you awake at night?” I think my job as one of your pastors is to preach the Word of God to the best of my ability and hopefully, you leave this place each week more and more in love with God. And when that happens, how you serve the Lord is between you and God, but you serve because you love God.

This reminds me of the way that the New Testament describes what a local church ought to be like. *“The gifts he (the Holy Spirit) gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ ... the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:11-12, 15-16).*

Reading this scripture reminds me of this song, you’ve probably heard it. “The toe bone’s connected to the foot bone and the foot bone’s connected to the ankle bone and the....” I’ll spare you the details, but this is the linked chain of bones, working together to make up your

body. That's why if you injure your left ankle and start limping, you might develop pain in your right hip. For the body to work properly, every member must do its part. Perhaps the most important thing for us to take away from this scripture is the simply stated purpose of God's gifts, given to believers, to equip the saints for ministry and to "build up the body of Christ." All gifts are given for the good of the whole.

I recently read an article about the FedEx truck that transported and delivered the very first COVID-19 vaccines in the U.S. in December of 2020. This article waxed poetic as it described this ordinary FedEx truck delivering vaccines that had become, as they described it, the hope of the world. I agree that the truck delivering the vaccine has given us more hope and that the vaccine is saving lives, but the hope of the world? I believe the local church is the hope of the world because the local church is the vehicle, the FedEx truck if you will, that delivers good news to every person, neighborhood, and nation around the world. Let me share a couple of examples of how you, Messiah Church, are delivering good news to a hurting world.

It is a long-standing Messiah tradition that each year we give away our entire Christmas Offering. It's the largest single offering of the year and it all goes to help people in need. Half of last year's Christmas' offering, \$15,000, went to benefit children living in poverty in western Kenya, specifically to dig a well at the Mali Mali Primary School. We partnered with the organization called **H2O for Life**. Just in the last few weeks, we received the good news that the project has been completed and the children and staff now have access to a safe, clean water source. We also were able to fund the installation of 6 new latrines and 2 handwashing stations. The students attended classes on improved sanitation and hygiene practices, including COVID-19 prevention. This is one example of how you, Messiah Church, are you are working together to build up the Body of Christ and bringing hope to the world.

Here's one more. In 2021, when the Taliban began taking control of Afghanistan, the Afghani people began fleeing their homeland for fear of their lives. In response to this humanitarian crisis, as we had done in the past, Messiah Church made the commitment to get involved and sponsor one of these families. Because of our previous and successful sponsorship of the Agid family in 2018, we were quickly approved and on boarded as sponsors. The invitation went out and in very short order, there were 20 of you raised your hand to serve. The Amini family left Afghanistan in October of 2021, and 3 months later after several scheduled, yet laborious stops along the way, arrived in Minnesota on January 13, 2022. Over the past six months, our team and this church, have come alongside this family in incredible ways as begin their new life in Minnesota. It began with apartment hunting and gathering the furnishings. If you were around here earlier this year, you may remember the Giving Clothesline that held little tags requesting household items that was set up in our atrium and that you picked clean in record time! Then there has been ESL tutoring as they are learning to read and write English, help with how to use appliances like the stove, oven, refrigerator, washer, and dryer, all new to the Aminis. They've learned how and where to buy groceries, how to open and use a bank account, schedule medical and dental appointments and navigated public transportation.

One of the first things upon arrival in this country was for the husband, Allahaddin to find work and that happened very quickly. But using public transportation from their apartment in South Minneapolis to his workplace in Hopkins took him over 1 ½ hours each way. Can you imagine working an overnight shift of 12 hours and then spending an additional three hours getting to and from work every day? Our team couldn't either, so they made a schedule and began taking turns giving Allahaddin a ride to and from work. And they also began the search for an apartment closer to his place of employment. And here's some great news, at the end of this month, the Aminis will be moving to a new apartment just a short walk from Allahaddin's work and just in time to welcome a baby boy to their family this fall.

There is no way one person could have accomplished all of this. In addition to this team, so many of you have given of your gifts of your time, prayers, household items and money to

provide this family with support, encouragement and hope for a better future. YOU, Messiah Church, are generous people. There are many ways in which to be generous. It can mean generous with your money, your time, your possessions, or it can be generous of heart. You are generous hearted people. Over and over again, I've been proud to be one of your pastors as you answer the call to serve God and serve other people by working together to build up the Body of Christ.

There is much in the world to make us weary, weigh down our souls, and break our hearts. There is war causing death and suffering. Mass shootings. Our climate is creating more storms, deeper droughts, torrential rains. Economic news has been more bad than good. The capacity of the people to draw deep lines around "us" and "them", "I'm right" and "You're wrong" seems as strong and as cruel as ever causing the divisiveness in our country to run deep. Watching the news can make one feel hopeless and alone. It's times like these when we need to draw close to God and close to each other because we are better together. When we pool our resources, our gifts, talents and time, whether it's in a marriage or other relationship, on a in a symphony orchestra, on a group project at school, or when we respond as an entire faith community to a humanitarian crisis, each person has a part to play. No one is insignificant. Every one's work is important. Let us rise up and build the body of Christ by working together with the strengths of all our gifts to bring hope to the world because we are better together.

Let's pray: God, in the world of suffering and pain, destruction and wars, pull us close to you. Build us up, bind us together as the Body of Christ so that we can support and encourage one another. And then let us rise up and build, offering hope, your hope, to a hurting world. Amen.

GPS for the Week of July 10, 2022

Weekly Prayer

Loving God, I give you thanks for the gift of this day. As I study your Word, draw me close to you. When I feel afraid or alone, help me feel your presence. Keep my eyes and heart open so that I may see those around me who need a word of encouragement or a helping hand and use me to share your love and grace. Amen.

This week, we will continue our study of the Old Testament book of Nehemiah by reading chapters 4-7.

Monday, July 11

Scripture: Nehemiah 4:7-23

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the people of Ashdod heard that the work on the walls was progressing and the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to create a disturbance in it. So we prayed to our God and set a guard as protection against them day and night.

But in Judah it was said,

"The carrier's strength is failing,
for there is too much rubble.

We are unable to rebuild the wall!"

Meanwhile, our enemies were saying: "Before they know or see anything, we can be in their midst and start to kill them. We'll stop the work!" Now the Jews who were living near them came and said to us again and again, "You must return to us!"

So I took up a position in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall in an open area. Then I stationed the people by families, and they had their swords, spears, and bows. After reviewing this, I stood up and said to the officials, the officers, and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid

of them! Remember that the LORD is great and awesome! Fight for your families, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses!" Then our enemies heard that we had found out and that God had spoiled their plans. So we all returned to doing our own work on the wall. But from that day on, only half of my workers continued in the construction, while the other half held the spears, shields, bows, and body armor. Meanwhile, the leaders positioned themselves behind the whole house of Judah, who were building the wall. The carriers did their work with a load in one hand and a weapon in the other. The builders built with swords fastened in their belts, and the trumpeter stayed by my side. Then I said to the officials, the officers, and the rest of the people, "The work is very spread out, and we are far apart from each other along the wall. When you hear the trumpet sound, come and gather where we are. Our God will fight for us!" So we continued the work, with half of them holding spears from dawn until dusk. I also said to the people at that time, "Let every man and his servant spend the night in Jerusalem so that we can guard during the night and work during the day." Neither I nor my relatives, nor my servants, nor my bodyguards took off our clothes, even when they sent for water.

Observation

When verbal threats and intimidation were ineffective, the Samaritan opposition and their collaborators decide to provoke a physical confrontation with the Jews in order to halt the construction and cause damage to the city. But Nehemiah's words of leadership are concise and to the point. He reminds them that God is on their side and that the welfare of their families is at stake. They must not cave in to the military and verbal threats from Sanballat and the others.

Application

The book of Nehemiah is the story of a great leader, but Nehemiah is a great leader by being a great servant of God, God's plan, and God's people (the builders). When have you faced a challenge – work related, health, finances, relationships – and were ready to give up or give in to the voices (even the voice inside)? Nehemiah does three things: he prays, he equips the workers, he urges the people not to be afraid. God is with them. God is with you!

Prayer

Eternal God, thank you for your faithfulness. In the face of life's challenges, I have felt alone and afraid. Help me to feel your presence. Be for me the strength that will guide me through all that I face. Amen.

Tuesday, July 12

Scripture: Nehemiah 5:1-6

Then there was a great protest of the people and their wives against their fellow Jews. Some said, "With our sons and daughters we are many, and we all need grain to eat and stay alive." Others said, "We have to mortgage our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine." Still others said, "We have had to borrow money against our fields and vineyards in order to pay the king's tax." "We are of the same flesh and blood as our kin, and our children are the same as theirs. Yet we are just about to force our sons and daughters into slavery, and some of our daughters are already slaves! There is nothing we can do since our fields and vineyards now belong to others." I was very angry when I heard their protest and these complaints.

Observation

Under Nehemiah's leadership, people of different social classes worked together for a common cause. In reality, however, the community was separated by different levels of wealth, influence,

and status. They didn't live in unity or solidarity. These differences caused a serious strain among the residents of Judah. Taking out a loan was a big gamble. When a farmer couldn't repay the loan, the family would lose everything - even his wife and children could be sold as slaves.

Application

Some people with lots of resources exploited their less-wealthy neighbors. Nehemiah saw the injustice and inhumanity. He didn't remain calm or apathetic but expressed righteous indignation. "God is a righteous judge, a God who is angry at evil every single day" (Psalm 7:11). When you see injustice, do you tend to remain calm or apathetic, or react with righteous indignation?

Prayer

Dear God, give me a heart that reacts like yours to injustice in our broken world. And strengthen my desire to let you plant me in the better world you have always promised. Amen.

Wednesday, July 13

Scripture: Nehemiah 5:7-19

After thinking it over, I brought charges against the officials and the officers. I told them, "You are all taking interest from your own people!" I also called for a large assembly in order to deal with them. "To the best of our ability," I said to them, "we have bought back our Jewish kin who had been sold to other nations. But now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!" At this they were silent, unable to offer a response. So I continued, "What you are doing isn't good! Why don't you walk in the fear of our God? This will prevent the taunts of the nations that are our enemies! I myself, along with my family and my servants, am lending them money and grain. But let's stop charging this interest! Give it back to them, right now. Return their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses. And give back the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you are charging them." They replied, "We'll return everything, and we won't charge anything else. We'll do what you've asked." So I called the priests and made them swear to do what they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my robe, saying, "So may God shake out everyone from their house and property if they don't keep this promise. So may they be shaken out and emptied!" The whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.

In addition, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah (that is, from the twentieth to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes for a total of twelve years), neither I nor my family ate from the governor's food allowance. The earlier governors who had come before me laid heavy burdens on the people. They took food and wine from them as well as forty shekels of silver. Even their servants oppressed the people. But because I was God-fearing, I didn't behave in this way.

Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. We acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. One hundred fifty Jews and officials, along with those who came to us from the surrounding nations, gathered around my table. One ox, six choice sheep, and birds were prepared each day. Every ten days there was a large amount of wine. Yet even with this I didn't ask for the governor's food allowance because of the heavy burden the people had to carry. Remember in my favor, my God, all that I've done for this people!

Observation

The common good. Nehemiah calls the people to move beyond self-interest and pursue God's purpose, which is for the common good. In the Old Testament, lending is a way to show

compassion to the needy, not a way to make money. The awareness of God's presence should lead to ethical behavior.

Application

When have we seen persons in a position of leadership take advantage of the circumstances to make themselves rich? In Nehemiah, we see someone who volunteered himself and his household to the work that would benefit the common good. This is called servant leadership. Jesus said, "I have not come to be served but rather to serve." (Matthew 20:28) How are you expressing servant leadership in your family, workplace, and community?

Prayer

God, I come to you grateful for this day and for your gift of life. Once again, I give my life to you, so that my actions this day will show my gratitude and serve your greater purpose in this world. Amen.

Thursday, July 14

Scripture: Nehemiah 6:1-19

Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had rebuilt the wall and that there were no gaps left in it (although I hadn't yet hung the doors in the gates), Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: "Come, let's meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono." But they wanted to harm me, so I sent messengers to tell them, "I'm doing important work, so I can't come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it to come down to you?" They sent me a message like this four times, and every time I gave them a similar reply. But the fifth time, Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same way, except that now he carried an open letter. It stated: It is reported among the nations and confirmed by Geshem that you and the Jews intend to rebel. This is why you are rebuilding the wall. According to these reports, you intend to become their king. You have also appointed prophets to make this announcement about you in Jerusalem: There is a king in Judah! Now, the king will hear of these reports, so come; let's talk together. So I sent him this reply: "Nothing that you say has happened. You are simply inventing this." All of them were trying to make us afraid, saying, "They will be discouraged, and the work won't get finished." But now, God, strengthen me! Later I went to see Shemaiah, Delaiah's son and Mehetabel's grandson, who was confined to his house, and he said:

"Let's meet together in God's house,
inside the temple itself.

Let's shut the doors of the temple,
for they are coming to kill you;
they are coming to kill you tonight!"

But I replied, "Should someone like me run away? Who like me would go into the temple to save his life? I won't go in!" Then I realized that God hadn't sent him at all but that he spoke this prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He was hired to frighten me and to make me sin by acting in this way. Then they could give me a bad name and discredit me. My God, remember these deeds of Tobiah and Sanballat! Also remember Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to frighten me. So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Elul. It took fifty-two days. When our enemies heard about this, all of the nations around us were afraid and their confidence was greatly shaken. They knew that this work was completed with the help of our God. In addition, in those days the officials of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters were coming to them. Many in Judah were bound to him by solemn pledge because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah, Arah's son, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam,

Berechiah's son. They also kept talking about his good deeds in my presence and then reported back to him what I said. In addition, Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.

Observation

Nehemiah's leadership is effective. Despite the political pressure from inside and outside of Judah, the repair of Jerusalem's wall is nearly complete. Nehemiah's faith and determination have paid off. However, the opposition continues in their attempt to thwart the project by spreading false rumors and resorting to intimidation – and even an attempt to assassinate Nehemiah. But Nehemiah remains resilient in prayer and discernment.

Application

As we read, it seems we continue live in a world much like what Nehemiah faced. False rumors and intimidation are all too familiar. Yet, we see in Nehemiah a person who is unwavering in his commitment to prayer. When have you found a commitment to prayer a means of living confidently, even when the circumstances around you remain challenging? Perhaps Nehemiah's simple prayer in verse 9 could be your prayer: "But now, God, strengthen me!"

Prayer

Strengthen me, God, in all that is before me today. Let others see that you are the source of my strength. Amen.

Friday, July 15

Scripture: Nehemiah 7:1-6

When the wall had been built and I had hung the doors, the gatekeepers, singers, and Levites were appointed. Then I put my brother Hanani and Hananiah the commander of the fortress in charge of Jerusalem. Hananiah was a faithful man who revered God more than many. I said to them, "The gates of Jerusalem aren't to be opened during the hottest time of the day. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut and bar the doors. Also, appoint guards from among those who live in Jerusalem. Station some at their watch posts and some in front of their own houses."

Now although the city was wide and large, only a few people were living within it, and no houses had been rebuilt. My God then prompted me to assemble the officials, the officers, and the people so that they could be registered by families. I found the record of the families who were the first to return, and I found the following written in it: These are the people of the province who returned from the captivity of those exiles whom Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile. They all returned to Jerusalem and Judah, everyone to their own town.

Observation

According to the initial request to the Persian emperor, Nehemiah's goal for coming to Judah had been accomplished. However, the second half of the book of Nehemiah shows that he was concerned for the long-term interest of the people. With today's reading, Nehemiah's attention shifts from the physical rebuilding to building the community's identity and morality.

Application

With the wall rebuilt, Nehemiah needed administrative help, if the wall was to function effectively as a defense for the community. He chose his brother, but more importantly he chose someone who was "a faithful man who revered God." His name, Hananiah, means "Yahweh has been gracious." Once again, we are reminded that our first step in whatever role we have in life is to be in a right relationship with God.

Prayer

Dear God, you have been gracious to me. In whatever tasks I undertake, help me to see each task as an opportunity to serve you. Amen.

Saturday, July 16

Scripture: Nehemiah 8:1-8

When the seventh month came and the people of Israel were settled in their towns, all the people gathered together in the area in front of the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Instruction scroll from Moses, according to which the LORD had instructed Israel. So on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Instruction before the assembly. This assembly was made up of both men and women and anyone who could understand what they heard. Facing the area in front of the Water Gate, he read it aloud, from early morning until the middle of the day. He read it in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand, and everyone listened attentively to the Instruction scroll. Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that had been made for this purpose. And standing beside him were Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his righthand side; while Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam stood on his lefthand side. Standing above all of the people, Ezra the scribe opened the scroll in the sight of all of the people. And as he opened it, all of the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all of the people answered, "Amen! Amen!" while raising their hands. Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah—helped the people to understand the Instruction while the people remained in their places. They read aloud from the scroll, the Instruction from God, explaining and interpreting it so the people could understand what they heard.

Observation

Ezra, the priest, and Nehemiah, the governor, lead the community in a covenant renewal. In a public gathering, the Instruction from the Lord (the exact contents are not clear, perhaps a copy of the Torah or teaching from Deuteronomy) was read in front of all the people. Then, the scripture was interpreted in small groups (the first-ever Bible study groups in the Bible) so that all would understand. This would be a reminder to Israel of the terms of their covenant relationship with God – what God had done for them and their response.

Application

What's interesting is that Ezra, the priest, does not summon the people. Rather, the people summon Ezra because they want to hear the Torah read. The people gather as one person to listen and to learn. They are one, connected with worship and connected with listening. No one is excluded. They are not divided by age or gender or status. Whenever we gather for worship, all are included. We do not sit according to age or gender or status. As Paul wrote: *"Though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ, and individually we belong to each other."* (Romans 12:5)

Prayer

God, I give thanks for our church and the opportunity that we have each week to gather to offer praise to you, to hear from your Word, and to receive guidance for my life. I am grateful for the way worship welcomes all and helps us see our common connection with you. Help me to keep worship a priority when so many other opportunities are available. Amen.