

# Celebrating Renewal

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Date: 03 June 2012

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[ 0 : 00 ] We turn back to the AMIA chapter 8. We're going to look at this chapter together this morning. But I want to begin this morning by asking you a question. I want to ask you to think about whether there's ever been something in your life which you would see as your cause.

The thing that you would maybe decide to give most attention to. The thing that really takes up your mind. I thought of a few things that people maybe think of.

Things that would be described as a cause that really get people going. And it becomes like what they're all about, what they really care about, and all the consuming passion for them. Campaign for nuclear disarmament.

Maybe a bit of an old one now. But it could well be described as a cause. Something that people get really heated about. The World Wildlife Fund, maybe you're a conservationist.

And this, the things that the World Wildlife Fund are engaged in, is something that you really care about. It's one of the most important things that you could think about.

[ 1 : 09 ] The yes vote. Maybe you're for independence. Or maybe you're a unionist. And that word fills you with dread right now.

Maybe politics is a cause for you. It's an all-consuming passion that you get really, really into. And it's a big thing. Or maybe you know people in your life.

Or maybe dollar or pound signs. Money can easily become an all-consuming passion, can't it? We could put various things up there that could well be described by a lot of people as the focal point of their life.

If you were really to boil down what motivated you, what would it be? It could be that we could put a big love heart up there. Because relationships, love, whether romantic or just friendship, is what you really want right now.

It's what you really care about. Now I mention these things because this chapter, Nehemiah chapter 8, is a really good one for seeing a really clear commitment to a cause on the behalf of Ezra who's involved here.

[ 2 : 18 ] But also from God. This chapter is about God coming into the picture. So what we have here is the people of God, the Israelite nation, who had been exiled, the Babylonians had come and taken them out of their land, partly as a punishment really, because they kept disobeying God.

They kept going completely in the opposite direction from how he wanted them to live. And he's allowed this providence to come into their lives. And yet these books show us God coming into their situation again and reminding them of his commitment to them.

That in a sense they are his cause. That God is massively committed to his people and to building them up again. And to making sure that they as a people group remember him and worship him.

And this chapter is a focal point in their history as they have been rebuilding. They've had a massive rebuilding program that has been going on for some time because their land was devastated.

And at this point in time they bring out the law again. They call on Ezra, the priest, to describe and say, bring God's word out to us again.

[ 3 : 33 ] And as he reads it they stand and they re-remember their God's people and the focus that they have. A few things just in background to this chapter.

This may be completely new to you. And as you read it you may have thought it's an old story about a people group and I've got no idea what that was all about. Well, here's just a couple of things in background.

As a people they were a really low ebb. Things have been pretty bad for them. As I said they'd been carted off to another country which was a devastating thing for them because as a culture they were so bound up with the idea that God had prepared a land for them, the promised land.

And having been taken there to be removed from that land was devastating. And so their sense of displacement was really devastating for them as a people.

They'd ignored God and he'd allowed them to be exiled. So their city was a mess. The temple walls were all smashed to bits. They had to rebuild the temple walls. They had to rebuild the temple, the center of worship, broken down.

[ 4 : 39 ] Many hard hours. And much struggle had to go into rebuilding the temple. But also spiritually they were a low ebb. Their sense of collective togetherness as a people who worshiped God was a low ebb.

Between Nehemiah and Ezra there are two main characters, the title characters, Ezra. And they have very different roles in many ways, quite different personalities as well.

Ezra, the scribe, the learned one, the one who brings the law and reads again the scriptures to the people. Nehemiah, again focused on that, but in many ways very different.

He's a really active guy. He's a great encourager. He's really good at motivating the people and in getting the building work done. As you read through these two books you see the way that they compliment each other brilliantly.

So they're the two main characters in many ways. And they're the ones that lead the people in this rebuilding time. The final bit of background is really important to remember as we look at this.

[ 5 : 48 ] That this wasn't just like Ezra and Nehemiah didn't wake up one morning and decide, do you know I think I'll get every together and we'll rebuild these walls. It wasn't their own project, but they had a real sense and they record in these books, a real sense, that this was what God wanted.

That reminds us, us this morning as we turn back to these chapters, that this was God's cause. It's what he really wanted for these people, was that they didn't just drift.

He didn't let that happen, despite the fact that he'd punished them and he'd had to intervene because their sense of worship of God had just gone way off beam.

He comes back to them once again and builds them up and picks them up and puts them back on the road. And so as you read through this we have a sense of this being God's purpose.

Let me just read you one verse, Nehemiah chapter 2 verse 8. This is when he's making his request to the king, may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he'll give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple for the city, for instance I will occupy, and because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my request.

[ 7 : 06 ] That's not a standalone verse, there are more like it. And they keep telling us that they have the sense that, well, this is amazing. The kings are allowing us to go back to our country and to rebuild and to open up the Bible, the law that they had, because the gracious hand of the Lord was upon us.

So they have a real sense that this was what God wanted. But let's, as we turn to this chapter now, what is it that happened in this broken down community to help them buy back, as it were, into this cause, this singular focus?

They'd been so scattered, they'd been so knocked about, and they'd been so trodden down. How do we see them coming back together as a people with this singular focus again on God, and on their role as a people who were to worship Him?

Well, the first thing is in verse 1, we turn to Nehemiah chapter 8. All the people get together, 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. First point to notice here, and again, if you take time to read through Ezra and Nehemiah, it'll be really clear to you that the leaders lead.

[ 8 : 24 ] So in this situation, it was Ezra's job to bring the Word of God to the people again, and he does exactly that. He was a strong leader for them at this time when they really needed it.

God was intervening, and He was bringing them back to Himself, He was calling to them and saying, remember me, I want you to remember me, I don't want you to drift. And the people that He put in place to lead led.

Ezra's a perfect person to do this. He was commissioned to do this, but as we turn back into the book of Ezra itself, it turned back when we just said, Ezra chapter 7.

You get a real sense in this verse of what Ezra was like. Let me just read this verse to you. Ezra chapter 7, verse 10, for Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the law of the Lord and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.

He devoted himself to it. That's His cause, that was His all-consuming passion, if you like. Now isn't that a really great example to us? Sure, we can say that, okay, well that was His job.

[ 9 : 38 ] He was the leader, He was the person who was supposed to stand up and tell everybody about the Word of God, but He'd personally devoted Himself to it. And that's encouraging for us.

Imagine if He'd been called by the people to stand up and to read the Word to them and to make it clear, along with all the other people who are designated to help.

And He hadn't been reading it for ages, He'd forgotten about it. It was kind of half-distant in His mind and He thought, oh man, where have I put it again? I can't remember. And it just wasn't something that was close to His heart.

Ezra was devoted to reading the law of God and I think that's an immediate application for us. That if we're Christians, if we're people who follow God and who follow what He has to say to us, that that's got to be something that's a big part of our lives.

That if the Bible is something that lies in ourselves and we never really look at, then it can't be close to our hearts in many ways. And reminding ourselves daily of what God would say to us will be much more difficult for us if it's something that we're not devoted to.

[ 10 : 45 ] So the first thing is that the leader was the model for the people and he was prepared. He was ready because he'd spent time devoting himself to the Word and he was making sure as well that, you know, he was on a platform, everybody could see him, everybody could hear him, they had people spread out throughout this massive gathering so that if somebody couldn't hear, it could be relayed to them and different people could interpret it as it were passed down through this crowd.

So the Word of God is noticed again. It's really important. You sense as well, don't you, as the people gather, they call out, they want this, they call out to Esra, bring us the Word of God.

So they had a collective sense of looking forward to God's Word being read to them. Do we? Do we come to church on a Sunday morning with a real sense of looking forward to what God's Word will have to say to us?

That's a challenge for us as well. The second point to notice is the response. If Esra was designated to be the leader, it was important that the people listened.

Now, if you look at verse 6 and verse 9, we get a real sense of how the people, you know, they weren't kind of opening a packet of mints or falling asleep on each other's shoulders here because they'd all stood up.

[ 12 : 12 ] That was how important it was to them and how much they seemed to revere what was happening in their presence. They stood for hours. Can you imagine it? Can you imagine even standing for half an hour to listen to God's Word being read?

Look at the response in verse 6. Esra praised the Lord, the great God, and all the people lifted their hands and responded, Amen, amen. And then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

They demonstrated what was going on inside of them, which was a sense of how right it was for them to worship God and to respond to His Word.

It actually challenged them. It actually spoke to them. And so they showed it by bowing down and by calling out amen. And verse 9 as well. Well, for we read from verse 8, they read from the book of the law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so the people could understand what was being read.

And then they said, I am I the governor, and Esra the priest inscribed in 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.

[ 13 : 28 ] They were convicted, and it challenged them so much that they cried openly and realized how far they drifted from God's Word.

And sometimes we maybe have a sense of that, don't we? From time to time, maybe, we feel, ah, it's been so long since I cared.

I remember when it was so precious to me. I remember when I first realized God's love for me. I remember when I first understood the Gospel, I first died for my sins.

How can I care so less now? How can that happen? And so as they are convicted by the Word, they break down and weep.

And now this is very different, this is important because if you go back into a book of prophecy, the book of Haggai, Haggai was a prophet who had to come and speak to these people before this event we're looking at here, because they'd been given a job by God.

[ 14 : 32 ] And so Haggai said to them and brought them together as a people and said, okay, you need to rebuild. I want you to be able to come back to your land, but if you're going to come back to your land, it's a mess.

So you're going to have to rebuild the walls and you're going to have to rebuild the temple. And if you read into Haggai, particularly the first chapter, they're challenged, Haggai sent to challenge them, because their attitude was kind of like, well, no, well, okay, well, we'll give it a go.

And because they faced some opposition, they thought, well, maybe not give it a go just for now, we'll just leave it. Maybe later, maybe we'll get back to this a bit later. And particularly in verse 1 of Haggai, let me just read, sorry, chapter 1, verse 9.

God really comes into their situation and challenges them, because their attitude was totally, it seemed, blasé. They were pretty relaxed. And they decided that it really wasn't important for them to be doing what God had asked them to do.

From verse 7, let me just, I'll just read this to you. Haggai, this is what the Lord Almighty says, give careful thought to your ways, go into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house so that I may take pleasure in it and be honoured, says the Lord.

[ 15 : 44 ] You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why? Declares the Lord Almighty? Because in my house, which remains a ruin, well, each of you is busy with your own house.

The issue here was that they decided, well, leave God's house, doesn't really matter that much, we'll build our own houses. And as you read further in Haggai, you get a sense as well that they were probably putting quite a bit of effort into their own houses.

They had quite nice houses. So was there previous attitude, let's get comfortable, rather than let's make sure we worship. Let's make sure we have what we want and that life is good and our houses are nice and we have everything that we want.

But the call of God to rebuild the temple, not so important just now. So you can see how their reaction here in Nehemiah chapter 8 is so instructive to us.

Because they've realised, it's as if they're saying, what a waste. All this time, God has allowed us to be back here. He's given us a sense of national identity again.

[ 16 : 55 ] He's reminded us of how important we are to him. He's allowed us to rebuild the walls and the temple. But it took so much encouraging. We were so blasé, what a waste of time.

What have we been doing all this time? And so they repent. Because they recognise their carelessness.

And they have a very public show of sorrow, don't they? And a very public show of guilt as well. It was reminding me, I've been very aware of the last little while.

I've been half following some of the things that have been going on in the press, in the media with the Levison Inquiry. And the investigation into what seems to be everybody nowadays, the media and the politicians and almost everybody who's anybody in our country seems to be under scrutiny for some kind of corruption or some kind of problem.

And it's really interesting to watch the media's reaction is to see who's guilty, who's connected to who, who's corrupt. And because they're corrupt, that person that they had lunch with must be corrupt as well.

[ 18 : 02 ] It's like a massive guilt hunt in our country as we seek to see how far corruption or dodgy dealing might be going on in the country.

And as various people are convicted, what's interesting is how far they'll go to deny guilt and to maintain that everything that they did.

Now I might not comment on whether people are guilty or not, I don't know. But it's just interesting how determined people are to cling on to position and to power.

And in many ways, not to show a sense of guilt, not to show a sense of sorrow. It was interesting as well that in the reports in the media, you know the family in Derby I think it was, who's sadly, who's six children died.

And the Philpots, the couple who are currently charged with their murder, what was reported when I read that story in the news was the fact that, I've read a few different news stories about that and what the people seem to be interested in was whether they showed any guilt.

[ 19 : 11 ] All the reports that I read, they showed no emotion in the witness box. So, you know, what we want to see is people recognising that they were wrong and breaking down and showing publicly their sense of grief.

Because we want to see, in many ways, the media are looking to see people guilty and convicted for that guilt. Well, what's interesting about this public show of guilt and of grief is the response they get from God.

And that's really important for us as we apply this passage to ourselves as well. The third final point I want to just bring out here is that as they were challenged and as they recognised their guilt and their grief, their corporate life, their life as a group, as a people changed.

The Word of God made a difference in their lives. They didn't just hear it and kind of maybe in their heads say, yeah, I agree with that and then just carry on as if nothing had happened.

The first thing that we see is that they remembered this festival that they were supposed to be celebrating. And it's really interesting as well, isn't it, that the Nehemiah and the people, Nehemiah and Ezra challenged the people and say, why are you crying?

[ 20 : 33 ] Now is not a time for crying. We'd maybe think that they would almost capitalise on this. Oh, the people are sorry for their sins. That's what we want. And they're crying, good. They say, no, you're supposed to be celebrating a feast at this time.

Stop crying and go and celebrate. Because what they want the people to remember is that when faced with the guilt that they have, God shows them mercy.

And God reminds them as a people that he loves them. That's the point. That's why God is about doing this. That's why God is coming back into their lives as a people.

Because he wants them to remember him and he wants them to know that they're loved by him and that he's committed to them and he's committed to establishing them again. And so they're told this whole festival of tabernacles, the Feast of Booths, that they're to go out and to get the palm branches and to make these little huts that they were like to remind them of the time that they were wandering in the desert.

And they were to celebrate and they were to be thankful and they were going to get some food and give it to people who didn't have any food so that they could celebrate as well. And so what God says to us isn't that we should go about seeking to find people who are nasty in society and guilty and just condemn them.

[ 21 : 55 ] Because if we're honest with ourselves, who of us can say that we have no guilt? If we're really honest, can any of us say that we can just look around at everybody else in the world and say, they're horrible people, you're all bad people, but I'm a good person?

Really what God's word says to us is that all of us, and we sometimes hate that, don't we? All of us have sinned and we've all turned away from God. And so God comes into our life and he says, I want you to remember my mercy to you.

I want you to remember how much I love you and how much I care for you. And remembering is so important. The Feast of Tabernacles that the people were celebrating here. Again, when we read that you may have thought, I have no idea what this is all about.

An ancient feast that doesn't mean anything to me. Well, the whole purpose of this feast that was celebrated at this time as they gathered in the seventh month was to remember.

It was to say to them, so they built these little temporary shelters. It was to say, well, remember when you didn't even have a land? Remember before God had even brought you into the Promised Land?

[ 23 : 01 ] You spent all those years just wondering about in the desert. But remember how I, God says to them, remember how I cared for you? And how after that time of wandering, I made sure that you got into the Promised Land?

And remember all the times when you went against me and all the times when, even though I told you which way to live and how to behave, you just ignored me. Remember that I still cared for you.

And then what you're saying to them now is, even though you've rebelled so much that I had you exiled from your country, I want you to reinstate this feast as you re-remember my word, because I'm showing you again how much I'm committed to you.

I want you to remember as a group of people how much I care for you. So what do we do with a chapter like this?

We see a group of God's people being reminded of God's, the fact that they are God's cause. They're what God is all about, because from this group of people, they're reminded and we're reminded, comes the Savior Jesus.

[ 24 : 11 ] What do we do with a chapter like this? I want to ask a couple of questions just as we finish off. And it's important because we've been praying over this month. If you're visiting the congregation, we've spent the month of May praying for three things, for rebirth, for people to become Christians, for renewal, so that we as a congregation of St. Columbus would be built up in our faith and for resources, because we recognize that we need God to help us and to provide for us.

The first thing just in application is, are you, or what time are you putting aside to remember?

We know that we celebrate the Lord's Supper as Christians. That's why we have the Lord's Supper, right? So we can remember Jesus' death. But we only do that every three months. So we could say, well, on Sundays I remember I come to church and I remember that Jesus is raised from the dead.

But I have to ask myself the question and I recognize very much, if I've spent no time during the week, if my week has been so busy, which it sometimes is, if I've been very careless and caring about remembering the gospel, then I can easily come to church on a Sunday morning and it can mean very little to me.

What time are we putting aside to remember the gospel? And to remember the fact that this is life. If we look into the big picture of what's going on in this chapter here, God was building these people up for a purpose so that Jesus could come from this line, from these people, so that we, centuries later, could be called God's people, so that we can remember, we can look back and see how has God been committed to us?

[ 25 : 44 ] Well, he sent his son Jesus. He was so committed to us that he sent his son Jesus to come and to die and to take the punishment for our sins. That's what we have to remember. We don't remember that we come here because it's a social gathering.

We don't remember that we come here because we're on T duty, although we might be, and that's important. But we come here because God is committed to us and he showed that commitment in sending his son Christ to die for our sins.

Let me give one example of this in the letters from the New Testament. When Paul writes to the Ephesians, he prays for them. He tells them what he's praying for them.

But it's really interesting when you read the prayers, how he almost can't help but go back into talking about Jesus. Because he's reminding them, he's saying, I'm praying for you and I care about your Christian lives and it's also intertwined with Jesus, their saviour, in Ephesians chapter 1, verse 15.

For this reason ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus, I've not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation so you may know him better.

[ 26 : 58 ] That power, if we go further on, is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead. It always goes back to Jesus. This is why you're a people, because of Jesus.

You remember Jesus and the same is true in Ephesians chapter 3. If you read that, you read the Paul of the people there, the same is true again. He reminds them, he says, remember the hope that you've been called to for the future based on what happened in the past when Jesus Christ died and was raised again.

That's what we remember, that's why we worship. That's what God's cause to us. So the final question really as we finish, if we were to go back to thinking about how we started with the CND or the WWF or the yes vote, is just to ask the question, if you think about what your cause is, having been reminded that you are God's cause, you and me are what God is committed to.

He's committed to bringing us into knowing him so that we can worship him. Doesn't that mean that our cause, who we are and what we are daily concerned to be, is God's people.

Daily reminding each other, because what's important here is this isn't just an individualist thing, we're not just like islands. This is about a group of people and we're the same. Are we reminding each other?

[ 28 : 26 ] You know you're concerned for your brother or sister or you're sitting next to in the pew, they were collectively coming closer to God and they were collectively being built up. At a time when May has finished, so officially our month of praying has finished, at a time when our minister is on sabbatical, summer is coming, it's nearly party time, are we going to drop all of that and kind of stop caring for a while, or are we going to be reminded by looking at a passage like this, that God's commitment to us is amazing and is complete and is absolute and it's good to ask ourselves a question, isn't it?

What is the most important thing to us in the light of the commitment that God shows to his people here and is our life on a daily basis with all the circumstances that life throws at us, the ups and downs, are we committed personally and corporately to praying towards and working towards and encouraging each other towards a sense of renewal and a sense of anticipation similar to what was experienced here with these people.

Amen, let's bow our heads and pray. Father God, we praise you for your commitment to us.

We praise you that you care so much about us and you're committed to us. Help us not to grow lazy or to care less. And we thank you for the example of the people, your nation here, who you really convicted of their need to come back to you.

Lord, do the same for us, we pray. Help us to remember that you showed commitment to your people all those years ago and you showed the ultimate commitment to us in sending your Son Jesus.

[ 30 : 17 ] And that really matters to us today. It really makes a difference to know what you have done for us and the fact that we go into each day remembering that.

Help us when we struggle, when we're tempted to give up, when we're tempted to not care because it's easier to just do the same as everybody else around us or to just follow what we feel like doing in life.

Help us to remember the sacrifice of Jesus and to recommit ourselves to you on a daily basis. Lord, we ask for your help with this. In Jesus' name, amen.