

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Nehemiah 8-10: The Renewal of the Covenant

Ezra and Nehemiah describe rebuilding projects. In Ezra it's the *temple* that's rebuilt; in Nehemiah it's the *walls*. But those rebuilding projects are secondary to the *real* rebuilding jobs – of the people themselves, of their lives and their relationship with God. At the heart of both books is not a restored temple or rebuilt walls, but renewed relationship with God.

At various points in our Christian life we find ourselves in need of renewal. We might be faithful in attending church, but we feel our faith is stagnant. We're eager to grow closer in our walk with God, but we don't want a temporary high, and we know a short-lived guilt trip won't make any lasting difference. What we want and need is *real* change, a transforming joy, a fresh experience of the grace of God, a confidence of belonging to him, and a deep assurance that nothing will change that. Nehemiah 8-10 provides insight into how renewal might come about: it involves a new receiving of the word of God, a new relationship with him, and it happens in community with each other.

1. Renewal through the word of God (8:1-18)

The renewal of God's people comes through his word. And it involves, first of all, reading and understanding...

(a) Reading and understanding (8:1-8)

Ezra is back on the scene (7:73-8:4). Notice it's the *people* who ask him to bring out the law, and Ezra reads it all morning, 'from daybreak to noon', probably about six hours! Picture the scene. Thousands are crowded into a public square; everyone is there, including children of a certain age (that's probably who is meant with the phrase 'others who were able to understand'). Ezra stands on a raised

platform large enough for other leaders to stand on either side of him – which adds to the seriousness of what's going on – reading the word of God for about six hours. And the people listen *attentively*, we're told in 8:3. They also listen *reverently* (8:5-6). When Ezra opens the scroll, the people stand up, Ezra blesses them and they respond in worship. But reading it and listening to it is not enough. It needs to be *explained* and *understood* (8:7-8). Ezra does not allow the people to make of it what they want; he wants to make it *clear* to them. But even understanding is not the final goal...

(b) Responding and celebrating (8:9-12)

When the people understood, they *responded*. They began to weep (8:9). We're not told why they wept, but it's not hard to imagine that they were convicted by what was read. Now they knew how far they had drifted from God's word. There is a time for weeping in response to God's word, but this wasn't it; this was a time for celebration (8:10-12). Exposure to God's word has led to a renewed joy in being the people of God, a joy which will bring them strength and protection, because it flows from a deep and settled conviction that we belong to him. But there's still more...

(c) Remembering and participating (8:13-18)

They learned about the feast of tabernacles. For seven days, during the feast, they lived in tents or make-shift shelters, remembering how their ancestors lived in the wilderness. It was an annual reminder of when God rescued them from captivity and brought them into relationship with himself. Everyone was called to take part (8:15), and we're told there had been nothing like it since the days of Joshua (8:17).

The chapter as a whole reminds us how important the word of God is. It reminds us

that God renews us through his word. It reminds us that it's a word for men, and women, and children, that his word addresses the *whole* community. It reminds us to *listen* to it attentively and reverently; but not just to listen or read, to *understand* it too; and not just to understand it, but to *do* it. Reading... understanding... obeying. The preaching or reading has not succeeded when the word has been heard or read, nor even when the word has been understood, but when the word has *transformed* lives. Minds informed, hearts touched, lives changed.

It reminds us why we must be determined to have God's word central in the church. And the passage is clear that there are responsibilities on those who teach the word: that they proclaim it openly; that they proclaim it clearly. They don't make up their own message, or blind people with theological science; they let the text speak, and make it clear. And the passage reminds us that there are responsibilities on *hearers* too: to listen, to understand, to respond.

It reminds us, too, of the importance of God's word in our *personal* lives. Those in need of renewal need to open their ears, minds, and lives to God's word. The people are recovering what it means to be the people of God because they are hearing the voice of God in the pages of his word, and responding to it in obedience.

2. Renewal in relationship with God (9:1-37)

At the heart of renewal is restored relationship with God. The people of God had to put things right with God. This can be seen in how the chapter begins (9:1-3). Reading from the book of Law leads to confession. What follows in 9:5-37 is a long passage which tells the biblical story from creation (9:6), through the covenant with Abraham (9:7-8), the exodus (9:9-12), the covenant with Moses and the giving of the law (9:13-15), right up to where the people now find themselves. And through it all, the people are doing two things...

- (a) Confessing their faithlessness, and
- (b) Confessing God's faithfulness

The whole passage is a confession of *failure* and a confession of *faith*. That's what confession is about: *admitting our guilt* and *acknowledging God's grace*, telling the truth about myself and telling the truth about God.

The passage describes how God blesses, but his people turn away, and yet God still shows mercy. The nation deserved judgment, but again and again God forgave them (see, for instance, 9:30-31). They're reminding themselves of what they're like, what God is like, and how he has dealt with them in the past. 9:33 provides a good summary of the whole section: the people have been rebellious, forgetful, and faithless, but God has been forgiving, patient, and faithful.

All of which reminds us that when renewal comes it is not because we have deserved it, but because of God's ongoing grace. When revival hits the people of God it is not because we have finally reached the point where we have earned enough spiritual merit points with God, but when we realise we can only rely on God's continued faithfulness towards us.

But it also reminds us that we are renewed in our *relationship* with God. It's *him* we have offended; it's *him* we have let down. And it's *him* who forgives us; it's *him* who welcomes us back. Renewal comes through God's word, but it will lead – through confession – to *restored relationship* with him.

But there's a further thing to note...

3. Renewal as the people of God (9:38-10:39)

Here's something very important: it's a *corporate* response. This passage is not just about me as an individual. We're in this together, as a *body* of God's people.

- (a) Sealing the agreement (9:38-10:29)

The renewal of the covenant in chapter 10 flows from the awakening by the word of

God in chapter 8 and the confession of sin in chapter 9 (9:38). The leaders put their names to it, seal it, and make a firm agreement to live according to the covenant God made with Moses (10:29).

(b) Living the agreement (10:30-39)

When it comes to the specifics of living out the agreement, three areas are specified: not to intermarry (10:30), to honour the sabbath (10:31), and to support the temple (10:32-39). They would separate themselves from those who lived according to different standards (10:30), because God was more important than relationships. They would follow the principle of rest (10:31), because God was more important than work. And they would provide for the house of God (10:32-39), because God was more important than money. And they would do all of these things *together*, as God's people.

Of course, there is a need for ongoing renewal at the *personal* level: 'Lord, I belong to you. Thank you for saving me. Restore me and renew me.' But what's taking place here in Nehemiah, crucially, is *corporate* renewal, renewal of the *people of God*, being restored together.

A restored relationship with God leads to a restored relationship with each other, to a concern not just for our own individual spiritual welfare, but a concern for the welfare of the people of God as a whole.

Nehemiah 8-10 offers us an amazing vision: a renewed commitment to God, to God's word, to relationship with God, on the part of *all of us* as the people of God, which deepens and widens our commitment to God all over again.

•••

Renewal through the word of God; renewal in relationship with God; and renewal as the people of God. May God bless us and renew us – *all of us* – for his own greater glory. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 26 November 2006