

#2 Driven by God's Word

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Preacher: Brian King

[0 : 00] in your lives. The joy of the Lord is your strength. Let's pray. It's all about a rebuilding project.

But we mustn't miss the significance of this project. Because just repairing and putting up a few structures is not going to secure the reformation and revival and the joy of God's people.

For as a Greek historian, Thucydides, who lived in the same century as Nehemiah, once said, it is the people, not the walls, that makes a city.

It is the people, not the walls, that make a city. God knows very well that simply having a physical temple and rebuild walls will not secure his people's future.

No, he must not just rebuild the city, but the people. He must engage not just in physical renovation, but spiritual renovation.

[1 : 12] And indeed, in our church, we must not make the same mistake of thinking that putting up a few new structures, whether that's shiny new church facilities, an activity-filled church program, or a new youth-oriented leadership team, will in itself bring reformation and revival and joy.

Those things are not wrong. They're even necessary. But they're not the main thing. For how will God bring through reformation and revival and joy in us?

How will God rebuild his people? That's where Nehemiah, chapter 8, will help us. And indeed, it will help explain and unpack core conviction number 2 for our church.

So let's look at Nehemiah, chapter 8, under three headings this morning. Firstly, reformation and revival happen when God's people delight in God's word.

When God's people delight in God's word. In Nehemiah, chapter 8, verse 1, we find that all the people came together as one. This is the very first time this has happened in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

[2 : 44] Indeed, it has been over 200 years since Jerusalem has seen anything like this when King Josiah ruled over them. And even for at least a decade since the people returned from exile, they had not gathered in this way.

This suggests that there had been little appetite for what was about to occur. But now, things are changing. In verse 4, we're told that a high wooden platform is built for this particular occasion.

So this gathering doesn't seem to be spontaneous, but planned. notice who are gathered. In verse 2, we're told that the assembly was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.

Earlier in chapter 7, we're also given a list of what kind of people they were. Ordinary citizens, priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers, servants.

This was everybody. Everybody was welcome. Everybody was gathered. And they gathered not in the temple, but, verse 3 tells us, in the square before the water gate.

[4 : 1 0] A modern parallel today might be the crowd you see who gather at Dataran Merdeka on a New Year's Eve or doing a birthday rally. In other words, this gathering was held in a place which would be as accessible as possible to as many people as possible.

They wanted everybody to come. Indeed, as you read through this passage, did you notice how the phrase all the people keeps on repeating?

The people and their actions are the focus. But what are they gathering for? now, here's the reason they are meeting.

Here's the plan. They have gathered to hear a book read. How many of us would go to a Christian gathering to do that?

But they did. They wanted this book. They desired it badly. In verse 1, they told Ezra, bring out the book.

[5 : 2 0] Bring out Moses' book. Most likely, they were talking about the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Notice that they were not drifting in 15 minutes after the service had started.

Rather, they were already buzzing from the beginning, waiting in anticipation, ready for this book to be opened. They were not asking God to reveal himself in the cloud of fire, or to drop manna from heaven.

They simply wanted this scroll to be unwrote and recited to them. And did you notice in verse 3, this book is read for at least six hours, from daybreak until noon.

And right at the end of verse 3, amazingly, we're told that as this book was read, all the people listened attentively to the book of the law.

Just imagine that. They're not just going through the motions. They're not switching off. They're giving their total concentration for six entire hours.

[6 : 3 9] And they're not concentrating on Ezra's latest ideas or Nehemiah's upcoming plans. As the commentator Derek Kidner points out, this is not a new manifesto.

These are simply the foundation articles. That's what they've come to hear. For as they listen to Genesis and Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, they know what they're hearing.

this isn't just a book. This is God speaking. This is not just hearsay. This is the direct voice of God.

When our sister was reading earlier, that's what you heard. The direct voice of God. And as they listened, they are worshipping.

In verse 5, as Ezra opens the book, the people all stood as a sign of their reverence. And in verse 6, they shouted, Amen, Amen.

[7 : 5 5] That means we believe, we agree. May it be. May it be. They were listening actively and responding. And they fell down in worship.

For to listen to the word of God is to worship the God of this word. The two go together. Listening is worshipping.

For the Bible is God's voice. So here is something extraordinary happening. The people are united.

They came together as one. And at the very centre of their unity lies the word of God. And they were not distant from the word.

They were personally involved. They were the ones who called for Ezra to bring out the books. Not the other way around. They delight in the word.

[9 : 0 0] they wanted to know what it said. And my friends, this is what we want. Do you want to experience true spiritual power?

Do you want to experience a reformation and revival? do you want to hear God's voice? To hear his love song and his words of life? His painful but necessary challenges and his gentle sounds of encouragement?

Do you want that in our church? Then we must pray to rediscover a love for God's word.

God's God's God's word. When we come willing to open our Bibles, when we come expectant that he will speak when we do.

When we come to God's word allowing him to set the agenda for the conversation rather than coming with predetermined ideas of what he should say.

[10 : 03] When we are willing to listen even when he says things that are uncomfortable and difficult for us, while we allow God to build us up and renovate us, we let him bring revival and joy to us.

For all throughout church history, it has always been the case that authentic revival is accompanied by a true rediscovery of the word.

It happened in Israel to King Josiah in the Bible. He stumbled upon this same book of the law, which had been gathering dust.

He read it, was convicted of the nation's disobedience, removed the idols from his land, and led the nation to renew their vows to the Lord.

It happened in America in the 18th century, when George Whitfield, the evangelist, brought God's word in such an electrifying way that even Benjamin Franklin, the guy credited with discovering electricity, who wasn't a Christian, he could not deny the evidence of the revival.

[11 : 20] He said, man, everyone's becoming more into God. Everyone's singing psalms and hymns. It happened in China in the 20th century, when under God's word, people confessed their sins, returned stolen goods, gave up their concubines, and boldly shared the gospel.

And indeed, the Canadian Presbyterian missionary, Jonathan Golff, who witnessed the revival firsthand, said this, the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God, is the only weapon which has ever been mightily used in revival.

My friends, if you want the Holy Spirit to move, you must love God's word. If you want the spirit apart from the word, you will get neither.

True worship of God results when the true word of God is rediscovered. True devotion to God happens when the true word of God is delighted in.

It was true of Nehemiah's day. It's true in ours. Parents, do you want your children to love God?

[12 : 46] Then you yourself must love God's word and model that love to your children. Research shows that that's the best way to ensure your kids stay Christian.

But we don't need research to tell us that. The Bible already tells us so. God builds and rebuilds his people through his word.

So how can we foster a love for God's word? Well, this brings me to my second point. Secondly, reformation and revival happen when God's people deliberately digest God's word.

When God's people deliberately digest God's word. In verses 7 and 8, look at what the Levites are doing. The Levites, Jesus, Joshua, Joshua, Benai, Sherebiah, Jamin, Aquab, Shabbatai, Hodiah, Masaiah, Kelitha, Azariah, Josabat, Hanan, and Peliah instructed the people in the law while the people were standing there.

They read from the book of the law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. They were teaching and explaining.

[14 : 16] They wanted to make sure everyone understood. They were helping people deliberately digest God's word. During the Protestant Reformation five centuries ago, this principle was clearly expressed in the actions of the reformers.

During the 15th century, there were many churches in which there was no regular preaching. They merely sang songs in Latin, which they did not understand.

Indeed, if there was a sermon, it was also usually in Latin. Going to church for them would have been like me going to a Fuchao Association dinner.

I'll understand nothing. If there was a sermon, it rarely touched on Scripture directly. according to one of the reformers, there were two common kinds of sermons.

One in which the sermons talked about obscure academic issues of no interest to anyone, and another that simply told amusing story after amusing story.

[15 : 30] So the people were spiritually weak and lethargic. Spiritually speaking, they had been systematically starved. Indeed, it might be worth asking ourselves, could it be that our situation in Sarawak is not so different from the 15th century in Europe?

But the reformers insisted. If the message of the gospel was to be appreciated, and its power unleashed, it had to be properly understood.

And that could only happen if people knew the contents of scripture for themselves. And so they devoted themselves to learning the original languages and to preaching the Bible.

They didn't just preach from the Bible, they preached the Bible itself. And this was also seen in their architecture. Medieval Catholic churches put the altar at the center.

the reformers replaced it with the pulpit. And in front of the church's platforms, they placed a large open Bible translated into the language of the people so that those who could read had easy access.

[16 : 49] And as a result, people began to hear the gospel for the first time. One of them said, the scriptures began to be more pleasant to me than the honey in the honeycomb.

As they were taught, the word of God became alive, wrong ideas dispelled, and the reformation happened as people turned back to God.

So reformation and revival can only happen if people can understand and digest God's word. That's one reason we're having our classes in the next two weeks on learning to dig for treasure, to help all of us understand and digest God's word better.

And that's not an easy task. Many of us here know what feeding babies and teaching them to feed themselves is like. It's often a messy and drawn-out affair.

Sometimes they vomit the food out. Sometimes they reject it, they throw it on the floor. Sometimes they have no appetite for it. Sometimes they do try to put the spoon in their mouths, but most of the food doesn't end up in there.

[18 : 07] And it can take a while for people to know how to digest God's word. They might not like it or get it at first. They prefer jokes, they prefer light anecdotes, they prefer bullet points.

And certainly it took some time for the people in Nehemiah's day to learn to digest God's word. But they did. Just like children eventually learn to be fed and feed themselves and appreciate meal times more, so did the people here.

They developed an appetite for God's word. For as the word was taught and they understood it, it didn't just stimulate their minds.

It captured their hearts. They were not unmoved. They were not hardened. Did you notice how they responded at the end of verse 9?

For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the law. Perhaps Ezra had just read Genesis 3 and the Levites explained that the fundamental sin of Adam and Eve was an acute failure to take God at his word.

[19 : 30] They had chosen to listen to the voice of the serpent saying, you shall not surely die if you take the fruit, rather than God's voice saying, enjoy the whole garden, but if you eat of that fruit, you shall surely die.

Perhaps Ezra had just read Exodus 32 and they've heard how Aaron and their ancestors built and worshipped a golden calf, even as Moses is up the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments.

Perhaps Ezra had reached the book of Numbers, and they've heard the story of their forefathers grumbling repeatedly in chapters 11 and 12 and 14 and 16 saying how much they wanted to go back to Egypt.

So they weep because over and over again, they have seen a picture of their own sin, their own foolishness.

They have seen the human heart in all its darkness. They have seen a record of their own failure. It is worthy of tears.

[20 : 52] This was repentance and it's the right response. Later in Nehemiah chapter 9, the people will come together and confess their sins.

But paradoxically here, this weeping leads to rejoicing. Look at verse 10. Nehemiah said, go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared.

This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength. Nehemiah says, weep but not today for it's a holy day.

You see, we were told earlier in chapter 8 verse 1 that it's the seventh month, which means it's the time for a whole series of Jewish festivals.

And all those festivals in one way or another celebrated God's goodness in redeeming them through the Exodus. These festivals celebrated the God who always keeps his promises, who does not punish, who shows mercy and love.

[22 : 10] They celebrated the God whose joy is their strength. Because as the people listened to the scriptures, this is what the teachers might have also pointed out to them.

Perhaps they pointed out the beautiful promise found halfway through Genesis chapter 3, where God says, one day there will be a descendant of Eve who will crush the serpent.

perhaps they were at Exodus and they pointed out the power of God as he sends plague after plague against their enemies.

And they pointed out the grace of God as he provided a Passover lamb for his people to rescue them from judgment. Perhaps they had reached Deuteronomy and they saw that God had been faithful in leading them right to the edge of the promised land despite their constant grumbling and unfaithfulness despite their cries to go back to Egypt.

In other words, they heard the promises of the gospel. At this point in their history, they do not know Jesus yet the way we are privileged to.

[23 : 32] But they heard the promise of a serpent crusher. They heard of the provision of a substitute lamb. They heard of the preservation of God's people when they deserve nothing but punishment.

And all these are promises of the gospel. It's the declaration that God rescues and rebudes his people.

And that's why in verse 12, 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.

They understood the gospel in shadow form. So how should Nehemiah chapter 8, verse 7 to 12, shape the convictions of our church this morning?

Well, one thing it means is that we must do everything we can to help each other digest God's word. One way that happens is by a commitment to faithful expository preaching from the pulpit.

[24 : 48] What is expository preaching? It's simply doing what the Levites did here, reading from God's word, making it clear, and giving the meaning so that people understand.

Well, that's what I'm trying to do right now, as I try to make clear the meaning of Nehemiah 8 to you. That's preaching as biblically defined.

But it's not merely teaching and understanding. Expository preaching is not the same as an academic lecture. teaching. It's teaching with the ultimate aim of capturing our hearts with the gospel.

Because we see Jesus even more clearly than those in Nehemiah's day, we have that privilege because we stand on the other side of the cross. It's to cause us to be convicted of our sin and marvel again at Jesus who stands at the very center of the entire Bible.

So, you see, as we understand the scriptures more and more, we begin to see the gospel more and more clearly. When we begin to see the gospel more and more clearly, we begin to love God more and more dearly.

[26 : 08] And when we begin to love God more and more dearly, we can obey him more and more joyfully. And that's what brings about revival and reformation and joy.

Digesting God's word allows us to be gospel-centered. And that's what changes a church. So, that's why teaching the word takes such a high priority.

some of you might remember that I'm involved with a national conference called NextGen, which aims to train the next generation of Christians aged between 18 to 35 to handle and teach God's word rightly.

It gets people from different states, and I think last year we had something like 34 churches represented, both from mega churches and small churches. every year we have a waiting list.

And for the last three years it has consistently been one of my highlights. I really wish I could bring you there with me to see for yourself. A whole filled with young adults, all hungry for God's word, all incredibly focused as they take in expositions of Bible books, as they learn how to connect individual passages to the overall storyline of the Bible, as they discuss excitedly among themselves all that they're learning and how that will apply when they go back to their respective churches.

[27 : 39] And when I speak to them, I keep hearing the same thing come up again and again. They keep saying the same thing to me. They say, one reason we love NextGen so much is that we're not getting this kind of thing in our churches.

The churches keep thinking that we don't want God's word, that we will find Bible study boring. They pay lip service to the importance of God's word, of course, but they keep trying to give us what they think is the fleshy stuff.

They don't teach us how to understand God's word, and when we ask questions, they keep putting us off. And that's why we feel so frustrated. My friends, let's have confidence in the word to bring reformation and revival.

Let's have confidence that the word can bring every generation to know God. The word is the fleshy stuff. Finally, our third point this morning.

Reformation and revival happen when God's people are driven by God's word, God's people are driven by God's word. In verse 13, we find the man this time listening to God's word.

[29 : 06] On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered round Ezra, the teacher of the law, to give attention to the words of the law.

And as they listened in verses 14 to 15, they discovered something they had forgotten. They were meant to celebrate this specific festival called the festival of booths or tabernacles.

And as they heard and understood, they began to realize that they needed to do what they had not been doing. Gather branches, make booths, and at the appointed time gathered together again in Jerusalem and hold this festival.

This was in line with instructions from Leviticus and Deuteronomy. I don't know if you've ever had the experience where sometimes you're reading a part of the Bible and it felt like the Bible was speaking directly and immediately to you.

Well, that was how the men fell. Look at how they responded, verse 16. So the people went out, and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their 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.

[30 : 31] No questions asked. No excuses made. No delays given. They just did it. God's word was in the driving seat.

It wasn't that they were being legalistic. They weren't trying to earn God's favour. They did it because it's the right thing to do. They did it because they were God's people who obeyed God's word.

We shouldn't confuse obedience with legalism. As God's people, we do need to be driven by God's word. And for us today, of course, our obligation is not so much to observe the festival of booths.

That was part of the ceremonial law, which has been abolished by the finished work of Christ. But we know there are plenty of other instructions to obey. Let me just choose one at random.

Colossians chapter 3, verse 12 to 14, it should appear on the screen. Colossians chapter 3, yeah. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

[31 : 47] Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

While God calls us as his chosen people to be driven by God's word. So is there anything in that list, for example, that you need to obey today? Perhaps sorting out a grievance with someone and forgiving them?

Perhaps showing more kindness to another person? But whatever it is, let God's word drive you. And obedience leads to joy.

Come back with me to Nehemiah chapter 8, verse 17. The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters 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.

One of Satan's favorite lies is to tell us that obedience is bad for us. Obedience is a chore. But when obedience is gospel-centered, as it is in this case, when it comes out from knowing the God who rescued them and who keeps his promises to them, well, it becomes joyful because it's no longer about obeying abstract laws.

[33 : 23] It's about pleasing the one you love. And notice in verse 18 what Ezra did. He kept reading the word.

day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the book of the law of God. He's continually exposing his people to the word because he knows that's what secures not just their obedience, but their joy.

He knows that as the word of God dwells in us richly, it strengthens us. Indeed, one of the convictions of the reformers is how every part of the Sunday gathering should be driven by God's word.

They summarized it in this way. On a Sunday, we must preach the Bible, read the Bible, sing the Bible, pray the Bible, and see the message of the Bible in the Lord's Supper.

And so in practice, it doesn't really matter how many songs we sing. But what matters is that the words of the songs are scripture shaped and Christ centered, not me centered.

[34 : 41] It doesn't matter how many Bible readings we have, but as 1 Timothy 4.13 tells us, we must devote ourselves to the public reading of scripture. Our prayers can be set or spontaneous, but they must reflect the priorities of scripture.

We must be driven by God's word on a Sunday and outside of Sundays. So as we finish, I hope you can see core conviction number two for our church.

We delight in God's word as we digest it, and that should result in us being driven by God's word. In Casey, we won and we're trying to let the word drive our song choices, in the fact that we have a Bible reading before the sermon, in our preaching.

Next month, we'll hope to give you more details about what's happening in our Bible study program, and I hope you can see that also comes out of a conviction that we want to let the entire Bible shape us.

This year, once in a while, maybe every quarter, we'll offer a doctrine class after the Sunday service, and we do that not just for the sake of learning more information, but so that we can draw near to Jesus.

[36 : 17] For the word of the Lord is the sword of the Spirit that he wishes to will. And if we are driven by God's word, in God's timing, they can be reformation and revival.

And the words of Nehemiah 8, verse 10 no longer need to remain on your fridge magnet, but be rooted in your lives. The joy of the Lord is your strength.

Let's pray. Amen. When do that night way, God T Thank you.