

Beauty of Renewal

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 00] So, Vicki read this evening from Nehemiah chapter 8 and we're going to look at that chapter a little bit for a few minutes this evening. It's a one-off sermon.

We're hoping to start a new series next week in the morning on the parables in Luke and then on the evening from the pictures in Ezekiel.

So that'll be good. And Thomas is leading us off in the evening next week. But I think one of the challenges we face, all of us face in life is routine and doing things all the time, sameness, and then maybe becoming stale because we do things all the time and they become routine to us, whether it's marriage or friendships or work or faith or church.

You know, this is your routine for a lot of you, coming to church and you come every week. And I think more than just coming to church, but spiritually we can, in our work with God, we can become very routine and very much in our rut, in our work.

Sometimes cozy in that rut, sometimes we feel safe in that rut but desperately dull, maybe at the same time. And there's lots of different reasons for that.

[1 : 23] Some of them are very practical. But even spiritually I think we need to be aware of the potential danger of becoming bored in the routine of our Christian lives.

I think like all things, routine and change, if you take the opposite of routine, change, can be good and bad. So there's a degree of paradox within it.

So you know, your love of routine, well, routine can be a good thing. Your love of routine can be because you're sinfully, and because I'm sinfully lazy, or because we lack faith to move out of our comfort zone and work cowardly.

And we forget that the gospel, you know, while we stay here, I'm the same, I'm always going to be the same. The gospel is about transformation and about renewal and about becoming new creations.

So there's two sides to that. But equally the longing for change can be the same. You know, change, you know, spiritual change can be a great thing in renewal and transformation.

[2 : 32] But our longing for change in our life, spiritually, can be all about dissatisfaction. It can be itching and looking for fulfillment in the wrong places, needing excitement all the time, not working through challenges, but just lurching away from them, running away from them, not facing up to them, and needing a new situation, a new people, a new everything else in our lives, forgetting that perseverance, patience, time, routine and habits can be really good, godly things as well.

So there's good and bad in both things. And in this passage in Nehemiah, the people of God had been taken into promised land, if you remember, they'd been freed from slavery in Egypt, been taken to the promised land.

And then they had become captives in Babylon as a judgment from God because they'd gone on to worship idols. They hadn't worshiped God, but they had repeatedly ignored the prophets who had sent to remind them that God was the only God and they worshiped idols.

And they had been warned they were then taken into captivity. And 70 years later, they were released from captivity and they came back to Jerusalem, to the promised land, and Ezra and Nehemiah were the prophets at the time.

And this chapter is the beginning of a different section of the book of Nehemiah. And the first section is all about the rebuilding of the wall in Jerusalem, where they all came back to the city that they loved the city of God and they rebuilt the wall and the people were chosen to live in the city and it was all new, you know, and the people were settled and the danger in a sense was them settling into something different.

[4 : 30] All the tough groundwork for the rebuilding of the city had been done and they could now, as it were, settle down in their homes, in their new homes, in peace, back in the promised land and everything would be okay again.

And yet God wasn't content to leave them just physically back in the promised land with rebuilt houses and a rebuilt rampart and walls.

Something much deeper was needed in their lives and that was a heart renewal. And this chapter is all about a spiritual heart renewal. There's a city renewal, they're back in the promised land, but this is much more than something geographical.

It's a spiritual renewal in a sense. I think it's a glimpse into the future. It's a glimpse into the New Testament and into the spirit of God being poured out on all people.

This was very rare in the Old Testament, very rare to see this kind of worship that was read in the chapter and the spiritual revival that went on during that time among all the people, very rare.

[5 : 31] As prophesied in Joel 2.28 where God would change all the people's hearts from stone and make them hearts of flesh. But this is really kind of a foretaste of what would come through Jesus Christ.

So the structures of the city, the structures of the town, the structures of the new homes, needed God's breath, needed spiritual revival. More than anything, what God wanted to remind the people here was they needed Him and they needed Him in their lives, not just the routine of being in a new city, a new way of life with new homes.

And to parallel that, we can work a great deal on the structure of our lives, you know, the relationships, the careers, the homes that we have.

But all of us, what we need most is to nurture our hearts. In a sense that's very much the message that comes through from this chapter is that we need to know God and we need to work at that particular routine as it were in our lives.

And interestingly, it can be the area that we neglect most. And all the things that are going on, all the developments and all the work and all the structure and all the building of our lives, we can leave God out at the very heart and at the very core.

[6 : 54] And what this chapter is reminding us is of the need, the people of God had a great need for a gracious encounter with God in their lives. And through His prayer, through prayer and His word, interestingly, nothing dramatic, nothing that isn't accessible, in fact, it's much more accessible to us as New Testament believers, but it was a great encounter with the living God.

So what happened in this chapter is Ezra reads the law to them. That is their Bible, the Bible they had, the early books of Moses, the first five or maybe a few more books of the Old Testament. He reads that for six hours and they're standing. You're comfortable in your seats and you'll be looking at your watch if I go past the half hour, you come on.

I know you will because I do. But they were wrapped for six hours standing. It's remarkable, remarkable revelation of God that God spoke through His word and the Holy Spirit was with them. What did it look like? What did it look like for them? Well, the word was living and powerful. You know, we read that in verses three to eight, you know, that they stood and they listened powerfully to what was being read.

[8 : 21] It was read clearly to them. The word of God became real and meaningful in a new way. It was treated with great reverence.

Verse five, Ezra opened the book of the law and if he was above the people and as he opened it all the people stood. It provoked worship. In verse six, Thomas read this verse this morning, Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God and all the people answered, Amen, amen.

It means a lot more to you now tonight, doesn't it? Than they did this morning because you know all the depth of meaning in amen. They lifted up their hands and they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord.

And it was explained and it was made clear to them as well. He told that in verse eight that they read from the book of the law clearly and they gave the meaning so that the people understood the reading.

So it wasn't just read, it was preached, it was taught, it was explained, it was made understandable to them and they could see the relevance of that and it was transformative in their lives.

[9 : 23] The word was living and powerful. And verses nine to 11, we see that it touched their hearts as the word was read and they stood, they mourned and they grieved and they wept and

then they celebrated and rejoiced.

So we go through the whole range of emotions because there's this remarkable picture of renewal happening as they read the word. In other words, as the word was read, it was much more than just knowledge to them.

It was much more than just the taking in of information and facts. They were seeing who God was and they sensed their unworthiness and failure as his character was opened up to them and revealed to them.

His love and his grace became clear. They recognized his purity and perfection and begun to remember all that he had done for them as a people. And it was emotion at either end of the scale for them, mourning and weeping.

But they were commanded to take that mourning and weeping and change it into rejoicing and eating and drinking and celebration because God was their strength.

[10:35] So it was a remarkable recognition reminder to them that God was their rescuer.

Remember, they would have read about this, how God redeemed them out of Egypt and took them into the promised land and the land flowing with milk and honey.

And they realized that this was their God, the one they were redeemed to love and to serve. The giver of all the great gifts of freedom that they had taken and abused and ignored and destroyed and then turned and worshiped wooden idols made of, or idols made of wooden stone and they recognized the folly of that.

And rather than staying under his lordship, they returned to slavery in Babylon because of their disobedience.

And now they return and God's forgiveness and God's grace. So there was to be a feast. There was to be a party. There was to be a celebration. So the word was really powerful and it touched their hearts.

It touched all of their life. And there was then a new obedience. The last section of the chapter from verse 13 on says that as they read the law, they recognized and they studied and they found there that there was to be a feast to be enjoyed and participated in.

[11:57] And they obeyed that command from God. There was new obedience. They relearned about this great feast of booths that's spoken about here.

And it was something that they were to participate in altogether. And they did so. It was to be a feast that was to remember they're being taken out of slavery and their journey into the promised land which took 40 years.

And it was to be a seven day feast and they were to leave their homes they just made, leave their homes they just built and they were to live in booths or kind of manmade tents, things that they just built themselves.

And they were to worship and to celebrate and to eat and to drink together and to remember what God had done for seven days. That's what they were to do, to remember God's rescue from slavery.

It required effort. They had to get out of routine. That was the thing, you see, they had to get out of routine. They had to spend time together and fellowship with one another.

[13:01] They had to build these booths and then they were eating and drinking and worshipping and resting. And we learned that it was a time of unparalleled joy for them.

There was very great rejoicing in this great feast that they had forgotten about and that they were now celebrating as they rejoiced in God.

So how does any of this from chapter 8 and Nehemiah relate to 21st century Christians in Edinburgh and to your life as you'll go out into the world tomorrow and even this evening in your life?

Well, first of all, we remember it's part of God's Word, Old Testament and the New Testament together. And it all fits together as we recall that the Old Testament points towards the work of Christ.

We're hanging the Bible before Christ points towards Him and everything since Christ points back to Him. And so we have a reminder of the spiritual work of God in the Old Testament is paralleled by the work of Christ in the New Testament.

[14:06] And the significant reality for us all is that Christ came to change people's hearts. That's the theme of this passage, is that their hearts were renewed and revived and refreshed under the

Word of God, and that's what Christ has come to do.

2 Corinthians 5, 17, therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the oldest past away, the new has come. And the new creation that you and I are, are that Christ has changed our hearts. He has changed our hearts in order to worship Him. And this, I do believe this passage touches on the much fuller work of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, which is also spoken about in Ezekiel, which is one of the pictures we'll be looking at, the valley of dry bones, where God breathes life, the spirit of God breathes life into dry bones and brings them alive.

And that is what we have, and that is what is inexplicable about our lives. For the first time, we can worship the living God as we have come to faith in Him through Jesus Christ, and prayer is what enables that ongoing work to develop and mature as we keep going back to Him and seek, as we read His Word, that we recognize it becoming a living Word and a Word where God speaks to us and speaks into our hearts and speaks into our lives, and we can be moved to tears.

As we grieve over our sin and recognize how far away we are from His purity and His beauty, as we were singing about, or as we mentioned at the call to worship, and we turn to Him, it's, that's where we find the beauty of Jesus in the Bible, in His living Word.

[16:06] You might say, well, I want something better. I want something more dramatic. I want something more visual. We have in His Word that they stood for six hours weeping and praising because they met with God through His Word in a spiritual and miraculous way.

And as we read, as we prayerfully read God's Word, we should seek the same, that we see our need of repentance and that is ongoing, but that our tears are turned to laughter.

There should be great joy and celebration because of His strength and because of who He is. And as we rest in Him, we are given a whole new transformed heart.

And the danger is we're working on the pattern and the structure and the building of our lives and are maybe neglecting most this relationship with the living God through His Word.

Through His Word, through His prayer and His Word is two great, two great pillars of our Christian lives, prayer and the Word. That never changes.

[17:21] The Word of God is living and powerful. Hebrews 4, 12, you know this verse, don't you? We've heard it so much. The Word of God is living and active. It's sharper than any two-edged sword piercing to the division of soul and spirit of joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and intentions of heart.

You know that and I know that it takes really well, but do we believe and do we experience that in our lives?

That is what I would like to just impress upon us all this evening. That is true, and this is true in MI9, but we need to recognize that and wrestle with God's Word and wrestle in prayer to enable that to be the case in our lives.

We need to pray it into our experience and pray, believingly, in the dynamism of God's Word. This is a living Word, okay?

It's not a dry dull. But if we go into a thing that is a dry dull book, that's exactly what will be. But as we recognize a living God speaks through His Word to us, we will find unsearchable riches and insights of truth.

[18:34] But what does that mean? Well, it means a couple of things. It means it needs our attention. We're told here that the people of God attended to the Word of God.

They were attentive. They listened, and we saw that for the six hours that they stood. And that's true for us, and that's true for you and me in our lives. Too often, I think, our opening of the Bible is an afterthought.

It's cheap, and it's meaningless, and it's quite either ritualistic or even worse, it's superstitious. I'll have a better day today if I read my verse.

I'll have a worse day if I don't. It's not related to the power of a living relationship with God. We need to get our attention, and we need to move beyond the knowledge barrier.

You're not reading the Word simply to gain knowledge. However important and significant knowledge is, you're listening, we're searching, we're pleading, we're digging, we're applying, we're examining, we're discovering God.

[19:41] That's what we do in the open. We're needing to ask what God is saying, and what God wants us to learn from this, and what dark corner of my life is God's light shining into that He wants?

What is it? They were attentive to God's Word. What is it in our lives that gets our attention? What is it that we spend all our time on? Now, I know I'm in danger here of being a stuck record, but I speak to my own soul first.

Because today's distractions of social media and entertainment at the touch of a switch is an appetite we're feeding all the time, and it takes our attention all the time.

It does feed an appetite. It's a different shallow appetite, and it's a different appetite generally from what the Bible requires. It's much tougher, much more sinew and muscle spiritually required to open the Word and to dig and to find truth, unsearchably rich truth, than it is to spend half an hour on Instagram, much harder.

So it needs our attention. And as it needs our attention, then it also triggers our spiritual emotions, and we look to pray for that in our lives.

[21 : 03] Morning, seeing how easily we love the wrong things and hate the right things, and maybe take God's grace for granted, moved by His holiness, weeping possibly at the state of our own lives, or it can be tears of relief and joy at the forgiveness or the answer to prayer we find through His Word.

But also celebration. There's a great emphasis in this chapter on joy and celebration. I wonder how often that is a response to communion with God and His Word.

But it's at the very core of God's Word to us, His love and His gracious character to us is the response. You know, if you say, you know, don't weep, don't cry, don't be grieved.

This is a day for eating and drinking and sharing fellowship and sharing with those who don't have and great rejoicing because of understanding who God is. And understanding the strength of God, God's strength in their lives.

That's a great reason for us to celebrate and to rejoice and to eat and drink and be joyful in our Christian lives.

[22 : 22] And I think that's a hugely underplayed element of our Christian lives is rejoicing and celebration in the name of Jesus, eating and drinking together, celebrating who He is and doing so because of Jesus Christ.

And the last thing I want to say about this chapter is the importance of being reminded to rest in grace and rest in grace together. That was what the Feast of Booths was all about.

And that's what the Feast of Booths here reminds us of as we look at it with New Testament lens, New Testament eyes. Now, okay, I'm going to say something ridiculous here.

If I ever did a PhD, okay, I would do one on the theology of rest and celebration. I think it's the most counterintuitive and ignored teaching in the whole universe.

I would do it on the theology of rest and celebration because it's so different from what we think in our minds. Everything about us says that our work justifies who we are, what we've done.

[23 : 42] Our worth is in our gifting or in our labor or in our effort. You know, we might not verbalize it, but basically we think God's going to help those who help themselves.

That's what we think. We deserve what we get. Busy is virtuous. First question we ask people, what do you do? What's your identity? What do you do?

Identity is not who we are, it's what we do very often. And there's an element that has to be the case, I guess. But it spills into our thinking and the church and to our relationship with God.

But grace changes everything about that way of thinking. Grace changes everything about that so that rest biblically is a huge concept because rest is understanding the doctrine of justification by faith.

We are justified because of what Christ has done on our behalf. It's all about what God has done, not what we can do. Grace says, I've done it all for you.

[24 : 46] You rest in me. You rest in me. You can never earn it. You can never repay it. So rest in me. The whole theology of rest of the Lord's day, rest on day seven of creation, is all pointing forward to our eternal rest, but it speaks of the rest spiritually that we're to enjoy now in Christ.

And then when we're resting in Christ and not finding that we need to earn our favor with Him, it means that the work we do, which is absolutely right, that it's important to work, we can put Him at the center of it rather than us, and we can give Him the glory for what He's given us and for what we do, and we can lay it at His feet as well and remind ourselves of the importance of that.

And here, so here day, this day is an important day. The Lord's day is important. Here daynes rest and celebration. It reflects His grace.

It reflects His grace. The seventh day in Genesis, it doesn't say, and there was evening and there was morning, the seventh day.

It doesn't say that. God entered His rest and there's, Hebrews takes that and links it to our rest in Christ and celebration and the foretaste of heaven.

[26 : 12] It's the theme of the kingdom. Heaven isn't described as a sweatshop. It's described as a marriage feast, a place of rest and fellowship and love and extravagance and all the characteristics that go with that.

Because the closer we are to Christ, the more we are joyful and celebratory in our lives. It's very un-Calvinistic.

Or is it? I think it's very Calvinistic. And this one day in seven is to be a taste of heaven.

You need to rest on this day, physically and spiritually. Don't make Sundays just like every other day. Make them days of worship and rest and celebration and sharing hospitality together.

Celebratory days. So each Lord's day shouldn't be stale for us because they're not stale because we're coming to them as those who recognize who God is.

[27 : 25] We don't want to be chasing new experiences, external experiences all the time. But there should be an internal newness from our relationship with God.

And it's good not only to break with routine once a week, but break with routine throughout the year. Do things at different pace, different perspective, festivals, holidays, special times with God, doing things out of the ordinary.

That's what he's... The Old Testament is full of that, renewed and refreshed. And I think that speaks loudly into our crazy, busy world. And if you're looking for satisfaction and rest and meaning and significance in anything outside of Jesus Christ, you will never find it.

Never find it. Jesus Christ is where we find our rest. And His grace says, I've done it all. That's a great thing, isn't it? Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank you that you've done it all for us. And we thank you. And ask that our worship together would be times that are really vibrant and meaningful and fresh, not because of razzimataz or anything like that, but because we are being renewed in the Spirit.

[28 : 41] We are working at grace, working at receiving grace, working at understanding grace, not in order to make us right with God, but because we are right with you.

And may we focus and celebrate on who you are and what that means, and know the joy, repentance and joy and fullness that He brings.

Bless us as we conclude with a song together of praise. Amen.