

Bring Out the Book!

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- [0:00] Over the last few weeks, in the book of Nehemiah, we have been watching a people rebuild! Now, initially, that might sound not that exciting, just watching bricks and mortar go! But for those of us who have been here for the journey, it's been epic. It's been a story full of bravery, suspense, risk, and reward.
- The underdog of God's people have done what the surrounding nations thought was impossible, rebuilt the destroyed wall around Jerusalem.
- Intimidation from without and oppression from within has all been overcome in God's grace to get us to this point, where God's people are back from exile with a rebuilt temple and a rebuilt wall.
- So, as we come to the end of chapter 7, we're ready for the curtain to come down, for the credits to start rolling, and I mean us all to go home.
- What else is there for us to see? What else is there to be done now that the wall is complete and the city is safe? Well, as we see the building equipment being tucked away and the scaffolding being brought down, it reveals more clearly the work that is only just beginning.
- [1:37] You see, in the midst of a wall being reconstructed, God has revived a people. A people imperfect, but a people who've been revived to roll up their sleeves and get stuck in.
- Sacrificing comfort and ease to work hand in hand with one another, even risking their lives all to be a part of God's work in their generation.
- The wall may be complete and a people may be revived, but their restoration in many ways has only just begun.
- The city's safe, so now it's time to renew a revived people. But what will a people being renewed by God look like?
- And what means will God use to accomplish it? Well, after walking through chapter 8 together, I hope we'll have a better understanding to those two questions.
- [2:45] Because the picture that chapter 8 paints for us of a revived people that God is renewing is a picture of a people collectively hungry for, moved by, and submissive to God's Word.
- So, let's look at this picture, frame by frame, and let's see how God will renew us. Let's see what means God uses. So, firstly, God renews a people by making them hungry for His Word, verses 1 and 8.
- Now, the people's hunger for the Word of God is seen in their very direct request to Ezra at the end of verse 1. Bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel.
- The people's desire is simple. They want to hear God's Word. And what does that desire cause the people to do?
- Well, it causes them to gather as one man. Men, women, and all who could understand come together to hear the Word of God read. Verse 3.

[4:04] And he, meaning Ezra, read from it facing the square before the water gate from early morning until midday. But not only do they gather to hear the Word of God read, they gather to hear it explained and applied.

Because as Ezra and his 13 helpers read the Word of God from the elevated wooden platform, Levites are positioned amongst the people to help the people understand the Word of God.

Verse 7. So, in summary, a revived people being renewed by God will be hungry for His Word, causing them to gather together to hear it read and explained.

That's what a people being renewed by God look like. They will be hungry for and centered around the Word, gathering to hear it taught, and through those means they will be built up.

What we're doing here this morning might look strange to those of you who are new, or maybe even routine to those of you who are regular.

[5:21] But what we're participating in is the means that God chooses to renew His people. I mean, just like the rebuilding of the wall, it's not done through flashy means.

The wall was restored through ordinary people, picking up shovels, joined together with bricks and mortar. I mean, the surrounding nations even looked at them and laughed.

It looks so unimpressive. Yet, that's what got the job done. That's the means God chose. And here, to rebuild the people and to renew them, it's done through similarly ordinary means.

To anyone looking in, it just looked like a random large gathering, listening to a man read from a book and have it explained.

Nothing worth taking note. But in that gathering, God was at work gradually restoring a people.

[6:30] And brothers and sisters, I hope you take great comfort and reassurance in that this morning. Before we dig deeper into these verses, I want to take the time to emphasize this point.

If you're a Christian here today, being hungry for God's Word and gathering to hear it read and taught is proof that God is at work within you.

And gathering to hear it read and gathering to hear it read and taught is one of the main means that God uses to change us and mature us in our faith. You might be looking for a bigger sign.

Or you might be looking for something flashier. But know this. God changes us through His Word. That's why He gives desire for it to those He's revived and renewing.

It's the medicine our hearts and minds need. So gathering to hear it clearly read and taught from is one of the most effective ways to take it in.

[7:42] Now, some of you might be sitting there thinking, Well, that's great, but I'm still not convinced. Simply teaching God's Word plainly and clearly isn't enough.

I mean, sure, it might be how they did it back in Nehemiah's day. But we've moved on from that now. Time to move on with the times. But this template that we see here, of God fulfilling His purposes, of renewing His people, through them gathering to hear the Word read and taught clearly and plainly, is one that carries over to the New Testament and we see come up time and time again.

Jesus went throughout the regions preaching, teaching large crowds the Word of God made up of whom? Men, women, and children.

His prayer to the Father in John 17 for His followers was that the Father would sanctify them in the truth. Your Word is the truth.

And how did that Word spread? Well, just look at Paul and his missionary journeys in Acts. He consistently went around, reading and teaching God's Word to large crowds made up of whom?

[9:05] Well, oftentimes, men, women, and all who could understand. And Timothy was to build up the churches.

How? Well, by preaching the Word in and out of season. And what's preaching? Well, if it's not just verse 8, reading clearly from the Bible and giving its meaning.

God's, God's at work here this morning. He's gradually renewing us through our gatherings where we hear His Word taught and proclaimed.

It might look unimpressive. It might seem outdated. But it's God's way of doing things. It's how He's gradually building us together like living stones around the cornerstone of Christ.

It's how He's building His church that the gates of hell will not prevail against. It's accomplishing something that's going to last into eternity.

[10:12] So, brothers and sisters, let's be committed to it. If you're a new Christian here this morning and you're wondering how to grow in your faith, there are lots of good things for you to do.

But what should be top of the list? Gathering with God's people to hear the Bible read, explained, and apply it.

Be assured that through it, you'll gradually grow and be changed. But to those of us who've been gathering like this for a while, who feel like we're running on fumes, lacking enthusiasm for gathering together like this, let me ask you, are you gathering with God's people as one man?

Or are you divided, drifting into living the Christian life in isolation? Do you come chanting, bring out the book, bring out the book?

Or do you come murmuring, please don't be long, please don't be long? Do you come and pay attention?

[11:37] Are your ears attentive, ready to listen? Or are they dull, ready to go for a snooze? What's your attention on as you look up here into the pulpit?

Is it on the word being opened? Or is it on the color of the shirt the minister chooses to wear? Do you come ready to participate and engage in the service?

Verse 6, And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen. Or do you just come out of habit?

And finally, do you come with a teachable heart, ready to hear the word explained? Or do you come thinking you know everything already?

I can see hints of myself in many of these. And to those of you who can see the same, lacking enthusiasm for gathering together like this, let's pray God would give us the hunger we see here in this people.

[12:52] May we learn from this people's example, and may the Spirit brush off the cobwebs we've allowed to grow. Lord, make me hungry for your word once again.

May that be our prayer. Instead of beating ourselves up for our lack of hunger, may we simply just confess it to our God and ask Him to change it in us.

As we just sung before we started, Holy Spirit, cause your church to hunger for your ways. God is renewing, God is renewing, will be hungry for His word, causing them to gather to hear it read and explained.

But not only does God renew a people by causing them to be hungry for His word, He also causes them to be moved by it. Just look down with me to the end of verse 9.

For all the people wept as they heard the words of the law. Now, presumably, there were tens of thousands of people that had gathered before the water gate.

[14:10] And they're all brought to tears and made to mourn through the word of God, being clearly read from and taught from. That's how powerful God's word is when it's unleashed.

Now, I think it would be wrong for us to read this and to start shaming ourselves for not bursting into tears every Sunday as we meet together. That would be a wrong application. This was a significant moment in the Old Testament.

But I think it's worth stopping to reflect and remind ourselves of the power of God's word. When it's read and applied, this is the effect it can have.

Let's not limit it and let's not feel like we have to compensate for it in any way. Simply reading and teaching the word can bring tens of thousands of fully grown men to tears.

That's what's possible when proclaiming God's word. We can so quickly domesticate it. We can so quickly limit our expectations.

[15:22] But brothers and sisters, let's be confident of this. If God so pleased, through the preaching of his word, he could bring all of the today to tears.

He could move the masses. He could fill the churches. The word of God is that powerful. Just because we aren't seen it doesn't mean it's lost its power or effect.

Let's not give any space, any space to those lies that can start to creep in and take root. Now, a helpful question you might start to wonder is, what about God's word was it that caused the people to mourn?

I mean, what section was Ezra reading from? Well, we know that it was from the words of the law, in other words, the Old Testament. But what kind of things would they have been reading that would have caused this effect?

Well, if you want a summary of the whole story of the Old Testament up to this point, just read chapter 9. There, it's all summed up. But in short, they were hearing all about God's faithfulness and their unfaithfulness.

[16:48] The people were coming face to face with who they were. A people who'd forsaken their God, the God who had treasured them, the God who had protected them.

They'd abandoned him, and their sins were many. Now, knowing this is what makes the words of Nehemiah and Ezra so surprising in verses 9 and 10.

Look down with me to them. Verse 9, And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people, said to all the people, This day is holy to the Lord your God, do not mourn or weep.

Verse 10, Go on your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready. For this day is holy to our Lord, and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

What's going on here? The people come to Ezra with sackcloth and ashes in hand, and Ezra says, No, no, not today.

[18:02] Here, have the best of meat and the sweetest of wine instead. But Ezra, here are people who've just come face to face with their sins.

They've looked back at their past and seen all the ways their people have failed God. Ezra, it's right they mourn. Ezra, let them sit in it for a while. And Ezra, in God's word, says, No, not today.

It's not the occasion for sorrow and grief. Today's an occasion for feasting, thanksgiving, and joy. So save the tears for later.

Now, that term, holy to the Lord, what is it referring to? Why is today holy? Well, if you look back with me to the end of verse 2, we are told what day the people gathered on.

End of verse 2, the first day of the seventh month. And Leviticus chapter 23 tells us that that day was to be the feast of trumpets.

- [19:17] The feast of trumpets was one of the seven main feasts that the Lord had commanded Israel to keep. Now, admittedly, a feast we're not told that much about. But that was presumably meant to be a day of celebration and thanksgiving.

So, in accordance with God's word, Ezra tells the people to feast and give thanks, not mourn and wail. And look at verse 12. And all the people went on their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

If you're not a Christian here this morning or you're just starting to learn more about the God of the Bible, I hope this little section throws a spanner in the works for how you normally think of God.

Because, let's be honest, you ask most people what they think of God and they'll describe some tyrant in the sky that just wants his people to be miserable all the time.

What do most people think their Christian life is all about? Well, it's about being miserable. The more miserable you are, the more holy you are and the happier God is.

- [20:38] But friends, that's such an evil and distorted picture of God. It's a lie. Here we see God through his word give to a completely undeserving people the best of meat and the sweetest of wine to go share and enjoy.

The people don't deserve to feast. They don't deserve to be joyful. They don't deserve to go away with smiles. Yet that's what God's word gives them reason to do.

God's word says, go and enjoy what you don't deserve because that's everything I've been wanting to give you all this time. That's the God of the Bible.

One unbelievably generous. Not wanting to kill your joy but give you reason for it. He's the God of feasts that he throws for the undeserving.

So stop thinking God's some miserable tyrant in the sky. Stop believing that lie. And instead come to the God of the Bible who wants to give you what you don't deserve.

- [22:00] I mean, that's the whole message of the gospel. The gospel is the free offer to sinners that says, come and receive everything you don't deserve.

The feast has been paid for. You see, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, God came down to take the misery you deserve away from you.

Christ died under God's frown so you could live under God's smile. Christ heard the words, the Lord curse and forsake you.

The Lord turn his face away from you and condemn you. The Lord pour out his just wrath upon you and give you hell so you never have to.

And now risen and reigning in heaven, he calls through his word to all the undeserving to come. Come, receive the forgiveness of every one of your sins.

- [23:12] Come, enjoy peace and friendship with God. Come, claim your seat in the banqueting hall of heaven for all eternity. but I don't deserve it.

Exactly. That's what makes it such good news. So if you're not a Christian here this morning, what are you waiting for?

Run to Jesus. Come, receive everything you don't deserve because it's everything he wants to give you.

but now finally, as we turn to the last section of our passage this morning, verses 13 to 18, where we see a renewed people seeking to submit themselves to God's word.

It's now the second day of the seventh month, and in this section the people of God come to the realization that in just 13 days, they are to celebrate the Feast of Booths.

- [24:25] Now, this feast was to be a celebration. It was designed to make the people of God remember their deliverance from Egypt while also reminding them of God's provision as they journeyed through the wilderness.

wilderness. And just as the people of Israel back in Moses' day wandered through the wilderness in handmade shelters, the people in Nehemiah's day were to celebrate the feast in them too.

Verse 16, so the people went out and brought them and made booze for themselves, each on his roof and in their courts. Here, we see the people are now once again celebrating the festival as God had always intended them to.

Something that was missing has been put right and the people are now living more in accordance with God's word. And what does that lead to?

Well, just look down with me to verse 17. And all the assembly of those who return from captivity made booze and lived in the booze.

- [25:36] From the days of Jeshua the son of Nun till that day, the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. You see, here we see the result of a people collectively seeking to live their lives in submission to God's word.

There was great rejoicing. joy. Amongst a people centered around God's word, seeking to submit themselves to it, there should be great joy.

Now, for us here today, seeking to submit ourselves to God's word won't look like us celebrating the feast of booze. With the coming of Christ, that has been fulfilled.

But it will look like us seeking to submit ourselves to his moral law that's summarized in the Ten Commandments and reflected and unpacked in Christ's teaching.

Seeking to be those who want to grow in our love for God, in our love for our neighbor, all in complete dependence upon the Spirit.

- [26:51] God's word. You see, a church family, who looks to take God's word seriously and seeks to follow it and be shaped by it, won't be and shouldn't be a place of coldness.

It should and will be a place of genuine joy as we taste the goodness of doing life God's way. I don't know about you, but the lie the devil always seems to fool me with is the lie that God is trying to keep something good from me.

That God's commands lead me away from the path of joy to the path of mere miserable duty. It's amazing I still get surprised when following God's word leads me to say, man, I wish I did that sooner.

It would have saved me so much hurt. Brothers and sisters, I wonder if like me, you just need to be reminded again that God's commands are good for you.

Yes, they show you how you ought to live, but they also show you the best way to live. God only commands what's good for you.

- [28:17] Let me say that again to make sure we all hear. God only commands what's good for you. You see, delight and duty go hand in hand in the commandments of God.

They're like railway tracks joined side by side so what God has joined together, let no one separate. So often, we can imagine God as some strict father who's trying to take the sweet lollipop out of our hand and replace it with a piece of celery.

God is but no, he's a loving father calling us to hand over the razor blade. He's calling us to let go of what's deforming us, to lead us in ways of sweet righteousness.

goodness. So, dare you be excited? Dare we all be excited of what joys will await us as we seek to live more in accordance with God's word?

It's good for us. It really is. It leads us on the path to where true joy is to be found. So, in closing, let's pray God will continue to make us a people hungry for, moved by, and submissive to his word.

[29 : 58] It's how he renews us into everything he wants us to be. Let's close now in prayer. Let's pray. Father, thank you for your word.

Thank you that through it you are gradually renewing us and maturing us. Would you please give us a hunger for it once again? Would you please deepen our confidence in it?

Father, make us a people with a growing desire to gather to hear it clearly read and taught. Lord, ensure that's at the center of all we do here. I pray for those gathered amongst us or listening online that do not yet know you.

Would your grace draw them like a moth to a flame? And would they come to Jesus to claim everything they do not deserve? Father, I pray for us all that we would all be growing to see you as you truly are, abundantly generous and wonderfully kind.

Take away our mistrust and suspicion of you. Take away the lies we are so quickly fooled by. Show us more and more of your goodness and would that cause us to hunger for your ways once again?

[31 : 25] May we want to follow where your word leads us. So now, Lord, as we sing to you once again, cause our hearts and minds to be warm towards you.

Encourage and strengthen us through the truths we are about to sing, all for your glory and our good. Amen.