



Time to Reflect

- In what ways do we currently devote ourselves to the study and observance of God's Word?
- Have you ever been particularly challenged and blessed by the preaching of God's Word? What made this occasion so special for you?

Last week our attention was drawn to a long list of names and numbers. This was a census and it reminded us that people matter to God. We reflected on people who have inspired us in our journeys of faith. This week we are focusing on the ministry of the Word. We will be reminded about the importance of being a biblical people and we will discern some of the reasons why we should understand, rejoice in, and obey the Word of God.

“When God's people get away from loving, reading, and obeying the Word of God, they lose the blessing of God. If we want to be like fruitful trees, we must delight in God's Word (Ps.1:2-3).”

(Warren Wiersbe, *Be Determined: Nehemiah*, p107-108)

Specifics

- Our studies have, thus far, focused on the rebuilding of the walls (ch1-6) and the taking of a census (7:5). From chapter 8 onwards, the focus of the book of Nehemiah changes.
- We could suggest that the material needs of the city had been met and now Nehemiah was concerned with its spiritual condition. From the outset it is important to recognise that Nehemiah and Ezra sought to elevate the importance of the Word of God in Jerusalem.
- Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones brilliantly suggests, **“The primary task of the church and of the Christian minister is the preaching of the Word of God...The decadent periods and eras in the history of the church have always been those periods when preaching has declined.¹”**
- As we look at this week's passage, we will see the ministry of the Word and three main responses to it.

1. Understanding the Word of God (v1-8)

- The importance of understanding is emphasised on several occasions in our passage (v2, 3, 8, 12). We see clear teaching occur in Nehemiah 8 and it was with the intention of helping the people to grow in their faith.
- Ezra was the person who led this extended period of teaching (v1) and he was perfectly suited to the role. He was a priest and scribe who had **“...devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel” (Ezra 7:10).**
- The location of this gathering is also worth noting (v1). The Water Gate is symbolically significant. In the Bible, water for washing often represents spiritual cleansing (John 15:3 and Ephesians 5:26) and water for drinking is a picture of the Spirit of God (John 7:37-39).
- The date is also significant (v1). This was the Jewish equivalent of New Year's Day and it was a perfect occasion for the people to make a fresh beginning in their relationship with God.

¹ Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971), pp19-24

- Ezra brought the Book of the Law of Moses, presumably the entire scroll of the Torah, and he used it to teach and instruct the people who had gathered (v1-4). Note how he stood on a wooden platform (v4).
- All the people could see Ezra and as soon as he opened the scroll everyone stood up. Note another way in which they responded. They lifted their hands (v6).
- Pope Benedict once reflected, **“The oldest gesture of prayer in Christendom is prayer with arms extended. This gesture is 'a radical form of worship.’²”**
- There were no time limits on this period of teaching (v3). Ezra started at daybreak and continued until noon – a period of five or six hours! The people who had gathered were prepared to spend half their day reflecting on God’s Word.
- Warren Wiersbe writes, **“We are...in too big a hurry to have the meeting end...In the average Western evangelical church, the shorter the sermon, the better we like it.³”**
- Our passage reflects on what it means to have a hunger for God’s Word and the teaching of it. (v7) speaks of the Levites also instructing the people. They probably mingled with the gathered assembly, answering questions and developing points of application. Here is a model of the public proclamation of the Word in a large assembly and the unpacking of it in smaller groups. Both are important.

2. Rejoicing in the Word of God (v9-12)

- On hearing the Word proclaimed and explained, the gathered assembly mourned and wept because of their sins. This was their moment of conviction and realisation that they had drifted from God.
- As we read this passage we encounter an important spiritual sequence – conviction, cleansing and celebration. Wiersbe reflects, **“The Word of God brings conviction and leads to repentance, but it also brings us joy, for the same Word that wounds also heals.⁴”**
- Nehemiah offered an important insight to the people. **“Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength”** (v10). We are to be a thankful people who rejoice in what God has done for us.
- Wiersbe writes, **“The secret of Christian joy is to believe what God says in His Word and act upon it...Faith based on the Word will produce joy that will weather the storms of life.⁵”**
- The Word of God does convict us of our sins and it highlights where we really are in our relationship with God. But it also challenges us to respond to the leading of God and embrace the fullness of life that He longs for us to have. In this we can and should rejoice.

3. Obeying the Word of God (v13-18)

- Having heard the Word of God, we should respond in obedience. As we read this passage we see how the people had joy in hearing the Word of God and they also had great gladness in obeying it (v17).
- During this time of feasting, when the community lived in booths and tents, they looked back and remembered the Exodus and the wilderness years. Yet they also looked forward to the glorious Kingdom that God promised His people (Zechariah 14:4, 9, 16-20).
- They reflected on the importance of obeying the Word of God and being faithful to Him. This faithfulness led to blessing. Today such faithfulness still leads to blessing.
- Wiersbe concludes, **“From time to time in the history of the church, God’s spirit has burdened people to pray, search the Scriptures, and confess their sins, and from them sincere spiritual exercises, He has seen fit to bring fresh life to His people. It happened in Nehemiah’s day, and it can happen again today.⁶”**

² Referenced in the *Bible In One Year* with Nicky and Pippa Gumbel, Day 362.

³ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Determined: Nehemiah* (David. C. Cook, 1992), p111.

⁴ Ibid, p112.

⁵ Ibid, p113.

⁶ Ibid, p116.