

## Nehemiah 8 – David Morrell – 29 July 20

So what we're looking at today is not the end of the story of Nehemiah but in many ways it's the climax. Partly for that reason and partly because if I keep on going to the bitter end I'm going to start repeating myself, this is going to be the last in the Nehemiah series.

However, in a couple of weeks time I've got a real treat for you because Michael recorded a little while back a sermon entitled "The God we invent". It's got some fantastic graphics that are way beyond my capabilities.

Then my current plan after that is to have a stab at exploring the big themes of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Anyway that's all in the future.

Today we're looking at Nehemiah chapter 8; Nehemiah's response to God's word.

*"When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns,  
1 all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.  
2 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.  
3 He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.  
4 Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.  
5 Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up.  
6 Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.  
7 The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.  
8 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.  
9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.  
10 Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."  
11 The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve."  
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.  
13 On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law.  
14 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  
15 and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: "Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters"—as it is written.  
16 So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim.  
17 The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of 1 all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.*

*Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great. 18 Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly."*

So just to bring us up to speed: The walls around Jerusalem has been completed. We're told that the first phase was accomplished in just 53 days although presumably there was still plenty of tidying up to do after that.

People settled back into their towns and contributed to the renewed worship in the Temple. But there is one big thing that is missing. It's actually been years and years since anyone opened up the law of God and explained it.

And now through Ezra the priest - the other great God-given leader of this time - that's put right.

On the big day everyone's assembled by the square at the Water Gate. They arrive from the crack of dawn arriving from all the towns and villages - men, women and children - everyone who has any capacity to understand.

There at the front is Ezra on a great big platform booming out the words of God's Law at the top of his voice.

Scattered around the square are a baker's dozen of Levites. Not just reading the Law but explaining it to the people around them.

And so this great crowd is standing there for hour after hour from dawn till noon. Grappling with it.

They're doing something that is absolutely fundamental to being part of the people of God.

They're engaging with what God has to say to them through His word.

And it seems to me that they got five very important things right and one rather important thing wrong.

In the first place they recognised God's word for what it is. Frankly you don't spend 6 hours standing in the hot sun for Ezra to say "Guys I've had a few thoughts about how we should live a little better if you'd like to share them with you!"

I mean who is interested in hearing what Ezra thinks, or Eddie or Eric. Or David. Probably him the least of all, actually!

We're each just one voice and opinion among many.

In the church where I was brought up people used to say "I like to think..." "I like to think that sin doesn't really matter too much." "I like to think that everyone will get to heaven in the end." "I like to think that Jesus didn't really mean what He said on that occasion."

Well of course, as a guide to Truth there are few things less reliable than what you or I would, personally, like to believe.

We'd all like to believe that the Coronavirus will disappear tomorrow in a puff of smoke. We'd all like to think that the debts the UK has been racking up during the lockdown will be instantly repaid by a gigantic cheque falling out of the sky!

We know it won't happen like that.

What we think doesn't really count for so much.

But what if. What if the Creator and Sovereign of the universe has things to say to us? That's an entirely different matter. If He's got things to say it's going to be worth listening to.

When Paul writes to his friends in Theselonika he says "I thank God that when you receive the Word you took it exactly as it is. Not as a human opinion but as God's Word at work in you."

That is the first and most important thing to do with God's Word. To recognise it for what it truly is.

Second thing they did right was that they took the time and trouble to hear it properly. I'm not sure how many of us would manage 6 hours in a stretch. And we're told that throughout that time they listened INTENTLY.

It's important that they did because all through Bible times people would have had little or no chance to read the Scriptures privately at home.

Not because they were illiterate incidentally, most of them could probably read, but because only the very rich would be able to afford the scrolls on which the Scriptures were written.

So with no private Bible reading, let alone any Bible notes, the only way they were going to be able to engage with God's Word was to hear it read in public.

That actually goes for New Testament times just as much as the Old.

All of which means that you and I have got very little excuse for not following their example and taking both time and the trouble with the Scripture. Frankly it's an awful lot easier for us to access God's Word than it ever was for them.

Third thing they did right was that approached God's Word practically. Sometimes people approach the Bible simply out of curiosity. How old was Methuselah, how tall was the Tower of Babel and all that sort of rubbish.

My first theology degree was at King's college, London where the study of the Bible was done almost entirely as an intellectual exercise. I remember one seminar that was based on Acts chapter 2. You might think that it would be impossible to study the day of Pentecost without being inspired by it. Well these guys managed it!

We spent an hour and a half in an entirely theoretical discussion of one single phrase: "When the day of Pentecost had fully come."

They came to the Bible with all the personal commitment you might bring to The Times' crossword puzzle.

But God's Word is not information but in formation.

Matthew chapter 28 Jesus tells his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to do all that I've commanded you.

When Paul talks about the Scriptures in 2 Timothy chapter 3 he says "All Scripture is God-breathed." It's breathed out by God, it's the words that He wants to say to US.

But Paul isn't concerned merely with theology here. What he is concerned with is more about how we should receive the Word of God and what it's actually for.

And here's the full quotation: "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."

It's not a theological textbook.

It is not an encyclopaedia of religion.

It IS a training manual for life.

And so when we come to Scripture we should have the same questions that Ezra's hearers had.

What does this say about me?

What does it say about God's purpose for my life?

What does it tell me about what God expects of me?

What does it tell me about what God wants to do in my life?

How should I live on the basis of what I'm hearing / reading?

They approached the Word of God practically. A great thing to do.

The fourth thing that the people in our reading got right is that they were prepared to be surprised by God's Word.

As they listened there was at least one thing that took them by surprise. The found written in the law, which the ORD had commanded through Moses that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters through the festival of the seventh month.

In fact, they hadn't been doing this. In fact, they hadn't even been aware of it. In fact this festival hadn't even been celebrated for donkey's years. The Israelites had not celebrated it like this since the days of Joshua son of Nun.

But they took it on board. They were prepared to be surprised by the Word of God.

It seems to me that we lose our capacity to be surprised by God's Word. We know what it's going to say don't we? Or at least, we know what we think it ought to say, before we even read it. And so we read it through a lens that only allows us to see what we're expecting to see.

You can do that by looking at Scripture through the lens of culture.

In the 19th century, all sorts of individuals thought that Jesus probably wasn't the way that the gospels described him.

So they wrote their own versions of the life of Jesus. Surprise, surprise it turned out that Jesus was a progressive, 19th century gentleman just like them!

Albert Schwizer compared them to a guy looking into a well and seeing nothing more than a reflection staring back up at them.

Lesley Neubingham describes liberal theologians as operating on the principle that the Scriptures provide the words but we provide the meaning.

If we look at the Bible through the lens of our own culture we're never going to be surprised because we are never going to be open to God saying anything we don't already think.

Actually, orthodox, supposedly Bible believing Christians can do this too. I'm immensely proud of the fact that 200 years ago Christians led the charge against the vile slave trade. Both here and in the West Indies. And Baptists were involved in that.

But I'm deeply troubled by the fact that many other Christians seem to find anything in their Bibles to challenge the awful cruelties that we inflicted on innocent Africans. In South Africa, some of the staunchest supporters of apartheid came from the Dutch Reformed Church.

What was in their Bibles I wonder?

In the US it seems there are plenty of Evangelical Christians who read their Bibles and still think it's important for everyone to walk around with guns and for America to dominate the rest of the world.

We probably don't spot it so readily in ourselves but I'm convinced that we do this. We come to the Bible with our theology - whether it is evangelical or reformed or charismatic -, convinced what we should find. Whether it's there or not.

When I was little I went to a Sunday school where we had story after story about "gentle Jesus, meek and mild", who never made waves, was always kind to everybody. So when as a teenager I became a Christian for a long time I wasn't really interested in reading the gospels. I didn't want to know because I knew all about Jesus as a man. Frankly he was pastel shaded and boring. He was a vanilla saviour.

It was only when I read the gospels cover to cover in JB Phillips translation that I realised that Jesus I thought I knew all about was actually completely different from my ideas of him.

He was stronger.

He moved through the gospel stories with authority and power.

He confronted injustice. He stood up to bullies.

He made outrageous claims.

And when I allowed myself to be surprised by Scripture, what I found was a whole lot richer than I ever imagined.

When we come to Scripture we need to be ready to see what we do not expect to see. Not to brush off its challenges with "That's not what I've been taught".

We should pray that we can come to this with fresh eyes, with a fresh heart that is open to the Holy Spirit.

Enable me to see, not myself, my own ideas, the traditions of my church reflected there but pray that You help me to see You as you really are.

Fifthly, they were ready to be changed by what they heard. There was a real concern, an acknowledgement that this is what God's Word says and we're not doing it.

Worship was changed. There were three festivals that Israelites were expected to take part in.

There was The Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, that re-enacted the exodus out of Egypt.

There was The Feast of Weeks that became known later as Pentecost that was basically a kind of harvest festival.

Then there was the Feast of Tabernacles that came at the end of the year when the grain had been harvested, when the grapes had been turned into wine that had a dual significance. It was linked with the harvest but also linked with Israel's redemption.

And for that reason people would come together in makeshift camps in a great big jamboree that reflected how God's people had lived in tents on their journey through the wilderness.

So it was a great feast for Nehemiah's time because it reminded them of how God had provided for them and also how he had rescued them from Babylon and brought them back home.

But it had fallen into disuse. They had forgotten all about it.

Now they are reminded by the Law that Ezra has read out to them. They joyfully enter into this celebration of God's saving goodness in a way that they hadn't done since the time of Joshua.

The worship of God's people was changed by what they heard in the Word of God.

And their lifestyle was changed.

But not all at once.

In chapter 13 at the end of Nehemiah, some of the people had lapsed back into some of their sinful ways. But nonetheless Ezra's teaching of God's Law marks a new beginning.

A beginning of basing their lives on what God has said to them. Actually living it out.

Now those things are an indication of God's Word is at work in us too:

- When our hearts are touched and changed.
- When our worship is deep and our delight in the LORD is renewed.
- And above all when our lifestyle is turned around and brought into line with what God wants.

All these things the people listening to Ezra got absolutely right. But one thing they got wrong.

That is that they allowed themselves to get demoralised and condemned by what they heard. It's been said that God's word comforts the afflicted but afflicts the comfortable.

Well that crowd in the square by the Water Gate are well and truly afflicted, They're distraught. The Word of God has just shown them how far they have fallen from what God asked of them.

And so in vv9 and 10 Nehemiah and Ezra have to go to the people and say: "This day is holy for the LORD, don't mourn and weep. Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Now there is something about their response that is right because they haven't trusted and obeyed what God is saying to them.

But there is also something wrong about it. The purposes of Scripture are not to flatten us but to build us up.

Scripture convicts us of our sin but it does not condemn us.

And here's the difference. If you have a music or sports coach they'll spend a fair bit of time correcting you. And they'll keep on correcting you until you get it right. They may also, like my violin teacher did, show what the music you're trying to play should sound like. Or how the sporting skill ought to be done. And that's bound to show you that there's a great big gulf between the way that you should be playing and the way that you actually are playing.

You can respond in one of two ways to that.

First of all, you can conclude "I'm a total failure, trying to learn this skill is absolutely hopeless." Then the chances are that you'll stop really trying.

Or, secondly, you can conclude, "Well I'm a long way from where I need to be but I am getting there, however slowly. My teacher's continued effort is an indication that they believe in me. That they know that one day I can be better."

The people in Nehemiah responded in the first way but second is actually the right one. The joy of the LORD is your strength.

We can rejoice in the fact that God is with us, that He's brought us out of darkness into his wonderful light. He's caused us to know His love and to experience His Holy Spirit.

In the case of the people of Nehemiah's time they could know that God had brought them home. He had enabled the temple to be rebuilt and the wall around their city to be renewed. Now God is speaking into their lives, He's on their case.

All of that SHOULD have been a cause of encouragement and not despair.

We are each of us a work in progress. We are not yet the way God created us to be. But one day we will be.

Our lives may look like a building site right now with all the mess and rubbish that goes along with that. But God is making us into a building that He has designed to be magnificent.

He who began a good work in us, will complete it in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We should go through life with a keen awareness of our sin but definitely not guilt-ridden.

We should go through our lives in the knowledge that there is still much that needs to change but taking courage from the fact that God has already accepted us and at this very moment is at work in our lives.

We should go through our lives confident that God operates on the 'Mastermind principle' - I've started so I'll finish. And He will.

As the hymn has it "Changed from glory into glory. Till in heaven we take our place. Till we cast our crowns before Him. Lost in wonder, love and praise."

Let us pray.

"Father, I'm s grateful that one of the marks of Your love for us, one of the indications of your respect for us, is that choose to communicate with us. That you share with us your Truth, your purposes. You open your heart to us. Will you help us to come to your word with an eagerness, an openness of mind and heart. Will you help us to come in such a way that your Word, in the power of your Spirit, will truly change us into the likeness of Jesus. Amen."

God bless you and have a fantastic couple of weeks before we meet again.

## **Before you go: A note about Friday**

Since you are unable to benefit from the recorded service published on the internet we'd like to offer you the opportunity to be part of a small group to hear Eddie live on Friday at noon. We will ensure social distancing and will provide hand sanitiser. Please bring your own Bible. If you have any questions please leave a message on the office number (01249 701078) and we'll get back to you.