

Nehemiah 8 – Rediscovering the Word of God.

III – The Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy is 810 years old. It's 179 feet high, moves about one-twentieth of an inch a year, is now 17 feet out of plumb, and is apparently going to fall by the year 2007. Its foundation is only 10 feet deep! When a building starts to fall, you know there's something missing. You know there's something wrong with the foundation.

1. Rebuilding the Community around God's Word – vv1-6 – the centrality of the Word

ch8, verse 1: When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, I all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

There's a hole in the community of Israel. A big hole. A foundational hole. If they're going to build a community, they need to fill that hole with a strong foundation, because everything they build on top will depend on what's underneath.

So Ezra brings out God's Word – his law. Everyone gathers outside, and as Ezra stands there with God's Word, *"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."*

And the Word of God is read and the Levites, verse 7, *"instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. 8 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."*

In other words, they **read** it and they **explained** it so people **understood** it. The solid concrete is being poured into the foundation of their community. And the result is breathtaking!

2. Transforming the community by God's Word – vv7-12 – the breaking into weeping

9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

When they heard the laws of God they WEPT, because they realised how they had broken God's laws. They grieved because when they heard God's Word, they realised their sin before God.

3. Reviving the community with God's Word – vv13-18 – the building of booths

Finally, in verses 13-18, the community engages with God's Word – they put it into action. They've not only listened to the word – they've understood it and are putting it into action.

14 They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month 15 and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem

The Israelites **used** to have a custom called the "festival of booths".

III – It was sort of like the 40 hour famine today. People don't eat food for 40 hours to remind them of the famine that many people across the world face every day, and they raise money to help those people.

The festival of booths had a similar effect. In the seventh month, they would set up portable booths, or tents, just like their ancestors had to live in while they were wandering in the desert. It reminded them of the time their ancestors wandered in the desert for 40 years before they entered the Promised Land, and how God looked after them. And when they celebrated this festival of booths, they found joy! They found joy in remembering their history and remembering how faithful God had been to them.

Chapter 8 is about **rebuilding, reformation and revival**.

Israel **rebuilt** their community around the **foundation** of God's Word.

They **reformed** the community by listening to and **understanding** God's Word.

And they **revived** their community by **acting** on God's Word.

How do **we rebuild, reform and revive** our community through God's Word today?

1. Building.

We need to build this community on the Word of God. Nothing else will be a suitable foundation for God's people. We need to have God's word at the centre. And I think we would all agree that at this church, our meetings together have a definite focus on God's Word. But let me ask two questions which affect the reformation and revival of our church:

Q1. (Reformation) - Does the Bible penetrate EVERY part of our lives?

III – A lot of people today suffer from allergies to things like peanuts. If they have peanuts or a peanut product, they can end up dead. So every time they go out to lunch or dinner, or to a friend's place, they make sure that what they're eating is OK for them. Do you think they then go home and have a peanut butter sandwich? Probably not! The same issues apply whether they're out or at home.

We know the Bible is an important foundation for us here at church. But do we understand how important it is in our own personal lives? This is not just about God's word being central in our church meetings. It's about God's word being central in our lives.

III – Imagine eating breakfast on Sunday morning and then having nothing else to eat until next Sunday morning!? One super huge breakfast, then nothing until the following week? You wouldn't do it! We need food constantly. God's word will not transform us as a church if we simply let it into our lives on a Sunday. Verse 18:

18 Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God.

If we want to see lives transformed, if we want to see reformation in our lives, we need to feed on God's word every day. "Does God's word penetrate **every** day of our lives?"

Q2. Revival – Is the Bible our ONLY foundation

III – When you fill up your car with petrol, you have to make sure you put the right petrol in. Unleaded, high octane, or LPG – whatever you're supposed to use. That's what's going to make the car run properly. But what if next time you filled up, you added, say, a litre of water as well? Or a bucket of sand. Would that be a problem? (I don't recommend you try it!) You've put in the right petrol. What's wrong with adding something else? You see, it's not just important to have the right foundation as God's church. It's also important NOT to add anything else into that foundation.

If we want to see revival in God's church, we must not ADD anything to God's Word for our foundation. What ELSE are we tempted to add? We must be confident that God's word is solid and consider other things as flexible and non-essential.

We don't build our community around the prayer book, although that may be a helpful tool. We don't build this community around traditions, although traditions may be helpful at times. We don't build this community around a building or around music, although buildings and music can be helpful for us in ministry.

We need to respect these things as *helpful* but *non-essential* parts of our church life. We don't need to throw the baby out with the bathwater, but we do need to acknowledge that God's Word is foundational in all that we do. God has used his word to tell us everything we need to know to be saved. We cannot let other things stand in the way of pointing people to that life saving word. Jesus upset the people of the church of his day, he broke down traditions and customs, and he had little concern for the buildings they

met in, because he was always completely obedient to God's Word. It was his non-negotiable. Because his concern was that *people* would hear that Word.

So WHY is the Word so foundational?

God's word is foundational because it tells that we all stand as sinful people before God. And God sends sinful people to hell! That is a message that should bring any sinner to tears! There is no way around that message. Not one person in all of Israel was innocent. They ALL knew that they had sinned against God, and it brought them to tears. Not one person *here* is innocent before God. We've all lied, cheated, stolen in some form, committed adultery with lustful thoughts; even committed murder in our heart by hating another person. Friends, that should bring us to tears. God's Word, God's laws, leave us shattered before a great and almighty God who promises to judge the earth and send sinners to hell.

But in verse 10, we hear these words:

10 This day is sacred to our LORD. Do not grieve for the joy of the LORD is your strength.

The message brings us to tears, but then moves us to joy! This was a day of joy for Israel because they finally recognised that even though they didn't deserve it, God loves them!

Friends, it is a sad day when we read God's word and realise that we too deserve his wrath and judgement. We deserve nothing better than hell. But that sadness turns to joy when we realise that God loves us so much, he sent his son, Jesus, to take away our sin. And who is Jesus? **John 1:14** tells us that he is God's Word in the flesh. Every promise of God's word is made complete in Jesus. Every detail in God's word points to Jesus. So when we come to know Jesus, we come to know God's Word, our foundation, in a personal relationship. **1 John 1:1** spells it out more for us:

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."

John writes about God's Word of life, which he has heard, seen and touched. Jesus is God's Word fulfilled in every way. Our living foundation.

Jesus, God's word, condemns people, and then shows them the grace and mercy of God, and his power to save them through Cross. The cross brings us to grief, and then to joy. We need to be moved to tears by our sinfulness and his sacrifice, and then moved to joy by his love and his resurrection.

As a community, we need to be prepared to change anything that gets in the way of hearing and understanding the Word of God. NOT change for the sake of change – but change for the sake of the gospel. And the one thing that will enable us to embrace that is a greater thirst for his Word. Only the word of God, through the work of His Spirit, will have the power to change lives and see revival in the hearts of the men, women and children of this community. If we want people to know Jesus and the power of his cross to save people from sin, then we need to point them to God's word, and remove any obstacles in their way.

Let me finish by just saying it really simply:

We will only see this church built properly with the foundation of God's Word.

We will only see people transformed by understanding God's word.

We will only see revival through a thirst for God's word.

Thirst after God's word. It will build you up, it will reform you and it will revive you.

"Bible in a year program"