

Sermon Bible Sunday

Nehemiah 8.1–4a, 5–6 and 8–12

Why bother with the Bible?

By Andy Bissex, Bible Society

Introduction

A series of books you might not expect to find listed as a *New York Times* Bestseller is *The Book of Useless Information*. Produced by The Useless Information Society, issues of this book have sold thousands of copies.

In these books you can read fascinating facts such as:

- Fish scales are used to make lipstick
- 10% of the United States annual income comes from organised crime
- It is estimated that half of the world's spider species are yet to be discovered
- In the 1920s, Hollywood made twice as many films per year as it does today
- A baby giraffe is six feet long when it is born
- Sales of Shakespeare's works are second only to the Bible
- And my favourite! In a recent five year period, 24 residents of Tokyo bashed heads whilst bowing to each other!



Sadly, the Bible, which used to be the supreme point of reference for most people in public life in our nation, is perceived by many in the UK today to be as useless as *The Book of Useless Information*.

Available in over 400 languages, written thousands of years ago by over 40 authors, a book which 500 years ago, men and women gave their lives to translate and distribute in this nation, and upon which the social and moral foundations of western civilisation were built, is today seen by most as irrelevant.



Today we look at a passage from Nehemiah chapter 8. The book of Nehemiah picks up the record of a man called Ezra and takes them further. The people had returned to the land of Israel following the decree of King Cyrus of Persia in 538 BC that all captives should return home. Chapters 1–7 tell of the rebuilding of the walls under Nehemiah despite opposition from the people of the land.

The middle of the book (7.73b–10.39) recounts a ceremony which renewed the covenant between God and his people and celebrated the law. In chapter eight particularly, the Book of the Law is solemnly read, and a great act of covenant renewal is performed. This section shows the unity of Ezra and Nehemiah's projects. With the walls securely in place, the centrality of the Mosaic law is once again made prominent, since it is not security alone that is essential to the life of the community, nor even the temple, but trust in God and obedience to God's word as revealed through Moses.

Here we see a community who valued their Scriptures. Let's think for a minute about the posture and attitude we see in these people. I find these characteristics very challenging! In verses 1–6 we see three values expressed which show how this vast congregation values God's word: Let's look together at the passage as the people demonstrate **unity, attentiveness and worship**.

Unity – the people of God coming together to hear God's word.

Here is a group of people who are committed to hearing God's word (verse 1). I guess that group included all kinds of people – families and single people, rich and poor, husbands and wives, widows and widowers, young and old. I'm sure that there were people there with diverse experiences and perhaps were living in different circumstances. They were people who had endured hardship – a real mix of experiences! But despite so much that could separate them – we see here inclusiveness, a willingness to come together as a community to hear what God has to say.

Bible Society is an organisation that for over 200 years has and still is working amongst all different kinds of people, from all across the globe to help open the Scriptures. As the group in the passage are diverse, so too are we today, and Bible Society believes that when people engage with the Bible, lives can change – for good.

Bible Society is helping communities and individuals to unite around the Bible. The Good Samaritan project in Nala, Tanzania enabled Cecilia's family to understand from the Bible that having HIV didn't mean she had to be excluded, but that she could be included in all they did together as a family. (*See biblesociety.org.uk/latest/news/the-bible-showed-me-i-was-loved/ for the full story*)



Photography by Jon Challinor

Attentiveness – the people of God hungry for God’s word

In the passage (verse 3) the people come together in unity not to boast at achieving a great wall, or even to celebrate being together, but to hear the words of God’s law. Earlier this year Andy Bissex from Bible Society, along with about 1,000 others, had the privilege of being in St Paul’s Cathedral to hear the actor and Bible Society Vice-President, David Suchet read the whole of Mark’s Gospel. For two hours he sat transfixed, in absolute silence as the life and ministry of Jesus washed over him. Familiar stories and passages took on a new meaning as he listened – and the whole event proved to be an incredibly moving and powerful experience. I don’t know about you, but I get a real sense of that here in this passage. The vast crowd listening attentively and longingly as Ezra reads God’s word, speaking into the hearts and minds of the crowd.

All over the world people are longing for God’s word and that same word of Jesus, bringing comfort, hope and light – even in the darkest of circumstances. Alan Kember from Bible Society met Salma* in Jordan in April 2016. Salma is a Muslim refugee and her home in Iraq is now in rubble. She started attending a women’s group in Jordan to share her worries and study the Bible that she was given. She says ‘Belief in Jesus makes life worth living, even though I own nothing.’ (See biblesociety.org.uk/latest/news/how-one-syrian-woman-discovered-hope-in-a-refugee-camp/ for the full story)

Worship – the people of God responding to the authority of God’s word.

As the people listened, something happened (verse 6). They worshipped God with arms outstretched and then knelt with their faces to the ground. They recognised the uniqueness and authority of God’s voice revealed in the Scriptures. That’s a real challenge for you and me. What do we understand the Bible to be? Is it a ‘Google like’ spiritual search engine? Is it something that we engage with just as part of Sunday worship? Or is it much more than that?

Bible Society have just helped launch three new Bible translations for communities in China. The tears flooding down the faces of the Black Yi tribe at the launch event of their Bible show the significance of receiving God’s word for the first time. Pastor Wenfu told Hazel Southam that ‘My greatest hope has been fulfilled.’ (See biblesociety.org.uk/get-involved/donate/appeals/translating-the-bible-into-new-languages/ for the full story)

So in the first part of our passage (verse 1–6), we have seen how the people demonstrated unity, attentiveness and worship. What did they do next? They applied God’s word and shared it with others.

God's word applied

In the second part of the chapter (verses 8–12) we see the application of Scripture in the hearts and lives of the people.

As they hear, as they understand, they apply it and we see God's word changing lives – for good. It's the same for us today. Bible Society spoke with Chris who told how reading Psalm 139 was a tremendous help to him and his wife when their unborn baby was diagnosed with Edwards' Syndrome. In an incredibly traumatic time it helped because whatever the absolute pain of the moment, there is a bigger purpose. *(See Bible Society's Facebook post from Tuesday 4 July 2017 for the full story)*

To start with, in our passage the people evidently feel challenged and provoked – we read that they begin to weep and grieve – Their consciences have been touched. But as they weep and mourn, the Scribes who have been explaining tell them that there is Good News!

The people who are grieving are reminded that God has forgiven their wrongdoing – so they can rejoice!

We too can hear the words of verse 10. **'Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'**

God's word shared

The blessings of Scripture are not just for ourselves, but to be shared with others. Verse 10 also shows that as they rejoiced in God's goodness, the blessing was to be shared with others. It's a great privilege that we have too – that we who have been so blessed, can tell others and share the message of God's love – revealed in the Bible in our community and around the world. Bible Society is on a mission to offer the Bible to the world and our help is needed in that mission!



Photography by Jon Challicom

How can you and your church help?

How can we apply this passage and share its good news as the people in Ezra's time did?

Pray – Get involved - Give

Here are some great ways that we as a church and individually can support the work of Bible Society.



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Bible Society's prayer is that through the provision of the Bible, everyone everywhere will, in the words of the Apostle Paul, one day be able '...to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge...' and 'may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.' (Eph 3.18–19)

Volunteer to run a Bible Book Club in your home – Pick a book of the Bible like Nehemiah, read it then get together with friends to chat about it. Download Bible Society's helpful guides including tips, discussion questions and hints for handling those tricky sections. (*See biblesociety.org.uk/biblebookclub for more information*)

Finally, think about whether as a united community you too could put verses 10 and 12 into practice – eat and drink together and send gifts to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. You can do this by making a combined church gift to Bible Society, or making a personal gift to show your support for the vision of a world where everyone has access to the Bible and can recognise its value for them, their families and communities.

As we ponder the experience of God's people as they stood outside the Watergate in Jerusalem all those thousands of years ago – their unity, attentiveness, worship and generosity – may we as God's people today, be united in our passion to engage with the Bible ourselves and share it with others. May we day by day remember that the Bible is not a book of useless information, but a book that encourages unity, deserves attentiveness and inspires worship.

Let me finish with the words of Brenda Dainton, another life-long lover of the Bible and supporter of Bible Society.

'Because I love the Bible, I want other people to love it too. Everybody has a right to have God's word, to be taught how to read it and engage with it'