

The Word of Life

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[0 : 00] Well, we are in the run-up to an election, aren't we? That's now less than a month away. And if there is one thing that everybody pleading for our vote seems to agree on, it is that things need to change, don't they?

Nobody is happy with the status quo. Every party, and I think probably the majority of people voting, is of a mind that change, whatever that change might be, change needs to happen.

But what kind of change do you think would make lasting difference? And what would need to happen for that change to come about?

We're jumping into the middle of Nehemiah this morning, and it's probably one of the books in the Bible that we are likely less familiar with than most. But we come to it here at the start of chapter 8 at something of a turning point in the book.

Up to this point, through Ezra and Nehemiah, the two kind of come as a pair, it has been something of a fairly messy political situation. But change is about to happen for the better.

[1 : 29] Let me just explain kind of briefly where we are here. Ezra and Nehemiah, they take us into the time of Israel's return from exile in Babylon.

And as we read through these books, we find the return from exile brings about sort of a mixed bag of results. Things have happened, things have gotten done, but not without trouble.

Through the long, dark years of exile, Jerusalem, the city, had been reduced to rubble, almost to the point of extinction. And the returned exiles over the previous chapters have reconstructed the city, right?

They have rebuilt the temple. They have rebuilt the walls. None of it without difficulty. But within that, there has been no apparent restoration of worship.

The city has been rebuilt. But worship seems to be not present in the pages.

[2 : 43] Temporal matters were being cared for, but eternal matters were seemingly left behind. That is where we are left at the end of chapter 7.

Good things have been done. Something is sorely missing. But drastic, dramatic change comes about through chapters 8 and 9.

Through these chapters, something changes. So that the people are not left beleagueredly building, but joyfully celebrating.

Praising God, caring for their neighbors, sharing what they have, and living in obedience to God in a way that hadn't been seen for hundreds of years before this point.

There is revival. People gathering to worship God and celebrating His goodness together.

[3 : 47] People reaching out in love to one another. Confessing their wrongdoing. Confessing their wrongdoing. Sharing all that they have. This was not a kind of super spiritual nation before these days.

Nothing like it had happened for centuries. But in the space of just a few days, there is renewed spiritual life here.

Is that not the change we want to see amongst us? Across our denomination. Through every church in the land.

Throughout our whole country. Change happening so that people live loving one another.

Celebrating joyfully at the revealed grace of God.

Delighting to share what they have. Caring for their neighbor. Longing and loving to worship God and live in obedience to Him. That is exactly what we want to see, is it not?

[4 : 57] Let us just look at what brought about exactly this change in Nehemiah's time. Where does this time of spiritual revival begin?

Verse 1 of chapter 8. All the people came together as one in the square before the water gates. Revival is brought about by practical concerns.

Taking a back seat. Not unimportant, but not primary. And the Word of God taking center stage. That is what illicit revival in this land.

The Word of God becomes the focal points of their worship and their lives. And sure enough, renewal is what follows.

That is what we see happen in Nehemiah chapter 8. So let's just look at what happens with the Word of God as it takes center stage in this chapter.

[6 : 28] And as we look through this chapter, we see two very, very simple things. Two things that have been practiced throughout the history of God's people. From the moment God preserved His Word in written form.

Two things that every faithful church has not only included in their liturgy, but has allowed to shape their worship. We see God's Word is read and God's Word is preached.

That is it. God's Word is read and God's Word is preached.

We might want to see something more flashy. We might long for something that seems a little more innovative.

We might think, surely there's a better way. But this is how God works. This is how God speaks.

[7 : 32] This is how change came about in Nehemiah's time. This is how the gospel spread across the ancient world in the time of the apostles.

This is how the kingdom is spreading to the ends of the earth today. God's Word is read and God's Word is preached. And all we do is respond to what we hear.

That is it. That is it. As we continue our series on worship, we come this morning to just consider exactly those two points.

The reading and preaching of God's words. And as we look through this passage and consider a little of what else the Bible tells us about God's words, I hope you will see why the Bible is so central to all that we do here at Bon Accord.

And why it must remain so if we want to see change. People coming to faith. And people growing in their faith.

[8 : 40] So let's just see this morning how these two very simple but immeasurably powerful elements are unpacked for us in this chapter.

First, the reading of God's words in verses 1 to 6. We've seen in verse 1 that the people ask Ezra, don't they, to open the law.

And even this is probably worth being in mind. This does not strictly come from their own initiative. They're responding to God's call back in Deuteronomy to have his law read regularly in the presence of all the people.

Just as we respond to God's call every Sunday morning. His word is not only at the heart of our worship. It is the beginning and the end from start to finish.

Worship is scripture shaped and scripture saturated. And it is that because this is not any old book they are asking to hear from, is it?

[9 : 43] These are the words of God Himself. That is who is speaking every time the Bible is opened.

That is a very simple truth, isn't it? And it is one I suspect most of us here might nod along with knowingly. But just pause and think for a moment.

The magnitude of what we are saying here. When the Bible is opened, God Himself is speaking to us through His words, by His Spirit.

These are God's words. And God's words are inherently powerful to change.

When God speaks in Genesis 1, nothing becomes something. God speaks and there was light.

[11 : 03] God speaks. Hebrews tells us that all of creation is upheld by His words.

Why does the earth keep spinning? Because of the Word of God. Why do the rains fall? Because of the Word of God.

He creates with a word. He commands creation by His Word. We sung earlier of that in Psalm 147. And He recreates fallen humanity through His words.

You who are in Christ, Peter says, have been born again through the living and enduring Word of God.

This Word that is read, again, the writer of Hebrews tells us, is living and active. It is a word full of power and truth, just as the one who utters it is.

[12:11] That is the words we hear, we listen to Sunday by Sunday. As William read for us earlier, those were not William's words to us.

They were God's words to us. That is the word that this congregation is listening to in Nehemiah chapter 8.

It is a word that is powerful and effective, sufficient to make us wise unto salvation, profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. It changes lives.

It penetrates souls. It heals. It judges. It binds up wounds. It gives life where there was only once death. We could go on and on and on and on. The book, this book, the Bible, God's words is not just something we sometimes hear.

It is the primary actor in all of creation. It is a word like no other because it comes from a source like no other.

[13:25] And when this is our view of God's words, it is no wonder, is it, that the gathered congregation here in Nehemiah 8 ask for the word to be read, and then they listen.

Then they listen. Because when God's word is read, God is speaking. Wouldn't we want to listen? There are hundreds of thousands of people this weekend, aren't they, making all kinds of effort to get to Edinburgh to listen to somebody, just a normal person, sing some songs.

3.2 million people tuned in earlier this week to listen to seven people that argue about politics for an hour and a half. Millions more set aside their Christmas afternoons to listen to our king.

When there's people we want to listen to, we make an effort to hear them, don't we? What better person to listen to than the maker of heaven and earth, the one who formed your very being and gave you life, who knows you better than you do, who knows your needs more than any other, who loves you more than anyone, the one who knows all things, whose wisdom knows no limits, whose every word is filled with his infinite goodness and grace.

[15:13] Surely we want to listen to him. And we don't have to go to Murrayfield, we don't have to wait 365 days to hear him again or five years to the next election cycle.

We get to come Sunday by Sunday, gathered with his people and listen as the sovereign Lord, the God of heaven and earth, our creator and redeemer, speaks to us.

What an immense privilege. What else would you want to do with your Sunday morning?

Ezra's audience in Nehemiah 8, they knew who they were listening to. And so they gave him their full attention. Didn't they just look down at verse 3?

He, that's Ezra, read aloud from daybreak until noon as he faced the square before the water gate in the presence of the men, women, and all who could understand.

[16:21] And all the people listened attentively to the book of the law from daybreak until noon. I don't know if you think we sometimes have long readings here at Bonacord.

Somewhere between four and six hours. And they all listened attentively. These were not people with superhuman powers of concentration.

These were people who knew they were listening to the voice of their creator and redeemer. And so hung on to every single word.

We've been in this series for four weeks now. And in the last two weeks, we have looked at prayer and praise.

And that has been good, and I hope helpful. But remember where we began. And remember, take heed of where we are now.

[17:27] God's word calls us to worship. And God's word is at the center of our worship. It sculpts all that our worship entails.

We respond in singing and prayer. And that is good, and it is necessary. But our response is only ever contingent. Contingent upon God's word.

God sets the agenda of our worship Sunday by Sunday. It is why we're in the regular habits of usually going through books, chapter by chapter, verse by verse.

Because we want to hear what God has said to us. Joe and I don't sit down on a Tuesday morning and think, what does the congregation need to hear? And thank goodness for that. We simply read on through God's word to hear his voice and hear what he wants us to hear.

Not picking and choosing the parts we like best or the parts that are straightforward, but trusting God to do the talking. Knowing that our primary activity in worship is listening.

[18 : 51] Allowing all that he says to structure all that we do. The songs we sing, the prayers we pray every Sunday is grounded in the portion of God's words that we are coming to next.

He sets the agenda, not us, because his word is true and perfect and infallible. His word is powerful. His word alone brings revival, brings life to dead souls and hope to lost people.

And so we, with saints of old, from the very days of Deuteronomy, read God's words.

We listen. And as we see at the end of verse 6, here in Nehemiah 8, when God's word is read, then, then we respond rightly in worship.

But what we see in Nehemiah 8 is that while their worship was a good response, not everything about the reaction was quite what it should have been.

[20 : 07] The revival in Nehemiah's time does not begin only with God's words read, but with God's word read, and then God's word preached.

We have the reading of God's words, and then we have the preaching of God's words. If you look down there at the end of verse 9, and the end of verse 10, actually the end of verse 11 as well, you'll see that the people who have listened to God's word were weeping and grieving because of what they heard.

Now, not only is this not the response Ezra and the Levites were expecting, it was not the right response because they go about fixing the problem, don't they?

They plead them not to grieve, not to weep. And we can see exactly what the problem was when we look down to verse 12 and see the resolution.

Then all the people, the same people who had been weeping and grieving, went away to eat and drink, to send portions of joy and to celebrate, send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy.

[21 : 24] Why? Because now they understood. Now they understood the words that had been made known to them.

Upon hearing the word of God, the people are initially left weeping and grieving. We don't know exactly why. But then once they had the meaning explained to them, once that had happened, they rightly responded in joyful celebration.

That is about as simple and straightforward a definition of preaching as you can get. Explaining God's word clearly so that people rightly respond to it.

I don't know if you've ever sat and listened to a reading in church. Perhaps it even happened this morning. And despite sort of listening intently throughout, you're left at the end sitting there and thinking, I have absolutely no idea what that was all about.

Not a clue. If that has been you before, that is okay, right? That is exactly what happened with Ezra's audience. It's where I find myself often enough too.

[22 : 42] We've been reading through Ezra in her time of family worship recently, and I would quite regularly get to the end of a chapter and just sort of look at Mary and go, I don't know. There are a variety of reasons, aren't there, that we can be initially confounded by God's words.

It is beautiful and powerful, but it is also at points rich and dense, isn't it? Sometimes it is too much to take immediately in.

Sometimes it takes a lot of time and work to unpack. Sometimes we get lost in the trees. God's word is a beautiful tapestry, an absolute masterpiece, but sometimes when we focus on a single thread, we find it hard to pull back and see the full picture.

Sometimes the meaning is not immediately apparent to us because in God's perfect providence, his word has been written at particular times to particular people in particular contexts that we are often unfamiliar with.

And so it is no wonder, is it, that there are times we do not initially understand or as the congregation Nehemiah's time did, even if they didn't misunderstand, at least didn't get the full picture.

[24 : 07] That that is why God's word is not just to be read, but to be preached. That is what the Levites go and do in verse 8, making it clear so that the people rightly respond.

that is why we preach Sunday by Sunday in our service and in many other services across the country and the world. Because it is the means by which God has ordained, unflashy as it might seem, it is the means which God has ordained through which God's people understand what their redeeming is saying to them and so respond in genuine heartfelt praise.

That is the purpose of preaching, making God's word known that his people might praise him. It's what Joe and I labor to do week by week, not to tell you what we think you should hear, not to tell

you what you want to hear, not to entertain you, not to make it about us in any way, but to tell you what God has said in order that we together might rightfully respond to his word in joyful praise. That is the end goal of all preaching. It is more than a lecture. We do not just stand up to transfer information. the aim of preaching is doxology, praise, worship.

That happens often through teaching, but the teaching is never the end goal. Praise is the purpose of preaching. If at the end of a sermon everyone understands the passage, but no one is eager to praise God, I have failed.

[26 : 20] If everyone at the end of a sermon thinks, what a great preacher, and no one thinks, what a great God, I have failed. If at the end of a sermon you think, that was entertaining, I had a good laugh, but you do not want to praise God, we have failed.

Doxology is the glorious aim. And we arrive at that goal not by being funny, not by making it about ourselves, but in seeking to clearly explain the meaning of the text in front of us in order that we might all respond rightly in joyful praise because of the gospel God has made known.

That is the aim of preaching. That is what you should expect from your preacher, whether it is here or you're a regular somewhere else. That is why we preach expositively in our services, drawing out from the text, chapter by chapter, book by book, not what we think will be helpful from it, but what God is saying through it.

Rooted and grounded in His words, not our ideas, holding fast to His truth, not our preferences. Sometimes that means hard messages come, doesn't it?

Ones that if it were up to us, we'd probably not choose. But that is why it is so important to do, lest there be parts of God's words to us that we would never hear.

[28 : 05] prayer. So, please pray for your preachers. Pray for Joe and I. We need help.

We need care and support and encouragement. We are young and weak and far from perfect. Pray that we would know always that we are weak and that this would be all about God, being as transparent as possible, that you might look through us and see His glory in the words before you. We love you as a church family and so we labor week by week not to bring you something of ourselves, but something of God's words. because it is through these means, through the reading and preaching of God's words, that God's people rightly worship Him and that spiritual renewal takes place.

If we want to see something of the renewal that takes place in Nehemiah 8 and 9, we need to cultivate ever greater faith in the power of the Scriptures.

Read, expounded, and applied because that is the means God has appointed and employs to build up His church. The Holy Spirit illuminating His Word and giving us life, changing us inwardly and outwardly, enlightening the mind, regenerating the heart, engaging the will.

[29 : 47] God's Word read and God's Word preached. It might all seem so dull to the outsider, maybe even somewhat unimpressive to us, but the end result is not only effective because this word is living and active, but it leaves no doubt, does it?

It leaves no doubt about whose work this is. We do nothing special, but God does.

We do not speak our words of wisdom, but God speaks His Word of life. our services are outwardly in many ways unremarkable, but we have seen evidence, haven't we, even just last week of the eternal change they bring about in people's lives because when God's Word is at the center, God, God Himself is speaking in this place.

And where God speaks, change happens. all we do is hear Him gladly, listen carefully to His Word and long to understand it, and change will happen here just as it did in Nehemiah's day.

Let us pray that we would be faithful in our duty to listen and then respond in praise to the God who has spoken to us most wonderfully and clearly in His Son Jesus Christ by His Spirit because we who otherwise would be lost, we who would not know how to worship, we who would not know how to be saved, we who would not know how to live, because of God's Word, we know Jesus Christ, we know life, we know salvation, and we know the hope that awaits us as we look forward to joyful worship in His presence forevermore.

[32 : 07] Let us long for that amongst us as a church family and trust in God's Word to change. Before we sing in joyful praise, let us come before Him now in prayer together.

Father, we thank you and praise you for your words.

We thank you that we can hear it read. We thank you that you make it known to us through the preaching of it that we might do what we were made for and come before our Maker in joyful

worship.

In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[33 : 14] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.