

A Time to Laugh

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 15th of August 1999. The preacher is Phil Muleman. His sermon is entitled A Time to Laugh and is from Nehemiah chapter 7 verse 73b through to chapter 8 verse 18.

Verse 18. O God, I pray that you would open our hearts and our minds to help us understand your word. May we value it. May we apply it to our lives.

And may we share it in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Page 379 is Nehemiah chapter 8.

And for those who might be here for the first time today, we are preaching through Nehemiah. Over the past few weeks we've heard how Nehemiah has rebuilt the walls. And today we'll see how he reforms, is involved in reforming a community.

A Greek writer who is writing in the same era as Nehemiah wrote that it is the people, not the walls, that make a city.

[1 : 25] It is the people, not the walls, that make a city. If we only read select portions of Nehemiah, we could be easily led to believe that Nehemiah's ambition was to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem.

But as we have seen over the recent weeks, his ambition has always been much more than just rebuilding city walls. In the reconstruction process, we also see that it is Nehemiah's ambition to revitalise and to reform the spiritual community of God's people.

Nehemiah believed that the people living within the newly rebuilt walls of Jerusalem, which had just been completed, and their neighbours in the surrounding towns and villages, had a right to spiritual prosperity as well as physical security.

Now, as soon as the building work came to an end, an unusual event took place which was to prove dramatically influential in the spiritual life of God's people.

The work of the rebuilding was finished in the late summer month of Elal, Elal, I don't know how to say it, which was seen in chapter 6, at the end of chapter 6.

[2 : 43] And the next month, called Tishri, which is around about September or October, marked the beginning of the year. Now, the first day of the seventh month was a public holiday known as the Feast of Trumpets.

So, only a few days after the walls had been rebuilt, hundreds of men, women and children gathered in Jerusalem for a New Year celebration in which God's Word was written, and in which God's written Word played a central part.

An outdoor, so what was going on here, was an outdoor public meeting was devoted entirely to the reading and to the interpretation of Scripture.

Now, there are three points that I want to draw out and draw to your attention this morning, and Hayley's going to turn on the overhead projector. And the first one, in chapter 8, in verses 1 to 8, is that we see that God's Word is valued.

Secondly, in the second point, don't pull it down yet, in verses 9 to 12, we'll see that God's Word was applied by the people, and the remaining verses of the chapter, verses 13 to 18, we'll see that God's Word was shared by the people.

[4 : 05] So, let's look at the first point, God's Word valued. And let me comment by saying that in our Western world, we have become increasingly indifferent to the Bible.

Regular churchgoers who read the Bible on a daily basis is declining. One survey of 700 churchgoers throughout various churches says that only 15% were committed to daily Bible reading.

Another 15% stated that they had never read any version of the Bible outside a church at all. Isn't that staggering? 40% indicated that they only read the Bible at home once a year or less.

Committed Christians who neglect the privilege and discipline of daily Bible reading are severing links, severing their links with vital spiritual resources.

You see, God speaks uniquely to us through His Word. And if we close our ears to this daily conversation, through this daily reading, we cannot hope to develop into mature Christian believers.

[5 : 23] Those who attended this outdoor meeting, or this Bible study, if you like, led by Ezra, as Anna so well answered, and Nehemiah have important things to say to us.

These people that were gathered were wholehearted Bible students and they seriously valued God's Word. So there's six things I want to draw out under God's Word valued.

The first one is that the people were single-minded. In verse 1, we read, All the people gathered together. They were all there.

Although these people were from different homes within Jerusalem's walls and beyond, they were driven by a common desire to hear the Word of God uniquely recorded in Scripture.

However diverse their individual likes and their dislikes, the common desire to listen to the message of Scripture took precedence over everything else.

[6 : 25] It was the most important thing for them. The second thing is that the people were enthusiastic. One of the features of this outdoor meeting was that the demand for Scripture appears to have been initiated by the people rather than their leaders.

Look at verse 1 again. They, the people, they told Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel.

These people craved for God's Word as hungry people long for food. And this passionate quest for biblical truth is something more than human desire.

It's a gift from God. And throughout biblical and Christian history, one of the genuine characteristics of, one of the characteristics of genuine revival has been the sovereign initiative of God in giving a people longing for spiritual things.

It's God who does it. It's not artificially promoted by religious leaders, by peoples standing up here in the pulpit, but it's initiated by God himself.

[7 : 41] The people, he yearn for God's truth and they cannot have enough of it. As the psalmist has said, and I just sort of paraphrased some of the things from the psalms, about God's Word, it is sweeter than honey to these people's taste.

It is a lamp to their feet, the joy of their hearts, and infinitely, the Word is infinitely more valuable than gold. They long for it as a person short of oxygen gasps for breath.

And it was that kind of craving which drove this huge crowd of people into the square of Jerusalem's Watergate to hear the public reading of Scripture.

The third point which we look at is that verse 3 tells us that the people were attentive. Nothing was going to distract this crowd from hearing the Word of God and the blessings that they would receive from it.

Verse 4 tells us that a wooden platform was constructed and from there Ezra and his colleagues were both visible and audible and the listeners hung on every word that was spoken.

[9 : 00] And this congregation clearly expected God to speak directly through His Word. Our daily Bible reading, our daily reading of Scripture will only be of minimal worth if it becomes a mere habit undertaken hurriedly, mechanically or half-heartedly.

It's diminished. And throughout history, Christian writers have frequently emphasized the importance of reflection upon the Scriptures. That is, taking time to inwardly digest them.

And we, as Christians, need to allow the time for Scripture to penetrate our mind and stir the heart and direct the will. Now, in our 20th century world, which is so demanding on our time, we need to find the time to make time to read God's Word, to see what it is saying to us so that we don't run around aimlessly.

Well, the next thing that we see is that the people were responsive. In verse 5, when Ezra opens the book, the people, convinced of its authority, what did they do?

They rose to their feet. It was, if you like, as if you like, an outward expression of their immense reverence for the message of Scripture.

[10 : 31] And that's a practice that's maintained in churches when people rise for the reading of a biblical passage. We rise for the reading of the Gospel when it's read in church. And not only did

these people make a physical response, they also made a vocal response.

In verse 6, Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered by lifting their hands and saying, Amen. Amen.

Yes, may it be so. They are in agreement with it. Amen. One thing to also notice here in the reading of the Scriptures that the people made no distinction between the exposition, the teaching of Scripture, the reading of Scripture, and made no distinction between the exposition of Scripture and the offering of worship.

Exposition and the adoration or worship belong together, each flowing naturally into the other. Now, worship has become a buzzword in our contemporary church vocabulary.

So often you hear people go out, hopefully, saying, gee, that was great worship today, I'm really looking forward to worship tonight, and so on. But what do they really mean? Because the meaning of worship is in danger in our world of being narrowly restricted to that aspect of our praise which is expressed only in singing.

[12:15] Yet we adore God as much by faithful exposition as by wholehearted singing. And we mustn't detach one from the other, as so many people do, I think.

just as the hearing of the word can degenerate into arid intellectualism or mere conventional listening, so the vigorous singing of songs and hymns can become meaningless repetition, not necessarily related to the heart and mind.

There's a sort of a phrase which goes around which says the hymns are seven eleven songs, seven lines repeated eleven times. that can become mindlessness.

Neither listening nor singing is immune from the danger of distraction, insincerity and half-heartedness. And at this outdoor meeting the readings from scripture led directly to the opening of people's hearts and mouths in praise of God and repentance.

and friends, lively, relevant biblical exposition ought to be ought to promote genuine adoration just as inspired singing can create a longing for more of the truth.

[13:42] Neither singing nor the exposition of scripture neither must be allowed to be an end in itself. The next point is that under valuing God's word not only were the people responsive but they were submissive.

They not only rose to their feet but fell to their knees. In verse 6 they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground God recognizing that by his word the living God was present among them they had no greater desire than to fall before him humbly gratefully and adoringly.

Now they weren't worshipping the book but the God of the book who uniquely addresses his people through it and the same God who addresses us today through his written word which Warwick pointed to us earlier on.

But the sixth thing that we see was that the papal were teachable. It's clear from verses 7 and 8 that the response of the papal to the reading of the law was not merely an outburst of mass hysteria but their interaction with its message and as a second group of the Levites that is the teachers of the law moved among the papal they carefully explained and interpreted God's word to them so that the people could understand the reading.

Perhaps this large assembly broke into small groups here to have some more Bible study to help understand the scripture we don't really know but that's something which I like to think that they perhaps did it's all speculative but anyway the Bible is not a magic potion which will miraculously change us into saints regardless of our grasp of its teaching we can only implement the teaching of the Bible if we discern what the teaching demands of us and these Levites these teachers of the law provide for us an excellent model for all who are involved in any kind of Christian religious education and that is what's the model understand the scriptures know how to interpret them so that people can respond faithfully and obediently to God's word so that's the first point God's word was valued and there's those six little headings underneath the second point in verses 9 to 12 is that

[16:31] God's word was applied the people's response to the interpretation and application of scripture at this outdoor meeting was evident and immediate now we don't know which passage of the scripture was read to the people that day but we know that it was a part of the law and it is probably a part of the law in Deuteronomy which was read to them and Deuteronomy was originally given to Moses as the people were about to enter the promised land many many years before the time of Nehemiah whichever part of scripture it was read to the people it was made to be relevant to them and whenever God's word is relevantly applied the implications are wide reaching and two

things we see here as God's word is made relevant to the people the first one is that scripture exposes our sin as God's word is applied to people's lives scripture exposes our sin the first sign that God's word was reaching the hearts and informing the minds of these people was that they began to grieve about their failures the scriptures that were read to them had touched their consciences heightened their awareness of ways in which they had disobeyed or dishonoured and ignored

God William Bridges a 17th century preacher used a biblical illustration popular among the reformers and puritans when he described the bible as a looking glass I was looking for a mirror this morning I couldn't find one that was small enough to bring in here using a mirror we see three things this is what he said the material glass the reflection of our own image and also that of the things around us in the room as we see the glass itself we are reminded that scripture is God's testimony to his own nature there is God seen especially and Christ seen there also you see yourself in your own dirty face there also you see the creatures that are in the room with you and the emptiness and their emptiness the emptiness of man and of all the comforts and relations without the mirror we would have no vision of ourselves the people wept here because what they heard in the reading of scripture condemned their lifestyle but they would not have had an awareness of their sinfulness unless they had first been confronted with the mirror of scripture's revelation of the majesty of

God the bright light of this holiness revealed their impurity his faithfulness challenged their disloyalty and his compassion their selfishness moreover seeing themselves exposed in the mirror of God's word the people became distressed concerning the universality and the consequences of human sin everybody present was guilty in one way or another they had all fallen short of the glory of God now despite the seriousness of their sin the people were urged to dry their tears the teachers of the law these Levites told the people in verse 9 do not mourn or weep you see scripture not only condemns sin it proclaims the remedy for sin as well and for God's people here the remedy for the forgiveness of their sins would be enacted in a few days time on what they called the day of atonement and on that day a goat was released into the wilderness taking with it all the sins of the people to a solitary place and you know the name of that goat was called it was called the scapegoat it was the scapegoat that freed the people of their sin before God thus probably why we have the name scapegoat today and this was the practice of the

Jewish people and each year they would release that that scapegoat and each year that Levitical scapegoat also anticipated a greater atonement by far for God's people and you know what the day came when on that first good Friday God's son Jesus Christ carried our sins to the cross in his sinless body by his sacrifice those who repent and believe in him are eternally forgiven anyone who does that will also hear the reassuring words of verse 10 here do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength so scripture exposes our sins the second thing as it does is scripture widens our horizons scripture not only makes us aware of our own failures it also opens our eyes to the needs of others and the people were not to indulge in grovelling introspection when there was a world out there needing the assurance of forgiveness and love this day for them was a day of rejoicing a time to celebrate

God's mercy to them and his compassion for all and the time of rejoicing was to be marked by festival meals to which families and communities should invite their natives and the best of food must be sent to those people who lack the basic necessities of life readings no doubt from Deuteronomy would have convinced them that God was concerned about the poor about the widows about the fatherless about the orphan and the alien in fact anyone who had nothing prepared for this celebration meal that they were to celebrate and verse 12 shows us that they were to be obedient to God's word in other words they applied it to their own situations eating drinking sending portions of food and rejoicing greatly because they had understood the words that were declared to them and when we apply

[23 : 09] God's word to our current situations it ought to convict us but we also ought to be aware that acting upon his word should give us great cause to celebrate and to rejoice in God's goodness to us well God's word has been valued by the people God's word has been applied by the people and lastly in verses 13 through to 18 we say that God's word is to be shared amongst the people the thing of joy in this passage in Nehemiah chapter 8 is actually very strong and the festival that they are celebrating is called the Feast of Tabernacles and if you go back into Deuteronomy chapter 16 verses 13 to 15 reveals the joy or reveals that joy was to be a feature of this festival and

Moses commanded

God's people back then to rejoice during the festival seven days you shall keep the festival and you shall surely celebrate you have to apply that if that's what it says in scripture Nehemiah records for us here that there was very great rejoicing in verse 17 because they not only celebrated the deliverance of their forefathers from Egypt you know the escape from Egypt but also their own release from exile in Babylon and this feast of Tabernacles looked not only back to the exodus but it also reminded the people of the wandering of their forefathers in the desert and the book of Ezra the book just before Nehemiah records that the people who had returned from exile did keep the feast of Tabernacles in Ezra chapter 3 you can read about that but it's apparent here that an aspect of the festival that involved what they called the building of booths had been neglected now in obedience to the word of

God through Moses these people resolved to correct this oversight in verse 14 we look at that and between the second day of the assembly and the feast two weeks passed in which time they collected the materials and the necessary materials and so on to erect booths and spread or share the news about this forthcoming commemoration and then the people who lived in the city made their shelters on the flat rooftops and the country people constructed theirs in the courtyards and streets of Jerusalem as verses 14 to 16 point out now the feast of tabernacles directed God's people to three great themes the first theme is that of thanksgiving for the past this festival was their annual reminder they celebrated it each year of God's protection and provision centuries earlier as God's people journeyed through the wilderness from

Egypt to Canaan and during those times they lived in booths simple tents made from leaves and branches as they journeyed so it's thanksgiving for the past secondly it is also a witness to the present as they celebrate this feast of tabernacles and the reenactment of living in the booths during this festival would have been a great witness to traders and visitors to Jerusalem at that time and it would have provided them a great opportunity to share about God's goodness to them in the past as well as in the current situation their present situation and it would also have been a great teaching aid for people who knew the importance of passing on to this and the next generation the truths which God had entrusted to them so thanksgiving for the past witness in the present and thirdly a confidence in the future this feast of booths also spoke convincingly to any discerning Israelite about their perspective on life and their consequent pattern of behaviour it told them that not just during their past history but in present experience they were a pilgrim people occurring at this present time as it did may have been a sobering reminder of the impermanence against a false trust in walls remember they had just reconstructed the walls of Jerusalem in other words what I'm saying is that their present situation is not permanent it's only temporary but being aware that God has been with them throughout this process of rebuilding can give them a confidence in the future that God will also look after them but while Jerusalem may only be a temporary place given to them by God they can be confident of a better place a heavenly place to which

[28 : 50] God has provided for them in eternity well these three things thanksgiving for the past witness in the present and confidence in the future are the marks of a Christian Christians look to the past to see how God has paved the way for his people in the Lord Jesus Christ offering forgiveness of sins to those who place their trust and obedience in him alone and in realization of our forgiveness we are thankful for God's generosity the result of our thankfulness gives us courage to be witnesses to God in the present because of the firm foundation that we have in Christ and finally it gives us confidence to look to the future to look beyond this world to that home for which God has prepared for all those who trust in him in John 14

Jesus says to his disciples I'm going to prepare a place for you he wouldn't have said that if he wasn't going to do it we have that same confidence that for those who trust in God he has gone before us to prepare a place for us well there are lots of thoughts thoughts and reflections in that passage for us to think about and I was just thinking up at the end this morning there's that work cover out on TV which says think it talk it work it it's sort of entrenched in our minds well I want you to think about God's word and value it apply it and share it in your lives Amen