

So Nehemiah has finished restoring the wall in 52 days, and now we see a shift in direction. Up to this point it's been all about how we build; the people pick up a rock and fix it to the wall, some pick up a sword to defend the builders against enemies, and then they fix the gates in place to control who comes in. But now we shift to building up people. You see the goal of all this building work was not to just have the most amazing wall. It was so the people would be safe in order that they could do the thing we are all called to do and that is to worship the Lord with all we have.

So just as we delve further into God's word this morning, I'd invite all of you to just take a moment and pray expectantly that God by his Spirit will do something new in all our hearts this morning as we look at his word. Let's pray silently into our own hearts right now in expectation.

So what we are going to learn today is the way in which the Word of God has the power to build people up. It gives us strength, it sustains us, it directs us. We don't need self help books, we don't need google, we need to look to God. That's why Paul's 2nd letter to Timothy in Chapter 3 is so so important - **'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'**. The scriptures are used so that the people of God are built up.

So why scripture? And you may be asking that question about this church, "Why is it that we place such an emphasis on the word of God? Is that not what happens within the Presbyterian church or other evangelical denominations?" Well I personally believe that God's word must be foundational to us as it shapes every aspect of our life. It was the great protestant reformer Martin Luther who said that the word alone, Sola Scriptura, would be the basis of the decisions we make. And only after that, he says, can one determine whether the words of men can be accepted as true.

So what we see here today in Nehemiah 8 is the impact of the word of God on these people - the people gathered expectantly to hear the word of God, they listened to it attentively, and they responded to it. Today it is my hope that as we look at these 3 points we may consider what God wants to do in our community as people come back to His word.

1. The people gathered expectantly

Notice that in the opening verses it says the people gathered as one, and they gathered in the Square before the Water Gate. Think about where today you typically hear God's word proclaimed. Yesterday I was in Rathriland as Nathan had a football match there, and in the town square the preachers were out giving it everything, but no one was standing listening. How does it make you feel when you hear preachers in the town? Is it a bit uncomfortable or is it something that you wish you could do? In Chapter 8 the people gathered as one in the Square waiting to hear the word of God. Why is it then that in our context this doesn't happen? What a witness and impact it would be on our country, that irrespective of our denominational differences, we came together expecting to hear God's word. Coming together as one portrays that they were united together, and for all of us, we may have differing views and

opinions on many things as people, but the word of God should be the thing that we are all united around. We should be one.

It doesn't mean that we all agree with everything, but it does mean that at the very centre of what it means to be the family of God, there is a unity in relation to the priority of prayer, to the authority of the Bible, to the centrality and superiority of Jesus, to the absolute necessity of evangelism, to the central place of the worship of God's people, and so on. And it is these shared convictions which allow God's people to gather together as one, in the way it is described here in Nehemiah.

The picture we have here of the people gathering was that everyone was together – not just the men, but also the women and their children, coming to hear the word of God. Now imagine this, that on a Sunday morning, there's that sense of unity as all your children jump out of bed with joy, screaming "We're going to Church! I am so looking forward to going there with my parents". The reality is that unity would not be a word very often used in our house if we are trying to get children to come out to church. It doesn't matter where you rear them or what you do with them; children today do not by nature love the word of God. Neither do they like singing. Teenage kids, many of them, the last thing they want to do in the world is sing. And if they do sing, it's definitely not any of these kind of songs. So how do we have that unity in our families which is described in our reading? Well we have got to pray for our families, we've got to pray for the Spirit's awakening in the hearts of our young people.

Families gathered expectantly, and their expectation was directly related to what was about to happen, because they told Ezra the teacher in verse 1 to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses which the Lord had commanded for Israel. Now that the walls were built, they wanted to hear what God had to say. They didn't want to hear any funny little stories, or little introductions that preachers today use to kind of entertain the crowd. They wanted to hear from God.

So why is this so important? Well, when reformations and spiritual revivals have taken place in history, they have all come as a result of hearing the word of God. Do you remember that moment as Josiah the young king discovers the scrolls of the scriptures in the temple in 1 Kings 22 a revival began in the nation. Look at the day of Pentecost in Acts, that as the people heard from the word of God they were cut to the heart, and they said to one another, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'

The great preacher Martyn Lloyd Jones said this, "What is it that always heralds the dawn of a Reformation or of a Revival? It is renewed preaching. Not only a new interest in preaching but a new kind of preaching. A revival of true preaching has always heralded these great movements in the history of the Church".

My big fear for the wider 21st century church is that in order to be popular we drive a model of entertainment, great facilities, more and more programmes in our churches, all at the expense of a dulled down gospel message. So let's pray in our families and neighbourhoods that people come expectantly seeking to hear God speak, and let's pray that our churches would have leaders who remain faithful to God's word rather than opt for the popularity game. The people gathered because they realised how important it was. Oh for the day when our towns would realise in all the mess of

politics, the economy, and the world, that the only real source of wisdom comes from God's word. We've got to keep praying that that will happen, and for some of you I know every day you pray that that desire for God would touch your husband or your wife whose not here, or maybe you children who used to come to church but no longer darken the door.

2. Next the people listened attentively

Verse 2: "On the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly"—notice—"which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand."

Notice that they weren't divvied up into different age groups. All are listening, no matter the age, attentively to the word. How do we in today's church approach it? When it comes the time in the service what we think as the right answer is to send the little ones on their way so that the teaching they receive is relevant to them. This didn't happen in Nehemiah's time. because parents understood their responsibility in passing instruction down to the children. I'm not saying that there is not a worthy place for children's ministry, what I'm saying is that unfortunately I think we have lost the responsibility of the parents to be the teachers and examples. We send our young out to be taught in Sunday School, or YF and think that's the job done. It's not. As parents God has placed the responsibility with us to shape our children. And then we wonder why we don't see the kids return to church when they get into teenage years - we think it's because we now have to put in place another clever slick church programme to draw them back. Wrong. It's because the example of the parents has not ensured that when it comes to learning from the word of God, the whole family comes. That's what happened in my generation and I think there is much merit in looking at why the numbers in Sunday schools and attendance at churches across our country was greater back then - it's not the children's fault, it's the parents' in my view. In that city square, anyone that was able to understand were standing waiting to hear the word read, and so as the children grew up being shaped more and more by their parents their understanding of the word of God gave them that same desire to learn more.

And so from sunrise through to lunchtime the word of God was read. The people's attentiveness to it shows that each family knew its importance in how it would shape a new generation. It wasn't just some fellow standing up on a wooden box and reading out words aloud - no, it took hold of people because they were expectant of its power, and also the person declaring the word was also expectant of its potential with the power of the Holy Spirit. If all that happens each Sunday is that someone stands up in a pulpit and speaks for 15 mins because it's the thing that happens in church, or that the congregation come along to be tickled and entertained by a few funny stories rather than the message, then no reaction or response will come from it. And so our prayer today should be that we all as families are attentive to hearing what the word of God is saying to us.

Which therefore leads me to my final point, and that is that the people did indeed respond to it.

3. They Responded Properly

In verse 7 we read that the Levites (with all those difficult names) “instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.” Now from what I can imagine here is what happened. One of the elders read from the Book of the Law, then there was a pause, at which the Levites would have been spread throughout the crowd and would have asked the people, “Does everyone understand what he has just read?”. And if the people say, “No, I don’t,” or “I have a question about this,” then the Levites who are out amongst the group, they then read again from the Book of the Law; they make it clear, they make it understandable, so that the individuals can apply it to their lives.

You will know that for many weeks now I have been banging on about joining a small group through the week. Well I think today’s reading gives good reasons for it. The reality is that me taking 15 mins on a Sunday to preach will never possibly answer all the questions that might be floating in your minds concerning what you have read from God’s word. But if people are able to gather together around God’s word each week and there is more time to chat openly, then there is a greater chance of being able to understand more about what a passage of scripture means in the context of our daily lives, and then apply it to whatever we have to face, whether in work or family or whatever. The role of the house group leaders is a bit like the Levites, they are there to steer people in some direction with God’s word so they do not misinterpret it. This is exactly what was going on here amongst the people - they listened attentively but they then had a chance to discuss it to ensure they understood it. And therefore as a result of understanding it they could then respond to it.

And that’s why folks, for me, there is an importance of placing the word of God at the centre of our gatherings, because out of that it has the power to affect our lives as we then respond to it. You know I can appeal to many of you to consider all kinds of things in life, but actually I have no power – it’s when you study the scriptures and pray for God’s Spirit to direct what you have read, then that’s what will convict you.

So how did the people respond? They lifted up their hands saying, “Amen! Amen!” Isn’t it funny that there is this idea of labelling people who raise their hands in church these days. And yet the origins of raising of hands was a symbol in those times of submitting oneself to the Lord. When they prayed they didn’t clasp their hands like we do, no they would have raised their hands symbolising the desire to connect with the living God.

Conclusion

And so they all gathered. they all listened. they all responded. they lifted their hands in worship, they bowed their faces in repentance, and they wept. Why did they weep? Because the Word of God impacted them, it hit them, it convicted them. The Book of the Law touched them in a way that only God can. But what was it that made them respond? It was having an open heart and mind to accept the power from the word of God to change their lives around. They were open. And for all of us, we should never have the defence walls up around us so much that we can’t be open to hear God speak to us through his word. It’s not to expose us, it’s not to make us feel guilty or ashamed; it’s instead to bring revival.

Notice that all that Ezra the priest did was read the Word of God to the people – no funny stories, no clever points to ponder. And for me, whilst I would long for people to tell me how they have responded to my preaching each Sunday, I have been humbled by God to know that it's not in my words, but it is in the power of his Holy Spirit through his word that he will touch the hearts of those who listen.

Like the people listening to Ezra declaring God's word, I long that everyone of you who hear the word of God will not just hear it, but will be expectant as to what power can come from it, and therefore respond to it. I invite you that as I did at the very beginning of this talk to take a moment in your own hearts and to pray expectantly that as you read God's word in this coming week, maybe it will be for the first time in a while, that he would do something in your heart. Let's take that moment in silent prayer as we come expectantly before God.

God bless you as you soak yourselves this week in his word. And for those that are not sure where to start, then no better place than the daily bible reading notes available at the back to begin the journey of coming expectant of what God can do through his word in your life.

Small group questions

1. Verse 1-3 : What do you think we can do to increase our desire for the study of God's word?
2. Do you have a tendency to interpret your life through the lens of the Bible or the Bible through the lens of your life (what determines your actions) ?
3. Our passage says that the people gathered together as one – men, women and others (which may mean children who understood). What do you think the role of the church should be in teaching our young people versus the role of parents in sharing God's Word?
4. When we come to read or hear God's word proclaimed, why is it important to prepare our hearts to receive from Him, and what practical steps could you take to prepare your mind to hear from God?
5. Verse 9 says the people wept as they heard the word of God. How do you differentiate between how the devil uses guilt, and the Holy Spirit uses conviction (also refer to Acts 2:37-38)?
6. The people knew the power that came from God's word. Paul said that God's word is breathed by him and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3). Do you believe Christians today put a high enough authority on God's word and what it says about life?
7. Let's now take an example of a passage - Psalm 42 :
 - a. pray before we read it,
 - b. read it together aloud
 - c. read it ourselves quietly
 - d. take a moment of silence
 - e. Now discuss how you think it may apply to your lives today