

Back to basics

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[0 : 00] Nehemiah chapter 8 and that's page 482. 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.

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 the purpose.

And beside him stood Matithiah, Shema, Aniah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Masaiah on his right hand.

[1 : 06] And Pediah, Mishael, Melchijah, Hashem, Hashpadana, Zechariah and Meshulam on his left hand. And Ezra 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. 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, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Aqab, Shebethai, Hodiah, Masaiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Peliah, the Levites.

They 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 meaning so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was 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.

[2 : 27] Do not mourn or weep. For all the people wept as they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, Go on your way, eat the fat, and drink sweet wine, and 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. So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, Be quiet, for this day is holy.

Do not be grieved. And all the people went on their way to eat and drink and to send portions, and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

On the second day, the heads of fathers' houses, and all the people with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the law.

And they found it 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.

[3 : 46] 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 the people went out and brought them, and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the gate of Ephraim.

And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity, made booths and lived in the booths. For from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day, the people of Israel had not done so.

And there was very great rejoicing. And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day, there was a solemn assembly according to the rule.

I think you'll find it a help to turn back to Nehemiah chapter 8, which you'll find on page 482 of the Church Bibles. And if you want to take notes, there's some space to do so on the back page of the service sheet.

Shall I lead us in prayer as we begin? We've just sung, Lord Jesus, let me meet you in your word. And we remember the words of the Lord Jesus about the Old Testament, when he said, these are the scriptures that testify about me.

[5 : 14] And so we thank you that we can meet and hear from Jesus today in your word. And we pray that that would be our experience this morning. And we ask it for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Well, in my previous job, we lived in a house that had a long-running problem with rising damp.

There was a mouldy smell when he walked into the house, and mouldy stains all over the walls in several rooms. But when we first arrived, the problem wasn't so obvious.

The worst areas had been given an extra lick of paint to cover the damp just before we arrived. All looked well. But of course, before long, the problem returned.

Each time we mentioned it to the landlord, some temporary solution was found to conceal the problem. But it never lasted, because the root problem remained. There was a deep rot in the core of the walls.

[6 : 15] Well, in the autumn, we looked at the first seven chapters of this Old Testament book of Nehemiah. They tell the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, and are a wonderfully encouraging tale of how God's people triumphed amidst adversity and opposition.

We left the story with the building work now completed. And we might have been forgiven for thinking that that would be the end of the book of Nehemiah. But after all, Nehemiah's great project had now been finished.

But over the next few weeks, as we read the rest of the book, we'll see that that wasn't the end of the story. Because a greater, more important, and far more difficult building project still remained.

You see, although the external walls of the city now stood firm and all looked well, internally, there was still a deep rot. You may remember that again and again when we looked at the opening half of the book, we noted that the New Testament views the Old Testament city of Jerusalem as a picture of God's people.

If we're Christians, we are now the true Israel, the city in which God dwells. And we look forward to a new heavenly Jerusalem. And the tragedy of Nehemiah is that while the physical city had been rebuilt, a deep rot still beset the spiritual city, the people of God.

[7 : 46] Because the hearts of the city's inhabitants were still mouldy, unfit for God's presence. Nehemiah understood that the ongoing problem of sin that had plagued Israel throughout her history hadn't gone away.

So if Nehemiah 1-7, the first half of the book, deals with the rebuilding of the city, the second half, chapters 8-13, deal with the far greater challenge of the renewing of the people.

External rebuilding gives way to inward renewal. And today we see that the path to renewal begins with the word of God.

We've got two headings, two things that we can learn from God's people in Nehemiah 8. Here's the first. They had a hunger to hear God's word. A hunger to hear God's word.

Let me read the beginning of verse 1. We're told, and all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate. You may recall that in the previous chapter, chapter 7, we're given a long list of all the people who'd returned to Judah after the exile in Babylon had ended.

[9 : 00] They were divided into different families and professions. But here, they all assembled together on their own initiative. All the people gathered as one, we're told.

And in verse 2, Nehemiah tells us the crowd consisted of men, women, and children. So what was it that caused all these different people from different strands of society to unite together?

Let's look at how verse 1 continues. 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. There aren't many occasions when vast crowds of different types of people willingly assemble.

I guess we sometimes see it when there are high profile protests or marches such as the recent women's march or for football matches or for special events like New Year's Eve or a royal visit.

[10 : 11] But notice what prompted this great gathering of the people. They told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel.

They gathered because they wanted to hear God's word read and taught. It's very striking, isn't it? The people call for the preacher.

They had a hunger to hear God's word. This is actually the first appearance that Ezra makes in the book of Nehemiah. If Nehemiah was the great governor of the people exercising secular leadership, Ezra was their great preacher exercising spiritual leadership.

And it's striking, I think, that what the people wanted to hear was the book of the law of Moses. That is the first five books of the Bible as we have it today.

You see, they were wanting to embark on a new era in Israel's history to turn over a new leaf. But in order to do so, they went back to an old book, to the law.

[11 : 16] They understood correctly that great spiritual renewals and revivals don't take place by discovering some newfangled idea or fresh revelation, but by returning to the basics.

It seems that for many of these people, they had had limited access to God's word. The law had almost become lost amidst the half-heartedness and worldliness that Nehemiah and Ezra had been seeking to tackle.

Similar, perhaps, to the frightening biblical illiteracy that we see today, not only in the pew, but sometimes from the pulpit where far too many clergy know far too little of what the Bible actually says.

But no spiritual progress can occur without the preaching of God's word. A church which loses the word will lose its way, as has happened in Israel's history.

And this, of course, was what had also happened prior to the Reformation. Medieval church services and Bibles were in Latin and so ordinary people knew nothing of the saving grace that the Bible taught.

[12 : 25] And so what drove the Reformation was when men like William Tyndale translated the Bible into the native languages of the ordinary people. And it led to a great rediscovery of God's word and a fresh appetite for it, just like the one that we see here in Nehemiah 8.

Just look what happened when the people were assembled. Verse 3. We're told, And Ezra read from it, from the law, facing the square before the Watergate 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. A couple of weeks ago, I preached at a church where I was told in advance that the congregation would be grumpy if I spoke for more than 15 minutes.

But Ezra's sermon here probably lasted six hours. Imagine that. And yet Nehemiah tells us that the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

Now the word assembly, which is used in verse 2 here to describe the gathering that took place, is the word that's used in the New Testament to describe the church. It looks back to the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, which is often described in the Old Testament as the day of the assembly or the day of the church.

[13 : 49] In fact, I think we're perhaps supposed to notice parallels with Sinai here. Ezra seems to be a kind of new Moses and Nehemiah, perhaps a new Joshua. Ezra teaches the law of Moses to the assembly from high up on a wooden platform just as Moses received the law high up on a mountain on the day of the assembly.

But the point is that what we have here is supposed to be something of a model for the New Testament church, the assembly of God's people. And it reminds us that we gather together primarily to hear God's word taught just as Ezra taught it here.

And so we would do well to ask ourselves, wouldn't we, if we share the hunger for God's word that we see here in Nehemiah 8? Do we look forward to hearing God's word taught?

Or is it secretly the part of the service we want to get out of the way as soon as possible and where we switch off mentally? If it is, then we probably haven't understood what these people understood, that spiritual renewal and progress always begins with God's word.

government. That's why they respond as they do to the Bible being taught. Just have a look at verse 5. We're told, And Ezra 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.

[15 : 15] And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, 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.

I don't think this is a blueprint for exactly what we should do every time the Bible is opened, but it does reveal the people's attitude to the Bible. Did you notice how in a sense they treated the opening of the Bible as if God himself were with them?

Raising their hands, bowing, and worshipping the Lord. Now sometimes we evangelical Christians have been criticised for so-called bibliolatry, for worshipping the Bible rather than Jesus.

But do you see that while of course it's not the pages of the Bible that we're to worship, that nonetheless you can't put a cigarette paper between the Bible's words and God.

To hear the Bible taught is to be in the presence of God as surely as Moses was on Mount Sinai. No wonder the people bowed down as the law was read.

[16 : 25] There's no greater spiritual experience, no deeper intimacy with God possible than when the Bible is opened up and we hear God speaking to us. As John Calvin put it, we owe to the Scriptures the same reverence which we owe to God.

Elsewhere he writes, as often as the Word of God is set before us, God is present. I wonder if we view the Bible in that way.

If we come to it with a sense of awe because in it we meet and hear from the living God himself. I guess this also explains the commitment to God's Word that we see throughout Nehemiah chapter 8.

Just have a look. So not only does Ezra preach the Bible for a whole morning, but in verse 8 we learn that his assistants read it and gave the meaning of it to the people.

It's a reminder of the importance of Bible teachers and why we need to come to church to hear sermons so we can understand the meaning of the Bible as it's explained to us by those set aside to do so.

[17 : 35] And this wasn't just a one-off thing either. Look on to verse 13. We're told on the second day the heads of fathers' houses of all the people with the priests and the Levites came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the law.

The senior lay figures, the heads of fathers' houses came back for more from Ezra. So often it's the women not the men who are keen in church life.

And those verses remind us of the responsibility us men have to be devoted to God's word if we're to lead our families as we should. Or look on to the very end of the passage in verse 18.

In the festival that follows we're told and day by day from the first day to the last day Ezra read from the book of the law of God. The people couldn't get enough of the Bible.

They had a deep hunger for God's word. So this is how spiritual renewal begins with a hunger for God's word.

[18 : 44] Perhaps some of us here are conscious of feeling spiritually dry at the moment distant from God. Perhaps our Christianity is perhaps a bit like Israel's faith here in Nehemiah.

We look the genuine article with pristine new walls on show as it were. But if we're honest there's a deep rot on the inside. And if that is us well what we need to do is to go back to basics this morning.

Not to pursue something new but to hear God's word taught afresh. To be attentive to it and to come back to it again and again as we immerse ourselves in it as these people did.

They had a hunger for God's word. But that's not all. Because secondly the people also had a hunger to respond to God's word.

A hunger to respond to God's word. In fact this was the evidence of their reverence for the scriptures. It's easy I think isn't it to hear God's word but not to heed God's word.

[19 : 51] To be challenged by the Bible but not to be changed by the Bible. But as the American evangelist D.L. Moody put it the Bible was not given for our information but for our transformation.

We're not to listen to sermons merely to master the Bible but to be mastered by it. And in Nehemiah 8 we see the Bible not only being read but people responding to it.

And notice that they do so in three particular ways. first of all there's remorse remorse look with me at verse 9 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 Lord.

All the people wept. God's word is often uncomfortable to hear because it exposes our sin. It shows us how far short of God's standards we fall.

It convicts us and that's painful and humbling but it ought also to lead to a right remorse as we're confronted by our sin before a holy God.

[21 : 17] And that seems to be what was going on here. All the people wept as they heard the words of the Lord. They realised how much of the Lord they hadn't been keeping. How much of the Lord they'd allowed to fall into disuse.

How by disregarding his word they had disregarded God himself. And it grieved them. Alongside the Reformation I guess the other great time of spiritual renewal in English history occurred during the great awakening of the 18th century when thousands of ordinary people were converted through the preaching of the gospel.

George Whitefield was arguably the chief leader of the revivals that took place. Despite being a Church of England clergyman he'd found himself kicked out of churches and pews locked to him because of his gospel preaching.

And so he began instead to preach outside in the open air to those who never normally hear the gospel or darken the door of a church building. One of his first open air sermons was to a group of coal miners in Bristol as they emerged from the pit after a day's work.

It was said that they'd never heard the Bible taught before. The account was recorded like this. About 200 men gathered as Whitefield spoke of hell as being black as their pit and of the certainty of judgment.

[22 : 41] He talked about Jesus who was a friend of publicans and sinners and came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. He spoke of the cross and the love of God.

Suddenly he noticed tears coming from the eyes of a young man on his right. These tears were forming a pale streak on his grimy face. He saw the same thing happen to an old bent miner on his left and then more and more of them.

He said he saw white gutters made by their tears down their black cheeks. They were tears of remorse flowing I guess from a conviction of sin weeping just as the people wept in Nehemiah's day.

Their response is a challenge to us isn't it? Do we allow God's word to convict us? Do we grieve our sin when the Bible exposes it?

does sin bother us as it did those minors? I guess it's one of the reasons why we have a time of confession in our services because it's right that when we gather around God's word we acknowledge our sin and turn away from it.

[23 : 56] God's grace. But that wasn't the only response to God's word in Nehemiah 8 because not only did the people respond to God's word with remorse but also with rejoicing.

Rejoicing. In verse 9 Nehemiah commands the people not to mourn or weep and have a look down with me at verse 10. Then he said to them go your way eat the fat and drink sweet wine and 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.

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 to send portions and to make great rejoicing because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Nehemiah effectively calls for a party. Notice that lovely phrase at the end of verse 10 for the joy of the Lord is your strength. They were to rejoice in what they had learned from the Lord.

One of the things that I think is so frustrating about the portrayal of Christians in television dramas very often is how often we're presented as being dour and serious and dull as people who deprive ourselves and others of life's pleasures.

[25 : 19] But actually an understanding of God's word ought to lead us to rejoice. Yes the Bible convicts us of sin but it also leads us to a saviour.

It's first and foremost a message of grace, of God's undeserved love and free offer of mercy to sinners. George Whitfield once met a lady from high society in New York who was sceptical of the Christian faith.

Afterward she commented about Whitfield that he was so joyful it almost tempted me to become a Christian. And I guess we should be like him.

People known for our joy are rejoicing. It's noticeable I think that the thing that particularly made the people rejoice here if you look at verse 12 was that they'd understood God's words.

I wonder if we really believe that God's word is sweeter than honey and more precious than much pure gold as the psalmist tells us. If we do then I guess we'll rejoice as we hear it taught and understand it.

[26 : 29] So a hunger to respond to God's word will lead to remorse and rejoicing. But then finally it will also lead to repentance. Repentance. You see remorse is one thing but repentance quite another.

We can easily be remorseful because we feel guilty about something and yet never actually change. It's easy to leave church feeling convicted of sin and resolving to be different and then to completely forget all about it the next day.

But the people in Nehemiah are a great example for us because they immediately put into practice the law that had been preached to them. I think that's why we have this account of them celebrating what was known as the feast of booths or tabernacles in verses 14 to 18.

It's a sign of their commitment not just to hearing God's word but also then to acting on it, to obeying it. Look with me at verse 14. Sorry, verse 13.

On the second day the heads of fathers' houses of all the people with the priests and the Levites came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the law. And they found it's 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.

[27 : 50] 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 the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God and in the square at the water gate and in the square at the gate of Ephraim.

And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths. For from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so.

And there was very great rejoicing. And day by day from the first day to the last day he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the feast seven days and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly according to the rule.

For generations this part of the law had been ignored. And in verse 14 they find it and immediately mobilise everyone to get what they needed to celebrate this festival.

You may know that Christmas was banned by the Bolsheviks in the old Soviet Union for twenty years. You can imagine the joy when its celebrations became permitted once again.

[29 : 02] Well how much more wonderful must it have been to rediscover this ancient festival of tabernacles which were told in verse 17 hadn't been celebrated since the days of Joshua. Haven't got time to look at these verses in depth but it's striking the way they emphasise how the people observed the law's instructions about the feast of tabernacles down to the smallest detail.

Verse 14 talks about what they had found written in the law. Verse 15 explains that the people were commanded to do things as it is written. Verse 18 that they kept the feast according to the rule.

The people were obedient to the law repenting where they saw the need to do so as they read it. And I guess that's a sign that we really have heard and love God's word that our remorse is genuine and our rejoicing real.

Those things ought to lead to obedience and repentance. Of course for us that won't mean celebrating festivals like the feast of tabernacles.

Colossians chapter 2 in the New Testament tells us that such festivals have found their fulfilment in Christ. We don't observe the feast of tabernacles today. But I guess for each of us there will be times where we need to change because of something we read in the Bible.

[30 : 24] responding to God's word will lead us to repentance. So as we close let's remember again that the renewal of God's people, that work which is far greater than the rebuilding of God's city, begins with the word of God.

We need to pray for a hunger to hear God's word and a hunger to respond to God's word like the people do in Nehemiah 8. Jesus says doesn't he that the wise man who builds his house on the rock is the one who hears his words and puts them into practice.

We too easily can think we're okay as Bible believing Christians simply because we do the first. We hear and we know what the Bible says. But the people in Nehemiah 8 are an example to us at least in this point in the book anyway because they're not only hear but also obey.

Shall we pray that we would be those who would also do the same, not only hearing but responding. Let me lead us in prayer. Father we want to confess that too often we don't have the hunger for your word that we ought to have, that we think we're already familiar with it or that we know what it says or that we don't need it.

And so we don't listen attentively as these people did in Nehemiah's day. And we're sorry also for the times when we do hear it and we are challenged by it and yet then fail to respond to it.

[31 : 59] We pray that by your spirit you give each of us a greater hunger for your word and then that by your spirit you would enable us to put it into practice. Please help us to weep over our sin where that's right, to rejoice in the saviour from sin that your word has revealed to us and to repent and to obey your word where we need to.

And we ask it in Jesus' precious name. Amen.