

Nehemiah 8 – Are we really committed to God’s Word? Clint Le Page
CPS – Desire to read God’s word, teach it, have it affect you and change you.

Back in July, a team of people from other Presy churches went to Malawi, in Africa, one of the poorest countries in the world.

And having fundraised they went to teach God’s word, proclaim the Gospel, and hand out over 8,000 Bibles in the local language.

People actually walked for hours to come to the church, to line up in a long queue to get a bible – their first hard copy bible. **(SLIDE)**

John Wilson, lecturer at our Presy Theological College said,

The distribution of Bibles to those too poor to own a book, brings smiles to faces, warmth to hearts and changed lives.

One thing the short-term mission team did, was teach a method of bible study, looking at Context, Observation, Meaning, Application (COMA), so people could understand the bible for themselves.-----

This church **(SLIDE)** doesn’t even have walls.

Some sit on BYO plastic chairs, others on the floor.

John said, we were blessed by witnessing this congregation’s warm devotion to God, their obvious love of the Gospel of Christ, and commitment to taking the good news to those outside Christian faith.

They have none of this world’s goods. Many don’t even have a bible of their own, yet they love God, by loving and listening to his word.-----

I was humbled, encouraged, and challenged by this.-----

Maybe it highlights our lack of dedication to reading God’s word?

Our failure to listen carefully, really engage with it, and read & study the Bibles we do have?

Maybe our passage today reveals our lack of passion for obeying God’s word?-----

I think we can all make progress in these things.-----

If you’ve just joined us, we’re in this series through the 5th Century BC book of Nehemiah. After today we’ll have a break from Nehemiah, for Christmas and some of Luke’s Gospel, then return in January.-----

The context of Neh 8 is, many Jews from Judah had returned from exile in Babylon.

The temple in Jerusalem has been rebuilt.

Under Nehemiah, the governor’s leadership, the wall around the city has been rebuilt.

This was not primarily about defence, but reconstructing God’s people in God’s city.

The temple worship has been established, and the people have settled in their towns, ch7 v73.

Now, with the physical rebuild done, the focus turns to the spiritual rebuild.

In chapter 7 last week, we saw that Neh wanted people in the city, particularly all who had put their faith in God’s word and God’s promises.

Now we see God’s people hungry for God’s word.

Which brings us to **my first of two points, Hearing and Understanding.**

In vv1-12 the Word of God is read and taught, heard and understood.-----

Notice in **v1**, the people of their own initiative gather together.

It’s the Jewish New Year’s Day.

Now **Ezra 7v10**, said Ezra the priest was determined to study God’s law, obey it and teach it.

So in Neh 8 they ask Ezra, to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, that’s Gen to Deut.

But here at least Leviticus & Deut is read.

And **vv4-8** give more details about what this involved.-----

A high platform is built for the 10’s of thousands of people to see and hear Ezra, and his 13 assisting priests.-----

Picture a huge outdoor church service, **(SLIDE)** like at a Billy Graham Crusade 50 yrs ago, but without the amplification.-----

So Ezra is asked to read God's Word, and in **v3**, how long does this Bible reading & bible study go for?----

Daybreak to midday, that's 6 hrs.

Imagine that? A 6-hour Bible reading? A 6-hour church service?-----

Even without printed transcripts.-----

I wonder if some of us complain or grumble if our sermon or service goes too long?----

Yet look at the end of **v3**, 'all the people listened attentively'. For 6 hours.-----

Now I know in an oral culture, people would be better at listening.

And I recall in **Acts 20** (v7-9) the apostle Paul preached 'on and on', after dinner, and until midnight. **(SLIDE)**

Remember poor Eutychus fell asleep, and fell out the 3rd story window, and died.

Paul raised him from the dead.

But if you go to sleep in a sermon, thank God that there aren't such consequences 😊

But I hope the Jews give us encouragement to stay awake, stay attentive, and not wander off mentally, when God's word is read and taught here.

Maybe taking notes could help you stay engaged?-----

Now we are in a different time and place; and we're not an oral culture, that helps us to remember so much of what we hear.

But they hunger for God's word

Do we long for the word like this?---- Do we?-----

Where we read or listen to it, with desire and effort and engagement?-----

For me personally, what led me to the Presbyterian church, was their commitment to teach the Bible, believe the Bible, and love God by loving his word.

Cos it's more precious than gold (**SLIDE-Psalm 19.10**).-----

But also as individual Christians, whatever our age, don't stop listening to God's word with your full attention.-----

Because as we'll think more shortly, here are the words of eternal life.

Here the God of the universe speaks to us.-----

Here we know the God who made us.

Here we know the way to salvation by faith in Jesus.

Here we know how to live God's way, live the best life, the most fulfilling life.(Jn 10.10)

What step do you need to take, what change do you need to make to hear more of God's word?-----

Maybe it's recommitting to your daily 10 min or 30 min quiet time, or listening to the bible as you travel, or before you watch something else?-----

Maybe it's praying you will long for and desire it, cos you don't now-----

Or maybe, an application for you, is supporting and partnering with those who translate God's word, and help people have it and read it.

Those who serve with Wycliffe, like Bruce and Kathy, Sebastian and Betty, or Joshua and Christina at 11am.

All of them are worthy of your partnership and our prayers.-----

But even in this huge gathering in Nehemiah 8, it wasn't enough that the word of God was read, it needed to be **understood**.

It needed to be explained, so the people could understand it. **(SLIDE)**

v8 tells us the Levites are like modern-day preachers, teachers and Bible study leaders.

This was a like, city-wide Jerusalem Bible study meetings.

These teachers explain the Word of God, giving the meaning, the interpretation, so that the people could understand what was being read.'-----

You see it's not enough for any of us to know what the Bible says, if we don't understand what it means, it's not going to save and transform us.

Reading alone is insufficient.-----

How can you grow in your understanding of God's word?-----

Maybe it's by joining, attending, or really engaging with, your growth group?

Or by offering to lead a study – for you always learn more that way.-----
 Maybe you have capacity to read a Christian book even 2 chapters, one night a week?
 Borrow one from our church library for free.
 Maybe you could study a subject at bible college, or put up your hand for training at Bundy?-

John Calvin in the 16th century said that to merely listen is to be like a **warrior**, whose splendid but unused armour, is hung up, and allowed to go rusty.-----**(SLIDE)**
 Christian preaching & teaching must be eagerly received and constantly applied.
 In thinking about, personalising and applying what we read, we put the armour on.----
 We must allow the message to be enclosed in our minds and 'deeply fixed in our own heart'.-----
 Pray for that, for God to do that.-----

One more comment before we come to our next point – thinking about who was present in Neh 8 for this 6 hour, and every day for 7 days bible readings?
v2 and v3 say the congregation is made up of men, women, and all who could '**understand**'.
 This might relate to those who speak the language, but it's also teaching us that the younger children weren't expected to be there, stay still n' listen for hours.
 This is one of the bible passages that gives a basis for having age-appropriate education.**(SLIDE)**
 It's why we have Sunday School teaching for the younger children – with the Word of God taught and explained in a way they can understand.
 Now **parents** especially have the responsibility to teach their children
Deut 4:9 says,**(SLIDE)**
 The things you know and have seen, "Teach them to your children and your grandchildren."
 And **Deut 11.19**,
¹⁸ "Imprint these words of mine on your hearts and minds,... ¹⁹ Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit", walk, lie down and get up.(&Eph 6.4)
 I pray that all the parents and grandparents at Bundy will teach their children the word of God.
 But know that **as a church** we remain committed to partnering with parents in age-appropriate teaching.
 It's why we have Sunday School, for pre-school and primary, and Sunday Youth & Youth Group.
 We want young people of all ages to hear, understand, and know how God's word relates to them; to you.-----
 So if you're investing time, even months and years, in teaching children or Youth, it's a worthwhile investment and cause.-----
 Please consider that, and please pray for those who serve with their gifts in that way.

However, God's word isn't just to be heard and be understood, its goal is changed & transformed lives, so we trust and obey it.-----

Point 2, is Responding, to God's word.(SLIDE)

The people gather, and respond to the Book of the Law being opened in **v5-6**, by standing. A sign of their respect and readiness.
 Then when Ezra praises God, the people say 'Amen, Amen'.
 But notice they do more than that.
 They **lift up their hands**, then they kneel low, and bow down with their faces to the ground in worship.
 Now we are not prescriptively commanded to respond to God's with certain bodily actions. But see how they respond with words and bodies – hearts, mouths, and movement.
 How does God want you to display and express what's going on in your heart?----
 Even as presbyterians, we don't need to fear showing emotion.-----

After having heard and understood God's word, in **v9 the people weep**.

Now we're not told why they were weeping.

Were they grieving that the past exile and judgement could have been avoided, if they'd trusted and obeyed God.

Were they grieving that they'd not been obeying God's commands?

And grieving their own sins and shortfalls?-----

As **James 1 says,(SLIDE,v22)** being hearers and not doers of the word, doesn't cut it.

When we read the Bible it does reveal our failures

God's word exposes our sin, doesn't it?-----

It's like you're a 5 year old, and you go out and play in the **mud.(SLIDE)**

Then you come inside, but you don't realise how muddy you are, and how you're spreading filth everywhere, 'til you look in the mirror.

The Bible is like a mirror held up to us.

It shows us who we really are, and what we're really like.-----

It helps us see how much we need grace and forgiveness, and a Saviour.-----

And grief, a godly grief that leads to repentance is appropriate.(2Cor 7.10)

But surprisingly, in Neh 8v9, this day is not a day for weeping.

Ezra, Nehemiah and the Levite teachers say, It's a holy day, a set apart and special day, a day of joy.

From "**holy day**", we get the word, 'holiday'.(SLIDE)

The first day of the 7th month was actually when the Feast of Trumpets was meant to be celebrated – it was a festival day.(Lev 23.23-25, 33-43)

- Eat rich festival food, literally, 'the fat', drink sweet drinks, and make sure everyone can enjoy the celebration.

And they were to share and make sure none of the poor missed out.-----

I wonder if we have such a sharing, generous-to-others attitude, at Christmas?-----

The main point is, instead of grieving they are to rejoice.

'Because **the joy of the Lord is your strength**', v10.(SLIDE)-----

And for Christians, we too are to rejoice. We have even more reason to rejoice.-----

Do you remember, how 450 after Nehemiah, an angel of the Lord, appeared in shining glory before some shepherds out in a field near Bethlehem.

And the angel said,(SLIDE) 'Don't be afraid, I bring you **good news of great joy** that will be for all the people'.

Today in the town of David, a Saviour has been born to you, the Messiah, the Lord.

The Lord **Jesus**.

Jesus, the Lord and Saviour, his birth, was good news of great joy, for everyone.-----

At our Christmas holy-day, we remember and celebrate the Son of God coming into the world to save sinners.-

And at our Easter holy-days we rejoice in the life Jesus Christ gave up for us; and the life He has obtained for us, in God's glorious and wonderful presence.-----

For all who trust in him.-----

More than those 5th century BC Jews, we remember Jesus and his salvation, and we should rejoice, with tremendous joy.-----

So this Christmas holy-day enjoy and celebrate with family or friends, eat special food and drinks, send gifts to others, especially those in need. And rejoice in Jesus.-----

Because of Christ, our weeping over sin and failures, can turn to joy.-----

Has yours?-----

It is right to grieve over our sin which God's word convicts us of.

But if you've realised how wonderful a Saviour Christ is, and you trust in him for forgiveness and life;--- then brother, sister, you can rejoice.

We can rejoice.-----

In v12 the Jews had a great celebration, or great joy and gladness, for they understood God's word.

We can have more joy than these Jews, because Christ has come.

We have God's word in our own language.

We've understood the Gospel Message in it.

God has come, the word-become-flesh, and Jesus has revealed God more fully, and enabled us to be forgiven, adopted into God's family, with a glorious future awaiting..-----

So let's Rejoice.-----

There are so many in our city, maybe many of you, who are needing joy today.

People in the darkness of depression, anxiety, hopelessness, pain.-----

Remember that in Jesus there is joy.-----

Because this joy of the Lord, will give you strength.-----

Coming back to Neh 8 and the final section in **vv13-18**, we see the people not only **rejoicing but obeying**.

After the 7-day festival with Bible reading every day, the temple and community leaders all gather together for Bible study.

And they are reminded about the Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths/ Shelters.(**SLIDE**)

They learn from **Lev 23** (v33-43) that they ought to build tents, temporary shelters, out of branches.

In this way they remembered the wilderness wandering, they remembered God's provision for them, also thank God for the harvest.-----

This was another time for joy-filled thankfulness.-----

In **v16**, the people build their branch-shelters and lived in them.

Since the days of Joshua after the Exodus, 'the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And there was tremendous joy.'-----

They heard the word, and then obeyed it.

And even those who didn't like camping, ☺ they too, went camping for a week.

They heard the Bible every day, and their joy was very great.

They found **joy in obeying God's word**.-----

How are you going with that?-----

See how this is not a begrudging, guilt-motivated, forced-into-it obedience.

It's joyful obedience.

The trust that God's word is for their good.

They remember and celebrate God's past goodness and grace.

They rejoice in God's provision and blessings.

They know that God's way is the best way to live.-----

Now it won't last and the people will disobey.

Because as **Romans 8** teaches us,(**SLIDE**) it's only in Christ and by the power of the Spirit, that we can put sin to death and live God's way.(vv1-4)

We need to be connected to Christ.

That's exactly what Jesus said in **John 15**.

He said,(**SLIDE**) I am the vine and you are the branches.(Jn.15.5)

Yet how do we remain in Jesus and bear fruit?-----

By having his words remain in us – v7.

And **Jn 15.10**, we remain in his love as we 'keep his commands'.(**SLIDE**)

Particularly loving one another (v12,17).-----

To be clear, we're not saved by what we do, but because of what Jesus has DONE.

But true faith shows itself in doing what Jesus; in love.-----

And **v11**,(**SLIDE**) ¹¹“I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.”

As we obey our Lord Jesus' words, it's actually for our good, and our joy.-----

The word of God isn't to ruin our fun, it's to enrich our lives, and gives us real joy, a joy that lasts, yet a taste of the ultimate joy to come in heaven.-----

As God's people in Neh 8.18 heard God's word every day, we will be blessed if we hear God's word every day, even in snippets.-----

Neh 8 tells us that Reading, teaching, hearing, understanding and obeying God's word is to be central to our lives.

Central to our lives as individuals, and as a church.

For us, God's word how we see and enjoy Christ, and his salvation.

In him, and in obeying him there is joy.-----

I close with this true story.

John loves to study the Bible. Although he has never attended Bible college , he knows the Scriptures more thoroughly than many pastors. Over 40 yrs ago John committed his leisure time to meticulous Bible study. Today, his pastor Mark, enjoys talking with him about the meaning of specific passages because it helps Mark see God's truth in new ways. John studies the Bible, not out of a sense of guilt or duty, but out of sheer love.

Maybe years ago, you devoured God's word, and eagerly studied, but now you've grown increasingly unconcerned and unexcited about God's truth.

So Bible study to more of a bore and a chore, than a delight.

Let's learn from the Jews of Neh 8.

Remember how blessed we are to hear God's word in our language and be able to understand it.

And let it move you, affect you and change you, as you find JOY in the Lord Jesus, and in living his way.

Let's pray.