

Building Back: Redirect

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[0 : 00] So, since the start of this year, we've been working through the book of Nehemiah, and as we have just read, we are in chapter 8.

As we're looking at rebuilding, Nehemiah has been leading the rebuilding of the wall. Chronologically, this is one of the last events to happen in the Old Testament.

After this, the next major thing to happen is the birth of Jesus. There are obviously several books that come after this in the Old Testament. There were a lot of people around who God still spoke through, but this is regarded as one of the last major events chronologically.

So, if we can have the PowerPoint, please. Thank you. So, where are we at at the moment? So, it took 52 days for them to rebuild the wall.

I don't know about you, but I think that's pretty impressive, to rebuild a whole city wall in 52 days. They've laid out their defences around the wall, and they've all been counted so they know how many people there are living in the city.

[1 : 07] We've had the building of the wall, but the time for building is done. Now it's time to focus on what this was all about. The point of the wall wasn't to have some beautiful, magnificent city to show off to everyone else.

It wasn't to be the best around. It wasn't even a project to show their own skill, to show that they could work together. It was about making them safe.

This was the third wave of people to come back from exile. The first came back with Zerubbabel, and he rebuilt the temple. The second came back with Ezra, we think about 30 years before Nehemiah.

And then Nehemiah came back, and the wall hadn't been built. The people were not safe. And so that's what they were focusing on. They dealt with the tangible, practical need, so then they could do the important thing that comes next.

If you withhold food from someone who hasn't eaten in several days so that you can say something to them, they're not listening to you. They don't care what you're saying. They are only thinking about the food that they haven't eaten in several days.

[2 : 19] We deal with the tangible, practical needs first, but then dealing with the spiritual needs after is what is important.

God's people are built on God's word. So if we can have that verse from Matthew 4 up, please. Jesus says, Jesus is actually quoting Deuteronomy chapter 8 here.

So this is something God has already said to his people. The practical needs you have are important, but it's not enough to only deal with that. What comes next is the important thing.

The time for the building of the wall is done. Now it's time to build the people. So I've broken this up into three sections for us.

Each of them with, I think, a slightly catchy name. The first I've called Open and Read. So if we can have verses 4 to 6 up on the screen, you might want to keep Nehemiah open in your Bibles, or if you have a Bible on your phone, you might want to do that.

- [3 : 34] They will be on the screen, the verses I'm referring to. But if you want to make sure that the verses I'm referring to are correct, you may want to have your own Bibles open as well. We see in verses 4 to 6, we start with Ezra stands up on a platform.
- There is both something practical and a purpose to this as well. All the people could see him because he was standing above them. If we can move through one at a time, it should come up with some highlights.
- And then the next one. They go, all the people could see him. So all the people could see him because he was standing above them. When we're speaking from the front, we stand on a platform so that everyone can see.
- We use a microphone so that everyone can hear. If you're going to the theatre and you can't see what's going on, you're not going to go back to that theatre. If you go to a music gig and you can't see or hear what's going on, you're not going to get anything out of that music gig.
- When we're speaking about God's Word, the practical side of things is no different. Actually, God's Word is there for everyone to hear. There shouldn't be anyone left out.
- [4 : 47] That means if there's someone who can't see, if there's someone who can't hear, they're missing out on God's Word. Traditionally, Baptist churches, and a lot of churches still do, have pulpits that they keep front and centre and often quite elevated above as well.
- Part of this is so that people can be seen and heard. Part of this is about, actually this is dedicated to the reading of God's Word. It's placing God's Word somewhere where it is considered important.
- It takes place above everything else that happens during the service. It's about showing how important God's Word is.
- We don't have a pulpit here anymore. I wasn't here when the church was entirely downstairs. I assumed there was a pulpit at that point. We don't have a pulpit here now.
- But the Bible is still an important part of us as a church and of the services that we run. We also have that the people stand.
- [5 : 57] We can have the next highlight up. There we go. As Ezra was reading the Bible, all the people stood to their feet.
- Maybe so they could hear, maybe so they could see. But also to show how important the Bible was, show how important God's Word was. It wasn't compiled into the Bible at that point.
- I do want to say that this is descriptive, not prescriptive, which means this is telling us what happened. It's not telling us what we must do when we're reading the Bible.
- But it makes a point. To these people who have just, some of whom have just come back out of exile, hearing God's Word again for the first time, for many of them, is important.
- It is significant. So they do something that shows how important it is to them. So how important is God's Word to us?
- [6 : 57] How much does God's Word matter? How much time do you give to hearing the voice, hearing the words of maybe a partner when you get back from work, or a parent, a child, a friend, a neighbor, a sibling?
- How much time do you give to hearing from other people? If hearing somebody's voice, if knowing someone is important to you, you give that time. So how much time do you give to hearing God's Word?
- On Friday, there were a couple moments that actually I thought were fantastic. We were in the Blue Room with two of the groups.

We do a Thought for the Week. So that is a chance to give a reflection. It might be, sometimes it is directly pulled out of the Bible, but it is always coming from a biblical and Christian perspective.

And while we were doing the Thought for the Week with Blue Kids, that's the youngest of the groups, one of the kids had picked up an action Bible that we have. If you're not sure what that is, that is the Bible told in the style of a comic, or graphic novel, a huge comic.

[8 : 06] And just seeing them, this child who's doing that isn't a Christian. He's not from, he has no church experience. He has no experience reading the Bible. Later on, I had the Sevens in there.

So that's the next group. And one of the Sevens was doing the same thing. And actually, she asked me if I could find a good place for her to read in the Action Bible. These are two people who aren't Christians.

What do we do in that moment? Perhaps for those of you who are parents, or for those of you who have been parents, you can think back to this. If your child wants to read the Bible, what response do we give?

Maybe they're choosing to read the Bible instead of doing their homework, or instead of doing their chores, or instead of family time, or maybe slightly more difficult one instead of going to bed.

Are we saying to them, no, this isn't the time to read the Bible? Or are we saying to them, I love that you want to read the Bible right now. Are we helping them with it?

[9 : 12] If we can move on a couple slides to get verse one. All the people asked Ezra to bring the word of the law to them.

They wanted to hear God's word. It wasn't that Ezra came out and said, right, we've done the wall now, we've counted everyone, we've done all the practice, now it's time for God's word.

They asked for it. They made time, they made space. So what time do we make?

We can easily make time for the things that we want. To watch a little bit of TV, to go out with friends, to have some family time. All of these things are important.

To relax, to read, whatever it is. We can make time for the things that we want. We don't struggle with that. Do we make time for all the things that are important?

[10 : 14] If we can move on again, we have Mark 1, verse 35. Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place where he prayed.

Jesus made time to spend with God. He made time for prayer. We need to make time for God's word.

If God's word is important to us, it should be one of the first things that we make time for. And yes, there is a need to read the Bible, to pray, spend time on your own with God.

But actually, if that's all you ever do, you will find that's not enough. You will find that you need to give that time with other people as well. We're not called to be Christians on our own.

We're called to do this together. If we can move on to verse 2 on the screen. So on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.

[11 : 26] They didn't come one at a time wanting to hear God's word. They came as a group to hear it together. They gathered in a place to read the word.

Currently, I live on my own, but I can recall times when I was growing up, I remember the four of us, my parents, me and my sister reading the Bible together. I did a gap year before going to university.

It was a Christian gap year. There were six of us living in the house together. We were all Christians. And although we didn't do this every day, regularly we made time to read the Bible together.

And that makes such a huge, huge difference. So there's point one. Pick up the Bible. Open it. Read it.

Point two. Explain it and understand it. If we can move on till we have verse seven and eight on the screen. The Levites introduced the people in the law while the people, sorry, the Levites instructed the people in the law while the people were standing there.

[12 : 35] I'm skipping over all the names you've noticed. They read from the book of the law of God making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. Nehemiah 8 uses variations on the words understand, understood, and instruct six times in total.

We need to pick up, we need to read the Bible just as the people were calling for Ezra to do. But just doing that isn't enough. It's not enough to just open the Bible.

It's not enough to just read it if we don't understand it. Last week was the end of Children's Mental Health Week and I shared a little bit of my own story that I started struggling with depression and anxiety when I was a teenager but I never talked to anyone about it.

I was too ashamed, too scared of the response that I would get to talk to anyone about it. And it wasn't talked about in church, it wasn't talked about in school, there was nobody who would explain to me what was going on.

So for a long time I knew what I was struggling with but I didn't understand it. It wasn't until 2016, about 11 years later, that I went out to get help and I started speaking to people and then I finally understood not just a name for what I was going through but I understood what I needed to know about it and I understood what I could do, how I could change my life, how it could actually make a difference.

[14 : 16] If you go to the doctors or the hospital and you get a diagnosis, it's no good just being given a name for something if you have no idea what that means. We need to understand it as well.

Equally, if not more so, we need to understand God's word, what we are reading. Likewise, we need to teach it in a way that is understandable.

That's why we preach from the front. We have someone at the front every week to unpack God's word, to explain it to us, to help us to understand it.

That's why we run youth and children's groups so that we can engage them with the Bible in a way that they will understand it. Right now, downstairs, Rob is leading with the youth about creative and different ways to engage with and to understand the Bible.

We want them to have a love and a desire for God's word. But to do that, we've got to present it in a way that is understandable. We do the same thing in our all-age services.

[15 : 24] Richard did the same thing in the first part of the service this morning. We present God's word, we present God's message in a way that is understandable to our children, to our youth, also to new Christians, also to people who have come into church for the first time, and also to people who may have been Christians for 20, 30, 40 plus years.

Typically, when you've got a mixed group of ages in a room, a mixed group of abilities in the room, you aim towards the lowest common denominator. You present something in a way that your children are going to understand.

For everyone else, if you understand, sorry, yeah, if you understand God's word from what we have done aimed at the younger ones, aimed at the children or the teenagers, you've got something out of that time.

It's not about us sending the youth and the children down so we can then have the songs that we like. We can then hear God's word in the way that we like. It's about doing everything in a way that people can understand God's word.

There's also why we need to use language that we can understand as well. If you've been to Bible college, you've been theologically trained, is it going to do any good using a lot of big theological language to somebody who just became a Christian a week ago?

[16:58] They're probably not going to have a clue what you're talking about. I studied philosophy and ethics when I did my A-levels and unfortunately I can't remember who this is attributed to and I forgot to look it up this morning.

But I learned about something called language games. And language games is this idea that you can't partake in what's going on if you don't understand the language that is used.

And the responsibility there isn't on the people who want to join in with church to learn the language, to get the right lingo, to know what it's all about. The responsibility is on us who know what it is about to explain it in language in a way that is understandable.

We can move on the slide to Ephesians 1.17. Paul says in the first chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation that you may know him better.

I've put this verse up there. Paul says this and he says this in a few of his letters that I pray that God will give you the understanding of what to us.

[18:14] I can stand here from the front and I can give some great thoughts on this but if what I'm saying all comes out of here instead of from here, actually we're not understanding God's word, we're understanding what I might have to say.

if you only take one thing away from the sermon this morning, that's fine because it's the spirit of wisdom and revelation that will reveal the understanding that you need to hear.

If you take one thing away, the Holy Spirit has decided that's the one thing that you need to hear and understand this morning. I want to skip ahead a little bit in the Bible to the time of Jesus when he was talking with the Pharisees.

Actually, I was told the other day that this time with Ezra after the wall has been built, this is the start of the Pharisaic tradition where they take God's word, they place it on their hearts and on their minds and they memorize it and that's a good thing to do but then we get to the time of the Pharisees a few hundred years later and Jesus is saying to them over and over again, you're missing the point.

The Pharisees didn't understand that God's word was pointing towards Jesus. They completely missed that. They didn't understand what God's word was about.

[19:51] They knew it. They had minimalized it. They read it regularly but they didn't understand it. And beyond that, they didn't let the word of God change them.

They didn't let it make a difference in their lives. The title that was mentioned earlier for this sermon is redirect because reading the word of God should be redirecting us.

It should be changing and transforming our lives. So that brings us on to the next section, the third and final section will be pleased to know. Respond and act.

Opening and reading the Bible isn't enough. Understanding the Bible is better but it isn't enough. What is the point of reading the Bible if it doesn't make a difference to us?

the next step after opening and reading and understanding is to act and to respond. While I was doing a bit of reading and I was watching a couple of the sermons on Nehemiah 8, I picked up a great line that actually I think I've heard before is we don't worship the Father, the Son and the Holy Scripture.

[21 : 13] we worship the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The point of saying that is yes, reading the Bible is really, really important but if it doesn't point us to God, if we end up focusing all of our time on reading and memorizing the Bible and we don't let it point us to worship of God, we're missing the point.

we keep God's word in high regard not because it's the Bible, not because it's a good thing to do or it's the right thing to do but because of whose word it is.

We keep God's word in high regard. If we can move on the slide until we get to verse 14. Thank you. They found written in the law which the Lord had commanded through Moses that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month and if we can add verse 16 to that as well just two verses later so the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters.

We've moved over one verse and they're already acting upon what they just read in God's word. They read the word they understood the word and they acted on it straight away.

I can recall a time when I was a new Christian that actually I was eager to hear what people had to say. I loved going to my youth group at the time. I loved going away at the time it was to places like Soul Survivor but we also had local Christian youth camps as well.

[22 : 54] I loved hearing what people had to say about the Bible and letting that make a difference. And I'm sure we all did when we first became Christians. We had a passion for reading for understanding and putting into practice God's word.

Is that still the case now? If not when did it stop? Perhaps we became so familiar with God's word.

We managed to place it on our mind on our hearts. We may not memorize it word for word but we can recall God's word. But that's all it's become.

It's become about reading God's word. We've lost the understanding. We've lost the desire to act on it as quickly as they did.

If we've lost that when did that happen? When did we become less like the people in Nehemiah 8 and more like the Pharisees who memorized God's word but didn't act upon it?

[24 : 06] I've got a short video. It's about two minutes. This is a testimony from Nicky Gumbel that shows us how powerful God's word is. If you don't know who Nicky Gumbel is, he used to work for HTB.

I believe he's now retired. He worked there for a long time. He was involved, he was responsible for setting up of Alpha. right back when Alpha first started, he was the leader of the team who set that up.

And as he said, he wasn't a Christian as a teenager, even as a student. He was adamantly against it. And actually it wasn't meeting Christians that changed him because he would quickly argue against that.

It wasn't even his friends becoming Christians that changed him. It was reading the word of God. The word of God has power to transform our lives.

He didn't need someone to actually explain to him what he was reading at that point. God changed his life anyway. And he became such a huge figure, not just in the UK, but globally making a difference to millions of people, helping millions of people either come to know God for the first time or to deepen their love and their relationship with God.

[25 : 31] If we can have 2 Timothy up on the screen, I'm not far from the end. All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

God's word has the power to equip us to serve him and to make a difference to other people. God's word has the power to build us, to strengthen us, to comfort us, to reassure us.

God's word has the power to change lives. We need to open it and read it. We need to understand it.

We need to act on it. Go back to Nehemiah 8 in verse 12. Then all the people went away to eat and 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 we'll add verse 17 to that. The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua, son of Nun, we think that was about a thousand years prior, until that day the Israelites had not celebrated like this.

[26 : 53] And their joy was great. The Israelites opened God's word. They read it. They understood it.

They acted on it. And then they responded with joy and with celebration. God's word has the power to change our lives.

We need to let it. And when we do, we should be celebrating. Verse 10 says, the joy of the Lord is your strength.

And that is the kind of joy that we should have when we're thinking about God's word. Do we have that same enthusiasm for God's word?

For the power of God's word to change our lives that we did when we first became Christians? If we don't, when did we lose that enthusiasm?

[27 : 54] The people responded to hearing God's word with joy. Then they put it into practice and then they were filled with more joy. When we don't live out God's word, when we don't act upon it, when we don't let it make a difference to our lives, we're missing out on half of the joy that we could have.

We should be getting joy from reading God's word, but the other half comes from letting it make a difference to our lives. I think this is the final passage I've got on the screen this morning.

It's from James 1, verses 22 to 25. Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in the mirror and after looking at himself goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it, not forgetting what they have heard but doing it, will be blessed in what they do.

[29 : 10] let's not miss out on half of the joy by only opening and reading. Let's act upon it as well. One of my favorite worship songs at the moment is a song called Build My Life.

And the bridge of that song is I will build my life upon your love. It is a firm foundation. I will put my trust in you alone and I will not be shaken.

perhaps this morning we can change one of those words. I will build my life upon your word. It is a firm foundation.

We're not singing that song today but in a moment we are going to sing Cornerstone. And so that's my challenge for you today. It's up to you what you make the cornerstone of your life.

What you make the foundation that you build your life on. So what is the cornerstone of your life? In times of illness, pain, loss, suffering, and in times of celebration, joy, thriving, do you build your life upon the word of God that brings hope and brings joy?

[30 : 33] Amen. Amen.