



Bible Sunday 2023
Sermon outline
Nehemiah 8.1-11 (GNB)
Celebrating God's word

Nehemiah 8.1–11 is the story of the reading of the law to the people of Israel after their return from exile in Babylon. It's a great way in to talking about the importance of God's word to his people today. This is a sermon framework and ideas you might find helpful either in thinking about the passage yourself or in sharing it with others.

Introduction

Question: does anyone know in which UK public building these words (in Latin) are found?

'Unless the Lord builds the house the builders labour in vain' (Psalm 127.1).

Answer: They are inlaid in the floor of the Central Lobby in the Houses of Parliament in Westminster. They are a reminder that Scripture has informed, shaped and provided the foundations for our country. God's word is a strong foundation not just for a nation, but particularly for God's people as we know it and learn to live by it.

Background

In around 445 BC Nehemiah arrived back in Jerusalem, sent by King Artaxerxes, to whom he was the cupbearer. This was the second return; a few years before, Ezra had arrived. The people of Israel had been exiled in Babylon about 140 years earlier; Babylon was subsequently overturned as the regional superpower by the Medes and Persians (539 BC). Though the temple had been rebuilt and efforts to rebuild the nation had begun, it was not all plain sailing; the Book of Nehemiah tells us of the trials and tribulations he and other leaders faced. The reading of the Law was a key moment for them as they realised and reaffirmed their identity as God's people, bound to him in a sacred covenant. The Law – perhaps the Book of Deuteronomy – was written in Hebrew, but during their exile their everyday language had changed to Aramaic. Most of the people wouldn't have understood what they were hearing, so it was translated and explained for them.

Hearing God's word

1. They met with a sense of anticipation

Nehemiah and the priests had prepared carefully for this event. They had prepared a wooden platform so that Ezra could be seen. They made sure everyone was there. They had arranged for the Levites to explain the meaning of what was being read. These Levites would have had to study and discuss the text beforehand so they knew what to say. The whole event had been planned as a centrepiece for the foundation of this renewed community. It was built around God's word, and 'they all listened attentively' – for about six hours!

To think about: how do we centre God's word in our worship today? Do we plan carefully and study hard? Are we attentive to his words?

2. They were fed according to their needs

The Levites 'gave an oral translation of God's Law and explained it so that the people could understand it' (verse 8). There was good reason for this, because this was a complex audience. There were those who had become zealous for their faith in the hostile environment of the Babylonian Empire and those who had lost their way as they had been left behind leaderless. Perhaps there was friction between the different groups. They all needed to hear God's word for them.

To think about: The Bible is a wonderful record of events, teaching and visions, but it contains things that are difficult to understand. The Levites took time and skill to explain the Law. We all need help from those who've gone before us, and in a culture where people don't know or read the Bible as much as they once did, it's even more important to 'translate' it in ways they can understand.

3. They were changed by what they heard

Verse 9 tells us that 'when the people heard what the Law required, they were so moved that they began to cry'. They were struck by the gap between what they ought to have been and what they were, and grieved at how they'd fallen short. But Nehemiah and Ezra tell them not to become obsessed with their sin but rather to enjoy and celebrate what the Lord had done for them. God's word convicts us of sin, but much more, it brings grace and the knowledge of love and forgiveness.

To think about: how confident are we in the power of God's word to break through our selfishness and hard-heartedness and change our minds? And are we open to his words of blessing as well as his words of rebuke? Are there stories we can share together about how he's spoken to us?

Conclusion

It was as the people gathered around God's word that they were bound together as a community. For us too, coming together around food and the Scriptures and sharing stories, hopes and fears can prove to be a restart moment. The Bible transforms lives because it is the written word that leads us to the living Word: 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us' as John says in the prologue to his Gospel (John 1.14, NIV).

As in Ezra and Nehemiah's day, the word of God is central to understanding our place in the world and how to live. It shows us that it is the truth and grace of Jesus Christ that is the hope of our lives and the hope of the world.

Resources

[Open the Book](#) is one of Bible Society's most established and effective ministries. It brings the word of God to schoolchildren through innovative storytelling, active drama and audience participation. Volunteer teams in schools around the country tell 10 to 15-minute scripted stories to primary school assemblies. Could your church form an Open the Book team to share God's word with children today, as Ezra did so many years ago?

[The Bible Course](#) is a video-based series giving participants an overview of the full sweep of Scripture, and it's one of Bible Society's most popular resources.

Following on from that, Bible Society has recently launched [The Romans Course](#) with a similar one-hour small group format to encourage immersion in one of Paul's most-read letters. With video explainers from Rome, discussion questions and testimonies for each session, this ten-part series is a great way to tackle a challenging letter.

Bible Society wants everyone to have access to the Bible and to understand its message for them. We translate it into different languages, and we invite people to engage with it through the resources we provide. On this Bible Sunday, please consider supporting Bible Society's [Bible a Month](#) scheme which funds Bibles for those in greatest need of the Scriptures from £10 per month.