

Renewal Through the Word

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Paul Brennan is going to be picking up a series from Nehemiah, and he'll be preaching to us from Nehemiah 8. We do have visitor Bibles available, so if you're sitting beside someone who is new or doesn't have a Bible, feel free to grab a copy for them so they can be following along.

If you're using one of our church Bibles, it's found on page 403. Nehemiah 8.

In the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the years of all people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose.

Beside him stood Metatiah, Shema, Aniah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseah on his right hand. And Pedaniah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashem, Hashbadanah, Zechariah, and Meshulam on his left hand.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people. And as he opened it, all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God.

[1 : 42] And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also, Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbathiah, Hodiah, Masaiah, Kelita, Azariah, Josabat, Hanan, Peliah, and the Levites helped the people to understand the law.

While the people remain in their places. They read from the book, from the law of God, clearly. And they gave the sense, so the people understood the reading.

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. For all the people wept as they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, Go your way, eat the fat and drink the 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. So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, Be quiet.

[2 : 59] For this day is holy. Do not be grieved. And all the people went 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.

On the second day, the heads of the fathers' houses, of all the people, of the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe, in order to study the words of the law.

And they found it written in the law, that the Lord had commanded by Moses, that the people of Israel should dwell in booths, during the feasts of the seven month, and that they should proclaim it, and publish it in all their towns, and in Jerusalem.

Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written. So the people went out and brought them, and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square of the water gate, and in the square at the gate of Ephraim.

And all the assembly of those who returned from captivity made booths, and leave the booths. For from the days of Jeshua, the son of Nun, to that day the people of Israel had not done so.

[4 : 14] And there was very great rejoicing. Day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the feasts seven days, and on the eighth day, there was a solemn assembly according to the rule.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Amen. Well, good morning, folks. My name is Paul Brennan. I'm one of the team here at the church, and good to be with you this morning.

Please turn to Nehemiah chapter 8 in your Bibles there, and we'll be thinking about this chapter together this morning. So Nehemiah 8.

Now, what, I wonder, do you think, is the greatest need in our world in general, but also for God's people, the church?

What is the greatest need? What is the most urgent priority, would you say? I think the books of Ezra and Nehemiah would tell us that the greatest need is spiritual renewal, total spiritual reformation.

[5 : 35] Those who do not know the Lord, those who are dead in their sin, need nothing more than spiritual renewal, so that they are made right with the God who made them for all eternity, in right relationship with them.

That's the greatest need, isn't it? But for those who have repented and believed, those who follow the Lord Jesus, those who are Christians, what do they need?

Well, the very same thing. They need spiritual renewal, always. We need constant renewal, because we are constantly drifting, aren't we? We need always to be spiritually renewed.

That is true today. It's true tomorrow. It's always been the case in the church, and it was true in Nehemiah's day, all those hundreds of years ago.

What God's people needed, more than anything else, was spiritual renewal. As we've seen over these recent months in Ezra and Nehemiah, there were great building projects to be undertaken.

[6 : 38] Rebuilding the temple, rebuilding the walls. That was all necessary, but it wasn't the goal. It wasn't the end point. Nehemiah's great goal was not just merely to rebuild some walls.

No, those rebuilding projects were undertaken to serve a much bigger building project, namely, the rebuilding of God's people.

The goal, the end point, the whole point, was to establish a community of faith which was alive and real, where the living God was rightly worshipped by God's people.

Those walls, they were necessary to provide protection for God's people, to give security. But what really mattered, the key thing, was the state of people's hearts.

Not the state of the walls, but actually, the reality of a living relationship with their God. That was the great goal. God's glory is the chief end of man, isn't it?

[7 : 45] God's glory and the right worship of him was the chief goal of Nehemiah's efforts. That's why he returned to Jerusalem. The wall was only the beginning. His chief concern wasn't the literal stones, but the living stones that would be contained within it.

The main thing, back then for Nehemiah, but also today, the main thing is the spiritual renewal of God's people. Living, vibrant faith.

And that is something that only God can do. And God does that. We see in these last chapters of Nehemiah, God does that through his word.

That is how God goes about renewing a dead people, those who have drifted. It's through his word. And that is why Nehemiah takes something of a back seat in these chapters.

He knows that what God's people need most is God's word. And he knows that the man for that job is not himself, but Ezra. Did you notice that was read earlier?

[8 : 57] Nehemiah is almost absent entirely. Ezra is all over this chapter. Eight references to Ezra. Nehemiah gets one. Clearly, Nehemiah is not in this for personal glory and attention, is he?

Remember the accusations leveled against him back in chapter 6? Remember that open letter that went around trying to bring him down? Nehemiah is in it for himself. He wants to build a little empire. He wants to be king, doesn't he?

Really? Well, read on in these chapters. Is that what Nehemiah is really about? Of course not. Look at what's actually going on rather than believing the slander.

Nehemiah is almost nowhere to be seen. Instead, he facilitates the thing that really matters. God's word. Nehemiah steps back and to the fore comes God's word.

God's word unleashed. That is going to transform the people. It's God's word that does the work of spiritual renewal always, in every age. And so, as we realize again that the greatest need right now for our church, for our world, is spiritual renewal, we will see what is needed if God's church is going to see spiritual renewal.

[10 : 21] And it all comes down to the unleashing of God's word upon God's people. That's the key. So then, what needs to be true of the church if God's word is to be able to do its work?

how is it that God's word is going to be unleashed upon its people? Well, this chapter, we see four things, four marks of the church that is primed for spiritual renewal.

Four indications that the spirit of God is at work in his people. Here are four things to pray for, to ask God to do in our own hearts as a church.

Four marks. Number one, we see a church that desires God's word. That's verse one. Have a look at verse one. A church that desires God's word.

Where does the initiative come from for the proclamation of God's word? It's the people themselves. Look what it says. The people are gathered together. They told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel.

[11 : 30] The people want to hear God's word, don't they? They're asking for Ezra. Bring us Ezra. We want the word. It wasn't Ezra coming and saying, listen, you're going to sit down and listen.

It wasn't Nehemiah saying, sit down and listen. No, the people themselves are saying, give us God's word. We want to hear. Now, this wasn't totally spontaneous.

There were key foundations in place. Let me mention two. Number one, they had gathered for a purpose. Notice the first half of verse one. And all the people gathered as one man.

They were there in that one place because Nehemiah had gathered them. Back in chapter seven, have a look at verse five of chapter seven. We're told that God put it into Nehemiah's heart to assemble together the people.

Now that the wars are rebuilt, Nehemiah pulls everyone together. And now that they're together, they want to hear God's word.

[12 : 36] They want to hear from God. That's the first thing. They've been gathered for a purpose. Number two, Ezra's ministry clearly has borne fruit.

By this time, Ezra's been in Jerusalem since four, five, eight BC. Thirteen years, Nehemiah, Ezra has been in Jerusalem.

He's been there at the very heart of the people of God. He's been doing his work. Thirteen years of ministry for Ezra amongst the people. And that's what we see spilling out here in chapter eight.

They want to hear God's word. They've got a hunger because of what Ezra's been doing those previous 13 years. One commentator put it this way.

The fact that it is Ezra that the people call for in the opening verse of this chapter shows that he has gained their respect as a Bible teacher. It is very likely that he has been quietly and faithfully doing the work of ministry all those years.

[13 : 43] Remember the strapline of Ezra's ministry back in Ezra chapter seven. It says this, for Ezra had set his heart to study the law of God and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

It would seem then that Ezra's word, his ministry, has had an impact. Clearly, God had been at work in the hearts of his people now that both the temple and the war were complete now that the people are gathered as one.

Their desire is to hear God's word. They want to hear it. And this is the key mark of the beginnings of a spiritual renewal. A God-given desire within the people of God to hear.

There's a hunger, a desire to hear God's word. And we would do well to ask the Lord for such a desire in our own hearts that we would long for God's word to be brought to us week by week as we gather together as a church.

It is our greatest need, isn't it? It's our greatest need to hear from the Lord week in, week out. Sitting under God's word is the very best thing for us.

[15 : 05] It writes our fuzzy thinking. It reorders our disordered wills. It reorders our hearts, our wandering hearts. It rearranges our misplaced priorities.

We need it more than anything else. It brings us face-to-face with reality. God's word is not an escape from reality. It brings us face-to-face with reality. And we need nothing more in this world than to have reality imprinted on our minds and hearts.

And God's word does that. And so our prayer needs to be as a church, Lord, give us your word. Because it's his word.

He's the living God. He's our creator, our sustainer, our Lord, our saviour. This is his word to his people. There's nothing more vital than that that we need. So that's the first thing we observe with a church primed for spiritual renewal.

There's a desire for the word of God. The second thing flows from it. If God's word is being asked for, then when it comes, we need to listen.

[16 : 14] So here's the second thing. The second mark of a church that is primed for spiritual renewal. It's a church that is attentive to God's word. Verses 2 to 8.

So there's a desire. But secondly, a church that is attentive. Ezra brought God's word to God's people.

Look at verse 2. So Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women, and all those who could understand what they heard.

Note that. All those who could understand. understand. In other words, it is men, women, and children who could understand what was being said.

Not children that couldn't understand what was being said, but those who could. that's why, as a church, when it comes to our children, our desires that they would grow up into church so that by the time they're in their late primary school years, they're in the whole service.

[17 : 26] They can understand by that point what is going on. Now, to make my point, I think we've got kids age 8 and up in the service today.

Now, here's the challenge. If you're a primary school student, and there's a few around, can you come up at the end of the service and tell me what my four main teaching points are?

If you can do that, I'll give you a high five. I was going to say a free book, but I'm not sure I can quite deliver that. So just to help you, point number one, so listen, a church with a desire for God's word.

Number two, our second point, which we're in the middle of right now, a church that is attentive to God's words. And the thing is, our children absorb more than we realize.

By the end of primary school, they are well able to follow the majority of a sermon. They will take things from it in the same way that a five-year-old just couldn't. And so junior church, which happens during term time, that is not something other than church.

[18 : 37] It is still church, but it's teaching to children in a way they can understand. But as soon as they can understand what's happening here, they come here in the main service.

So we seek to communicate Bible truth in age-appropriate ways so they can understand. So we've noted who is present here, men, women, and those who can understand.

We know also their posture, their demeanor, as Ezra reads from the Word. Look with me at verse 3. And he read from it facing the square before the water gate from early morning until midday.

That's a decent sermon. You're lucky with what you get here. In the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand, and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

They were attentive. Attentive. They, in other words, paid very close attention to what was being said. They listened carefully. Now you pay attention, don't you, to things that you care about or people that you care about.

[19 : 50] If they speak, you pay attention. So children, when their parents speak, they immediately stop what they're doing, don't they? They pay full attention to their parents.

Isn't that right? Perhaps on a good day. But what about when your football team announces transfer news, the summer spending?

You pay attention, don't you? The thing you care about, you give your full attention to. Those you love, when they speak, you pay attention. And God's people then, if we belong to the Lord, then when he speaks, we're to be attentive, aren't we?

We love him. He loves us. He speaks these tender words to us. We listen, we pay attention. Whatever God's word is taught or read. And note what happens when Ezra reads from the law.

Look at the end of verse 5. The people stood. The people stood. They stood out of reverence for the word of God.

[21 : 01] They were seeking to be attentive. Now, this isn't being prescriptive for us. Some churches do stand for the reading of God's word.

And that's a perfectly good thing to do. It indicates a real reverence. But we're not required to do it. It's not a requirement that we stand when God's word is being read. But actually, it's the attitude underneath it that is prescriptive for us.

It's that attitude of reverence and attentiveness that is required of us as God's people. We would do well to emulate that attitude of reverence which for them was marked by standing up.

Now, you can stand up and not be reverent. You can stand up and not listen. But what matters most is the internal disposition and attitude to God's word.

I'm sorry, there's a crash downstairs if you wouldn't mind. Thank you. So what matters is the internal disposition of God's word, the attitude internally.

[22 : 22] In the next verse, they lift up their hands and bowed their heads and put their faces to the ground. all of this is demonstrating the internal reality of reverence for God and a desire to submit to them.

Excuse me, folks. So what matters is the internal disposition, the internal attitude to God's word.

The very next verse, we see they're lifting up their hands, they bowed their heads, they put their faces to the ground. All of this is demonstrating the internal reality of reverence for God, a desire to submit themselves to it.

So what is our attitude as we gather together, as we listen to God's word, read and told? What is our attitude? What's in our heart as we sit here now?

Are we attentive? Are we reverent? Are we submitting ourselves to the authority of God's word? Or are we standing over it, judging it by our own standards?

[23 : 54] But as well as the people being attentive, the preachers were helping the people to understand. Ezra wasn't alone in this task, was he? Verse 4 lists 13 other men with him on the platform.

Verse 7 lists 13 other Levites who helped the people to understand the law. They read from the book, clearly, and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading.

This wasn't just some ritual where the congregation had no idea about what was going on. That was a scandal, wasn't it? Before the Reformation, the churches conducted services in Latin.

People couldn't understand what was going on. The Bible was in a language they couldn't read. That's dead religion. Ezra understood that the whole point of this gathering was for the people of God to hear the voice of God.

Part of his task was not only to read God's word, but to help the people to understand it, to hear the message. You can imagine the scene, the great crowd.

[25 : 02] Ezra up on the platform, he reads a section from the law, the Torah, perhaps a section from Genesis. And once he finishes reading a section, the 13 men mentioned in verse 7, they spread themselves out among the crowds, and once they've gathered enough folk around them, they explain what's just been read.

They help the people to understand. They might clarify certain things, reinforce the message, press home the implications for them. The goal of the whole exercise is to make God's word clear.

It is a wonderful and pithy statement of the role of any Bible teacher, isn't it? They gave the sense so the people understood the reading.

And that is what we seek to do week by week, Sunday by Sunday. We preach the text. We give the sense so that together we understand the message.

God's message. It's the message that God is giving us through his word. So for a church that is to experience spiritual renewal, this is the second thing that must be present, a church that is attentive to God's word.

[26 : 25] And as we've seen, there are two aspects to that. One, preachers and teachers do not only read God's word, but do so in a way that helps the congregation to understand God's word.

But that isn't all. Yes, the preachers have a role, but secondly, the second aspect is a responsive congregation, a church that is attentive to the word.

You can have the best preacher in the world, but if the congregation isn't attentive, if the congregation is actually hardened to the voice of God, God, then it's all useless, isn't it?

A church must be attentive, eager, willing to listen to God's word, to receive it. So are we? Are we attentive? Are we eager to hear what God is saying? And a church that is attentive to God's word will respond to God's word.

[27 : 34] God's word as it's received and understood, it will do something. It will have its impact, it will transform lives as God's word is received gladly.

And that's what we have in the second half of the chapter, we see God's response, the response of God's people to God's word. There's rejoicing, there's also obedience.

So here's the third point, we see a church that rejoices because of God's word, a church that rejoices, verses 9 to 12. Now there is something of a surprise here because the people have to be instructed to respond in joy.

Surely it should be spontaneous, you can't command joy. Well read again, look with me from verse 9, Nehemiah who was the governor and Ezra the priest and the scribe and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, this day is holy to the Lord your God.

Do not weep, do not mourn, for all the people wept as they heard the words of the law. The initial response from God's people as Ezra is there reading and teaching.

[28 : 55] The initial response was weeping and mourning. They felt the weight of their sin. And that is right, that is a right response initially to the teaching of God's word, but it's not a full and wholesome response to God's revelation.

God's word, as well as revealing our sin, it points to our salvation. It tells us how we can relate rightly to our creator. That is a wonderful thing.

That is a real source of joy, to know that we can know God forever, to be one of his people. The pastor of the church I went to as a student quite a while ago, but he on these verses said this, you cannot read the Bible long without confessing your sin.

That is true. But what is also true is that you cannot read it long without confessing Christ as the only and utterly victorious and all sufficient savior.

Soon even your sorrow is overtaken by joy, for the book of God rings with good news, and the keynote of biblical faith is celebration. The Holy Spirit does not minister discouragement.

[30 : 19] He convicts us of sin. He presses us to our knees, but then when Christ is grasped by faith, Christ who is mighty to save, he lifts us to our feet again with new hope and new purpose.

So a full understanding of the message of the gospel lifts us. A true grasp of the message of the Bible will lead us to rejoice. there will be weeping along the way, yes, but we don't languish in our grieving.

Our grieving will give way to gladness as we fully comprehend the glory of the gospel. Some Christian folk do wallow in grieving as if it were somehow more spiritual.

Never will they be seen to crack a smile. but that sort of Christianity is deficient, isn't it? That isn't real holiness. Three times in these verses the people are told that the day is holy and that they are to be therefore joyful.

Verse nine, the day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep. Verse ten, this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

[31 : 38] And verse 11, be quiet for this day is holy. Do not be grieved. Holiness does not equate to glumness but rejoicing.

True holiness leads to gladness not glumness. And so as we listen attentively to God's words, as we listen to the scriptures we find ultimately great reason for rejoicing.

For in the scriptures we hear our God, our creator, calling out to us to return to him to be his people. We hear our God say, I will be your God. You shall be my people.

That is the great call of the gospel. And that reality ought to lead to joy, not grief. And that joy will lead inevitably to glad obedience of God's word.

God's word. And that's what we have in our final section of the chapter from verse 13 to the end. A church that obeys God's word. God's word had really taken hold of the community of God, hasn't it?

[32 : 51] Note what happens there in verse 13. The various heads of houses, along with all the priests and the Levites, they come to Ezra in order to do what? Well, they come to study the words of the law.

As God's word is taught in a congregation, as the congregation attentively listens, as God's spirit works in people's hearts, convicting them of their sin, bringing them to the joy of salvation, that will feed a greater hunger, won't it, for the word of God?

The appetite to study God's word will be evident. And so it was with the people here. It wasn't just left to the full-time clergy, the Levites.

No, the leaders from amongst the people are there studying the scriptures. And that is how spiritual renewal takes hold in a church. The Bible is unleashed.

Many folk in a whole bunch of contexts are studying the word, teaching it to others. And what they discover, as they're studying with Ezra, what they find changes the corporate life of the people of God.

[34 : 06] It does something. God's word does things. It changes. It transforms. Notice what happens, verse 14. And they found it written in the law that the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month.

And that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem. It seems that they have a reading, perhaps from Leviticus 23 or Deuteronomy 16, which sets out the instructions for the feast of booths.

Now, what is that? What is the feast of booths? Quick aside, it's also known as the feast of tabernacles, celebrated on the 15th day of the seventh month. It was an autumn festival.

As well as a commemoration of the exodus from Egypt. It was reminding the people to look back on the day when they had no harvest fields, when they lived in the wilderness, they were wandering as tent dwellers in the wilderness for all those years, when God himself fed them, provided manna and quail.

And so this feast of booths was there to remind them of their frailty, of their absolute dependence upon the laws. And they were to do it every year.

[35 : 31] But they hadn't been doing it. It had fallen out of use. They had stopped marking this feast of booths. And so they read it. And when they read it, the people obeyed.

Look at verse 16. So the people went out and they made booths for themselves, each on his roof. And in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the water gate, and the square at the gate of Ephraim.

And all the assembly of those who returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths. For from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day, the people of Israel had not done so.

And there was very great rejoicing. It seems so simple, doesn't it? They read it, they did it.

The true sign of spiritual renewal is an obedience to God's word. That is the consistent message, isn't it, through the whole Bible.

[36 : 34] What did Jesus say? John 14, James, if you love me, you will keep my commandments. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he, it is, he loves me.

James in his letters, it's the same thing. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. God's love me, you see, it's that doing of the word, it's that obedience, that is the key to vitality in the life of God's people, it's the key to spiritual renewal, to joy.

Because the word, it is the very message of the living God, it is his voice that we hear. And when he speaks, we are to obey his loving commands because it's for our good.

What does it lead to here in Nehemiah 8? The people obey, there's rejoicing. Rejoicing. As we obey God's word, there's great joy.

So what are the marks of a church that is ready for spiritual renewal? There's a desire for God's word, there's an attitude of attention to God's word, there's a reception of joy, and then obedience.

[38 : 03] Those are the marks of a church ready for renewal. So let that not be our prayer for ourselves as a congregation, that that be true of us. So let's pray as we draw to a close.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that your word is living. It's active. It is sharper than any double-edged sword. It pierces to our very heart and soul.

And so would you help us as your people to be eager to hear your word because you are our Father in heaven and we are your children.

We are so needy, so utterly dependent on everything for you. So feed us by your word. Help us to be attentive. Please help us to respond in glad obedience.

For your glory we ask it. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.