

God's Word is the foundation for God's people

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[0:00] Nehemiah 8 is a wonderful chapter within the book, wonderful chapter within the whole Bible. Whether we're looking to discover what is God's will for my life, as we want to be faithful to His mission and calling, our same need is to encounter the living God in His living Word.

Ten years ago, ten marathons ago, we came to Bucleus, and the text that was given on the Saturday before was 1 Timothy 4, 13.

14, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, and to teaching. Ten years on, the church has changed, but that foundation reality is the same.

Our need will always be God's Word read, heard, preached, taught. My anniversary gift was to go to the General Assembly this week, and over and over again, as I was just praying, to hear encouragement that across the world and across our country, the Word of God is still changing lives.

That people are hungry to find God's truth, to learn who is Jesus and what's He all about? Where do we discover the truth? In the Word of God. So, Nehemiah 8 is a wonderful chapter, as it reminds us that God's Word is the foundation for God's people.

[1:56] As we think about spiritual renewal and reformation in our life, in our church, key to that is always going to be hearing and preaching the Word of God.

And so, what we see in Nehemiah chapter 8, so just to say where we've been, city walls have been crumbling ruins, Nehemiah comes back, leads the people to build the walls, those walls are now complete.

It's the time for a religious festival, and we see it's a time for the people to get back into their Bibles. Now, I've loved reading this chapter this week, so I want this to be a really encouraging and helpful morning for us, so that you and I would love what we see in Nehemiah 8, that we'd love to hear God's Word, that we'd love and want to believe God's Word, and we would do God's Word, so that God gets the glory as our lives, as our church is transformed, that all of us, we'd be discovering and rediscovering the wonder of God's Word.

So, it's all here in our text. Let's begin with hearing God's Word. It's here in verses 1 to 8. And this little picture that we get in verses 1 to 8 is a dream for a preacher, and it's a wonderful vision for a church, because what you have is a worshipping community where the people are gathering eagerly to hear God's Word, where it's being faithfully read and preached so that all God's people together are giving Him praise for His glory and His grace.

Look at the people, first of all. Verse 1 is where it begins. All the people come together, and what do they do? They tell Ezra, the teacher of law, to bring out the book.

[3:38] They are asking eagerly, Ezra, teach us the Bible. It's a great grassroots movement. The physical rebuilding of the walls is now matched by a desire for spiritual rebuilding.

And so, with one voice, they're saying to Ezra, Ezra, teach us the Bible. And look at verses 2 and 3. We find here is Ezra, and there's a great crowd before him.

There's men, there's women, there's all who are able to understand. And he reads it. And look at the end of verse 3. All the people listened attentively. So, their attention is being given.

The whole covenant community is being taught God's Word. They are literally sitting under the Word of God, not just for 30 minutes, but for 5 to 6 hours.

It is being read, and it's being explained. So, if we're here till tonight, we're following Nehemiah's part, but we won't be. But this has happened in Scotland before.

[4:37] As revival and renewal came, one of the things that happened is that people always wanted to hear God's Word. 1842, a preacher by the name of William Burns was up in Perthshire, Blair Athol, in the Blair Athol church grounds.

And he preached to a crowd of over 2,000 people for over 5 hours. It's a wonderful vision to pray for. It's a beautiful picture that we have in the book of Nehemiah of young and old gathered together.

Eyes and hearts are open. Pens are at the ready. Minds are engaged. Hearts are ready to receive God's Word. What does it mean? How does it apply to me?

Here's the truth. I want to live by it. At the General Assembly, our church planting director was giving a short talk, and he had a wonderful image. He had the image of a church being like a well. You know, in communities where people don't have, you know, taps and they need wells. And he said our business as the church is to keep those wells open. So for us, Bucleus is a well, and we want to keep it open so that people can come and hear about Jesus.

[5:43] And why do we plant churches? So it's like drilling new wells. Galashios would be a new well. Because there is nothing better, nothing more important than for people to come thirsty and to find a place where they can discover the living water, which is the Word of God, which is all about Jesus.

And that's what we've got from the people here in Nehemiah chapter 8. Well, what then about the preachers? So we meet this chap, Ezra, Ezra the priest. Ezra has his own book, Ezra, Nehemiah. In Ezra chapter 7, we discover that about 15 years before this moment, Ezra had also been sent back to Jerusalem. Now, Ezra was a man who devoted himself to God's Word to study it and to teach it.

And he has been patiently teaching the Bible week after week, year after year. And so now he becomes the automatic, here's the guy we need to go to.

He's the one who brings us the truth. And so they ask him to come and preach. And so we've got this great scene, verse 4. Ezra, the teacher of the law, stood on a high wooden platform.

[6:53] He's got guys on his right, he's got guys on his left. Ezra opened the book and he begins to read it and teach it. And as he's doing that, at the same time as he's reading God's Word, as it's being preached, there's also the Levites in verse 7.

And do you notice what they're doing? They instructed the people in the law while the people were standing there. They read from the book, making it clear and giving the meaning so the people understood what was being read.

So there's another, so it's a massive crowd, tens of thousands of people. And so people are being divided into little groups and there's Levites, they're coming over here and they're reading the Bible and they're asking, do you understand what's being read?

Do you have any questions? They're wanting to clarify so that everybody gets it. They understand what's being said and the significance of it. And this is where, so in Becclew, we practice a thing called expository preaching, which is a fancy word that says our goal is to take any section of the Bible and to look to explain it, to unpack it, to apply its teaching and to point ourselves towards Jesus.

And it's a principle that we see here in Nehemiah chapter 8. The aim for Ezra and those Levites is, let me give the sense of the passage and let's see the significance of the passage.

[8:13] We're always wanting to do that. Let's see the significance of this passage. What does it tell us about salvation? How does a person come to know God through Jesus?

Or for sanctification, how does a person take this word and grow to be more like Jesus, to grow in holiness? So we've got this wonderful picture. We've got the people and they're listening attentively. And we've got preachers are preaching. And then together we see the praise. Now look at verse 4 and recognize that the architecture here matters.

So Ezra is standing on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Now why is that? Well, we could say practically, well, it's a massive crowd, so the higher up you are, it's easier to be heard. But it's more than that. It's about showing this is a people that have a high view of God's word. And we know that because look at the posture they adopt.

[9:10] As Ezra opens the book in verse 5, all the people stood up. Why did they stand up? Standing up was a sign of honor in the Old Testament.

So they're standing up, but they're also sitting under. They're submitting to the word of God in their lives. And it's a great pattern. We want to honor the word of God.

We want to submit to its teaching. And in verse 6, we get a great picture of a church united in worship. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God.

And all the people lifted their hands and responded, Amen, Amen. Then they bow and they worship. It's a very physical set of actions. But what we see is that preacher and hearer together are praising God.

They are hearing His voice together. They are glorifying God together. And all of it because they're listening to the Bible. Why do we love the Bible as a church?

[10:10] We love it because it tells us of our God and of our Savior. We get the message about God's uniqueness. We get to hear about His character, His promises.

We get to hear about His covenant love and His faithfulness. And we get to hear about Jesus. Jesus' unique love, His unique wisdom and power. His miracles.

His unique death. He dies for us, taking our place, bearing our sin and its punishment. We love it because we hear about His victory through the resurrection.

Reminds us that He has exalted the King in heaven for us who will one day come back to renew this world and to live with His people forever. And so we love to hear the Bible.

Two points of application for your life and for us as a church as we think about hearing God's Word. One, and we see it in our text, let God's Word be our highest authority.

[11:12] Now that's not a given because we are, all of us, individually and collectively bombarded by messaging and alternative claims to the truth and surrounded by the skepticism of secular culture.

And what we must do is ground ourselves in the Word of God. To submit to it. To hear it.

To understand and to trust that God's Word has explanatory power for the whole universe. It explains everything that we see and it has explanatory power for our lives as well.

It makes sense of who we are and what we are here for. We are here made by God and to know God. And so very practically, it's really important that we be here. Or if you don't belong to this church, you be at your local church.

As God's Word is read, make it a priority. And we go on Wednesdays as the church gathers in different homes, community groups in our case. We want God's Word to be our highest authority and so we listen to it day by day, week by week.

[12:21] Come with a Samuel spirit. Remember Samuel? Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening. God's Word is to be our highest authority and we must let God's Word be our highest priority.

So it's great. Of all the things that we could be doing, God has put it in our hearts to be here. Of all the hassle that it was to get here on Marathon Sunday, we have chosen to be here.

And that's wonderful because what's happening right now is that God is speaking. Jesus is here with us and He is speaking with us. That's wonderful, isn't it? And think about what the Bible says about itself.

The Word of God is described as light in contrast with darkness. The Word of God brings life in the place of death. The Word of God is bread for hungry souls.

It is water for our thirst. So it's good to be here. And it's vital and necessary for us to be here and to commit to listening to God's Word, to make it our priority, to put in the effort to read, to seek, to understand, and to apply its truth to us individually and to us all collectively.

[13:40] So that's the hearing of God's Word. Now let's think, secondly, about believing God's Word. And that's really here in verses 9 to 12. It's wonderful sometimes to get asked questions like this.

You know, how can I read the Bible for myself and how can I understand it? Sometimes people will ask, what's the Bible all about? Or people just want to know, how can I hear God speak to me today?

Those are amazing questions. And I hope that we'll be a people who talk more about the Bible together and how God is speaking to us together. But it can be difficult to read the Bible with understanding.

And so we're going to think about that together. I've been trying to learn French badly as I do every summer after coming back from any given holiday. And one thing that I've discovered is you need a plan.

So I went online and asked the question, how do people learn a language when they're old and they don't have much time? And you discover, well, it's quite good to use the little green owl that lots of us use.

[14:45] And maybe you want to try speaking some sentences in a mirror to go through the awkwardness and build some confidence. Maybe you want to watch some French TV. So I've been doing all that and making not much progress.

But if you feel like you want to grow in your understanding of the Bible, you don't know where to start. Or you're not getting much out of your Bible reading.

You know, it's a habit, but there's not much joy in it. Or you think, this is a habit I want to start. Let's use Nehemiah 8 to give us some guidelines.

Because we can find some things here. Because what we want is to be receiving and believing God's Word, to move from our head to our heart, to move from information to transformation.

So I'm going to give us three questions that I hope will help us anytime we come to a passage of God's Word. There are others we could ask, but there's three that are in here. Verse 9 and 10, here's one question to ask of any Bible text.

[15:45] How does it show me my sin? And I say that because we find Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites in verse 9 instructing the people saying, This day is holy to the Lord your God.

Do not mourn or weep. Because they've been weeping as they listened to the words of the law. So they're having to be given this strange command. You need to stop mourning because it's a time for joy. It's not the time right now to fast over wrongdoing.

It's the time to celebrate the feast. But why do they need to give that command? What's been happening? Well, clearly what's been happening is that they are listening to God's Word.

They've been exposed to its truth. And they've become aware of how far short they are falling from God's standards. And so they weep as the gap between God's holiness and their imperfection is exposed.

Reminds me of another huge gathering, Acts chapter 2, Day of Pentecost. There is Peter preaching to a huge crowd. And he says, in effect, look, God sent his son, Jesus, promised Savior.

[16:49] And you rejected him. And you organized to have him crucified. That was God's plan for salvation. But you were in the wrong.

And God raised him and glorified him. And as they listened to that message, it says in Acts 2 that they were cut to the heart. The hearing of God's Word exposed their sin.

And they turned and repented and believed. God's Word is light. And it exposes the darkness and the stain. You wash your windows and the sun shines and you see the smear and the dirt that you've left behind.

The light of God's Word. God's Spirit takes that Word and applies it into all the dark corners of our lives.

It shines the spotlight on our disobedience. Where we cross over God's line into forbidden territory.

[17:51] It exposes our pride, our self-reliance, our self-righteousness. And as God's Word shines the spotlight on our hearts, the most important thing for us to do is to confess our sin and not cover up our sin.

That's the message from David of Psalm 32. To understand that repentance, turning away from sin and towards God, is a gift of God's grace.

And for a Christian, it is to be the daily rhythm of our lives as we sit under God's Word and we let it show us our sin. So that's one question that we can ask of any text in the Bible.

Here's the second question. How does it help me remember redemption? Or how does it show me salvation? Or how does it show me Jesus? Let's read verse 10 and 11.

Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared.

This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

[18:57] The Levites calmed all the people, saying, Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve. In verses 9 to 11, three times the people are told this is a holy day. And two times they are reminded of the Lord.

L-O-R-D, all in capitals. And what's going on there? The idea of holiness. This is a day that's set apart for God's purpose. And His purpose in this festival was to remind them that He is their Redeemer.

That He is the Lord. That Lord, when you see it in capitals, speaks to us of the personal covenant name of God. God, this is the God who is committed in love to saving Himself for, save a people for Himself.

And so they are to remember, this day is set apart to remember the Lord who is their strength. That's the point of this festival. That's the point of our worship, to remember God in His love and mercy has given us a Redeemer.

That's why it was a day for joy. The joy of the Lord is your strength. And this Lord that they're being reminded about, well, He's the God, and they've just heard it in God's Word, He created everything. [20:10] And this God in love, He has chosen them. And He has redeemed them from slavery. And He has now restored them from being far away in exile. Now they're home.

And He has protected them in all their rebuilding work from all their enemies. And so it's a time for joy because they're invited to remember the God of love who saves.

I think this reminds us that we always need to hear God's Word in stereo. There are those two inputs that we hear. We hear God's law.

And God's law convicts us. And God's law shows that we can't keep the law. And God's law reminds us why we need Jesus as a Savior. But we also hear the good news of the gospel.

The good news of Jesus. The message that God gave His Son to be a Savior for His people. That the Creator of the universe has entered into history to bring people back to God.

[21:10] He took on human nature. He took on our sin and our guilt. He paid the price and He bore the wrath to rescue us from Satan's sin and death. So we could be brought back to God knowing the joy of the Lord is our strength too.

One lesson from Nehemiah 8 is certainly this. As Christians we need to hear God's Word in stereo. They were only listening to the minor key notes. And they were weeping.

But they needed to hear the major key of God's joy and God's grace. To believe that yes my sins are many. And yes His mercy is more. So we're listening in.

And they're being reminded about sin. And they're being reminded about salvation. But here's a third question that we can ask. And we should ask whenever we're reading the Bible. How does this text help me to give glory to God?

How does it show me the glory of God? And how can I give glory to God in response? And that's the beauty of verse 12. All the people went away to eat and drink. To send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy.

[22:20] Because they now understood the words that had been made known to them. So now their hearts are still. Because they know God is for them, not against them. Their hearts are full of joy because they're reminded that God has rescued them.

And now they go to feast. Because they understand and they have believed God's good news. They have received it for themselves. The pattern for their lives.

Well it follows the pattern set out for them in God's Word. And just as we think about that by way of application for ourselves. Let's make every effort to let God's Word form us.

We all have many shaping influence in our lives. Our parents, teachers, friends. Maybe social media feed. Let me encourage each one of us to make sure that we are being formed by the Word of God.

To hear His voice. To don't let it be drowned out by all the other voices. To give the Bible space and time in our weeks and in our lives.

[23:28] For the sake of our hearts. You know like the Old Testament believers described in Deuteronomy 6. Talk about it. Talk about it on the road. Talk about it in our homes.

Talk about it when we're sitting down with people. Talk about it when we're sharing coffee after church. And to understand that to know the joy of the Lord as our strength.

As it's described here. We need to hear and we need to believe over and over again. That while we were still powerless and helpless. Lost in sin and shame.

Christ Jesus died for us. That takes us to the third and final thing briefly. And that's about doing God's Word. Verses 13 to 18.

Now, we read earlier the book of James, and the book of James has lots of picture language, and one of those pictures there has, I guess for us, imagined the scene where you are getting ready for a wedding or some important occasion, and you're rushing out the door, and you take a look in the mirror, and what you see is maybe your hair is sticking up, and you've got bits in your teeth, and your collar is undone, but you're in such a rush that you instantly forget, and you go to the wedding as a mess, and the photos are ruined. It's a disaster. James 1, 22, do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Jesus' words at the end of the Sermon on the Mount,

and everyone who hears my words and obeys them, puts them into practice, they are the ones who are built on the rock-solid foundation. Now, we see it in Nehemiah 8, because in verses 13 to 18, what's been happening is that they've been listening. Here's God's Word being taught, and now they discover. They discover they're at a festival that God has given, but they've forgotten a festival practice. It had been set down by God that this was a time where they were supposed to build temporary huts made out of branches, and to live in them, so that they could remember that God rescued them from Egypt, that they could remember God had cared for them while they were in the wilderness.

[25 : 50] So, they were missing that really important connection that the God who saves His people is the God who sustains His people, and that was supposed to be part of their praise. It's always an important part of our praise, too. But see what's different now, verses 16 through 18.

There go the people. They went out and brought back branches, and they built themselves temporary shelters. And look at the end of verse 17, from the days of Joshua until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated like this, and their joy was very great. They hear God's Word, they believe God's Word, and they do God's Word, and it gives them great joy. And then we leave them in verse 18, day after day, during these eight days of festival, and they're listening to Ezra teaching the Bible, and they want to be responsive to it. They want to apply it to their lives, and they want it to lead them into worship.

It's a wonderful pattern. I wonder if you've ever had that kind of experience. Sometimes you're reading the Bible, or sometimes you're sitting in church, and it's as if God speaks through His megaphone of His Word, and you become instantly aware, right now, there is something I need to do. Maybe you need to repent of a sin. Maybe it's you need to pick up the phone and talk to somebody, and you've been putting it off.

Maybe you feel that compelling urge to share Jesus with that person that God has put in your heart. Maybe it's time to leave and to go. God's Word is doing that. God's Word is living and active. Jesus speaks as the Bible is read and preached, and He looks for us as listeners to actively respond in repentance, in repentance, in faith, in obedience.

[27 : 48] Just as Jesus did when He was on earth, so He continues to speak and call us to response today. So, as we close, maybe today, Jesus is speaking to some of us. We need to hear, we need to believe, and to do. Maybe it's a message that this one from Jesus, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. And you know you've not really been listening or submitting. It's time to hear, believe, and do. But maybe it's a message like this from Jesus, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Maybe you're full of trouble and anxiety, and you need to believe and do this Word and invite Jesus to give you rest.

Maybe it's the commission where Jesus would look at the harvest field and say, well, the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. And you think, am I playing my part with my gifts in building God's church? It's time to hear and believe and do. But maybe it's the message that Jesus brought as He began His ministry. Repent and believe, for the kingdom of God is at hand. To trust and believe that Jesus is God's promised King. He is the one who brings salvation, that we would believe that truth and respond with repentance and faith. God's Word doesn't change. The foundation for God's church doesn't change. We must be devoted to reading, to preaching, to hearing the Word of God, to hear it, to believe it, and to do it. Let's pray together. Lord our God, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You that it is living and active. We thank You that it...