

Nehemiah 9. 5b-15. The Value of the Word April 30th 2023

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Today we're back with our friend Nehemiah in chapter 9. But before we go to look at the passage in more detail, as the title of this morning's talk is 'The Value of the Word' I thought it would be good to remind ourselves of some words from the Word about the Word.

John: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

The writer to the Hebrews: *'the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing between soul and spirit, joint and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart'*

Psalmist: *'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path'.  
word is flawless: He shields all who take refuge in Him'*

Ps 119: *I have hidden Your word in my heart, that I might not sin against You'*

Jeremiah in ch 15, says this *'When Your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear Your Name, Lord God Almighty.'*

As Matthew reminded us last week, *'If anyone obeys His word, love for God is truly made complete in them' 1 John 2*

Luke 11. *'Blessed..are those who hear the word of God and obey it'  
and 'Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built His house on the rock.'*

Luke 8. In His parable of the four soils, Jesus explains that *'the seed is the word of God'*

Ephesians 6: *'take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God'*

1 Pet 1: *'The word of the Lord endures for ever. And this is the word that was preached to you'*

Jesus prays to His Father and ours: *'Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth' (John 17)*

Heb 1: *'The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word'.*

Revelation 19. John: *'He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and His Name is the Word of God'*

Do you hear these extraordinary, life giving words? Do they move your spirit? Perhaps we think the Bible, especially the OT, is old hat, that it has limited relevance to our own time and culture? I'd like to suggest an alternative view: if we allow it to speak to us, to read it with eyes to see, minds open to learn and hearts willing to obey, we will find that it is strikingly, piercingly relevant to our lives today. I remember at one particularly low point in my life, reading a psalm as I fell into bed, exhausted, every night. Each night the words I read would speak into my heart and situation in the most amazing way. It assured me of the Lord's continuing loving care and concern for me at a very difficult time. The problems didn't disappear, but being assured of His love for me as I walked a difficult road was a tremendous encouragement.

As the topic today is 'The Value of the Word' I googled the values considered to be the most beneficial for living a meaningful life:-

Here we go:- Health comes in at no.1, then family, friends, a sense of purpose, growth, integrity, respect, kindness, love and gratitude. The article I read reflected on the benefits of each one and suggested ways in which the reader might adopt them and build up those particular qualities. Nothing new there then! Nothing in that list that the Lord doesn't both exemplify and promote in His Word written thousands of years ago.

As we look back in our Bibles at the story so far of Nehemiah, we note that it was the reading of the Word of God - for no less than a quarter of a day! - that prompted the people's repentance and obedience. The people had made confession before God . That can't have been a very easy thing to do in public, but I wonder if you've ever noticed that when we admit to a shameful aspect of our past, the fact that it is set in the context of God's restorative love means that the story does hugely more to glorify God than it does to bring shame upon us. In this case that was certainly how it worked; we read that they worshipped the Lord; as forgiven people with renewed hearts they were eager for more, and so we come to Ezra's prayer.

Now the people knew this story of the Lord's generous dealings with His people; they shouldn't have needed reminding - but the fact is that they did. Just as it seems they had observed the Feast of Tabernacles as a token

gesture in former years, so they had a head knowledge - an acquaintance with their history as God's chosen people - but it took this time of united confession to bring them to a place of whole hearted engagement, and a recognition of who they were called to be under God. It's a motif that's repeated throughout Scripture and, if we're honest, a recurring theme throughout our own lives. We stray; we're brought low by our disobedience; the Lord reminds us of His love for us; He brings us to a place of repentance; He forgives us, taking our sins upon Himself; we know ourselves to be cleansed and redeemed and so renew our commitment to Him; He remains faithful and encourages us to go deeper with Him, giving us of His Spirit to equip us to worship and honour Him in our lives, living the story for others to see and themselves come to salvation.

The passage Rita read to us called the attentive crowd's attention to some of the tenets of their faith:-

firstly, in sharing his prayer with the gathered people, Ezra the priest reminded them of just Who it was they were coming before in worship. He was the Lord, who alone made and sustains heaven, the heaven of heavens, the earth, the seas and all their inhabitants. This is foundational to their faith and ours. No wonder, as we've already noted, 'the host of heaven' worships this incomparable Creator and Lord.

Ezra thanks God for His desire to establish a covenant relationship with Abram and, through him, His chosen people. This is a God who hasn't just set things in motion but who tenderly leads His people. In verse 8, we read of God's righteousness and reliability, as He unfailingly fulfils His promises. Depending on the criteria you search for, between 300 and 500 OT promises or prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus. Coincidence? I don't think so! We go on to read of Ezra's gratitude towards a God who is tender hearted, who sees and responds to the distress of the people He loves. We sense his awe as he reflects on God's guiding hand leading His people out of Egypt and beyond.

Listen again:-

*You led them by day.. and by night; You came down ...and spoke with them... You made known Your holy sabbath and gave them commands, statutes and a law; You gave them bread; You brought water for them; You told them to go in and possess the land.* The focus is always on what God has done in His immense love for His people.

This is the Gospel - the Good News of the Old Testament upon which the story of Jesus Christ - Son of God, Son of Man, Saviour and Redeemer is built.

Ezra knew the importance of rehearsing known truths. Don't you find that it can be helpful sometimes to be reminded of what we already know? We do it Sunday by Sunday here in church. We remind ourselves of the truth of God's Word and of His faithfulness to it and to us; we're blessed with the joy that comes from prompt obedience to His commandments; and we're encouraged to go forward on the strength of what the Lord has said to us and done for us in the past.

The commentator John Goldingay makes the point that being reminded of what God has done for them helps the people to look afresh at their lives. They recognise their faults as they are thrown into relief against the background of His purity, and ask themselves what their response has been to God's interventions on their behalf. What a tragedy it is that so often God reaches out again and again in an overflowing river of grace, and we, or those around us, fail to recognise His hand behind the 'coincidences' or 'good luck' as some would term it. Maybe you or I are the person - the one who knows the Owner of the hand that's reaching out - to point others to the One who is moving unseen in our situations and comes to lovingly transform them.

But is the Bible as valuable as we'd like to think? What about the inconsistencies people point to? The early stories, the violence, all the talk of sin - a most unpopular concept today?

Well, here's the thing. I don't have all the answers, but you know, early in his ministry, even Billy Graham wrestled with the truth of the Word. At one time he had been travelling in the US and the UK, leading rallies for Youth for Christ. A fellow speaker on tour with him had come to believe there were errors in the Bible that couldn't be resolved, and that the Bible was out of date. Having always believed wholeheartedly in the truth of God's Word, Billy Graham began to question whether his friend might be right. Whilst he knew that Jesus regularly referred to the Old Testament stories as truth, he still struggled with doubt. He reasoned that he knew we could trust Jesus, and if we could trust Him surely it should follow that we could trust the Bible? He was confused and in a deep quandary. One day, when he was due to speak at a rally the following morning, he felt that he just wasn't in the right place to fulfil the engagement. He went out for a walk in a nearby forest, laid his Bible on a tree stump, and then cried out to God. This was his simple prayer: 'God, I don't understand everything about Your Word or have answers to all the questions that are raised, but I put my trust in Your Word, by faith'. Tears began to roll down his cheeks and he sensed the presence of God overwhelming him in a way he hadn't felt for many months. The next morning as he fulfilled that speaking duty, he preached with new authority and hundreds of people gave their lives to Christ. It was 1949. Billy Graham's new

submission to the Word of God - those parts he understood and those he didn't - marked the beginning of decades of major crusades, through which many thousands of people embraced a living relationship with Jesus for themselves.

Proof, if we needed it, that we are called to walk by faith and not by sight. (2 Cor 5)

So - the value of the Book? Nothing comes close. It is utterly priceless. In some countries people are persecuted and killed if they're found in possession of a Bible, or even a few verses torn from a copy of it. It is so precious to them that they are willing to risk their lives to own it.

The question for us is 'What is its value to us?' Matthew encouraged us last Sunday to get into the Word afresh, perhaps with a new set of Bible Reading notes to help us understand what the Lord might be saying to us. Because the Word of God is like no other book; its value to those who love Him is immeasurable; and He is still calling to the lost and speaking through it to those who are willing to hear.

Simon Peter said to Jesus "*Lord, to whom should we go? You have the words of eternal life*". Those words are here in this very Book. Let's read it, treasure it, learn it, seek the Lord in its pages, become the people He calls us to be by modelling our lives on what it has to say to us.

We'll end with a prayer - a verse of Timothy Dudley Smith's hymn. Let's pray:

*Lord for that Word, the Word of life which fires us  
Speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze;  
Teaches and trains; rebukes us and inspires us,  
Lord of the Word, receive your peoples' praise.*

Amen

## Home Group Discussion questions

- 1 Do begin by reading around the group the Bible verses listed at the start of the talk. Are there any that particularly strike you or move you as you consider the value of the Scriptures?
- 2 Spend some time recalling and sharing occasions when the Lord has spoken to you through His Word. If this hasn't been your experience to date, just be ready for Him to speak at a time of His choosing. Encourage one another.
- 3 What would be your top 3 values for living a fulfilled life? Where can you see parallels in Scripture?
- 4 How do you feel about confession and repentance? Do you think they're really necessary for believers? An agnostic friend tells me she feels 'clean' when she comes to church. How do you account for this?
- 5 Read Nehemiah 9.5-17. (Verse 17 is our 'Verse of the Year'). Notice where Ezra points to the Lord's sovereignty, His desire to be in covenant relationship with His people. His reliability, His loving care, His faithfulness through thick and thin, His guidance, His provision. When in your own lives have you seen Him display these attributes?
- 6 How are you able to respond to those who are dismissive of Bible truth? There are 48 specifically Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament fulfilled in Jesus. Would you be able to point to any of them if asked? You could practise!
- 7 How do you respond to the story of Billy Graham's crisis of trust in the Word of God. His friend held on to the view that there are irreconcilable errors in the Bible but years later admitted that he misses Jesus. What can we do to prevent those we love 'missing Jesus'?
- 8 What value do you place on the Word of God, and why?

Lindsay 30/04/23