Real Worship in a Reformed Congregation

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Date: 06 November 2016

Preacher: William Philip

[0:01] Now, we're going to turn to our Bible reading for this morning. We're picking up where we left off in Nehemiah. We'll be reading the second part of chapter 12, that's from verse 27, all the way through to chapter 13, verse 3.

If you're using one of the church visitors' Bibles, you'll find this on page 408, and we're reading Nehemiah chapter 12, verse 27 through to 13, verse 3.
And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, they sought the Levites in all their places to bring them to Jerusalem, to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres.
And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netothpathites, also from Beth Gilgal, and from the region of Geba and Asmabef, for the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem.
And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall. Then I brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall and appointed two great choirs that gave thanks.
[1:26] One went to the south on the wall to the dung gate, and after them went Hoshiah and half of the leaders of Judah, and Azariah, Ezra, Meshulam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, and Jeremiah, and certain of the priests' sons with trumpets.

Zechariah, the son of Jonathan, son of Shemaiah, son of Mataniah, son of Micaiah, son of Zacher, son of Asaph, and his relatives Shemaiah, Azarel, Mililai, Gililai, Maya, Nephnal, Judah, and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David, the man of God.
And Ezra, the scribe, went before them. At the fountain gate they went up straight before them by the stairs of the city of David, as they ascent of the wall above the house of David to the water gate on the east.
The other choir of those who gave thanks went to the north, and I followed them with half of the people on the wall above the tower of the ovens, to the broad wall, and above the gate of Ephraim, and by the gate of the Eshanah, and by the fish gate, and the tower of Hananel, and the tower of the hundred, to the sheep gate, and they came to a halt at the gate of the guard.
So both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me, and the priests Eliakim, Maseah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elionai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets, and Maseah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzi, Jehohanan, Malkijah, Elam, and Ezer.
[3:05] And the singers sang with Jezrehiah as their leader, and they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy. The women and children also rejoiced, and the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. On that day men were appointed over the storerooms, the contributions, the firstfruits, and the tithes, to gather into them the portions required by the law for the priests and for the Levites, according to the fields of the towns. For Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered, and they performed the service of their God, and the service of purification, as did the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the command of David and his son Solomon. For long ago in the days of David and Asaph, there were directors of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and the days of Nehemiah gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers, and they set apart that which was for the Levites, and the Levites set apart that which was for the sons of Aaron. On that day they read from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people, and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, for they did not meet the people of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. Yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent. Amen. Now may God bless us this, his words.

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Well, perhaps you'd turn with me to the passage we read together, Nehemiah chapter 12 at verse 27.
My voice is a bit raspy this morning, please forgive me. It sounds a lot better than it did two days ago, I can assure you. Here's a chapter all about reformed worship. Last time in chapter 11, in the first half of chapter 12, all about the repopulation of the city and repossessing the land, we saw the restoring of true kingdom witness. God's people fulfilling their calling as a people literally set on a hill to bring light to the world, the knowledge of the one true God of heaven, and how the one true God of heaven could be reached and known. But in today's section, we see, I think, an equally vivid picture of real worship restored. The worship of a renewed congregation of God's people reformed as they've been by the word of God. Don't worry, the title of reformed worship does not presage a lecture on the regulative principle or anything like that.
Actually, it's an important principle, but mostly misunderstood, I think. Some on the fringes of the reformed church seem to think that it means we should have only unaccompanied exclusive psalmody in the worship of the Christian church. But don't worry, we're not going to go down blind alleys like that this morning. But nevertheless, the corporate worship of the Christian church is an important thing, and it's an issue for many in the evangelical church today. There's a lot of ignorance. There's a lot of confusion around the whole language of worship, as it's commonly used today. For some today, worship is only what you do in church. And in fact, for many people, worship is only what you do when you're singing in church. We'll now have a time of worship, and we'll sing some worship songs. Others rightly point out, in fact, that the New Testament doesn't talk about worship that way at all, that it never means just the singing in church or anything like that. But rather, the New Testament talks about worship as involving the whole of our life. It's the whole of life and obedience to God in Jesus. It's about presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice, our minds transformed and renewed by the truth of God. That is your spiritual worship, worship, as Paul says in Romans 12 verse 1. And that's true, but of course, then some people go on to imply that, therefore, when we meet together as God's people to sing and to pray and to hear God's word, then that isn't worship in any sense at all. So we're worshiping God in all of our life, all of the time, except when we meet together as God's people in church. So the one time you can really be sure you're not worshiping God is if you're singing praise to God. We can be so stupid, can't we, in the church? We're so silly, falling off the horse one side and then the other. Well, look, here is a chapter that has a lot to teach us about both the special seasons of what we might quite rightly call the church's corporate worship, and also the sustained systems of corporate life and obedient living that is the ongoing sacrifice of living worship in God's people day in, day out, and year in, year out. And like all the Old Testament scriptures, as Paul tells us, they are written for our encouragement. They're here to give us endurance and hope. And I want us to be encouraged.
[8:35] And I hope that this will encourage us to see that there is a need both for particular rejoicing in the church's life, but also for persistent routine. That is just as much the true worship of the church today, just as vital if the people of God are going to be renewed and transformed and reformed by the word of God to do the work of God that is the calling of God's people in our age, just as much as it was in Nehemiah's generation. Indeed, it's true in every generation. So let's then look at this section, which one writer says is one where we reach what appears to be the climax of Nehemiah's career, the dedication of the wall whose construction so dominated the first half of the book. And the message, I think, is really very plain. The real worship of a reformed congregation of God's people needs both, both real celebration and real constancy. Look first then at verses 27 to 43 of chapter 12, where we see pictured so very clearly real celebration. These verses speak of the particular rejoicing of a special season of corporate worship for this reformed and renewed people. And I want us to look at what characterizes this time of special corporate gathering to celebrate the Lord's goodness to his people. And we might say it's the three R's that we need to learn about corporate worship.

First, I think we can say that it was marked by real reverence. And you see that in the careful preparation for this corporate gathering that's laid out in verses 27 to 30.
Careful plans in verses 27 to 29. Bringing all the Levites from all over the country to Jerusalem, ensuring that the orchestra was all well provided for, gathering the singers, verse 29. Building campsites for them all around Jerusalem, no doubt, so that they could have multiple practices, so that when the time came for this great day, everything was exactly as it should be.

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And Derek Kidner comments, elaborate festivities can be hollow. But where the occasion is great, the demanding business of planning and proclaiming and assembling and rehearsing by no means is to be despised. Careful plans for the corporate gathering of God's people. And notice verse 30, careful purification. The priests and the Levites purify themselves, the people and the gates and the walls.
This was a ritual purification, no doubt, of sprinkling water and blood and so on. But it indicated a real attitude of penitence and reverence for God who is holy. And it was not to be treated casually or with contempt. And you see, all this preparation, all this reverence, it's about taking God seriously.
[11:47] That's what all this purifying, all this planning signifies. And yet, as Ralph Davis points out, this sort of approach stands in direct opposition to much modern evangelicalism. But the last thing we seem to find amongst all the chatter and good cheer is this serious preparation. Our approach, he says, is casual rather than careful.

Now, I'm afraid that's true today in a very large extent, isn't it? You go to any Christian union meeting in the universities and colleges, and you'd be forgiven for thinking that chaos and disaster and disorder and the absence of any kind of planning and preparation is what marks the presence of the Holy Spirit of God. And you'll find that in many churches as well. But we all have to ask ourselves, don't we, are we really taking God seriously? Go to the New Testament and you'll find that the Apostle Paul is just as insistent that the gatherings of God's people should do everything to the glory of God.
That's his whole theme in 1 Corinthians 10 to 14. It's worth reading. And he repeatedly rebukes the Corinthian church for their disorder and for, therefore, their dishonoring conduct to God. And he instructs them again and again. They've got to behave properly when they gather together around the Lord's Supper and in all their meetings. Because, says Paul, God, our God, is not a God of disorder and confusion. And that's why he instructs all things, says the Apostle of Christ, should be done decently and in order.
You see what he's saying? He's saying where people take God seriously, there will be a real reverence evident in how they conduct themselves and how the church conducts itself. That's a good question, isn't it? To be reminded of ourselves, to ask ourselves, am I really taking God seriously? And the Bible suggests that at least in part, that will be manifest in the manner of our preparation for our special times of corporate gathering as a congregation. Both our practical preparation and also our spiritual preparation.
If you've got an important job interview, you won't treat it casually, will you? You'll make sure you're there on time. You're not late out of respect for the person interviewing you and the company you're going to work for, but also out of self-interest. You don't want them to think, oh, I don't really care whether I get this job or not. You'll make sure you've washed, won't you, and you've combed your hair and you put something decent on to wear. You wouldn't turn up looking like a tramp. And it's the same if you go to get your OBE in Buckingham Palace from the Queen, which I'm sure perhaps some of you might do in the future. Well, maybe not.
[14:39] But anyway, you'd prepare for that, wouldn't you? My goodness, you'd prepare. And we do the same if we go to a wedding, if we go to a social dinner. We prepare, don't we? It's a respectful thing to do.

If you've got an exam that's important, unless you're a complete idiot, you will not go out partying till four o'clock in the morning the night before, will you? So that you appear there bedraggled and half asleep and totally unable to concentrate, unable to perform. Of course you wouldn't do that.
And all of these things we take seriously, don't we? We make careful preparation and that shows our proper respect, our reverence for what's going on. Well, how seriously do we take God, the God of heaven and earth? Seriously enough to turn up on time even for church rather than be late every single week?
Seriously enough perhaps to do some preparation in advance so that we're not out till all hours on Saturday night, exhausted and therefore unable to get the best of Sunday. Serious enough perhaps to make sure we've actually got some clean clothes to wear and actually get up early enough to wash our faces and comb our hair so we don't look as if we've been dragged through a hedge backwards. I hope so.
But even more importantly, serious enough to give even a few moments thought to what we will actually be doing when we gather together. Reading the passage that we're going to study together

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and that we know that we are. Thinking about it, preparing in advance and saying to God, this is the most important gathering of my whole week. I shall come in reverence and awe. I just asked these questions and there could be many others, couldn't there? Because I think we have to ask ourselves, don't we? And challenge ourselves living in the casual age that we do live in. Are we taking God seriously? Of course, our age in lots of social conventions is much less formal than it used to be. It was hilarious, wasn't it? On Wednesday evening, those of us who were at the prayer meeting watching that video about the work of UCCF over the years and seeing the interwar years and the IVF and all the students gathering together, wandering around in three-piece suits and ties. That's the way the world used to be.
[16:56] Working men would go to the football in three-piece suits and ties, wouldn't they? I'm not saying we need to go back to social conventions of the past. Of course not. Nobody's saying you have to wear three-piece suits and fur coats to church. That can just become hollow. That can become snobbish. That can become false. Mere religiosity. But at the same time, growing informality in our social conventions must not lead us into casual attitudes to God. The apostle of Christ is clear as day, isn't he?

When he says we must not fail to hear him, when he says to the church, let us worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.
And it's that real reverence that is pictured for us here in the preparations for that great day. As well as, secondly, real remembrance.
And that's what you see in this choreographed procession that's described in verses 31 to 42. Two great choirs. If you remember the map that you had of the city walls, they probably began on the west wall at the valley gate, both together.
And one of them, we're told here, first of all, walked south, going anti-clockwise around the walls, led by Ezra. And the other one started off going north, clockwise around the walls, with Nehemiah following. Until both choirs, verse 40 says, stood together in the temple and gave thanks in a great climax of praise.
[18:42] It was a real remembrance. And I mean that in at least two ways. First of all, it was surely an extremely memorable occasion, an acted out drama for all of these people, a drama of thanksgiving to God for everything that he'd done in their recent shared history.

He'd kept them, he'd guarded them, he'd strengthened them. On those very walls, in the presence of all of their enemies, they had built and God had brought them victory. Just think of all the remembrance that would have flooded back during that march of praise.
Not least for Nehemiah himself. Remember back in chapter 2, how he first went, scouting that very same route around the walls by night, and saw all the broken down walls which brought him nothing but pain. But now he sees rebuilt walls, a repopulated city.
And it was a cause of great praise, great thanksgiving to God. Now those kind of memories, those kind of remembrances, memorials, are things that resonate with people very deeply.
These corporate memorials. My goodness, we've had it in the Houses of Parliament this week, haven't we? The government and the MPs railing against FIFA for wanting to ban the poppy on next week's International and the football church between Scotland and England.
[20:00] Because these things are deeply resonant, they're significant, they're important. And they're associated with special times, special places. Of course, these things can become ugly and bitter, can't they?

Think of the sectarian marches that take place every summer in Northern Ireland, both the Unionist side and the Nationalist side. Horrible things. But we mustn't despise the remembrances that are God-given and God-focused on the one true God that speak of the great salvation that God has brought his people.
And this was certainly one of these. And God did give his people regular, tangible, visible remembrances to celebrate every year, to remember his great saving work.
Remember there were the three great feasts. Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. And they were all acted out dramas. Passover, God's great redemption out of Egypt.
Pentecost, his provision for them all the way through the wilderness wanderings. Tabernacles, where they stayed in booths and remembered that God himself camped in his tent in the midst of them all through their journeys, never to leave them or forsake them.
[21:13] Real remembrance is deeply rooted in the heart of Israel's worship. As, of course, it is in ours. As today, we remember in the drama of the Lord's Supper, the great redemption of Calvary.

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Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim that great remembrance. Every time we share in a baptism together in the congregation, we remember the sprinkling of our consciences and the washing away of our sins by the blood of our Lord Jesus.
So real corporate remembrance is an essential thing in the church's corporate worship. And I think by the same token, although, again, some people in the Reformed Church are very allergic to any sort of memorializing, any kind of remembrance of special seasons of the church year.
And, of course, I understand that. They've become ritualized and deadened so much in Catholic and Anglo-Catholic traditions. But isn't it a helpful thing that in the three great seasons of the church year that at least we pay some attention to Easter and Advent and Christmas, we remember, we feel keenly the reminder of the great events of our salvation, Christ's birth and Christ's death and resurrection for us and Christ's coming again in glory.
So this event was deeply memorable. It was a remembrance of all God's recent work of restoration and of the return of his people.
[22:45] But in a second sense, it was also deeply symbolic in an even deeper way. It was a remembrance of something much older. It was a deliberate recall of the ancient past of Solomon's first dedication of the temple.

You can read about that in 2 Chronicles 5 to 8. And if you do, you'll see the many parallels with the great festivities here, the choirs, the marches, the sacrifices, and so on.
But even in our verses here, there's a deliberate, deliberate recall of those days in verse 24 and again in verse 36. All of this was done according to the commandment of David, the man of God, the music that David had prescribed for that first temple.
And of course, the days of Moses are being recalled as well. We've already seen in chapter 10 how the people were going back to the commands of Moses. Well, look at chapter 13, verse 1.
Once again, they read from the law of Moses. And notice chapter 12, verses 45 and 46. They serve God in every way according to the command of David and Solomon.
[23:58] And you see verse 46. See how significant it is. It's a return, isn't it, to the days of old, to the things that happened long ago in the days of David and Asaph.

You see what we're being told? All Israel is returning to the faith once for all delivered. At last, they're heeding God's call, which for so long they had been rejecting, which had led to their exile. Remember in Jeremiah's day, God had said to them through Jeremiah, thus says the Lord, stand by the roads and look and ask for the ancient paths where the good way is and walk in it.
But the people had refused. They had scorned. They'd wanted to walk their own way. And they'd been cast out into exile. But here is a conscious remembering that has them deliberately returning to the old path, the one true path.
They're remembering who they are. They're remembering what story it is that they belong to. They're remembering whose they are, to whom they belong. It's a great remembrance that is recommitting them to their true destiny.
[25:07] And that's always the way for God's people. You see, to advance, to progress in worship, always, always means to be going back, to reconnect with the root of our faith, with the historic, unchangeable faith that is once for all delivered to the saints in the apostolic gospel.

Only through fellowship with the apostles, says John at the beginning of his letter, only through fellowship with them, the true foundations of our faith, can we, through them and their testimony, share fellowship with the Father and the Son?
Only thus. That's why here this morning, our table points us backwards, points us back to Calvary, back to the cross, back to the historic foundation upon which all our hopes for today and for the future are founded.
And that's why our corporate worship, too, must be rooted in remembrance. It must constantly be taking us back, back to the unchanging and unchangeable gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Real reverence and real remembrance. But don't miss, this is so important, don't miss the real insistence here also on real rejoicing.
[26:27] Look at verse 43. One writer says it is unparalleled in its intensity, in the emphasis on joy. Five times in the verse is the word rejoicing or joy.

And in fact, it's all through the passage, isn't it? From the glad thanksgiving of verse 27 to the marching choirs giving thanks, verse 31, verse 38. Again, the final crescendo of thanksgiving in the temple in verse 40.

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And this time, notice, it is not like it was back in Ezra chapter 3 when the temple was completed. What happened there? There was great joy and in the midst of it, also great weeping.
But there's no weeping here, is there? It's just sheer joy in what God has done. It might surprise you to know how often in the Bible, in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, how often rejoicing and joy is commanded.
Back in Deuteronomy 16, the commands for the Feast of Tabernacles tells the people that you are to be altogether joyful. And Paul is just the same in the New Testament, isn't he?
[27:39] Writing to the Philippians, rejoice. Again, I will say it. Rejoice in the Lord. Always again, I say, rejoice. Let thanksgiving be central and constant in the life of the church.

That's the note all the way through our Bibles. And it's not just because God wants us to have joy and to be rejoicing, but it's because God delights to presence himself in the midst of a people who are rejoicing in him.
Psalm 22 verse 3 says that God inhabits the praises of his people. God is enthroned on the praises of his people. That means he's present in the midst of his people who are delighting and whose joy is truly in him.
And that means he has made manifest to them. He is there to bless, to encourage, to reveal himself, and even to bring salvation to others. My father once put it this way, when the praise of God's people rises up spirit-filled, it is an evangelistic instrument usable in God's hand for blessing.
And that, I think, is what is indicated to us here in verse 43, where it says that the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. It doesn't just mean that the music was loud and it was heard. It means the message was being heard.
[29:02] That people heard and understood that the living God was back in the midst of his people there. That the God of heaven can be found there in that place among those people.

Isn't that a wonderful, wonderful thing for people to understand about a gathering of God's people? There is God in that place in the midst. But that's what Paul says ought to be true of the Christian church, gathered in praise to God its Lord.
As long as that praise is intelligible, of course. In 1 Corinthians 14, he speaks about it and he says to the Corinthians, if unbelievers, if outsiders come in among you in a church meeting, if you're all speaking in tongues, they'll think you're out of your mind.
Well, of course they will. But he says, if all are prophesying, that is, if all are telling forth the greatness of God intelligibly, not least, in their song, then what they will say is, surely God really is among you people.
And Paul says, some will encounter him there. They will even bow down in worship and give their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is what was happening here.
[30:15] People were saying, God is among this people. And they would want to come and find him. Just as in Jesus' earthly ministry, word got around, didn't it? Wherever Jesus was, he's in that place and the hungry, the thirsty, the needy, those who are seeking, came to find him and they found the presence of the Lord among his people.

That's what we want here, isn't it, as a church. We want our joy to be heard of, to be known all over the city. We want people to be saying, well, that's a place where the true living God can be found in amongst those people.
We want it to be a place where the hungry, the thirsty, people who are searching for they know not what, but searching, where they come and they sense in the midst of us here, here is the living God.
I don't understand it yet fully, but I can see it. I can feel it. God is really among you people. So tell me, how can I find this joy that you have?
This is so evident in your lives. That's what we want people to feel and to sense and to say about our gatherings, isn't it? Not as a friend of mine who was on holiday a couple of weeks ago and went to an evangelical church, a Bible preaching church and he said to me, it was cold, cliched, ossified, repressed.
[31:42] The whole congregation looked bored out of their minds. That's a terrible thing, isn't it? We don't want people to think that here.

Surely there must be food for thought for us all in these verses. Are our particular seasons of worship, our Sunday gatherings, our weekly gatherings, are they full of reverence and remembrance and rejoicing like that?

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Let's ensure they are, friends. We need to. We need it to be known far and wide across this city that the Tron church is a place where the living God can be found because he's there in the midst of his people.
But, as Derek Kidner says also with his characteristic pith, it's one thing to shout aloud on a great occasion, but it's another to offer the sacrifice of praise continually to make realistic provision for the church's needs.
Hence, as another scholar points out, the text hurries on. Notice verse 44 in chapter 13, verse 1. On that day, on that day, the text hurries on to deal with matters we might too quickly dismiss as mere routine, namely, financial provision for the regular temporal sacrifices and the purification of the congregation in obedience to the law of God.
[33:11] Without such a routine, the author seems to be implying, the joy of a single day can never be sustained. So this passage is simply one clear witness to what the whole Bible repeatedly emphasizes that worship is not merely, not merely a matter of particular times of rejoicing, but it is the persistent routine of living worship that encompasses the whole of our lives as God's people day in, day out.

And that's why from verse 44 down to 13, verse 3, we're shown clearly the need not only for real celebration, but also for real constancy. The persistent routine of a sustained system of corporate worship for this reformed and renewed people.
Let me quote to you from Professor Williamson of the New Bible Commentary. A very profound comment, I think. Although it's usually the high points of success that impress themselves on the memory, the true gauge of spiritual progress in the individual as well as in community life is the extent to which what might be passed by as the normal has been transformed.
The form of the narrative at this point emphatically asserts that without such progress in regard to the ordinary, the climaxes and celebrations will fade all too quickly into tarnished memories.
And that's very true. How many so-called spiritual awakenings have just faded out as a flash in the pan because of that very reason?
[34:53] You see, the whole point of the special and the extraordinary is not to perpetrate what by nature is unique and transitory, but it's to transform the ordinary, ongoing life of God's people.

And that's why these two paragraphs come hard on the heels of what we've just read. And they're all about the ongoing provision for God's work and about the ongoing purity of God's people.
It's very plain. Verses 44 to 47 are all about the need for real corporate provision. They're to be a people devoted to God and therefore there must be an essential setting apart to God.
And that's tangible, we're told here in verse 47. In a setting apart of all the necessary provision for God's work. You see, it's all very well to say, well, we want to be spirit-filled in the church.
But don't forget what the apostle says to the church in Acts chapter 5, verse 32. The Lord gives his spirit to those who obey him. And we've already seen very clearly in chapter 10 that the obedience of faith, which is real, which is tangible, provides for the work of God's kingdom.
[36:03] And that's why these portions are mentioned here, verse 44. Portions that are given, notice, verse 44, according to the command of Moses and, verse 45, the command of David and Solomon.

By the way, for those of you who are particularly interested in covenants, notice that all covenants in the Bible have commands to be obeyed. Not just Moses' so-called law covenant, but the covenant of David also, and of course, the new covenant.
And the greater the grace and the promise of God's covenant, the greater the commands and the responsibilities. How much more, says the writer to the Hebrews, are we called to obey the voice that warns us, not just from the earth, but from the heavens in the new covenant.
And they did obey here, notice, verse 47. Indeed, that provision, according to God's command, marked out this entire era, we're told, all the way through Ezra and Nehemiah from Zerubbabel, that's way back in Ezra chapter 1, right through to the time of Nehemiah.
And you see, the point is very clear, isn't it? The great days of blessing, the great days of praise and joy and thanksgiving for God's people, like it was back in David's day, they will also be always the days when God's people are providing together as commanded for the work of his kingdom.
[37:28] A renewed people with God's spirit in the midst will always be a giving people, a generous people, a people set apart in every way to God and therefore seeking first the needs of the kingdom of God.

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Constantly contributing together to the work of his house. Notice verse 47, it's all Israel, all Israel gave the portions that were set apart for the work.
that is real kingdom partnership, isn't it? Real kingdom fellowship, real kingdom sharing, real kingdom communion. It's the same word in the New Testament translated all these different ways. Real communion of God's people is not just sitting around the Lord's table eating the bread and wine together. Real communion is sharing in the worship of the real constancy of committed cash for the kingdom of God.
And we need to ask ourselves, is our worship constant in the manner of these verses? And is it constant in the manner of verses 1 to 3 of chapter 13 which speak of real corporate purity?
[38:39] You see, they and we are called to be a people distinct from the world. And so there is always going to be a necessary setting apart from this world and from those who are opposed and hostile and even haters of God and of his truth.

I once heard it suggested that these verses indicated that legalism was creeping into the life of Israel here because when they read in verse 1 that no Moabite, no Ammonite should enter the assembly of the Lord, they overreacted and they separated themselves, as verse 3 says, from everybody of foreign descent.
That is to totally misunderstand these verses. No, no, no. These people are showing a proper understanding of the Bible in its context and they are applying it thoroughly to their own situation. It is the very opposite of a kind of wooden and literalistic understanding. They clearly understood when they read Deuteronomy 23 which is where these verses are from that those particular instances mentioned there were those who are real enemies of God's kingdom.
Derek Kidna is quite right. He says, it is the Ammonite and Moabite in his native capacity as the embodiment of Israel's inveterate enemy and corrupter who is in view. It is the son or daughter of a foreign God as Malachi 2 verse 11 puts it who is in view borrowing into the life of Israel.
[40:04] And that is what can never ever be among God's people. God's people cannot pretend that such alliances with unbelievers are not dangerous. We can't just mix our lives up with them in close relationships in that way.

No, as chapter 10 has already talked about, they had rededicated themselves to a necessary separation which is always at the heart of real living faith. And Paul says exactly the same thing to the New Testament church in Corinth.
For what partnership, what communion, what fellowship, what sharing has righteousness with unrighteousness and lawlessness or light with darkness or Christ and Baal. For we are the temple of the living God, says Paul.
Therefore, go out from the midst and be separate. Touch no unclean thing and I will welcome you. And the people there had made that decisive declaration back in chapter 10 verse 28 to set themselves apart from the ways of the world and to the ways and the commands of the one true God.
And no amount of praise or thanksgiving or special celebration can mean anything at all if that holiness of life is not the great constant in their lives because that alone is true worship that God accepts.
[41:26] So this is not a racial separation, not at all. It's a religious one or rather it's a relational one. To be loyal utterly to this God, to the one true God, means that you must forsake all others.

All other gods, including Eros, the great God of sex, the God of our age today. You cannot follow Eros' commands upon your life where they oppose gods and have fellowship with him.
We have to put behind us the God Plutos, the God of wealth, the God Kratos, the God of power that wants power over our own lives. All these ancient gods are live and kicking in the 21st century West today, friends, and you know it.
That's what this is about. Ezra 6, verse 21, makes it very clear that people from other places, foreign people, who likewise separated themselves from what he calls the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the true God of Israel, they also were welcome among the people of Israel because they become like them.
But what he's saying here is it doesn't matter what your pedigree is in Israel or in the church of Jesus Christ, there's no other way to worship the true and living God but to set yourself apart to him and from all other gods and forsaking all other, keep the only unto him as long as you both shall live.

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[42:57] So it's not legalism. It's not a simplistic reading of the Bible. This is true and living faith expressed in the constancy of real purity.

And it's led by a mature understanding of Scripture and a humble submission to Scripture in every aspect of life. There is in many ways a great simplicity in their attitude.
Not simplistic but simple, settled, straightforward determination to make the Bible the supreme rule of their faith and life.
What their people are saying is what God has spoken and what God has written, we will do. It's as simple as that. You see, it was God's Word, the Bible, that shaped and directed the celebration of their particular rejoicing, their special times of corporate worship together as a thankful people.
And it was the Bible that shaped and directed the constancy of their persistent routines, the ordinary day-to-day life. as God's holy people.
[44:10] Great celebration and great constancy. The apostle Paul says these things are written for our instruction upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

So let's take heed and learn and be like them. And how much more as a Christian congregation, how much more ought we to be marked by real celebration of what God has done for us, suffused with real reverence, yes, and real remembering, but also real rejoicing.
And marked by real constancy in the provision of a people who are utterly devoted to God and in the purity of a people who are truly distinct from the world.
God. May God help us and teach us. Let's pray. Lord, help us to be a truly worshipping people, we pray, in our special times, week after week.
Grant us a desire, grant us a longing for your presence, an expectancy in our hearts that we should never come together in this place, but that we are so consciously preparing ourselves to meet with you, the living God, to hear your voice, to encounter your power, so that all who ever do come among us will see that and know it, and know without doubt that you're here, that you're in the midst of us and you can be found.
[45:45] And grant us constancy, Lord, in all our daily walk, that we should be in every way set apart to you as yours alone.

living for your kingdom alone, and not living for the loves of this world. And that we may obtain the glory that you've promised us in the gospel of your Son.
Make us also love all that you have commanded us in that same gospel of your kingdom, we pray, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

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