

Nehemiah 8

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 January 2006

Preacher: James Abernethy

[0 : 0 0] Gathered round Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the law. They found written in the law which the Lord had commanded through Moses that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month 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 booths as it is written.

So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs in the 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.

The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua, son of Nun, until that day the Israelites had not celebrated it like this and their joy was very great.

Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the book of the law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

[1 : 3 1] Amen. And may God bless to our hearts that reading from his own precious and inspired word. Let us again unite our hearts together in prayer.

Our heavenly Father, we do acknowledge that every good and perfect gift comes from your hand. And we thank you this morning for the gift of health and strength, for soundness of body and of mind, for the provision of our food and clothing, for the safety and security which our homes provide for us, and for the love and friendship of those who are our own kith and kin, and of our wider circle of friends and acquaintances.

O God, we often take those things for granted, and yet upon reflection, we acknowledge our dependence upon you for all that we are and for all that we have, and indeed for all that we ever hope to be.

Above all, this morning, we thank you for the spiritual privileges and blessings that have been made available to those who are your own people through Jesus Christ our Saviour, and through his death at the cross on Calvary, and through his glorious rising again.

And our heavenly Father, as we think of those things and give thanks for those things this morning, we would not be unmindful of those who are less privileged than ourselves.

[3 : 0 5] We remember before you those who are sick, either at home or in hospital. And we pray that it might please you to draw near to them and to grant them to know your comfort and the consolation of your presence.

We ask, O God, that you will bless the doctors and nurses and members of hospital staff who care for the needs of these individuals, and that, Lord, with your help they might rejoice in seeing many restored again to strength in these days in which we live.

We remember before you the downcast, for those, our God, whose spirits have sunk into the depth of despair. Lift them up, we pray.

Turn their eyes towards your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and enable them to put their trust and confidence in him. We remember all who are sad and lonely.

O Lord, whose lives have been turned upside down through the death of loved ones or friends in recent days. And we ask, O God, this morning that you will pour into their wounded spirits the oil of your joy in place of the ashes of mourning, drawn near as only you can, and speak words of comfort to their hearts.

[4 : 33] We remember the distressed, the troubled, those, O God, who labor under heavy burdens. O, enable them by grace to cast their care upon you in the knowledge that you care for them.

And, O Lord, we pray also for the aged this morning, for those who, because of their advanced years, are confined to their own homes, or who are requiring special care in nursing homes.

Lord, in the eventide years of their lives, when often they're feeling lonely and sad, and perhaps even neglected by others, O, may they find great comfort in the presence of one who has promised to all who trust him never to leave them nor to forsake them, but to be with them always.

Again, we bring our young people before you. And our Heavenly Father, we think of the pressures that have been brought to bear upon them, the temptations with which they are faced in these days.

And we ask, O God, that in your mercy you will draw near to many of them. We thank you for those who have the privilege of being brought up in a Christian home, who are exposed to Christian teaching and a Christian influence.

[6 : 01] And we pray that you will help those parents who truly love the Lord Jesus to be faithful, instructing their young people in the ways of God.

Bless the ministry exercised by the church in this respect. And bless especially the ministry of the Sunday School here in this congregation and all who teach and all who attend.

We do ask, Lord, for your own people in this place. We pray that day by day you will strengthen them and encourage them and enable them to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ and help them, O God, to be as you have commanded them to be, light shining in the darkness, salt and influence both to be seen and to be felt for good and for God.

We remember the nation before you today. O God, we confess that as a nation we have turned our backs upon you, the living and the true God.

And we cry unto you for those in positions of power both in Westminster and in Edinburgh. Lord, we thank you that there are those of your own people within such places of authority and we ask that you will strengthen their witness and help them to take their stand and grant that many others of our politicians may have their eyes opened and that they may see the direction in which they are seeking to lead our nation.

[7 : 39] And, O God, have mercy upon us. You have reminded us that righteousness exalts a nation, but that sin is a reproach to any people.

Lord, look upon us in favor. Look upon us in your great mercy, we pray, and turn us again to you, the living and the true God.

And as we pray for the nation this morning, we pray for your church within the nation. Lord, in a day of great spiritual declension, we ask that it might please you, the sovereign God, to revive your cause.

O awakened souls, we pray, strengthen the faith and the testimony of those who are your own people. And grant, O Heavenly Father, that your church in this land of ours may once again become a force to be reckoned with.

An organization, Lord, that people will take notice of as she faithfully and fully proclaims the full counsel of God.

[8 : 48] O God, remember your work overseas too. We pray for our missionaries, some of them in difficult situations, some of them sadly discouraged in the work to which they feel called.

Lord, help them this morning, we pray. And remember those who are traveling great distances in order to share your work. Keep them safe, we pray.

Help them, encourage them, provide for them. And in these days, O God, may it please you to lay your hand upon others who will indeed be trained and in time sent forth to proclaim your word even unto the uttermost parts of the earth.

So, Lord, be with us. Be with us throughout the remainder of this your own day. Be with us as we come again in the evening to worship you and to wait upon you.

Lord, help us to go forward with our hand by faith in your hand, looking to you and trusting in your Son, our Saviour, to help us, to guide us, to strengthen us and to comfort us each step of the way.

[10 : 11] So, Lord, accept our thanks and be with us now as we turn for a little while to consider a portion of your precious work. O Lord, speak, we pray, in the stillness while we wait on you.

And hush our hearts to listen with a spirit of expectancy. And may the words that I shall utter, the words of my lips and the meditation of all of our hearts be truly acceptable in your sight, O Lord.

Hear us and forgive us. For Christ's sake. Amen. I want us to turn again to the eighth chapter of the book of Nehemiah and to read verses two and three.

Nehemiah chapter eight and at verse two. 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.

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.

[11 : 30] And all the people listened attentively to the book of the law. The apostle Paul believed implicitly in the inspiration and authority of the scriptures.

In writing to Timothy, his son in the faith, he reminded him of the great heritage that had been his in the fact that he had known the scriptures from his earliest days.

From infancy, said the apostle, you have known the holy scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

From infancy, you have known the holy scriptures. Now, I have no doubt whatsoever that this is also true of some of you in this congregation this morning.

But sadly, the number of people who have the heritage of a Christian upbringing and who have exposure to the teaching and preaching of the word of God is becoming increasingly less.

[12 : 47] people are simply not attending church as they once did. And while this is true of the older generation, it is also sadly true of the younger generation too.

And so people are not being exposed as they once were to the teaching and preaching and even the reading of God's precious word.

I will remember as a child in school how every morning a portion of God's word was read before the lessons began.

There is a great lack even amongst those who are God's people. A lack of hunger for the word of God.

And we find, I find, as a preacher, as I travel around the country, I find that there seems to be a desire for people to be entertained rather than to sit under the solid, sound instruction of the word of God.

[14 : 01] People don't want solid, biblical exposition today. And as a church or the church in Scotland and as individual Christians, we are suffering greatly because of this.

The word of God, you see, is essential for the spiritual vitality of the individual. And it is also essential for the spiritual vitality of the community of those who are the Lord's people.

Now, the eighth chapter of the book of Nehemiah, part of which we have already read, illustrates for us, I believe, that the word of God is something that is central to the building up of those who are the people of God.

Let me suggest, first of all, that the community of God's people needs proper exposure to God's word. From the narrative before us, we learn that crowds of people had gathered near the water gate in the capital city of Jerusalem.

The crowd surrounded a raised wooden platform which was located in the center of the open square. Ezra the priest and the scribe, we are told, mounted this wooden platform and he did so in order to read the word of God to those who were gathered around the base of the platform.

[15 : 40] He was flanked by six men on his right and seven men on his left and these men were available to assist Ezra in the reading of the scriptures.

Now, we may well ask ourselves, what was it that prompted this particular action to be taken at this time? What was it that prompted Ezra the priest to stand up in a public place and to read from the word of God?

And what was it that prompted the people to gather around the platform and to listen to the reading of God's word?

Well, I might suggest that one factor was a sense of spiritual hunger. A sense of spiritual hunger that appeared to have gripped the people and roused them to request such a reading after a lapse, sadly, of many years.

It was something that had been neglected in the past and now the people were becoming aware of this. They were becoming aware of the fact of how important it ought to have been to them.

[16 : 59] And a hunger within their hearts desired or caused them to desire this public reading of the word of God.

But in addition to that, it was something that had been commanded as part of the assembly that was to be held during the Feast of Tabernacles each year.

It was something that was traditional in a sense. A practice that had been carried on for generations past, but a practice that sadly had become neglected.

The people for so long had neglected to attend upon the public reading of the word of God. And so, these are two suggestions as to why the people requested and desired this public reading at this particular time.

Well, what was their reaction as Ezra and those who assisted him read God's word? How did the people react to such a thing?

[18 : 09] Well, first of all, we learn here that they listened with attentiveness. even though this was no mere two-minute reading of God's word.

According to verse 3 there, we're told, he read it aloud from daybreak till noon and all the people listened attentively.

So, we're not talking about a very quick reading of God's word. We're talking of the reading of God's word during a period of several hours and as the word was being read, the people listened attentively to it.

Their minds didn't seem to be wandering. Secondly, we learn that they listened with reverence and they did this in recognition of the fact that it was not simply Ezra who was reading but rather it was God who was speaking to them through his servant Ezra as he read to them from the word of God.

And this inner reverence on the part of the people was indicated by their outward gestures. We're told there that they stood for the duration of the reading.

[19 : 35] They stood for several hours as the word of God was being read in reverence. Not just to the word of God but also I believe to the God of the word.

And not only did they stand during the duration of the reading of God's word but we learn here also that they raised their hands chanting Amen, Amen.

And they prostrated themselves on the ground. Now let me say this, we cannot use this particular text to legislate a posture for today's assemblies.

Nor can we forget, I believe, that outward gestures do not always indicate the true state of the heart. That's something that we should bear in mind.

But I'm simply pointing out that what these people felt on the inside, the reverence that they felt on the inside as they listened to the reading of the word of God, they clearly showed by their outward gestures as well.

[20 : 55] They listened with reverence, they listened with attentiveness, and thirdly, they listened with understanding. Verse 3 reminds us that the assembly included not only men and women, but also others who could understand.

Now who are those others who could understand? Surely the implication is that the children were present there in that particular assembly as long as they were old enough to comprehend what was happening.

I feel it's important for the children to be exposed to the teaching of the word of God. God. I know that our practice today somehow or another discourages our children remaining in church for the entire service.

We seem to separate them. We take them away to Sunday school and we instruct them there, but there's a lot to be said for exposing our children to the teaching of the word of God.

It's good for them to hear the sermon, I believe. And certainly it's something that as a denomination I feel we ought to be looking at today.

[22 : 18] We lament the fact that we're losing our children, we're not holding on to our children. Maybe part of the reason is that they're not receiving the teaching of the word of God that perhaps they should.

It's something to bear in mind, it's something to think about. I'm not decrying or putting down the Sunday school, that's a very important part of the life of the church.

It's important for our children that they be instructed in this way. But I feel that it's also important that at least from time to time they be exposed to the teaching and preaching of the word of God.

You'll often hear parents say, at least I hear them saying today, well you know, I simply cannot consider bringing my children out at night because the service is so late and they've got school the next day.

Ah yes, but when it comes to some extracurricular activity in the evening, somehow the children are able to go along there. Well here the children were exposed to the public reading of the word of God.

[23 : 29] They listened with understanding. And of course to aid the people's understanding. The reading of the scripture was supplemented with exposition.

The Levites instructed, we are told, the people in the law. They read from the book of the law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

So here we have Ezra standing up on this raised wooden platform. surrounded by the people there in the city of Jerusalem with a hunger in their hearts to hear the word of God.

They listened attentively. They listened reverently. And that was important. And what about their response?

how did they respond as the word of God was read to them on that particular occasion? Well, according to verse 9 here, they responded with conviction and weeping.

[24 : 49] They shed tears. They shed tears because, you see, the word of God was serving as a mirror which reflected their failures to measure up to God's expectations.

There's a story told of a missionary who went out to preach and teach an obscure tribe somewhere in the jungle.

And in preparation for his trip, he put together a few trinkets that he thought he would give to the native people in order just to break down any barriers that there might be between them.

And on arriving and being introduced especially to the chief of the particular tribe to which he had gone, he took out of his bag a little hand mirror, the kind of mirror that a lady might carry in her purse, and he handed it to the chief, and the chief took the mirror, and he looked into the mirror, and apparently he became very, very angry, and he threw the mirror to the ground, and he stood on it, smashing it to smithereens.

You see, his reaction was indeed prompted by what he saw in the mirror. He saw his own face in the mirror, and he didn't like what he saw, and the solution was simply to destroy the mirror.

[26 : 28] My friends, I use that as an illustration of the way in which some people today treat God's word. They read God's word, they look into God's word, they listen to the exposition of God's word, and they don't like what God's word has to tell them about themselves, and so in anger, they close the Bible, and they refuse to read any further.

Or they may say, well, I don't like that preacher, I don't like what that preacher is telling me about myself, and I'm certainly not going to go back to that church anymore.

There are people who are refusing to attend with regularity upon the preaching of God's word because they don't like what God's word is telling them about themselves, and about their sinful condition.

Ah, but listen, the word of God never lies. The word of God always tells the truth. The word of God always presents to us a true picture of the kind of people we are, not the kind of people that we may think we are, not the kind of people that others may think us to be, but the kind of people we are.

God's word reveals to you and to me ourselves as God sees us. And on this occasion of which we're reading as the servant of God read the word of God, as those who were responsible for the exposition of the word of God did their job, the people saw the depth of depravity within their own heart, they were made aware of their own sinfulness, and they responded with conviction and weeping.

[28 : 20] Someone has said that the word of God is not only designed to comfort the afflicted, but it is also designed to afflict the comfortable, and very often it does, and we must be prepared for that kind of thing.

It pricks the conscience, it makes the individual uneasy about sin. I wonder, can I pause here for a moment to ask you very simply, is that the kind of effect that the word of God has or is having upon your heart in these days?

As the word was read, as the word was expounded, the people were moved. They were moved to tears.

But that's not the only response. For we learn here from verses 10 to 12 that they responded with joy. 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.

I wonder, have you ever known that kind of joy, that kind of joy that comes through the reading of God's word, when we receive some word from the Lord, that brings great encouragement and comfort to our troubled hearts?

[29 : 59] Yes, it's true that the word of God does afflict the comfortable. It's true that the word of God does convict us or cause us to be convicted about the state of our individual hearts.

But you know, the same word that can prick the conscience can also act as a salve to the conscience too. God's word is the instrument that God uses, or rather the Holy Spirit uses in convincing us of the true state of our human nature.

When you and I are feeling a little unwell, we normally go along to the doctor, and we sit there in the doctor's surgery, and we pour out our complaint into, well, what we hope is a sympathetic ear.

The doctor listens to what we're saying. And then he carries out an examination of his patient, using various instruments, the stethoscope and other instruments, the thermometer and so on.

And having carried out that examination, he normally then goes on to diagnose the disease, to tell us what, in his opinion, and according to his examination, is wrong with us.

[31 : 36] And then he prescribes the cure. Now, my friends, God has a divine physician, the Holy Spirit.

And part of the Holy Spirit's ministry is to convict or to convince the individual that he or she is spiritually sick.

and the instrument that is generally used by the Holy Spirit is the Word of God. Not saying exclusively, but generally it is the Word of God that is used as the instrument in the hands of the Holy Spirit to convince us, as our shorter catechism puts it, of our sin and misery.

But that's not the end of the story, and it's certainly not the end of the process. Through the Word of God, through the faithful preaching and teaching and exposition of the Word of God, the Holy Spirit shows us the true state of our hearts.

But he doesn't leave it there. No more than the doctor simply carries out the examination and then informs the patient, well, I think you've got her, I think you've got her.

[33 : 04] He does go on to prescribe the cure. And the Holy Spirit, having convinced us of our sin and misery, we're told, then goes on to enlighten our minds in the knowledge of Christ.

And what does he use? He uses the instrumentality of God's Word. So the same Word that reveals the sinful condition of the human heart goes on to reveal the cure, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so, my friends, while it's true that the reading of God's Word, exposure to the teaching of God's Word, can convict us, can make us feel miserable, as we are made aware of our sin, the same Word of God can bring great joy to our hearts as the Holy Spirit uses it to point us to Jesus Christ, the one who is able to save and to save to the uttermost all who come.

and to God through him. Now, these people obviously were convicted through the reading of the Word of God, but the reading of the Word of God also brought great joy to their hearts as well.

And as we look into God's Word, as we study God's Word, as we learn from God's Word, as we have revealed to us from God's Word the provision that God has made for us in our sinful fallen state, all my friends, what joy it ought to bring to our troubled hearts.

[35 : 00] The glorious message of the Gospel, there is a cure, there is a remedy for all of mankind's ills, and that remedy is to be found in none other than God's Son, our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ. So the people responded with weeping, and they responded with joy, and thirdly, they responded with obedience.

Now the ceremonial law at that time required the regular observance of the Feast of Tabernacles during the seventh month. God's people were instructed to construct wooden booths in which they would live for seven days to commemorate their deliverance from the land of Egypt.

This was a command, a God-given command, but the people had neglected to obey this command for such a long time. But now, under the public reading of God's word, under the exposition of God's word, they were brought immediately to respond obediently to what God was commanding them to do.

And they corrected their long-standing neglect in respect to this particular matter. Going back to our shorter catechism, the work of effectual calling, the Holy Spirit convinces us of our sin and misery.

[36 : 40] He enlightens our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and then he does something else. He renews our wills, thus persuading and enabling us to embrace Jesus Christ, who is freely offered to us in the gospel.

There, you see, is a positive response to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, as it were, in convicting and convincing of the way of salvation, through Jesus Christ.

James emphasizes the importance of not simply being content to be hearers of God's word, but to be doers also. What a blessing to be exposed with regularity to the teaching and preaching of God's word.

What a blessing, my friends, when God speaks to us through his word, when God reveals to us Christ as the answer to all our spiritual ills, but we simply cannot leave it there.

For God looks for a response, my friends. God looks for obedience on your part and mine. Oh, that the Holy Spirit might indeed renew our will.

[38 : 03] Oh, that the Holy Spirit might enable us in obedience to embrace Jesus Christ, the one who is freely offered to us in the gospel.

That was the effect, you see, that the preaching and teaching of the word of God had upon these people. It convicted them, yes, but it also brought great joy and comfort to their heart and it evoked a response of obedience.

And one final thought here, they responded, we are told also, with stimulated appetite. Not only did these people listen attentively to the reading of Scripture all morning on the first day of the month, but we're told they returned for more on the following day.

In fact, the chapter ends by reporting that day after day from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the book of the law of God.

Oh, can I ask you as I need, I need to ask my own heart this morning, how is your appetite? Have you a relish for spiritual things?

[39 : 26] Have you a hunger for the word of God? God? Oh, that God might indeed cause us once again, not just to take a delight in attending the public reading and exposition of his word, but that God might give unto us all an insatiable hunger.

man. Yes, the people of God need proper exposure to the word of God.

And the people of God need to exercise a proper response to the word of God. What we need today is more teaching and preaching.

we need to be much in prayer that God will create within all our hearts that hunger. And that through the ministry of God's word, he will again revive his people.

This was a revival, the Watergate revival, it has been referred to as. And very often when revival comes, when the Holy Spirit is at work in a community, his presence is evidenced by a desire on the heart of God's people to get into the teaching and attend the preaching of his word.

[41 : 07] Oh, how I as a pastor long to see those days come amongst us again. let's pray. Our heavenly father, we do indeed thank you for the wonderful way in which your word has been kept down through the generations of time in spite of those who have tried to discredit it and destroy it.

We thank you for the testimony of your servant, the psalmist of old, who could declare, oh, how I love your law. May his testimony be our testimony too.

Oh, our God, give us a hunger, we pray, to read your word, to listen to the exposition of your word, to learn from your word, and help us, our God, to be obedient to it.

Hear us in these our prayers and be with us as we sing our parting praise and all we ask is in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.

Let us conclude by singing together in part of Psalm 119. Psalm 119 139 and from verse 33 to the end of verse 40.

[42 : 32] The page is 402 in the psalmody. Teach me, O Lord, the perfect way of thy precepts divine, and to observe it to the end I shall my heart incline.

33 to 40 of Psalm 119 to God's praise. la B Tel v.

hear