

Back to the Bible

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[0 : 00] The joy of the Lord is my strength. I'm sure loads of us have heard this, we've seen it on fridge magnets and inspirational quotes, but I don't know if many of you knew that it was from Nehemiah. I confess I didn't. So today we're continuing our series on Nehemiah. Throughout the series so far, we've seen how the word of God has been used to bring the people together through Nehemiah to build up the walls of Jerusalem and rebuild the wrecked city.

God has been doing miraculous things here, but through ordinary people and things. The people have joined together to rebuild the walls, but miraculously they've managed to do it in 52 days. So by the end of chapter 6, the walls have been completed and from now on we're going to look at how God uses Nehemiah's efforts and focus to concentrate on building up the actual people that live in the walls. The chapter, Nehemiah 8 verses 1 to 18, is full of really good stuff, but this morning I'd like to concentrate on three main things and it'll be really good if you've got your Bible there to actually open it up and follow along with me. So the three things we're going to look at is how understanding the word of God is really important and how we then rejoice in the word of God when we understand it. And then when we understand it and we're rejoicing, we actually then obey the word of God.

So first of all, starting to look at verses 1 to 8. Any time that we're asked to preach, we have a huge responsibility and we want to get it right and try and discern what God is saying through the passage. Here we see the people gathered together after the walls have been built and they are eager for Ezra the prophet to preach to them.

They tell him to bring out the book. They've had quite enough, to be honest, of Ezra and Nehemiah telling them all about their ideas and giving them building instructions and now they want Ezra to get out the book and teach them God's law because they're really hungry to hear God's word.

[2 : 27] Also, if you look at verse 2, it says the whole community of men, women and children were there listening. It was really important that everyone, including the kids, understood God's word.

This is true for us today. This is why the children's work here at Christ Church and all that we do here is so important. Children need both good Christian leaders and also their parents to explain what's written in the Bible to them and to actually help them to read it and learn to understand it for themselves.

In verse 2, it also tells us that this gathering was on the first day of the seventh month. You may wonder, what is the significance of this? Well, the number seven was very significant for the Jewish people of that time.

Just as for them and for us, the seventh day was a day of rest. They also had a law that every seven years, that would be a special year where all debts would be cancelled.

And every single year, the seventh month would be a really special month when people would get together to celebrate and share food with each other and also to look after the poor and the widowed and those on the margins who didn't have much.

[3 : 43] And this would be a time of fellowship with God and with each other. So this gathering wasn't just spontaneous, it was planned. They knew as they beavered away and worked away to finish that wall that this special seventh month was coming down the track.

However, we do see some spontaneity here when the people react to Ezra by wanting him to get out the book. This wasn't just like us on a Sunday morning, though, listening to a 20 minute preach either.

They were there from six o'clock in the morning till 12 noon. Six hours of attentive listening nonstop to God's word. So no drifting off halfway through and thinking about what we're going to cook for dinner here.

They want to hear from God and know what he's saying to them. And then if you look at verses four to six, we read it tells us that people showed great respect for the word of God by standing to hear it, by bowing their hands, heads, sorry, and lifting their hands as Ezra blessed them.

So bowing their heads and raising their hands. What we can learn from this, I think, is that it's really important to us to come ready to hear and understand God's word, to be expectant.

[5 : 06] Another important thing to note is how Ezra helped the people to understand. In verses seven to eight, we see that he has all different priests standing with him.

I can't really pronounce most of their names, to be honest. I imagine that Ezra would have been reading the scripture in Hebrew, but the people in the crowd would probably have spoken all different languages, with some of them there only hearing this for the very first time because they'd just come to faith.

This would have been an exciting time of revival, I imagine. So all the other priests would probably be dotted around the crowd, translating what Ezra was saying and explaining to the people what it meant so that the people could really understand what God was saying to them.

If the people and the city were going to rebuild and be reformed as the people of God in this city and land, it was crucial that Ezra explained to the people and that they knew exactly what was going on and what was needed.

They needed to use the knowledge they had correctly. If we now look at ourselves, it is important that we commit to prayerfully study the Bible, not just to learn more of what's in the Bible, but to learn much more about God himself through it.

[6 : 23] As our understanding of God's word grows and develops, then our rejoicing in God can grow and can be a reality in our daily lives that helps to sustain us in the peaks and the troughs, the celebrations and the trials that our lives go through.

And with that, our obedience to God's word will grow. But all this has to start with understanding God's word. If not, we open ourselves up to attack and we can start living by how we think or how we feel on any given day.

And we can very easily go off piste, get distracted and get ourselves in the right pickle. If we look through the Bible in books such as Acts, when the first church began, or we think about the Reformation or Wesley's revival, when the gospel is brought to the people, it brings life.

The Holy Spirit works alongside and through God's word and it gives people the feeling and the joyousness of revival.

They are revived. This message from Nehemiah is so timely and crucial to us at this time in history too. After this challenging and frightening year, many of us may feel that we have been thrown off course.

[7 : 48] Some of us have found that our faith has been really tested. Some may have felt, to be honest, like giving up at times. And that is why, as we hopefully start to emerge from this lockdown and move forward, that we are not passive in our faith.

We really need to get to grips with the stuff and take our part in rebuilding of the people of God and the worldwide church. So how do we do it?

Well, it's not easy. I know that. But some key things are engage and be expectant. Make coming to church to meet with God and your church family a priority.

You need them and they need you to be there. It's important that we show up each week wanting to hear the word of God preached. Come expectantly to hear what God is saying to you.

We've got Sunday services going on and we've also got midweek services as well. Next thing, join a small group.

[8 : 55] Work together with a group of people in a safe environment to really hash out what God is saying in the scriptures and how you can apply it to your lives. We have lots of groups to choose from.

So check out the website, ring the office or speak to Carolyn Waite, our small group overseer. She'll help you to find and join a group that's great for you. Also, if you think that you might like to start a small group, speak to Carolyn too.

You don't have to be a great theologian. We can provide lots of resources. You just have to have a willing heart and a commitment to study the Bible and share this with others. And maybe to be able to provide tea and cake and welcome people into your home.

That's also good too. Also, devote some time each day to read the Bible yourself and pray. It doesn't have to be hours.

Start with 10 minutes a day. Ask God to fill you with the Holy Spirit. Maybe get a study Bible or a life application Bible to help you. There are some really good daily Bible reading notes that you can get hold of.

[10:03] So just ask myself or Clive or Russ if you'd like some help with this. When you open the Bible, pray that the Holy Spirit would guide you and help you to understand.

Maybe download the Lectio 365 app or the Daily Prayer app or the HTB Prayer for the Day app. We also have some resources that might be helpful to get you started here at church on the resource table just outside the door.

If you're struggling with this, ask for help. That's what we're here for. If you've got children, bring them to fact on the first Sunday of the month and bring your kids to join in with the kids' church that's going on.

Get to know other families. Also, maybe think about joining Emmy and the kids' team to teach the children about God. Also, if you have or know of any young people, pray for them daily and take an interest in them.

Talk to them about their faith and yours and encourage them in their walk with God and to get stuck into whatever things that might be going on for them here. If you're involved in any ministry areas that might be suitable for them to join, ask them.

[11:16] Pray for the new youth leader also that we're advertising for and maybe get involved yourself. Pray for those that are leaving home for the first time that they would find a good church and some good mates at the university town that they're moving to.

It's been such a traumatic 18 months for them. They really need our love and our prayers. So get involved, get connected, get engaged.

Prayer and the word of God revives us, it equips us and it encourages us. So the second point that we look at is rejoicing in the word of God.

So when we understand the word of God, this leads us to rejoicing in it. So then we look, we go on to look at Nehemiah 8 and we go through from verses now 9 to 12.

So if you want to have a look at that in your Bible and follow along. So in verses 9 to 10, we see the people crying and weeping because they see their sin.

[12:23] But Nehemiah says to them, let's celebrate and have a party. This is a holy day. It's good that they recognise and are sorry for the sin and they repent, but they also need to see their saviour.

This is a day for rejoicing. They can then return back to the Lord. They are to pause in their mourning and celebrate the goodness of God by gathering and sharing food and fellowship together with those that don't have any.

There's a famous quote by the theologian Warren Wearsby and he says, it's as wrong to mourn when God has forgiven us as it is to rejoice when sin has conquered us.

So for us, it's important to remember that we all mess up. Whether we're the Archbishop of Canterbury, a mum at the school gate or a student in college, all of us fall short of God's standard. We need to see our saviour and rejoice what he has done for us and to celebrate how much he loves us. We are to rejoice.

[13:29] And then we go on to that famous verse 10, where Nehemiah tells the people, the joy of the Lord is my strength. This is the joy that God himself has.

And for us, on our side of the cross, when we know that we're saved, when we've been given the Holy Spirit and it dwells inside of us, we have the joy of the Lord.

God's own joy inside of us too. God is a joyous God. And we can have the joy of the Lord, even if it's sometimes we don't feel like we've got it.

Nothing can steal his joy, but lots of things can steal ours. You, like me, have lived through the past 18 months with all that COVID has brought.

And on the news, famine and wars going on over the world. We live that every day. There are so many things that can steal our joy, but nothing can steal God's joy.

[14:37] So if you have the joy of the Lord in you because you understand the word of God and you have Jesus as your saviour and the Holy Spirit dwelling in you, then nothing can steal it.

A good illustration I once heard by the theologian John Piper, which I'm going to adapt is if it's my husband and my wedding anniversary this year, which it is, we're 29 years married. If he turns up to the front door, knocks on the door and I open it and he's got this massive, great, big bunch of flowers. But he greets me with a really dour expression and says, it's my duty to give you these flowers to wish you a happy wedding anniversary. I wonder what kind of wedding anniversary you think we're going to have. But if I open the door and my husband is beaming because he's so happy that it's our anniversary and he's bought me the flowers to show me that he loves me because he knows that I love fresh flowers. Our anniversary celebrations are going to be a lot different. This, I think, is how we're supposed to be with God. When we understand God's word to us, we are to rejoice in his word. [15:47] We are to rejoice in our saviour. So each day, try and be thankful for something that God has given you. And some days that is going to be difficult.

I know that. It might be a really small thing, but develop an attitude of gratitude. And then we come to the end of verse 12 when they're distributing the food out. And it's a bit like maybe you can imagine some of us going out on Christmas Day delivering Christmas lunches and food parcels to those who don't have them. And why were they doing that? It was to share and to celebrate because they understood the words that were declared to them. So again, we see that once we understand the word of God and what it means to us, then rejoicing comes.

That's how we get the joy of the Lord. Because reading and understanding the word of God draws us closer to him. We get to know him better and have more of him in our lives. [16:51] And finally, obey the word of God. Sometimes we can try to ignore or bypass this and try to have the joy of the Lord without spending time with God in prayer and without understanding the word of God.

But this is not a sustainable joy. It might last maybe from when we get up in the morning to when we have our coffee break or our lunch break, if we're lucky. But it's not going to be sustainable when the storms come.

It has to start with making time to spend with God, asking him to fill you each day with his Holy Spirit and making time to pray and to read and to understand God's word. Then the rejoicing can come and then the obedience then comes out of that joy. Because we love God, we want to obey him. So as we start coming to the end of this talk, we then look at verses 13 through to 18.

Verse 13 says, So by the end of this six hour time of teaching, the people come back to the Lord, reading and understanding his word by having a party.

[18:15] And then the next day, the heads of the families come back to study it even more so that they can explain it to their families over the coming days. And verse 14 to 16 says, And they found it is written in the law that the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm and other leafy trees to make booths as it is written.

So as we read on to the end of the chapter, we see that the people then obeyed the word of God. And the reason that they did this was that the feast of booths was a festival where the Israelites would make little shelters for themselves, make it out of sticks and leaves that they gathered from the fields.

And they would live in them for that week or so to remember how God had been faithful to them when their ancestors had lived in the wilderness for 40 years. So taste and see that the Lord is good.

Do you know Jesus as your saviour and your friend? Being saved doesn't just happen by accident or by being beside something or just by touching it or hearing it in a sermon.

We get to know Jesus when we taste and see that the Lord is good and that's what gives us rejoicing and then obedience. Let's pray.

[19:55] Father, we come before you this morning coming as needy people that need to get to know and understand you more. Fill us, God, with a hunger to really want to bring out our Bibles every day and to dig into them to understand and know you more so that our lives and who we are as your people can be rooted and grounded in your unshakable joy and that we can daily grow more and more like you and be rebuilt, Lord.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.