

We Believe in the Authority of Scripture (Ezra 7:1-10; Nehemiah 8:1-12; 2 Timothy 3:16-17)

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[0 : 00] Children, at this time you are dismissed to Children's Church. You can head on back and join Miss Savannah.! Everyone else, if you have your Bibles, you can turn with me to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. This morning, I'm always excited to preach the Word of God, but also, we're going to start a new series today.

Now, over the next few weeks, we're going to be looking at some of the core commitments of the church in a series called We Believe. And so this morning, we're going to be stating that we believe in the authority of God's Word. We believe in the authority of Scriptures.

And in the weeks ahead, we'll look at how we believe that prayer, gathering together, serving, going, these are all commitments that we, as a church, want to be the core DNA of why we exist and why we gather together.

So this morning, we'll be looking at We Believe in the authority of Scripture. And we'll be in Ezra 7 and Nehemiah 8. We'll start in Ezra 7. We'll see Ezra's personal devotion to the Scriptures and God's Word.

And then in Nehemiah 8, we'll see how Ezra's personal commitment to the Word of God is displayed in their public worship. So as we're looking through here today, we're going to be looking at how we are to be devoted to the Word of God.

[1 : 05] Ezra and Nehemiah, specifically where we're at at this point in the biblical narrative, is that God's people have been living in exile. God's people are living in exile. They have disobeyed God's commands.

They have disobeyed God's plans for their lives. So God has removed His hands of blessing from upon them, and He is allowing them to suffer the consequences of their decisions. He's allowed foreign armies like the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Persians to overtake them, and they are living in exile.

This is where we find stories like Daniel and the lion's den. Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and the fiery furnace. Queen Esther and King Xerxes and the plot against the Jews that so many of our Wednesday night groups have just finished studying.

In fact, King Xerxes, the Persian king in Esther's story, he's had a son named him Artaxerxes, and some scholars believe that he would have been like a stepson to Queen Esther herself.

There have been occasional waves of Jews leaving exile to return to Jerusalem. They've begun to work on rebuilding the walls and the temples. And while there have been some groups returning to Jerusalem, returning to God's place for them to dwell, and even though they've rebuilt the temple, God's people have found themselves once again in great sin and disobedience.

[2 : 18] God's people have found themselves living in great sin and disobedience. And so we read throughout these books, Ezra 7 and Nehemiah 2, that in the reign of Artaxerxes, he allows Nehemiah, Ezra, and some others to return to Jerusalem from Persian captivity.

And their rebuilding efforts are twofold throughout Ezra and Nehemiah. Yes, they're working on rebuilding the buildings, the temple and the walls. But an undergirding theme throughout these two books is that God's people are also being rebuilt.

They're developing a foundation to build this new community upon. And I pray that today we see exactly what that looks like for us in our lives today.

These people, they've become disoriented, distracted, disobedient to the point where they're unrecognizable as the people of God. They need a foundation to build their lives upon.

They need direction, wisdom, and something bigger than themselves. So at this point enters Ezra and the word of God. Ezra chapter 7 verse 1.

[3 : 24] We're introduced to this character named Ezra. Ezra 7 verse 1. Notice this.

He clarifies, verse 6. This Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses that the Lord, the God of Israel, had given.

And the king granted him all that he asked for the hand of the Lord his God was on him. So this Ezra has something going for him. And though it lists his pedigree, it is not his ancestors that makes his story noteworthy.

It's his priorities. His priority of the word of God. And in verse 10, we're going to see that we must personally, individually be committed to the word of God.

Ezra chapter 7. This is the key verse for this part of Ezra. Verse 10. For Ezra. The reason God's hand of blessing is on him. The reason that God is favoring him for this.

[4 : 43] It's because of this. For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord. And to do it. And to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

There's a lot that we can unpack here. But this is not incredibly complicated. Ezra read the word of God. Studied the word of God. Sought to do it and apply it. And further, he sought to communicate it to others.

These are simple principles. But these are ones that we often forget. We look at Ezra set his heart. He made a conscious and active decision to devote himself to the scriptures. He further writes to study the law of the Lord.

And to do it. Meaning he read it and he applied it. He wasn't just seeking to read it and check off a box. He sought to read it in the purpose of comprehending it and understanding it in such a way. That it transformed his very way of life. And to teach God's statutes and rules in Israel. Ezra knew that God's word understood.

[5 : 47] God's word applied. Would affect not just the individual. But God's people can be transformed by the word of God. Through it we are sanctified.

Transformed to live again for our creator. For our covenantal God. Friends, if there's something for us to learn in this. If there's an application that we can glean from this.

It is that we must personally, individually be committed to the word of God. To study it. To do it. And to share it with others. There is no other authority that bears any significance more than the word of God in our lives.

We are entering into a new calendar year. And I promise you. You'll see posts on Facebook and social media. About people starting the Bible recap. And other Bible reading plans. You're going to see a lot of people starting Bible reading plans.

At least for January. And it may falter as it goes forward. But people are going to start reading God's word more and more. As it's a natural on-ramp. For people to read God's word in the new year. And friends.

[6 : 46] There's a lot of confusion sometimes. On what type of Bible reading plans best for the Christian. It can look different. Some people will advocate that you need to read the Bible chronologically. In the order of the events in which they occur.

Some will argue you need to read it canonically. In the ways in which it's just put together in the word of God. Some will say that you need to read the New Testament. Because it's more important than the Old Testament. I disagree with that. But that's something that people will say.

Start in the New Testament. Some people will say you need to read the whole Bible in a year. Three chapters a day. You can do it in like 15 minutes. And you'll read the whole Bible. But friends. Here's the thing I've learned in my years of living. The best possible Bible reading plan for you to start January 1st or better yet.

Today December 28th. Is the one that you actually use. The best Bible reading plan for you is the one that you actually use. We can purchase as a church Bibles.

We can purchase journals. We can make podcasts. Provide study resources. All day long. But unless you individually, personally set your heart on the word of God.

[7 : 45] There's not a lot else that we can do. The author of Hebrews and Hebrews 5 compares the scriptures to food. Chastising God's people. Though while they should be chewing on the solid meat of scripture.

Instead they're in need of the spiritual milk. The elementary things of God. He writes that they're immature. Unskilled. Because they have not devoted themselves to the word of God.

Friends, the scriptures like food. And you're relying on a single meal on a Sunday to satisfy you. Then you're going to find yourself desperate for something else. And when you're not feasting regularly on the word of God.

You'll find that the word of man can be quite appealing when you're hungry. Hungry for wisdom. Hungry for peace. Hungry for direction. All of which we can find in God's word if we'd simply devote ourselves to it.

It's been said before that if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything. And Ezra, he stood for the word of God. He was devoted to the scriptures. And in a time when God's people had abandoned his commands, he stood firmly committed to God's word.

[8 : 52] So what is it about God's word that allows Ezra to be so committed to it? Well, there are biblical principles we can find all throughout the scriptures that give us some understanding about the importance of God's word. But I'm going to lean on 2 Timothy 3, 16 and 17 for a few minutes here.

Just for us to think about how God's word is inspired, transformative, and sufficient. First, God's word is inspired. 2 Timothy 3, 16. Paul writes, all scripture is breathed out by God.

It is breathed out by God. These words may be penned by human authors, but a divine author inspired them. The spirit of God working in the people of God provided us with the word of God. Over 40 human authors, over 1,500 years of history, all while maintaining a central message without any substantive variation or discrepancy.

God's word is beautiful in that. There's consistency in it. There's an old saying that has three sides to every story. Your side, my side, and the truth. So the only explanation that God's word can be so consistent as it is, is that it is breathed out, inspired, divinely brought together by God's spirit working in God's people.

[10 : 06] God's word is inspired, breathed out by God. It is inerrant, meaning it is without error or any falsity. It is trustworthy. It is true because it is God's word. Further, Paul reminds us that God's word is transformative.

2 Timothy 3, 16, all scriptures breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness. Meaning this, God's word is intended to teach you something.

It's intended to change you. It is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, to train you in righteousness. It is intended to change you.

Finally, God's word is sufficient. 16 and 17 again. All scripture is breathed out by God, profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness. Verse 17.

That, so that, so that, the purpose being, the man of God may be complete. Equipped for every good work. That the man of God might be complete.

[11 : 09] That we may be complete. God's word is sufficient. If you feel as though your life is lacking something, odds are what you're lacking can be remedied by this book.

Your addictions, your suffering, your doubt, your desires, your obsessions, your sin can be addressed and remedied through this book.

The inspired, inerrant, trustworthy, true, sufficient word of God can make you complete. Equipped for every good work. Ezra, he was committed to the word of God personally.

But friends, it would impact his ministry publicly. Turn to the next book over, Nehemiah. We'll be in chapter 8. Ezra will spend the rest of our time this morning. Where we're introduced to Ezra for the first time in this book, Nehemiah chapter 8.

And we see that secondly, we don't only need to be personally and privately, individually committed. As the church, when we gather together, we must corporately be committed to the word of God.

[12 : 12] Nehemiah chapter 8, starting in verse 1. And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel.

So Ezra, the priest, brought the law before the assembly. Both men and women and all who could understand what they heard on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it, facing the square before the water gate from early morning until midday.

In the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for this purpose.

And beside him stood Mattathiah, Shema, Ananiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseah on his right hand. And Padaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashem, Hashbadanah, Zechariah, and Meshulam on his left hand.

And Ezra, verse 5, opened the book in the sight of all the people. For he was above all the people. And as he opened it, all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God.

[13:30] And all the people answered, Amen, Amen. Lifting up their hands and they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also, Jeshua, Benai, Sherebiah, Jamin, Aqab, Shabbathiah, Hodiah, Messiah, Kalita, Azariah, Josabat, Hanan, Peleah, the Levites.

Helped the people to understand the law. While the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the law of God clearly.

And they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people, said to all the people, This day is holy to the Lord your God.

Do not mourn or weep. For all the people wept as they heard the words of the law. And he said to them, Go your way. Eat the fat. Drink sweet wine.

Send portions to anyone who has nothing ready. For this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved. For the joy of the Lord is your strength.

[14:40] So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, Be quiet. For this day is holy. Do not be grieved. And all the people went their way to eat and drink and send portions and to make great rejoicing.

Because they had understood the words that were declared to them. So when the first half of the book of Ezra talks about the rebuilding of the temple, and the first half of Nehemiah speaks on the rebuilding of the walls around Jerusalem, Well, the second half of Ezra and the second half of Nehemiah covers the rebuilding of God's people.

Now we can see clearly from this passage exactly how that's going to happen. These people, God's people, become a people centered on the word of God.

They gather in the water gate, and it says they commanded Ezra in verse 1. Bring out the book, the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. And if we want to be a people that say we believe in the authority of God's word, then there are a few things that we can glean and learn from the Israelites in this passage.

First, we learn from them that we must desire the word of God in public worship. Ezra didn't guilt the congregation into the word of God. The people demanded the holy scriptures be brought forward.

[15:54] They had a desire to hear the commands of God read publicly for all who could understand. All the men, all the women, and even the children who had the capability to understand God's commands, they all gathered together and demanded God's word be read from them and read to them.

And it says Ezra read from this book, notice this, from early morning to midday. I don't want to hear if my sermon went long, friends. They stayed from early morning to midday.

And it says in verse 3, And the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. Kept their attention. There's something living and active and important here to where they listened and desired it.

Oh, that we would be a people that desired God's word in this way. That we would be a people that would desire God's word to be read over us, for us to study and hear and be changed by it.

God's people desired God's word to be proclaimed in public worship. We exist in such a consumeristic culture. To where there's an immense pressure to do everything except read from God's word.

[17:00] Many churches exchange it for entertainment. Sprinkling in just the bare minimum of God's word while they instead exchange it for politics, psychology, or even prosperity. We don't need stump speeches from the pulpit.

We don't need self-help from the pulpit. We don't need the heresy of the prosperity gospel from the pulpit. Friends, there's no substitute for the living and active word of God.

We need the scriptures. Above all else, we need God's word. It is the word of God that we get to meet and hear from God. And the reading of God's word here leads to the worship of God in verse 6.

It says, And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting their hands, and they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

It was the word of God that led to the worship of God. If you know me at all, you know that I absolutely love Christian music. I love songs, hymns, and spiritual songs.

[18:05] I love music, biblical worship. Music that is grounded into the scriptures, that calls the people of God to sing the praises of God. And we're given many commands in scripture to sing.

We're given a songbook in scripture. There's a scriptural precedent for enlisting trusted godly leaders to lead us in the corporate singing of God's word to God.

But friends, I've got to note this from this passage. I've got to point out what we see here. There's no background music as the scriptures are being proclaimed. There's no three-part harmony ushering us into the presence of God.

There's no tactics or a manipulation of emotions being used to keep people's attention or to get them in the proper mindset for worship. The word of God is sufficient to draw us into the presence of God.

Scriptures are read. So while we are commanded in scriptures to sing, and there's an endless supply of gospel-centered, God-exalting, worshipful music for us to sing, many songs like we sing today, we must never neglect nor exchange the central role that scripture is to play in our public corporate worship.

[19:21] Perhaps our consumeristic culture of the day has tempted us at times to chase the worship of God through shallow popular music, trendy artists with hidden or sometimes public sins, or worship concerts with a manufactured sense of all through all the smoke and lights.

It's possible for us to reduce worship to a genre of music instead of a proper posture before the Almighty God. The word of God is sufficient to give us access to God.

We must desire the word of God in our corporate worship so much so that we prepare for it. The people came ready to hear. They built a wooden platform beforehand for this purpose.

They didn't have other appointments to get to. They desired God's word so much that they stood for hours in the heat of day just to hear it read over them. They desired the word of God.

Secondly, though, they also sought understanding of the word of God in public worship. They sought understanding. There are 26 other men that are listed here that you probably heard me fumble through those names.

[20:29] There are 26 other men aside from Ezra that are present in this passage among the crowd. And Nehemiah 8, 7, and 8 tells us what they're doing. It says that they helped the people to understand the law.

And while the people remained in their places, they read from the book, from the law of God clearly, and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading.

Meaning this, they didn't just read the word of God or listen to the word of God. They sought understanding of the word of God. They gathered around these godly men and trusted to explain the scriptures.

And just like Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, these people, out of their commitment to God and their love of God and their belief in the authority of God's word, wanted to study it, not just simply read it.

I was listening to Pastor David Platt recently, speaking about what it looks like for us to have a love for the word of God and a desire to study it. And he likened this task to when he'd received a letter from his wife before they were married.

[21:30] In fact, he'd never dated a woman before, so he received this letter from his current girlfriend, and he said it just, he read it differently than other kinds of male. This is what he writes about how he read that letter from his future wife.

He says, and so I would devour every word like, dear David. Dear. What a sweet opening. She thinks I'm dear. Or she'd write this sentence.

What does she mean by that? She put a smiley face here, and I'd be like, why is there a smiley face at that point? Where she'd say, I'm praying for you, and I wonder what she means. She's saying, I'm

praying for you like I pray for anybody?

Or I'm praying for you like I'm praying for my future husband, and you come to mind. Is that what she means? I'm just devouring every word. And he might be like, David, you're obsessed.

And yes, I was. I was obsessed. I was in love. That's kind of the point. When you love somebody, you love their words. You're soaking it in.

[22 : 29] You see, as God's people, it's not just enough to read God's word. We need to seek understanding of God's word. Not out of some ritualistic or legalistic manner, but because we love God.

Because we love God and love his word. Now, this is why we're here today in public worship, with the reading of God's word, and someone that's been entrusted to give the sense. This is what Savannah, our children's director, is doing right now with our children, and she does an incredible job each week explaining the scriptures to those children.

On a normal week, many of you stick around for Sunday school, or you come back on Wednesday nights, where again, someone is entrusted to help us understand the word of God. And we don't gather together out of a ritualistic or legalistic demand for church attendance or engagement, but because we have a love for God, and a desire to understand his word, to apply his word to our lives, to do it, and share his word with others.

So we must desire God's word in public worship. We must seek understanding of God's word in public worship. Further, we see in this passage that we must allow the word of God to confront us of our sins in public worship.

Verse 8, Having read God's word and had God's word explained to them in a clear manner to where they understood the scriptures, we see in verse 9 what follows this understanding of God's word.

[23 : 53] Verse 9, And Nehemiah, who was governor, and Ezra, the priest and scribe, and the Levites, all those names of people who taught the people, said to all the people, This day is holy to the Lord your God.

Do not mourn or weep. And notice this, For all the people wept as they heard the words of the law. They began to weep because they understood the implications of God's law.

They understood what was being said to them when the scriptures are held up before our lives.

Each of them began to see the reality of the sin that is present within them. And after generations and generations of living among foreign and pagan nations, after generations of disobedience, being confronted about their present sin in their lives was likely not a common occurrence.

It likely wasn't something they were used to. And friends, that hasn't changed a lot today. The world around us is constantly seeking to make sinful practices, desires, and behaviors seem normal.

Our world wants us to be comfortable in what the Bible calls sin. Our own flesh will seek to numb the conviction of the Holy Spirit. We'll seek to distract ourselves with temporary and fleeting pleasures.

[25 : 09] But when we gather together and the Word of God is proclaimed over us, when the Word of God is put on display, it should shine a light that uncovers the darkest parts of our lives.

I love going to Sunday school some weeks. Now I sit next to Chad and Molly Hicks and Chad will just kind of lean over Molly and say, man, Brett was just stomping all over my toes this morning. And I usually say, good, good.

God's Word is not intended to make us comfortable in our sin. It's there to remind us that we are dead in our sin and have no hope apart from Christ. The Word of God isn't intended to make us comfortable.

The Word of God is to remind us that we are dead in our sins, guilty of what Jonathan Edwards would call cosmic treason against a holy God. Our sin makes us guilty.

And the punishment for that sin is eternal torment and damnation in a place called hell. The Bible speaks clearly about this reality and it should absolutely drive us to our knees in sorrow and repentance when we're made aware of this.

[26 : 10] There's a present tension in the church today as many pastors and churches seek to lighten the blow or not offend when it comes to addressing sin.

But friends, the Word of God, when it's held up against our lives, it will show us what God intended to show us in God's Word, that there is none that is righteous, no, not one. When God's Word is held up before our lives, it should show us very clearly that there is none that is righteous, no, not

one.

And when we gather together under the reading of God's Word, each of us on this side of heaven should be confronted with the present sin in our lives. And that conviction should draw us towards sorrowful repentance before God.

Transitions a bit in these final few verses. We see Nehemiah and Ezra point these worshipers from sorrow, though, to joy. The timing of this gathering landed during the festival of booths.

God had ordained the Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths back in Deuteronomy 16, which is one of the passages they would have read in this gathering. These festivals were designed and orchestrated as a time for Israel to slow down, stop, and remember God's faithfulness.

[27 : 23] To remember His provision for His people. And despite their present sin, despite their disobedience, they were to be reminded that God has consistently and has consistently made a way for them to experience life, forgiveness, and provision in the Lord.

These festivals were to be a time of joyful remembrance that sparked greater dependence on obedience from God's people. So Ezra and Nehemiah, they remind these people that the joy of the Lord, the joy of the Lord is their strength, their refuge, their sanctuary, their rest.

Sorrow over sin and repentance are necessary, but God's plan in God's word goes a bit further. You see, the bad news that we see in Scripture is that each of us are sinners deserving of God's wrath.

Every one of us sin, none of us are perfect, each of us stand as guilty before God, every bit deserving of His wrath and judgment. And the worst news, there's not a thing you can do about it. There's no amount of good works, no amount of righteous deeds that you may do because your righteous acts are as filthy rags before the Lord and there's no amount of penance that you can declare that will overcome the effects of sin in your life nor remove its stain from your flesh.

[28 : 44] Bad news, we're sinners. Worst news, nothing we can do about it. But the good news that we see in God's word is that God gave His Son Jesus as a substitute, as a substitute to live a perfect life free from sin and He handed Him over to death on a sinner's cross.

Having no sin of His own, instead He bore the sins of mankind, your sin and mine, so that on the cross the debt that we owe due to our sin was paid in full by the shedding of His blood.

He then rose again from the dead and ascended to the Father that we may have life in His name. The best news is that that can make a difference in your life today.

You can experience salvation, forgiveness of sins, rest, and joy in Christ right now, today. Romans 10, 9 says that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

1 John 1, 9 that if you confess your sins to God, He is faithful and just to cleanse you from all unrighteousness. Meaning that the Israelites, when they went to this festival, they were to remember that though sin may have defined their lives and judgment had been pending, a sacrifice stood in their place so that they may have life.

[30 : 12] And this passage ends with the people celebrating this festival with great rejoicing because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Many years later in the Gospels, we'll read of Jesus at the same festival. He says this in Matthew 11, 28. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest, refuge, strength for yourselves.

Friends, true, genuine joy can only be found and experienced in the Lord and His Word. The joy of the Lord is our strength.

This is what we find when we devote ourselves to the Scriptures. This is what we find when we bend our lives to the authority of God's Word. Rest and joy in the Lord.

[31 : 14] This morning, as we conclude, we're reminded in this passage that we must be committed to the Word of God, both personally and publicly, privately and corporately. So I've got to ask a few questions.

What has your relationship with God's Word been like? Do you believe in the authority of God's Word, that it is central and above all when it comes to the authority of our lives? What foundation have you been building your life upon?

I'm inviting you to be honest with yourself this morning. As we enter into a new year, maybe the problem isn't a short attention span. Maybe we just don't believe it's actually that true and important. Maybe our problem isn't that we're too busy.

Maybe we just don't like the reminder that our sin in our lives must be dealt with. Or maybe we've grown comfortable living like the world and perhaps you've never truly considered that you're in need of a Savior.

This morning, we're going to sing a verse of invitation. We're going to have a time for making commitments. Maybe, perhaps, you need to set your heart on the Scriptures. Committing to studying, applying, and sharing God's Word more this upcoming year.

[32 : 20] On the table as you leave, you'll see some Bible reading plans printed out. Again, the best one for you is the one you actually use. So maybe you need to commit your heart this morning. Set your heart on actually reading and digging into and studying God's Word this year.

Perhaps to attend one of our small groups on Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights where you can have God's Word explained to you and you can grow in that. Maybe God's laying a desire on your heart to give the sense to teach or preach God's Word and you need to surrender to that calling today.

Or perhaps you recognize that you're living in sin and the only way forward for you is to lay that sin at the feet of Jesus and surrender your life to Him.

Whatever commitment you need to make today, we're going to pray and then sing and as Clay sings and lead us, I invite you to step forward. Come see myself or Pastor Brett and if there is any way that you need to respond today, I invite you to come as we sing.

Let's pray. Father, we want to thank you so much for your Word. God, had it not been for your Word, I wouldn't have known that I'm a sinner. I would have known the great truths of the Gospel that though I'm a sinner, you demonstrated your love so that you died for us while we were still sinners.

[33 : 28] Lord, that we have hope, peace, joy, love, life, forgiveness because of you. God, your plan isn't for us to suffer or feel just necessarily condemned. Lord, your plan was to draw us back to you.

So Lord, I pray for this congregation right now. Lord, I pray for myself that as we enter into a new calendar year that we may devote ourselves to the Scriptures, that we may boldly proclaim through our lifestyles that we believe in the authority of God's Word.

And that is evident in my private life, my private discipline, but Lord, as we gather together, your Word is central above all else. Lord, it convicts us of our sins and we allow that.

We're changed by it. And Lord, we're ultimately through your Gospel, through your Word, drawn into a joy, a refuge that this world can never duplicate.

Lord, we encounter you in your Word. Lord, so help us to love you more, to love your Word, to commit ourselves to that this year. Lord, I pray that as we sing, if there's anyone that needs to respond in any way at this time, they'll step forward.

[34 : 35] In your holy name we pray. Amen. Let's stand together and as we sing, if you need to respond, feel free to come forward.