

The Transforming Power of God's Word!
Nehemiah chapter 8
Building for God's Glory!
April 7th 2024
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This building in Liverpool will be unknown to you. Like many disused church buildings it's been turned into luxury flats. But this place is very special to me - so much so that I returned there this week and took the photo! Why so precious? Because 45 years ago a scruffy student left his home in Wolverhampton to study Physics in Liverpool.

I remember Satan planting the thought Satan in my mind, "Roy, you can do whatever I please now, you're away from home, no-one will know!"

But by the grace of God, I found my way, on the very first Sunday of the term to Belvedere Road Baptist Church - who now meet at a school up the road. And here in this building over the next four years I heard the Bible preached every Sunday morning, every Sunday evening and every Tuesday night.

I was mesmerised, as my pastor, Stuart Olyott, with the simplicity a child could understand, preached through books of the Bible and sometimes doctrines of the bible, Sunday by Sunday. (I have often said to people that while I thought I was going to Liverpool to study Physics, God had other plans—he sent me to Liverpool to hear the Bible being preached!)

I look back on those happy but fleeting years with tremendous gratitude to God. They were life-changing! My thinking and my heart and I trust my life, were radically transformed by the preaching of the Bible.

Why was I spellbound - especially since I was already a Christian and I had grown up in a pastor's home, so I was used to preaching?! A minor reason was phase of life, I was at that stage where I was eager to learn. My pastor had the God-given gift of teaching; that's another reason, for the impact. A third reason, and we're getting closer to the real cause, was the fact that whole books of the Bible were preached, chapter by chapter and verse by verse. I had been used to pastors preaching on a theme here,

and a subject there, but I had never heard whole books, or whole Bible doctrines opened up! And as the whole counsel of God was explained, I heard God's voice! That was it His words filled my heart with joy and the Holy Spirit renewed my thinking, my philosophy, my worldview and my life.

This is my conviction: "As the Bible is simply explained, God's (powerful) voice is heard." People sometimes ask: how do we hear God's voice in 2024? In visions or dreams? The main answer, the most important answer is this: as we listen to the Bible explained in the power of the Holy Spirit.

What has this got to do with Nehemiah chapter 8? Well, put simply, when the Bible was read and explained to the people of God, a few days after the walls of Jerusalem were completed their minds and hearts and lives were transformed too!

And your life can be transformed by the Word of God today in exactly the same way. Transformed in a good and righteous and loving way!

Wherever the Bible has gone in the world it has always changed people and nations for good! (Of course there have always been people here and there who have twisted the words of the Bible and brought about mischief. The foolish crusades are a tragic example of that.) But in our day both Tom Holland from the West and Vishal Mangalwadi from India, have shown that the laws and the freedoms and values we enjoy in the west today all flow from the Bible. (If you are looking for holiday reading.....or a present to buy?)

The Story

So the walls of Jerusalem have been rebuilt! The city is secure and there's a real "buzz" about the place! People have begun moving back there to live, people like the 42,360 Nehemiah lists in chapter 7. The joy of this mammoth task completed in just 52 days with God's help, stirred up in the people a desire to hear God's word. "God has done great things for us, we want to know more about him and his ways." "They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses which the Lord had commanded for Israel" (verse 2)

This is what happened: First they built a platform wide enough for Ezra and 13 other

men to stand on and high enough so that everyone could see them.

DAY 1

Then, on the first day of the seventh month the people gathered around the platform - men and women of all ages down to the youngest who was able to understand. And Ezra the scribe and the 13 helpers climbed onto the platform. Ezra opened the Bible, which in their case is just the first five books, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus Numbers, Deuteronomy - the Pentateuch, the Torah.

The people all stood up in reverence.

Before Ezra read, he worshipped in prayer, “Ezra praised the Lord, the great God, and all the people lifted their hands and responded Amen! Amen! Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground” (verse 6)

And then he read the Bible for six hours! (my guess is that the other 13 men on the stage help him out by taking turns with this 6 hour Bible-thon!)

Something else is going on in the crowd. A group of 13 Levites, full time temple workers, are making their way through the crowd explaining the meaning of what was being read: “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.”

Either this was happening at the same time, as the reading from the front, or later on in the day, its hard to tell. The important thing was that the Levites were explaining what the Bible meant.

When my parents were working as missionaries in the Himalayas in the 1950s they would come across Buddhist prayer wheels, which contained their sacred scriptures and prayers. And the belief was that merely spinning them made the prayers effective. People would spin them, as passed by. The Bible isn't like that as if its mere existence in our hands or in our homes is effective: the Bible needs reading and explaining. So these 13 Levites moved among the crowd and explained what the Bible meant.

And sure enough God's Word began to touch hearts: the leaders noticed that the

people were getting upset because they realised how their lives were displeasing to God. The Bible was like a mirror exposing their evil thoughts and words and deeds!

Mourning for sin is a good thing but in this situation, penitence was for another day! On this day, after the walls had been rebuilt and the Bible re-discovered, rejoicing and feasting was to be the order of the day!

“This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep” (verse 9)

“Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send some to have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord, do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength. The Levites calmed all the people down...”

“Then all the people went away to eat and drink to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy. (How come the joy?) because now they understood the words that had been made known to them.”

That was first day of the month.

DAY 2

On the following day all the leaders, the heads of families wanted to get serious about obeying the words they had heard the day before. So they came back to Ezra. And as they studied the Bible they learnt that there was a Jewish festival coming up on the 15th-21st of the month called the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast had been lost to them or forgotten by them.

God had commanded the people to live in temporary booths. They had to gather branches - from palm trees and myrtle trees and olive trees and make a Bear Grylls survival-style dwelling and live in them for 7 days! To remind them of the forty years wilderness wanderings when living in tents God had protected them from enemies and provided food for them! It was an annual feast of thanksgiving!

Feast of Tabernacles, Days 15-21st

Somehow this festival had drained out of their collective memory, but it was revived on this second day of Bible study with the leaders.

“So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths

on their own roofs in their courtyards in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the water gate... 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.”

With me? Day 1 a great 6-hour gathering to hear God’s Word. Day 2 an in-depth, “how should we obeying God’s word?” Bible Study which led to a recovery and celebration of the 7-day feast of Tabernacles.

I pray that the Holy Spirit has already spoken to our hearts but let me draw out three lessons—because that is the task of preachers.

Three Lessons

(1) The Word of God must be central

The Word of God must be central, fundamental, foundational in church life and in our own individual lives.

The very first thing these people wanted, after rebuilding the walls, was to hear the word of God and it transformed their lives! It convicted them of sin which led to godly sorrow. It informed them how to live which led to obedience and great joy!

We need to make sure, brothers and sisters, that the Word of God takes pride of place in all of church life. The best hymns and songs are those that find their source—and even their very words - in Scripture. The most helpful prayers are those that use or echo the words of Scripture. The most powerful preaching is a faithful explanation of God’s word. In our day many of the once-great denominations are drifting or have drifted from the Bible. Preaching from God’s word has been substituted by a short pep talk or worldly philosophy.

Let us not for one moment imagine that could not happen with MPC and the 650 FIEC

churches to which we happily belong. Only constant, humble and prayerful vigilance will keep us from becoming like “Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have departed from the truth.” (2 Timothy 2).

And what is true about the church is also true in our own lives—the Word of God is essential! May, ask, are you a Bible Christian? Do you read the Bible during the week, or let your app read it to you? Are you careful about what internet teachers you listen to? Are they Bible people? I advise you to ask an elder if you are in doubt. Do you belong to a weekly home group where you can hear more of God’s word? We encourage everyone to belong to a weekly home group. Do you belong to one yet? They are scattered right throughout the week to make it as easy as possible for everyone to attend.

The people of God put the word of God at the centre, and so, with the Spirit’s help, must we.

(2) The Word of God is for everyone—so everyone must be able to hear!

The second application we should note is this: The Word of God is for everyone. “the assembly was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand” (verse 2 and verse 3)

Children who were old enough to understand were included in the great crowd who listened to the readers and the explainers. These children were encouraged to be part of the great congregation listening to the preached Word!

Why? Because children can respond to the Gospel! Children can possess true faith! So much so that Jesus set them up as examples “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18)

Let’s apply this truth—that the Word of God is for everyone including children - to ourselves!

Application 1 - encourage your kids to come to church on Sunday mornings!

When our children were young Yvonne and I made a guideline in our house that Sunday mornings were special, they were for meeting with God's people and for hearing God's word. So, with very rare exceptions, our children were not allowed to play sport, go to parties or engage in leisure activities on Sunday mornings. And I would encourage every parent of little ones to adopt that guideline for your kids. Before they reach the age when those pressures fall upon them. Explain it to them simply: this is one way we are going to show that God comes first in our lives.

Application 2—make sure your children are quiet in morning worship and especially during the sermon

The children who could not understand, by implication, were not present when the Bible was being read.

It is wonderful to have so many little ones present on a Sunday morning. And I want to encourage those without little ones to be patient and tolerant.

But I also want to say to all parents, make sure the rest of us can hear God's Word! When your little child makes a noise you don't even notice because you love them so much! But other people are distracted.

If my little grandson Charlie was here this morning, and he went walkabouts and made lots of pre-language Pingu noise I wouldn't even notice, because he's flesh and blood and I love him to bits! But three rows away you'd notice and you might be distracted, and perhaps even annoyed (how could anyone get annoyed with my Charlie?!)

If your child makes the odd noise during the first part of the service, we all understand that, but if they begin making noises during a prayer or a Bible reading or a talk by a missionary, please love your neighbour and take them out! That's why we have a crèche!

And especially if they make a noise during a sermon! Preachers can't concentrate, we notice the congregation becoming distracted and unsettled! Love needs to be exercised on both sides, tolerance on the side of those without little ones and sensitivity on the side of those with children.

Application 3—encourage your children to be baptised.

And my third practical application is this: since children were encouraged to hear God's word and since they can believe, encourage your children to get baptised. I do not understand parents who are not actively, sensitively, gently, encouraging their children who believe to be baptised! Especially when those same parents are actively encouraging good grades at school! How can we encourage worldly knowledge but not encourage spiritual growth? What are you waiting for, parents? Are you waiting for them to be perfect? What like you?! Few things will encourage a doubting child or an anxious young teenager more in their faith than to have a parent - who knows them best! - say "I see that you believe, why don't you get baptised, my dear son, my daughter?"

(3) The Word of God is powerful!

Hearing the word of God brought God's people to tears; understanding it brought them great joy and obedience! The Bible changed their hearts and lives! It changed my life, it has changed many of your lives and continues to do so; it became "the very foundation of Western civilization." (Vishal Mangalwadi) The Word...

- Saves us: "The Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe!" (Romans 1:16)
- Brings light into our souls, "The entrance of your word brings light" (Psalm 119:30)
- Guides us when we don't know which way to turn: "Your Word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path." (Psalm 119:105)
- Comforts us in distress: "My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life." (Psalm 119:50)
- Keeps us from sin, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." (Psalm 119:11)
- Preserves us in the darkest affliction, "If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction. (119:92)

May the Lord make us and keep us a Word Church and may each of find not only the salvation God offers in Jesus through his Word, may we find in here a lamp for our feet and a light for our path.