

# Nehemiah 8:1-18

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[ 0 : 00 ] So we're in Nehemiah chapter 8 this evening. It's supposed to be Chris, but we'll look at his temperature and the whole family are still locked in.

! I thought we'd carry on with Nehemiah 8. This is slightly unbindicored. Let's bow on us in prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word for this book. It helps us so much. We pray for your Holy Spirit that he will help me as I preach help us as he prepares. And to come to the table and feed us. For we are all you, Lord, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

So the walls have been completed. And the gates have been set up. The rules for the citizens of Jerusalem have been established.

And we saw last week the public community moved from the material to the spiritual rebuilding. Rebuilding, not on the walls, but on the people. Repairing, not just the ruins, but their faith and their understanding and their commitment.

[ 1 : 17 ] And we saw that last week that is the goal. That's the aim of Nehemiah. That the people of God have thrived again. The rebuilding of the walls was not a big thing.

The rebuilding of the walls was a meanness to the end. The walls have little value in themselves. The walls were rebuilt so that the people of God could live safely and worship and accept it.

And so tonight we come to what you and I and what the church in this country often needs. That is for the people of God to be renewed. For the people of God to be rebuilt.

And so what we have here in Nehemiah is an acaphrine of the renewal of God's people. Now we know what that's like personally, don't we? We know that there are times when our faith grows weak.

When the sharp edge of commitment that we once had becomes blunted. And there are times for most of us when we fall back away from the Lord.

[ 2 : 25 ] I think often, particularly in England, we can think that the Christian life is like a graph. And the graph basically goes like that. And I think we pretend in our changes that the graph goes like that.

And that's the Christian life. It's just a step in the evening. When the truth of it really is, it's not like that, what is it? That our Christian life and our experience of God is not like that.

Very often there are dips out there. And there are times when sin gets a hold in my life and in your life and we draw back from the Lord. The Lord hasn't changed, but we can often feel the Lord is stronger.

And there are times out there when we need to be brought back to God. From the youngest to the oldest. And what we see in Nehemiah age, I think, is what is true of all true renewals and revivals. And that is that the word of God is provident. And so when God is really working, his word will play and make this.

[ 3 : 34 ] And when his word is sidelined and marginalised, I think you've got a question whether it's a word of the Lord or not. And so let's see three hours tonight on the relationship of God's people with God's word.

So basically one to eight is a rediscovery of God's word. A rediscovery of God's word. The first thing we see at that point is we see a desire for the Lord.

A desire for the Lord. Look at the first one. And all the people gathered as one man, no social distancing, into the square before the Lord's gate. And they, that's the people, they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses that the law had commanded Israel.

And so the people asked for the word of the Lord to be brought out of the battle. And this request is apparently spontaneous. And there's been no manipulation.

There hasn't been any corruption. Nehemiah hasn't been sending out the Levites to go and urge people to kind of get them to request this. We want the word, we want the word, that's what you've chatted. There's nothing like that going on.

[ 4 : 49 ] But something has happened to them. And they suddenly have a widespread appetite and a longing for God's word. And that is a sign of God the Holy Spirit working in this community.

And the sign of his working was a renewed hunger for God's word. We want to hear God's word.

We want to understand it. And we want to be changed by it.

And we're talking about, we look at verse 1, it is all the people. We're talking about all the people, a community wide phenomenon. Look at verse 2.

So Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly. But men, women, all could understand what they heard on the first day of the Sabbath.

The men, the women, the teenagers, the children, those who could understand, they're there. The whole community is full with an appetite for God's word. And the reading continues for many hours.

[ 5 : 49 ] Is that the verse 3? Can you imagine this, children? They read it from early morning until midday. I've got about an hour and ten. That's what I count on Sunday morning, Sunday evening.

Anything from an hour and ten, you all get a bit restless. But the reading continues for many hours.

All the people listening to Tentini, they're not bored. Their concentration isn't weird. They're gripped by the desire for God's word. And that was a mark of God's working. And the people suddenly become interested in the Bible. They can't do enough of it.

They're gripped by the desire for God's word. And that was a mark of God's working. And the people suddenly become interested in the Bible.

They can't do enough of it. They love to read it. They want to study it. They want to discuss it. They want to understand it. They want to hear it proclaimed. And if we don't have that interest, we should be alarmed about our spirit.

about our spiritual condition. Why don't we want to hear God's words? So a desire for the women.

The second thing is the centrality of the women. Look at verse 4.

[ 6 : 53 ] And there's a lot of the scribes stood on a wooden platform. They made for the purpose.

It's a wooden platform. Here we go. And the preachers and the leaders, they stand on the platform.

And presumably there's a stand for the book of the law. And there are the people listening. He stands and he preaches from this platform, from this book of the law. There's nothing else.

And there's no elaborate ceremonial. And there's no rituals involved. No sacrifices, no robes, no processions, no special dress, nothing fancy.

It's a scene of stark simplicity. So that's the pattern for the worship of the synagogue. For the Christian church back to the ages. The word of God is central, isn't it?

To the scene. And so there's such a thing as reformed church architecture. You know that? So when you come to a church and you're looking for a church, what should you see?

[ 7 : 53 ] You should see, in a church, the word of God is central. And the table of the Lord, and beneath the word, the word over the sacraments.

And so, when you come into this building, hopefully in the week, and visitors come in, well, it's not completely clear in a way, they see what we're about. They see what we're about is the word of God being proclaimed. Central to all you do is the Bible.

The word of God's desire, the centrality of the word, and then the communication of the word. In verse 5, it's a pulpit high above all the people, so they can see.

It's starting, it's simple, it's practical. And in verse 8, the Levites, they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading.

So that people can understand. And so, here's the point, the people need to understand. That's absolutely crucial.

[ 8 : 56 ] God's word first must be understood. In other words, you have to think about the Bible. You have to use your mind.

You don't need to be an intellectual. You don't need to be understandingly clever, but you do need to apply your mind to understanding the Bible. Understanding is central in Nehemiah chapter 8.

And it should be central in the Christian life. And so, we live in a culture, don't we, where Bible study is quite fashionable in churches like ours.

time for reflection and Christian meditation. It's not so fashionable. Because we're in an impatient age.

We're instant everything. And here we are told that the word of God comes first and foremost through the understanding. We should grasp this first as we come to the word of God.

[10:05] It needs to affect our understanding. And by affecting our understanding, then it affects our emotions. And our emotions should respond appropriately to what we understand.

And so, as we understand the Bible, what will the Bible do? The Bible will at times make us happy and it will make us joyful. But there will be a time when we understand God's word and it will make us feel sad and repentant and deeply ashamed.

There will be times when the Bible will challenge us. There will be times when the Bible will embarrass us. There will be times when the word of God will encourage us and stimulate us. There will be a whole range of different emotions.

But those emotions are the result of our understanding. So here you ask, it would be first if the Bible comes to your mind and then through your mind it affects your emotions.

But lastly, it will move from your mind to the emotions to the will. Because we understand something and because we've been touched by what we understand, the next stage is how are we going to obey the Lord's word?

[11:17] The word that I've understood or the word that I've felt. As I want to say to you, you need to keep those three stages in order. And mind, emotions, will.

So be very, very suspicious of somebody who wants to influence your emotions without addressing your mind. Have you ever preaching about that?

Have you ever preached about that? Where you're crying and you don't know why you're crying. Be very aware of somebody trying to address your emotions without addressing your mind. It's an easy thing isn't it, to move people emotionally.

So you've got a football game and you have got thousands upon thousands upon thousands of people unmoved emotionally. You've got a pub after a kind of national event and people are very moved emotionally.

People can be deeply moved in tears while saying, well, there might happen, there might. We can move people emotionally but when there's no safety net, it's very dangerous.

[12:27] Our emotions should only be moved by the truth. Otherwise, you are handling yourself over and you turn to a manipulator or a showman who will come before. So what have we been taught?

What do we understand? What has been explained to us? What do we know? And then from that, our emotions can respond appropriately to the truth.

But we lived only in an age when experience-centered, emotionally-driven, that's what we're going on. Where people aren't interested in understanding but they're very interested in feeling.

So people can judge us through this on how they feel about it and that is a disaster. What have we been taught? We'll see in a moment these people were deeply taught but they were deeply moved because they understood the truth.

So firstly, recovery of the word. Secondly, I've seen the response to the word. The response to the word is essential. the word is essential. And so again, let me try to get that analyze where we're at.

[13:41] And understanding the Bible is important. Please don't misunderstand me. I'm starting to the word very, very important. But it is never enough.

And it can never be enough. And so here is exactly where churches like ours need to be very, very careful because we may be strong on teaching, we may be strong on understanding the word, and our temptation is to be satisfied with that.

To think we've learned now, we've understood, and therefore that's all that God requires of us.

That's our aim, for me to teach you, for me to get what's in my notes into your notebook.

But that isn't right, that isn't biblical. Because the great question is how have we responded? It's not an academic exercise on Sunday. You're not coming along so I can just teach you that you go out with a head filled with more facts because God wants us to be changed, doesn't he?

God's word wants to come into your heart and do something to you so you become a different person when you leave from when you came in.

[14:57] So do you see the response of these people in the great sex? It's an emotional response. In the great sex, these people are deeply moved. They are deeply moved.

They've been reading the Bible for hours on end and they say this, Ezra blessed the Lord, he lifted up his hands, blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up

their hands.

They bowed their hands and they worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. It's very much those days. And so if preaching leaves you dry, there's something that's wrong.

It isn't proper preaching. preaching. And so reading the Bible and hearing the preaching of the Bible should be an emotional as well as an intellectual experience.

And we should seek to get our heart affected by the truth we understand. So let's think for a moment, just think of the seriousness of sin.

[16:05] Should we be moved by that? we should spend time meditating on it and thinking, praying, I don't feel this, but help me to feel it.

When we see the centrality of Christ, we mustn't trust that that's a concept in our minds. We should feel that with our emotions. That Jesus is central to us and altogether lovely and we should love him.

And so we must always seek an emotional, this emotional response to the word of God. The Puritans talked in there about having their hearts affected, having a heart knowledge as well as a head knowledge.

And these people are moved by the word of the law as they hear in the word. Conversion of sin, verse 9. verse 9, they say, this day is holy to the Lord your God.

It's 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 have been weeping, they've been convicted, as they've heard the story, it's been like a dagger in their hearts.

[17:29] it's shown them where they've been disobeying and grieving their great-living heavenly father. And it had been a painful experience for them.

That's why it's often that we switch off. We don't like pain, none of us like pain, none of us like feeling sorry, none of us like feeling guilty or ashamed.

And when we don't like the word when it cuts us and removes us, so we would rather much happier passages. But that blocks, doesn't it, the channel of God's blessing and change.

And so often I need and you need God to convince us of our sins so that we can change for the better. And the word of God should convince us, so that means we should feel a little bit of apprehension as we come to God's word.

As we open it daily to read it, as we hear it preached, we ask ourselves, am I going to be rebuked? Am I going to be put right? We must just want pleasant things all the time.

[18:43] We should be willing to receive God's discipline through his word. And the people were weeping as they listened to the word. And we should respond to the word by being committed.

it. And so not only is there an emotional response, and there certainly there's a response of conviction of sin, but there's also a response of joy and forgiveness.

Joy and forgiveness at the first end. The weeping is brought to an end. And so he says to them, go your way, eat the fat, drink sweet wine, send your portions, the way you are there is nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord, and do not be grieved.

For the joy of the Lord is your strength. Do not grieve, he says, nor be grieved. They were right to grieve. They were right to lament. They were right to be convicted of sin, but now the time has come to end the grief.

Why? Because the Lord was their God. And he had forgiven them, and he had cleansed them, and they were his people, and there was forgiveness with God, and there was a new beginning with God.

[19:53] And that's the wonderful thing about the gospel, isn't it? That when God hurts us, when God hurts us, it is to heal us. And so God's hurt is not like a thug who sticks a knife into you.

God's hurt is like a surgeon. A surgeon who sticks a knife into you, yes, but for the purpose of love and blessing. And so when God rebukes us, it is to help us and to change us.

So it means we must not be afraid of receiving God's rebukes. Because God's rebukes will heal you and bring you joy. I love that saying in verse 12.

And all the people went their way to eat and drink and send portions and to make great rejoicing. Because they understood the words that were declared to them.

it is a joyful worship service. The people begin to celebrate with great, great joy. Why? Why do they celebrate with great joy?

[ 21 : 07 ] Well, it's because they have been singing for 45 minutes and there was this great crescendo and there was it. They began to celebrate because they didn't know what it says.

Why did they celebrate? Because they understood. They understood the words that were said. They understood the truth and they grasped it. Can you see what we saw earlier?

It's not a direct assault on their emotions. Ezra doesn't try to stir them up emotionally. He explains the truth to them and God's truth stirs them.

And then they are moved and they have a joy which was sane and biblical and healing. And so not only do we have a rediscovery with God's word but there's a response to God's word.

An emotional response. We feel God's word. We're convicted. And all of us should feel convicted by our sin and we are brought to Christ for forgiveness.

[ 22 : 13 ] We understand who he is and what he's done for us. And so we're filled with great gladness. Rediscovery God's word. And lastly, there's a reformation of God's word.

Because it spills over the daily life, doesn't it? I think that's always the case. Or it should at least always be the case.

If you go to the 18th century, start the 18th century, there's great fear that there'll be a bloody revolution. And then Wesley, Whitfield, and Stanley Rowland, and the great 18th century men.

And the gospel goes forth in this country and it has enormous implications. So we have no revolution. You think of Wales, after that revival, the pit ponies who have been working with miners and those miners are converted and suddenly those miners towns are different and they speak in different ways and they don't swear at the animals.

And the pit ponies come and stand. You think of 1859 and the revival in Ireland. And the courts meet and they're immediately adjourned because there are no cases, there's no crime transfer, because the gospel and God's word as it goes forward has implications.

[ 23 : 39 ] And the people will realise that there's something they be neglecting. They be neglecting that they am here and the feast of booths and God has told them that to remind them. God has given them this gift of the feast of booths to remind them you are a pilgrim people, you are a redeemed people, this world is not your home.

And so for a few days the people of Israel, you can imagine, it'd be a great, great fun, they would deliver doors and booths. A massive great church camping trip. Might not be fun, but they do. And they need to be reminded that I am the God who brought you out of Egypt. And do you remember you lived in the wilderness, and you are God's pilgrim people, and you have no earthly home.

You are people who are travelling to another country, and they would be ignoring it. They tuned God's word, they understood God's word, and then they realised here is something that we need to. And so in verse 17, they reinstated the festival, and all the assembly of those in the church in captivity made booths, and they lived in the streets, and from the days of Jesuits and Nun, to that day, the people of Israel had not done the service, and there was a very, very rejoicing. They changed their lives, they changed their practices, they altered their social lives, they changed their diaries, they altered the way they took business.

[ 25 : 03 ] Their cultural life, and their family life, and they built it on God's word. And they were saying, we have fallen into habits and practices that aren't going to be a problem, and we're going to change, by God's grace, and we're going to live in a different way, by God's grace.

There is reformation in our lives on the basis of God's word. And so I've been living in this way, but Lord, I see in your word, I should be living in this way, so I resolve from now on, by God's grace, that's how I live in.

And when we discover God's word, and when we respond to God's word, it will show itself visibly. practically, it will change our lives. And that is what we need, above all else, a willingness to change on the basis of scripture.

There are churches up there that become frozen and totally unwilling to change. I'm not arguing for change, for changes to speak, but I am arguing for change, what is scripture.

It's hard to understand God's word, and the implications of God's Lord, it will change how we spend our Lord's days, and it will change our practices in prayer, and it will change our Bible reading, it will change our family worship, and it will affect our free time, and it will affect the way we do money, and it will affect the way we do work, and it will affect the way we do school, and it will affect the way we support, and the ripples go on and on and on, until there is no part of life which is unaffected by

God's life.

[ 26 : 55 ] And you know, that can be very difficult, and very painful, and it's not easy to change. But what blessing there is, here is a people, they rediscover God's word, and they respond to it, and then they reform their lives, on the basis of God's word.

And that is a simple, practical path. To pray that God's word will come to you freshly and powerfully, that God, by his Holy Spirit, will help you to respond to it, and your emotions, your feelings, your affections will be affected by it.

God will show you whatever changes you need to make, and God will give you courage to make those changes, and we need to be prepared to change on the basis of switching.

That's great.