

Releasing the Word

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: 02 October 2016

Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Let's turn now to our Bible reading, and we're continuing, Willie is continuing his series in the book of Nehemiah this morning. So let's turn to Nehemiah, the very end of chapter 7, which you'll find on page 403, 403 in our big church Bibles.

So I'm picking it up from the last sentence of chapter 7 and reading through to the end of chapter 8. So Nehemiah chapter 7, beginning at verse 73.

And when the seventh month had come, the people of Israel were in their towns. And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate.

And they told Ezra, the scribe, to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra, the priest, brought the law before the assembly, both men and women, and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month.

And he read from it, facing the square before the water gate, from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand.

[1 : 19] And the ears of all the 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.

And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Aniah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Marseah on his right hand. And Pediah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, 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.

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, Sherabiah, Jamin, Akub, Shabbatai, Hodiah, Maseah, Kelita, Azariah, Josabad, Hanan, Peliah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places.

They read from the book, from the law of God, clearly. And they gave the sense, so that 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.

[2 : 42] 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 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, 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 fathers' houses of all the people, with 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 feast of the seventh 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.

[3 : 55] 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 at the water gate, and in the square at the gate of Ephraim.

And all the assembly of those who had 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. And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day, there was a solemn assembly according to the rule.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may the Lord make it a great blessing to us. Well, would you open your Bibles with me to Nehemiah chapter 8, page 403, I think, in the Blue Church Bibles. And as we've seen, this is a chapter all about releasing the word. God's ultimate purpose for the people that he has chosen for himself before the foundation of the world, as Paul says in Ephesians 1, his ultimate purpose is that we should be holy and blameless and to the praise of his glory forever.

[5 : 27] So that the entire created order, heaven and earth, will marvel at the manifest wisdom of God. That's what Paul says. And so it shouldn't surprise us that the whole story of God's people, as we read it in the scripture, is all about his people's spiritual renewal, their reformation, their revival.

That is what concerns the Lord more than anything else. Just as, of course, God's chief concern for his church today is its spiritual health and vigor. Not necessarily its material prosperity, certainly not its popularity in the world, but its spiritual health.

And that is certainly very obvious in this story of Ezra and Nehemiah that we've been studying together. The real goal of everything Nehemiah has been doing and all of his other leaders with him has never been just structural reconstruction.

It has been spiritual reformation of God's people. The new temple, the new walls, everything that was rebuilt, is so that God will restore his society, his people, to be living in his place, living in his presence, living under his protection, as he promised to Abraham all those years ago.

And that alone is what causes God's servants to fulfill their calling, which is to be witnessing his goodness and his grace to all the people of this world.

[6 : 57] And in their day, in the 5th century BC, or in our day, in the 21st century AD, God's people were and are in constant need of spiritual reformation.

Ecclesia semper reformanda, as the saying goes. The church is always to be reformed. But never, of course, by departing from the word of God, from the scriptures, always to be reformed more and more in accordance with the word of God.

And it's that spiritual reformation, according to the word of God, that is the focus of these next few chapters here in Nehemiah. Because only thus will God's people become what he has called them to be.

A people, as chapter 12, verse 43 says, whose joy is heard far away, and who therefore witness to the goodness of God. But, of course, no human being can produce that spiritual reformation.

Only the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God himself, wielding his great sword of strength, the Spirit of God, which is the sword of the Spirit of God, which is the word of God.

[8 : 09] No man can do that. And that's why, I think, in these chapters, what we discover is Nehemiah, who's been our focus all the way through thus far, Nehemiah fades into the background. He's only mentioned one or two times until chapter 13, where he takes up the story again.

And Nehemiah gives way, very pointedly, to Ezra, to the scribe and Bible teacher, whose job it is to teach the word of God.

So the criticism, remember, back in chapter 6, that Nehemiah was only building his own empire, only putting himself in the limelight, that was quite false. He's a humble man.

He knows his place. And he's humble enough not to hanker after a rule that God has not given him, but he has done his chief work. And he's glad to give that role of teaching God's people to Ezra, to the scribe, to the one for whom that is a task.

And the first task, remember, of the Levites is to teach the law of God. And actually, that's an important lesson, I think, sometimes for the church today. There are often able men in churches who are very frustrated by their clergy not really teaching the Bible.

[9 : 18] And they want to help the church. They want to sort it out. And often there are men who are very experienced and skilled in business or the professions or whatever. But they can sometimes think, oh, well, what they need to do is they need to start teaching the Bible.

And very often, the fact is, they just haven't been given those gifts by God. And they may have those gifts, in which case they should be honed and trained humbly along with others. But often it's not their gift.

And often the far better thing for them to do is what Nehemiah did. Get everything into place to put somebody who does have that skill and does have that gifting into a position of ministry.

And then support them in it. Help fund it. Help make it happen. So that God's church really can be built up through his word. That is what I think Nehemiah is doing here.

He's paving the way for a ministry of the word of God. So Nehemiah steps aside, but not until he has initiated this great gathering of the people to hear God's word.

[10:19] We saw last time, remember, in chapter 7, verse 5, that God had put it into his heart to bring about this great assembly, just as it happened 90 years previously under Ezra.

And so here we are in the seventh month, in the great month of festivals of God's people, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. All Israel, we're told, gathered as one man into this great public square by the water gate.

Notice again the emphasis on this corporate gathering. All the people as one man. Verse 2, It was a great assembly, a great congregation. The Greek translation of that is ecclesia.

It's the word we read in the New Testament, meaning congregation or church. And that reminds us, doesn't it, that God's word is primarily for his people together, for his church.

God's word is not primary for us as individuals, but it's for us together as his congregation of people.

And in fact, what we see here is a wonderful picture that illustrates for us that all true spiritual revival and renewal in any congregation begins with the word of God.

[11:33] That's true whether it's a church congregation, whether it's any group of Christians, a Christian union, it's at school, at university, any group of churches. Indeed, it's true in any individual human life as well.

Real spiritual renewal begins always with a decisive desire and appetite to receive God's word, which results then in God's word being released into every aspect of the life of God's people.

A people truly seeking God's word are truly shaken up by God's word and they become a people who are in every part of their life being shaped by God's word.

And that's what this chapter illustrates so plainly for us. The renewal of God's church through the releasing of God's word. Look first at verses 1 to 8 and what we see there plainly is a congregation seeking God's word.

First of all, notice in verses 1 to 3 the real readiness among the people to receive that word, a real readiness to hear the commands of God. This is a people with eager ears for teaching.

[12:53] Derek Kidner says that there was a mood of rare responsiveness shown not only in the people's flocking to Jerusalem as one man but in their call for Ezra to read the scriptures to them.

That is always the cardinal sign of a work of the Spirit of God in reviving power in any person, in any place, in any congregation. There is a hunger for God's word.

Think of the great awakening, the great revivals in this country and across the United States in the 18th century. People flocked, didn't they, to hear the preachers like Wesley and Whitefield and so on in their thousands in the open air.

It is the same when somebody comes alive personally, spiritually, to the gospel. They are eager, aren't they, to lap up all the preaching, all the instruction, all the teaching that they can get.

Somebody I was speaking to this week was describing exactly that, hunger and thirst for God's word in their own life as they opened up to the gospel of Jesus.

It's a wonderful thing to hear. And it's spontaneous, this readiness, this desire, verse 1, that people ask for it. And yet at the same time it's also been prepared for, isn't it?

[14:03] Verse 4 tells us that this great platform, this great pulpit has been built, no doubt, by Nehemiah. And I'm sure that Nehemiah was planning all along for the day to come when Ezra's ministry would be absolutely central.

He knew how ignorant the people were. He knew that the only cure was the teaching systematically of God's word. Just as during the Reformation, that was what whetted the appetite of people who were ignorant of God's word, who'd been starved of God's word by the medieval church.

And it was also what satisfied their appetite as the word was opened and taught. But surely where God's spirit is at work there will always be both of these things.

There'll be planning and there'll be preparing for teaching God's truth. And at the same time there will also be a great desire from people to receive that teaching. And notice by the way what is needed and what is wanted by this people for this great new situation, for this great advance in spiritual progress.

What is wanted is not something new but something very old, verse 2. The book of the law of Moses that God had commanded Israel. That is the faith once for all delivered by God's command to men.

[15:23] And we should be clear that nothing has changed. That's what Jude says we must never depart from in his letter, isn't it? If we're going to be rooted safely in God's truth. And nor, of course, does the New Testament in any way abolish or set aside the Old Testament.

Never. Just read the New Testament. Paul in Romans 10 quotes from Moses' command and he says, and this is the word of faith that we are proclaiming.

He ends that great letter of Romans telling us about his great task of mission. And that is, he says, to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations by the command of the eternal God. God's command has not changed. That's why in Revelation 14 we hear the angels proclaiming the eternal gospel that will be proclaimed to every tribe and language and nation to fear God and to give him glory.

So don't ever, don't ever be confused about that. Moses and Jesus and the apostles, they all speak with one voice, the same gospel of God, all the same promises, all the same commands.

[16:33] That's why Jesus says in John 4 that if John 5 it is, if you believe Moses, you would have believed me because he spoke about me. The eternal joy, the song of the redeemed in heaven that we hear in Revelation 15 is the great song of Moses and of the Lamb.

It's one song about the promise and the fulfillment of all God's gracious promises in Jesus Christ. And so the need for God's people today and indeed in any day is just exactly the same.

To advance forward spiritually, to find revival and renewal, we need to go back, back to the old paths, to all the scriptures, all of which teach us the same way of salvation and the only way of real service in Jesus Christ.

That's what Paul says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3, 16. So here is Ezra, the priest and the scribe as verse 9 calls him, who is the key to all of this because the first role, as I've said, of the Levites was to teach and to explain the word of God to God's people.

And notice verse 2. Everyone who is able to understand was there. Nobody was taking away the older children and the teenagers to play games and mess around and not hear this.

[17:58] Of course not. God's people from the beginning were to be known as an understanding people. To be in total contrast to all the pagans whose frivolous religion was without any kind of knowledge or understanding.

And that's why God commands in his word that the youngsters are to be trained and taught from earliest days in the home and in the life of the church. And this great gathering all were there who could understand.

So please notice here is a family service as set out by the Bible. Nobody's dressing up as clowns. Nobody's playing the fool. No adults are acting like children. No, the word of God is absolutely at the center for everybody.

A pastor just spoke to me just recently and said in our church we've got panicking parents of teenagers. And the reason the parents are panicking is because they have not trusted in the power of the word of God.

They've not taught their children the word of God. They've thought that the most sensible thing to do to attract their children to the church is to keep them away from seriousness about the word of God so as not to put them off.

[19:10] Friends, nothing could be more calamitous for the life of our children and young ones than that. But here are people with eager ears and also notice verses 4 to 6 with captive hearts.

Notice the real reverence that they display towards God and his word. God's presence is known in his word. And so hearing God's word can never just be a dry and academic exercise.

It means hearing the voice of the living God. and so it brings a real visitation of God's presence among his people. Remember in Luke 7 when the people said of Jesus a great prophet has arisen in Israel.

God has visited his people. What they meant was God's voice is being heard. God is in the midst. And that's why we sing Lord Jesus let us meet you in your word.

And it's right and we do meet him. And it's right also that that should evoke reverence and awe. And certainly that is what we see here. There's great solemnity isn't there in verses 4 and 5.

[20 : 22] Describes the first pulpit that we know of in the Bible and it was an enormous one wasn't it? If you count there was 13 of them up there high above the people. Not not to exalt any one man but to exalt the authority of God's word.

And that's why we're told when they opened the book all the people stood. It was a mark of great reverence and respect. Used to be a tradition in the Scottish church where the Bible would be carried in and all the people would stand.

It was a mark of reverence. Of course the problem is with any traditions like that is they can easily become empty can't they? And it often was empty. Everybody stood up as the Bible was carried in sat down shut their Bibles and then listened to nothing else.

There was no reverence at all. But of course we can go the other way can't we? We can get rid of all such things and very easily lose any sense of reverence for God's word when it's opened.

But we should have reverence. We should respect the book not for the thing that it is but for the voice of the living God that we hear when God's word is opened. That's why we always ask for the congregation to quieten our hearts together before we begin our service.

[21 : 38] It's a mark of reverence. It's to say that we are coming to meet God himself in his word. Notice also the others who were with Ezra on that platform because it is not ever one man's personality or charisma or oratory or anything else that has any authority.

No, it is the word of God alone that rules his people. But it's the collective responsibility of those who are charged with that task of teaching God's word.

It is their responsibility to assert God's authority in his name so that the pew does not control the pulpit so as to silence it or ignore it.

That's why as Edward said at tonight's induction in Gilcomboston there will be a plurality of pastors standing with Jeremy Middleton before that congregation to induct him and saying we are all standing with this man as he proclaims God's word to you and we insist in the name of Christ that you hear that word and heed that word.

So there's real solemnity and that is a right aspect of revering God's word as is an attitude of submission verse 6 the people all say Amen so let it be let God's word indeed be our rule and guide we bow down to its authority and they bowed low with humbled hearts it's a picture isn't it of prayerful submission their hands are raised in prayer their heads are bowed in a spirit of prayer and deep submission and that's the only way that any of us can hear God's word properly isn't it if we hear hear it prayerfully the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2 that spiritual things are discerned by spiritual people that is people who are humbly receptive of God's word in a spirit of prayer it's the person who comes to church not saying Lord tell me what I want to hear but Lord not what I want to hear but what you want me to hear and bend my knee and bow my heart to receive it and that's the clarity that marks verses 7 and 8 isn't it verse 7 they understood the law verse 8 they understood the reading eager ears and captive hearts is what leads to clear minds all these named

[24 : 18] Levites here they work hard over all these hours helping people to understand it until verse 8 it was totally clear you'll see from the footnote it's a little bit unclear what that word clear actually means how it should be translated it might mean translated into their local Aramaic language it might mean the method by which they taught section by section but the main issue is absolutely clear isn't it they got the sense of it the people understood the relevance of God's word for their daily lives in terms of God's words challenging them and rebuking them and directing them and teaching them and training and instructing them in all the aspects of their life together maybe it's a notable thing that you notice all of this Bible teaching was not going on in the temple courts but right out in the public square in the marketplace and that is surely symbolic because God's word has relevance for every path of life every part of our existence that's the purpose of God's law it's so that we can have clear minds so that we can develop mature Christian thinking wise understanding about how to live as God's people in this world of his and that's why God's spirit has given gifts of word ministry to his church read Ephesians 4 that's how the church grows says Paul in maturity and understanding and in Christ likeness and in size as people are drawn to that attractiveness but notice notice all of this takes time and effort five hours at least in just this first session that morning no coffee breaks we're told about no nice tray bakes halfway through nothing of the kind it made me think of India where every second year

I teach at the word conference it'll be happening just in November later this year where people come and they are hungry for God's word often they've traveled 24, 36 maybe 48 hours on a train to come there and we're straight in and we have hour after hour after hour of teaching with very very

brief and infrequent breaks I'm not suggesting that we should start having our service beginning at dawn and going on to the middle of the afternoon but if the church today is to have understanding if it is to have clarity about God's commands so that it will understand his will that is going to take time and effort and determination because as my father always used to say quoting one of his teachers the scriptures will not yield their treasures to chance inquiry and the church in our land the church in the west is not strong today is it the church is weak in understanding the church lacks clarity about God's commands and yes it's true the scourge of liberal theology has had a great part in that ignorance of God's word but even in evangelical churches today the country over there is enormous ignorance of God's word many young Christians come to university and they know dozens and dozens of songs but precious little of scripture and precious little understanding of scripture but if the church is to grow again if the church is to be renewed and revived then there needs to be a real work of God's holy spirit to release the word of God among his people and for that there must be eager ears and captive hearts and clear minds that are taught the relevance of the bible for our lives there needs to be a community that are seeking

God's words but when the bible when God's word really is released among his people when it's really understood that can bring a bit of a shock and verses 9 to 12 here certainly show us a congregation truly shaken up by God's word hearing God's word you see truly is never just an intellectual exercise although it can never be less than involving our minds of course but it always touches the heart it touches the affections as Jonathan Edwards put it not just the emotions but the deepest heart of our being the control center if you like our mind our heart our will that drives our whole life and God's word challenges us right there always and it devastates us in the face of the appalling reality of our sin which is exposed by his word but it also delights us in the astonishing reality of his grace and the sheer joy therefore that there is in his great salvation the word of God is a double-edged sword isn't it says Hebrews 5 piercing to the very heart of our being always yes exposing our sin and our shame but always also expounding our understanding of God's marvelous grace it convicts us in our sin and our helplessness but it also fills us with confidence in his great mercy and grace remember John Newton in amazing grace it was grace that taught my heart to fear and grace those fears relieve both fear and relief together in the grace that is in the gospel of Christ in God's word and that's a reminder too isn't it that the real sense of grief and tears that we see in these verses isn't just an

Old Testament thing it isn't something that we've all moved on from as Christians if you read Ezekiel chapter 36 the great promise of the new covenant where God will put his spirit in our hearts and cleanse us from sin forever and ever you'll see that the result of that says God is that he says you will feel a real heartfelt loathing that's the word he uses loathing for your iniquity and abominations a deep sense of shame and that's what we see here in verse 9 there's mourning there's weeping there's real grief for sin in verse 10 but also notice as they're shaken up by the gospel of God also notice as well as the real tears there is real joy there's real rejoicing verse 12 great rejoicing because you see we don't truly meet God in his word unless we also have this wonderfully enlarged vision of his great grace yes an understanding of his hatred of sin and his holiness but also his grace and his love for sinners as someone has said one does not come without the other when it's God who is truly at work we haven't understood the living scarifying word of God if all we have found in it is its condemnation condemnation yes but shining in the condemnation and through it a marvelous word of pardon and renewal and notice verse 9 I want you to see the note that dominates this living exposition of the gospel of God this announcement of God to his people the note that dominates is a call to gladness and not to grief do not mourn or weep it's a call to feasting verse 10 not fasting eat the fat drink the sweet wine send portions share the joy with those who have nothing joy predominates in God's call and it has priority in God's call over repentance and mourning for sin there is a real place for that there's a right place for that chapter 9 we'll see is full of sackcloth and ashes and fasting but not here not first because above all the great announcement from the voice of God for sinful man the heart of the gospel call is a call to share

[33 : 10] God's joy to rejoice to share in the joy of the Lord himself verse 10 the joy of the Lord is your strength that's why although I have a love for the Anglican book of common prayer Cranmer's book of common prayer I've always felt it was wrong to begin its morning worship service with that great great long prayer of confession for sin that's not what Ezra does here first he says let there be joy come into his presence with singing know that we are his people the sheep of his pasture enter his gates with thanksgiving enter his courts with praise says Psalm 100 that's why we had the extra

hallelujahs in that Psalm this morning to make the point because the truth is the truth is that really it is only the true and real gospel of joy and the transformation that that brings to our hearts that can actually lead us in real evangelical repentance because that's a fruit of

God's spirit having brought new birth having turned our whole lives around so that we see our rebellion for what it is and we bow the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ but that comes out of the reception of the glorious joy in the gospel of Jesus Christ and Ezra knew that and he knew that there's no strength there's no salvation merely in our recognizing our sin but only in receiving from God his wonderful grace only verse 10 the joy of the Lord can be your strength literally can be your place of safety your protection in other words your salvation and that's right isn't it delight in God delight in his grace that's the only protection that we have from despair and from being eaten up by the shame of our sins and to be joyless to forget his wonders is to leave us unprotected without assurance without hope and that's disastrous for us and it's deeply dishonoring also to God there's a verse you know

Deuteronomy 28 I think it's verse 47 that chapter full of all the dreadful covenant curses where God says to his people that because you have failed to serve me with joy and gladness therefore in the end you'll be sent into exile and William still once commented on that verse he said the sin of failing to be joyful and grateful in the service of God is the sin of neglecting the Holy Spirit of God which alone can open our eyes and hearts and he said spontaneous praise is not the iced cake of Christian service but it's mere bread and butter in other words what he's saying is you've not been truly touched you've not been truly shaken up by the Spirit of God through the Word of God if you haven't grasped what Ezra and his colleagues are making so very clear here that true holiness and true joy go hand in hand verse 11 this day is holy this day that God's

Word has shaken you people to the core so do not be filled with grief no make great rejoicing you see what he's saying furrowed brows and pained expressions are not the sign of true holiness real deep joy is a sign of true holiness that's why the New Testament is full of commands to rejoice rejoice in the Lord always says Paul again I say it rejoice rejoice always be thankful in all circumstances this is the will of God for you it's lack of rejoicing isn't it in the New Testament that's a sign of real pathology in the life of the church what does Paul say to the Galatians what has happened to all your joy it's not a sign that you're getting into deeper Bible knowledge and advanced spirituality of all your joy has drained away and some churches still need a lot lot more joy in evidence in their life some preaching can be so admired in sin and misery and prayers so relentlessly going on about sin and guilt and depravity and so on it's no wonder is it that people in those churches so often lack any assurance of salvation because it's only the joy of the Lord that can strengthen and satisfy joy in his wonderful grace that is your protection says Ezra and some Christians can be like that too you know I think that when some believers get to heaven the Lord is going to get them down on the floor and give them a really good tickling and say that's what you've needed all your life I mean it you know people like that I certainly do there's nothing trivial about this joy there is something deep and wonderful and thrilling about the joy of the Lord joy evoked by understanding God's word to man and that not only saves us and strengthens us but also you'll see here it reaches out to others it's not a selfish joy is it it's a sharing joy look at verse 10 send portions to others so that they who have nothing can also share in the joy of the Lord as Derek Kidna puts it it's invigorating it's not escapist or evanescent it turns selfish hearts around completely does the joy of the Lord so that we no longer look inwardly but we look upwardly in thanksgiving to God and therefore we look outwardly in love to our neighbors that's the result look at verse 12 that's the result when people understand truly the glorious word of

[39 : 55] God in the scriptures and what an almighty and wonderful shake up that is in any person's life in any congregation's life and where that really is the case where the scriptures really are in the driving seat in the life of God's people shaking up everyone then God's word will really start to shape everything in the life of the church as God intends it to be shaped and that's what this last paragraph verses 13 to 18 picture for us so clearly it's a congregation being increasingly shaped by the word of God verse 3 describes a growing culture of pervasive teaching and training throughout the whole community the heads of all the houses all the leaders of the people they're studying together they're being trained deeply in God's word so that of course they may teach others because if the word of

God is to be truly released in the life of God's people then that task cannot be simply left to the clergy can't just be left to Ezra and the Levites alone no their job as the apostle Paul puts it in

Ephesians 4 their job is to prepare all the saints for works of ministry and it's just so today isn't it all of those with responsibility for teaching whether it's in the church whether it's among the young people among the women among the men whether it's in the home wherever it is we are learning the word so as to be sharing the word so that the word is released increasingly to do its work in every part of the life of the church in everything the church does and that's what's happening here you can see it God's word being worked into the whole community it's no good for the word of God to be restricted in its ministry only to the pulpit of course the pulpit is essential of course if it doesn't happen properly there it's never going to happen properly anywhere else in the life of the church but no the word must get out from the pulpit into the pews and right down into the pores of every part of the church is life so that a whole congregational life is shaped by the gospel of

God that's how it becomes a community of true holiness and that's how it becomes a community of truly attractively infectious joy notice again verse 17 it's obedience to God's instruction that leads to joy to very great rejoicing you see verse 16 tells us they'd understood the commands of God about the feast of booths the feast of tabernacles and when they understood it they acted on it as James tells us to be they were being not just hearers of the word but doers of the word that's what Jesus is always saying too isn't it now the booths the tabernacles was the harvest festival it was celebrating a great memorial feast in the midst of all of that harvest reminding the people of Israel to look back to the day when they had no harvest fields when they lived in the wilderness as wandering tent dwellers and where

God himself fed them with manna and quails from heaven it was meant to remind them of their frailty and their utter dependence on God but that was the aspect of the feast that had the presence to think of well that's what the Israelites were doing here you see thinking about all of those material things totally forgetting what God was all about in saving them forgetting that he was in the midst forgetting that their life was utterly fragile temporary as a tent and that they lived not by bread alone or even a bountiful harvest but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of but when

God's word is shaping his church truly right down into every detail then the gospel will never be forgotten it'll always be to the fore it'll always be in constant remembrance and our utter dependence on his grace will never ever be allowed to fade away verse 18 tells us that they were reading the book of the law every single day of the feast that was a stipulation in Deuteronomy 31 for every seventh year only for the sabbatical year the sabbath year the year of release may have been that it was actually that year it may have been they just done it because it was the beginning again of all of this in Israel's life but either way how appropriate it was because God's command for this feast was that it should be celebrated altogether joyfully that's the words used in Deuteronomy 16 and of course it is only the release the liberation that comes from truly understanding God's grace in his word of promise only that that can lead to such altogether joyful rejoicing among [45 : 40] God's people releasing the word friends here's a chapter that is written as Paul says for our instruction so that we also might have encouragement and hope in our Christian walk hope surely of sharing the joy of the Lord which we see even more clearly and wonderfully on this side of the Lord Jesus Christ and his great work for us and it surely does instruct us so very clearly doesn't it to the way of joy in any congregation's life to that great release that comes paradoxically as we become more and more captive to the rule of the word of God over our lives our personal lives and our corporate life more and more it comes as the word of God is released constantly comprehensively in the life of the church and received by us readily and with real reverence and with understanding of its real relevance to every aspect of our lives that is the road to joy and to great freedom in your life and mine and in our life together as a church make me a captive

Lord captive to your word of command and then I will be free and it's also the way let me say to powerful witness to a watching world a church that is truly seeking God's word and being truly shaken up by God's word stirred with real grief about sin but with real gladness and joy in God's grace and so a church that is being shaped truly by the gospel of grace in every way that church will be a church that is characterized and strengthened by the real joy of the Lord that church will be joyful and happy and harmonious and united because grace truly does reign in the lives of God's people there is a gospel shaping us all the time so that there is among all of us great humility about ourselves a remembering that we are each one of us but sojourners living in these tents of our bodies utterly dependent on the grace of God for everything for every moment for every breath that we take but there is also among all a great hope in the

God we know and the God who speaks these words of comfort and joy so unceasingly every time this book is opened that is the portion that we send to them God help us to see this and to make us determined to allow our lives to be shaped so by his word and may that indeed be so for our lives let us pray blessed

God who has caused all holy scripture to be written for our learning grant that we may in such wise hear them read mark learn and inwardly digest them that by patience and comfort of thy holy word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which thou hast given us in our saviour Jesus Christ Amen