

The Public Reading of Scripture

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[0 : 00] I'd like you to open your Bibles again, the book of Nehemiah chapter 8 on page 492, and I would like to draw your attention particularly to words which we find at the end of verse 3, the last sentence of that verse, and all the people listened attentively to the book of the law.

So, the scene that is presented to us here in this chapter is of life in Jerusalem in the mid-fifth century before Christ.

And what we have recorded for us in this chapter is an example of a congregation engaging with the Bible as it is read in public.

The book of the law here is the Torah, or the five books of Moses, the Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. And what we have here is an example of reading scripture publicly out loud.

Now, reading scripture when we gather together to worship is very important. Paul wrote to Timothy, a young pastor in the early church in Ephesus, and he said, devote yourself to the public reading of scripture as well as to preaching and to teaching.

[1 : 27] And so, an important element in any act of worship is the public reading of scripture. Now, sometimes, occasionally, I have attended churches where the only scripture that is read is the text on which the preacher is going to focus.

But in our tradition, our Presbyterian Reformed tradition, here in Scotland and throughout other countries in the world, the reading of scripture has a place in its own right in the service.

And it's very important that we preserve that. And we see that the pattern for that in this chapter.

Now, Ezra ensured that the scripture was not only read, but that it was explained.

We read that the Levites read from the book of the law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood in verse 8. So, we find Ezra was helped by the Levites. There was a large number of people present. They were gathered in the open air. And the service went on for six hours, which is slightly longer than we're accustomed to here in Buclue.

[2 : 39] Probably, the scriptures would have been read in sections. And between the scripture readings, the 13 Levites present, named in verse 7, would explain the meaning to the people.

Perhaps the people would have been gathered in smaller groups. So, let's for a moment try to imagine the scene that is presented to us here. This was an important event. It's an example of a congregation engaging with scripture.

Now, one of the problems that the churches in the Western world face is that Christians are not engaging with the Bible as they used to.

And in contrast with the church, the churches in Africa, the churches in Asia, the churches in Europe and in North America, we don't really take as much interest in the scriptures in terms of reading them privately and personally.

Remember the first time I went to Ghana many years ago, the person who greeted me told me that he was brought up on a phrase which said, NBNB.

[3 : 49] And I said, what does NBNB mean? He said, no Bible, no breakfast. And there's a kind of biblical anorexia which is blighting the churches here in the Western world.

And so, quite a considerable amount of research has been done into why Christians are not regularly reading and meditating scripture. And that research has been helpful.

But as far as I'm aware, very little of any research has been done in how we engage with the Bible as we gather together. A lot of research has been done of what we do as individuals, what we do when we close the door, when we're in our homes.

But how do we interact with the public reading of scripture, the explanation of scripture, as we gather together here. It's difficult to know, really, how we do that.

But I think Ezra will help us to discover, because what we find here is that there are six key features of this public reading of scripture.

[5 : 04] So Ezra provides us with a template which will help us to evaluate how we respond today and each Sunday to the reading and preaching of scripture in public worship.

Now the scene that is presented to us here is described in verse 3 in summary and then in detail in verses 4 to 12. And in this description we find Ezra's open-air congregation interacting with the Word of God to its public reading and exposition in six key ways.

And this event, I believe, is recorded in the Bible in order to challenge us to examine the way in which we are responding to God's Word this morning and every time we gather here in church. As we now go on to note briefly the six key features of Ezra's congregation, let's evaluate whether here today we are reflecting them.

Let's examine each of these in turn. The first is that we find that Ezra's congregation was in step. The phrase all the people occurs ten times in twelve verses, in the first twelve verses of this chapter.

[6 : 28] And so we find the congregation standing before God's Word as a community. All the people were together. They were not a series of individuals. They were a community.

They were anticipating Paul's metaphor of the church as a body in which each member of the body interacts with the others. So that as we gather here this morning, God is calling us not simply to come as individuals.

He's calling us to come as a family. He's calling us to come as a body. He's calling us to be concerned not only about what we think and how we react, but how those around us are responding to God's Word.

So that we pray not only for ourselves, but we pray for them as well. And so the first question we need to ask ourselves this morning, are we conscious of being here as a body of people?

Or are we simply here as a bunch of individuals? There's a lot of individualism in our society. And perhaps we need to counteract that by becoming much, much more conscious of the communal dimension of spiritual worship.

[7 : 40] God has called us to worship together as different instruments in an orchestra. They all blend together. And there's a sense in which we are being called to worship the Lord like the musicians in an orchestra blend together.

So we need to be in step with one another. The second feature is that Ezra's congregation responded on cue to the call to worship.

Read at the beginning of verse 6 that Ezra praised the Lord, the great God. Now in effect, that was a call to worship. Similar to the verses that James reads before, calling us to worship the Lord each week.

Or the verse we used this morning from Psalm 100. Sing to the Lord all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness. Come before him with joyful songs. Now we find that not only did Ezra praise the Lord as the great God, but immediately the people responded and said, Amen, Amen.

They were ready to go. They wanted to be involved. They wanted to respond. The word Amen is repeated for emphasis to show just how keen the congregation was.

[9 : 05] And this is a reminder that we are all active partners in the worship of God. It's not just that the person who's leading the worship is active and the rest of the people are passive.

God is calling us all to be active, to be participants rather than spectators in the house of God. He's calling us to say our Amen.

We don't need to say it out loud. You can if you wish. But we should be saying that in our heart. Amen really comes from the Hebrew root to believe.

And it's an expression of faith. And so as soon as Ezra said the equivalent of let us worship God, the people say Amen, Amen. They want to get involved.

They come in on cue. And it's so important that we do that. Someone who is perhaps reading the news or doing a program on video will find symbols such as we see on the screen at the moment.

[10 : 12] And when he or she see that, they've got to be ready to go. They've got to come in. And that's important. That's so important before we come to church that we prepare, that we come prepared and that we're ready to jump in, as it were, ready to participate, ready to say our Amen.

Amen. So again, we need to ask ourselves this question. How keen are we to become active participants in the service from the very beginning? And so often we tend to think of the beginning

of the service as preliminaries.

But in a sense, perhaps they are. But the service is important from the very beginning, from the moment that the preacher says, let us worship God, or quotes a verse calling us to worship. We are called to participate. We're called to respond. We're called to get involved. The third feature of Ezra's congregation is that we find it was all ears.

We read in verse 3, in the second part of the verse, all the people listened attentively to the book of the law. They were eager to hear the reading and to understand what it means and implies for them.

[11 : 32] This explanation was given not only to the people, but also to those who were able to understand that as children. And they were taking, they were in part of this open air service.

The people wanted to understand what the reading meant and what it implied for their lives. Remember how Jesus tells us that we need to consider carefully how we listen, how we hear. And that's a word, surely for us today. It's so easy for us to drop off to sleep, metaphorically at least. It's so easy for us to lose attention.

We need to listen carefully because God is speaking. God is speaking when the scriptures are read and when they're expanded. But we hear as we listen.

If we're not listening, we won't hear. Just as in this atmosphere of this church there are many radio signals passing at the moment that we're not receiving because we don't have a receiver.

[12 : 42] Or we have a receiver, it's not switched on. And it's like that. God is speaking as his word is proclaimed, as his word is read and proclaimed. And we need to be ready to receive it.

We need to be switched on, as it were, and ask God to give us that faith which will say, yes, Lord, speak, for your servant is listening. So the church is an acoustic community and a community that listens, that hears the word of God.

The reformers said that the great mark of the church was not only the preaching of God's word but the hearing of God's word. And so for a church to be the church, not only must the gospel be preached, it must also be heard.

And it's so important that those of us who spend most of the time in church in the pews, I now do, that we are switched on, that we're listening to what God is saying to us.

The fourth feature of Ezra's congregation is that they are awestruck by the Lord's presence in their midst.

[13 : 53] We read in verse 6 that after responding with their amens, they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. They became conscious that God was present with them, that God was in their midst.

As in Corinth, centuries later, any stranger entering the square before the water gate would feel compelled to explain, to exclaim, as Paul said, God is really among you.

And our great desire as we come to worship God is that God would reveal himself to us and that we would become conscious of the presence of God. This church is the house of God.

Only when God's word is being read and proclaimed and when his people are at prayer that it becomes the house of God and we are here as God's guests and he wants us to hear what he is saying to us.

And as we hear him, we are struck by his majesty, by his greatness, by his holiness.

[15 : 12] And again, we ask ourselves this question as we come to church, do we ask and expect to have a sense, to experience a sense of God's presence?

In church, the screen, as it were, we call it a screen between time and eternity is very thin. And here in the house of God, as God's word is read and expanded, we can become conscious in a unique way of the eternal reality that surrounds us.

We live not only in a universe of space and time, we live in an eternal universe that is in, with, and under our universe of space and time.

And it's so important that we sense that spiritual universe, that we sense the presence of God, that we sense that spiritual reality of eternity.

The fifth feature of Ezra's congregation was that their heartstrings are pulled. We find that the people respond emotionally.

[16 : 28] They weep, first of all, at their failure to meet the high standards of the scripture they're hearing, in verse 9. But then lamentation turns into joy when Nehemiah reminds them that the Torah communicates grace as well as law.

Let's read again verses 11 and 12. The Levites calmed all the people saying, Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve.

Then all the people went away to eat and to drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

And so, as God's word was made known to them, their first reaction is to weep, because they're ashamed, because they become conscious that they failed to meet the high standards of God's law and of God's word.

But then Nehemiah and Ezra remind them that the Torah mentioned God's grace and God's love and God's mercy. And so their weeping turns to joy.

[17 : 36] They learn to rejoice in the goodness and grace of God. When we worship God, when we come to church, it's very easy for us to put up our sort of psychological defenses, and we have a barrier between, you know, what is being read, what is being said, what is being sung, and our inner being.

But the people in Ezra's congregation obviously lowered that barrier. And they were willing to allow God's word to impact their emotions, to impact the deepest part of their lives, to stir them, to pierce their conscience, and to rouse the heart.

Now, sometimes we can be rather suspicious of emotion, but the Psalms are full of emotion. And emotion is an element, an important element in worship.

It's not the only element, as we shall see, but it is an important element. And it's so important that we are willing to allow God's word to penetrate right into the depths of our consciousness.

And finally, the sixth feature of Ezra's congregation is that it gets in sync with God's will, because they are moved to obey the scripture in their lifestyle.

[19 : 12] We see this in the second part of the chapter in verse 13 onwards. They hear in the word that the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Tabernacles has to be celebrated at that time, and they're willing to do it.

They're willing to take part in this festival, an annual festival in the Jewish religious year, when the people would live for one week in the year in temporary shelters made from tree branches.

This was a reminder of the 40 years pilgrimage of their ancestors in the wilderness following the Exodus from Egypt. And we find here that they are moved to obey this command in verses 13 to 18.

And so not only were their emotions impacted, but their wills were moved. And they took decisions. And they did things differently. It wasn't just that they felt different, but they behaved differently.

And that is the way that God's word works. It impacts not only our emotions, important as these are, but even more important is that it would impact our will and our behaviors, and that we would become doers as well as hearers of God's word.

[20 : 33] His word, as the psalmist says in Psalm 119, is a lamp to guide us a delight for our path. So we need to ask ourselves this question.

When we leave this service or any other service, what have we been persuaded to do differently that we wouldn't have done otherwise? That's a hard question.

It's a question we need to ask. Because God's word impacts our behavior. It impacts how we live. And we need to ask ourselves that question.

What am I going to do differently as a result of hearing what God has said to me today? So we ask ourselves the question, has today's service or the service of any Sunday persuaded us to do anything differently or to do something you otherwise might not have done?

So these six features of a congregation interacting, engaging with the word of God. And I believe that God has caused this incident to be recorded in order that we might learn from it.

[21 : 48] It's not simply there as a historical piece, it's there to guide us. Paul tells us that the scriptures were given to help us and to encourage us and to give us hope. And so we might ask ourselves this question, have we been encouraged as we've read God's word together today?

So we need to ask ourselves the question, how are we responding? Are we as a congregation reflecting the six features of Ezra's congregation?

Are we conscious of being in step with others around us? Are we concerned for our neighbor, for the person sitting beside us or in front of us or behind us?

Are we concerned for them as well as for as much as for ourselves? Are we at the beginning of each service ready to go? Are we ready to come in on cue?

Are we willing to say our heartfelt Amen? Are we all ears? Are we listening attentively to what God is saying?

[22 : 58] Are we all struck by the glory of God? By a sense of his greatness and how majestic and how wonderful he is that we bow down before him and acknowledge him as God.

And have our heartstrings been pulled by being stirred to weep for our sins and to rejoice in God's wonderful grace? So will we leave this service with our lives more in sync with God's will and willing to be doers as well as hearers of the word?
from... Thank you. Let's try to keep it forward.