

SERMON

GATHERING AROUND GOD'S WORD

How the Bible can renew God's people post-lockdown (Nehemiah 8.1–12)

INTRODUCTION

Our world has faced unprecedented levels of disruption recently. At times, it's been like living on the film set of an apocalyptic movie. The coronavirus has reminded us of our fragility. We are not in control of the universe as much as we thought we were and we need each other more than we realise we did. Now, as we seek to rebuild following a period of major disruption and with many uncertainties still ahead, how can God's people experience spiritual renewal together? And where can we find the resources we need to face a brave new world with courage?

This Bible Sunday is an opportunity to reflect on these questions by gathering around the Bible. I want to focus on a particular story captured in the book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament. As I've considered this passage it has felt so pertinent to our context. At the heart of it is a story of Israel recovering from a time of major disruption and experiencing spiritual renewal through God's word.

THE BACK STORY OF EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

First, let's consider the back story that frames Nehemiah 8 in its original context. It's the fifth century BC and the Israelites have recently been through the traumatic experience of exile. A century or so ago, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and forced the majority of its inhabitants out of their homeland. By the rivers of Babylon they sat down and wept in a foreign land. Exile in Babylon proved to be an incredibly tough experience. However, fast-forward 70 years and the Persians took over from the Babylonians and allowed the exiles to return home. So in several waves, the Israelites returned to

Jerusalem and began to rebuild their old lives. If exile was tough, trying to get back to a new normal amid so much uncertainty was even harder. Perhaps that sounds familiar? Lockdown was hard but rebuilding on the other side feels even more challenging. However, when the great leader Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem he managed to mobilise the inhabitants to action, the walls of the city were rebuilt and the people began to feel secure again. Take heart. With God on our side, the rubble can be raw material and the ruin can once again feel like home.

With the physical fabric rebuilt, this is where the key character in our passage fits in. Ezra also returned to Jerusalem and worked with Nehemiah. He had a different skill set. Nehemiah was a visionary leader. Ezra was a Bible teacher. In Nehemiah 8, it is Ezra who takes the lead as God's people regather around God's word:

NEHEMIAH 8.1–10 (selected verses, NIV)

All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. 2 So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. 3 He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law ... [Then] the Levites ... 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 understood what was being read. 9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the

Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, 'This day is holy 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.¹⁰ Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet wine, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.'

This passage shows three ways that the Bible enables spiritual renewal:

1. THE BIBLE IS A DIVINE WATERING HOLE

Nehemiah 8.1-3

Have you ever seen animals gathering at a watering hole?

Our family recently had the privilege of visiting Kenya and enjoying a few days on safari. Early one morning we witnessed a whole array of animals arriving at a watering hole to drink. The source of H²O became a gathering point for a remarkable diversity of creatures.

- **The Bible is for all God's people**

After the trauma of exile and the exhaustion of rebuilding Jerusalem, the people of Israel were thirsty. They needed to drink again from the truth of God's word. So they asked Ezra to bring out the 'Book of Moses' and to read it to them. We are not sure which sections of the Torah Ezra read. Perhaps Deuteronomy? Either way, Ezra read from Israel's sacred Scriptures and they lapped it up. Did you notice who attended this public reading of Scripture and where they gathered? Instead of meeting in the rebuilt Temple where only Jewish males could enter, they assembled in a public square so that everyone could come and listen – men and women, young and old, literate and illiterate. Rarely in the Bible is there a display of such diversity and it's the Bible that provided the gathering point.

- **The Bible is for all humanity**

Too often we place unnecessary restrictions around

the Bible. We position it as a technical book for priests or a scholarly book for academics. However, the Bible is a divine watering hole that gives meaning, strength and hope to thirsty souls. As families, we can gather round the Bible – it's for adults and kids. As churches we can gather round the Bible – it speaks truth whether on Zoom or in the room together. It's a source of wisdom, comfort and hope for all humanity.

My wife went for a drink with some friends recently who were not Christians. As they talked, it became clear that for a couple of them, lockdown had been traumatic. As the lid lifted and the emotions poured out, my wife was able to offer prayer and later texted a verse from the Bible over as a source of strength.

We mustn't leave the Bible locked up in the Temple. More than ever we need to offer the Bible to our thirsty world. That starts by centring our own lives on the Bible. Why not invite others to read it together as the people did with Ezra? If we are to be spiritually renewed through challenging times we need God's word.

Application question: How can we centre ourselves on the Bible and invite others to join us at the watering hole?

2. THE BIBLE IS A LARGER STORY THAT GIVES HOPE

Nehemiah 8.5-8

A while ago I met with some leaders from across the Middle East. One of them shared movingly about his work with refugees. He described one occasion when a shipment of clothing arrived. Having arranged the clothes in the warehouse, he also put a stack of Arabic and Farsi Bibles next to them. When they opened the doors and word got round, there was a stampede... not for the clothes but for the Bibles! The refugees knew that when life is tough and fragile, the Bible is a unique source of hope.

- **The Bible helps makes sense of us**

As the Israelites listened to Ezra reading the Torah, it was clearly a powerful experience. Imagine the scene. Nehemiah 8 records it in a cinematic way. Ezra stood on a large platform built especially for the occasion. Thousands gathered round and as he read from the 'Book of Moses'. You could have heard a pin drop as young and old listened attentively to the Scriptures. What was it that was so captivating? After all, for us there is always more to watch on Netflix. Why bother with the Bible? Perhaps the key for Israel and for us is that the Bible helps us feel part of a larger story that makes sense of our experiences. As Ezra read Israel's history, including God rescuing Israel from slavery in Egypt, making a covenant with them on Mount Sinai and declaring them his 'special treasure' (Exodus 19), taking care of them in the wilderness when they were vulnerable, this wasn't just dusty old history. It was their story. As Ezra read extracts of the Bible, the Israelites felt part of something solid and certain. It gave them confidence to face their challenges knowing that God would be faithful through it all.

This is why we need the Bible. As the coronavirus exposes our fragilities, the Bible reminds us that we are part of a larger story, stretching back to creation and forward to a new creation. We may experience some chaos in the middle but the great author has an overarching plan that will not fail and promises to take care of his people. You won't get that from Netflix. It's why we need the Scriptures. The title of a book I've been writing captures the heart of it: THE BIBLE: A story that makes sense of life.

- **We need help to make sense of the Bible**

That said, have you noticed that sometimes the Bible doesn't easily make sense? It can be pretty complex and knotty, even disturbing. If you've experienced that, you're in good company. As the crowds listened attentively to Ezra reading the Scriptures there were clearly moments when they found it confusing. So as well as reading the text, the Levites and others trained in the Torah went out among the crowd 'making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read' (verse 8). Imagine that – Bible teachers moving from group to group, family to family and asking, 'How are you finding it? Do you need any assistance?' It reminds us that it's OK to struggle with the Bible and to ask for some help.

Today, there are great resources that make the Bible more accessible. Bible Project in America has provided really helpful videos. Closer to home, Bible Society's online shop has books and resources that can really help. One resource, called *The Bible Course*, helps ordinary people make sense of the Bible. Bible Society has now invested in a whole new edition of *The Bible Course*. Over eight sessions it shows how the whole Bible forms one big story. There are plenty of good resources to draw on to help make sense of the Bible.

Application Question: What's your next step to become more confident with the Bible?

3. THE BIBLE HELPS US CULTIVATE TRUE COMMUNITY

Nehemiah 8.9–12

When I was at university, I invited one of my rugby teammates to a Christian event. After a bold talk from the Bible, I felt awkward and wondered what my non-Christian friend made of it. "So what did you think of that?" I asked, bracing myself for the reply. None came. Instead, as I looked across my friend was crying. The Bible is surprisingly powerful. It gets under our skin and moves us in ways no other book can. Later that evening, my friend gave his life to Jesus Christ and today he is leading a Christian youth project in London.

- **The Bible can help us process our emotions**

After Ezra had finished reading, he suddenly realised that the people had started crying. They got so emotional that Nehemiah stepped in to try and coax them out of it: 'Do not mourn or weep' ... Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet wine.' That's an unusual request for a leader to make! Where did all their emotion come from? Remember, the Israelites faced major loss, disruption and uncertainty but had to keep going through it all. As the Bible was read it was like the lid was lifted. They encountered words of comfort and hope. They may also have felt a sense of conviction and remorse. Either way, Scripture created a safe space that allowed emotions to surface and deeper things to be discussed.

As a society we've been through a lot recently.

We've experienced loss and high levels uncertainty. We probably don't realise how much we've been holding in and the toll it's taken. In the context of community, the Bible can help us express our emotions as part of a process of healing and renewal.

I was on a Zoom call with some friends and we were reading a passage of the Bible in Colossians. It included the phrase "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (Colossians 3.15). One after another we began to share with each other how much we longed for this inner peace in the face of struggles. Some were experiencing bereavement, others had lost their jobs, and still others were finding homeschooling hugely stressful. Soon there were tears as grown adults found a safe and honest space opened up to express how we were really feeling.

- **The Bible can help us become more generous**

Nehemiah 8 finishes with a scene of celebration, as tears of sorrow transition to feasting and rejoicing. As Nehemiah famously put it: 'The joy of the LORD is your strength.' The Israelites responded by putting the Scriptures into practice and shared what they had with the poor and those in need (8.10). One thing the pandemic has taught us is to be aware of our neighbours' pain and to show kindness, support and concern for each other.

After a period of disruption, God's people experienced a new depth of community as they gathered around God's word. Over the next few months, no doubt we will have reason to cry together and celebrate together, lament and laugh. As we do so, we will discover that vulnerability and generosity are the keys to authentic community, whether in the room or on Zoom. Healing and renewal come when we gather around God's word together.

Application Question: How can the Bible provide a safe place to process our experiences and face our fears together?

RESPONSE

In Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, a poignant conversation takes place. Frodo says, 'I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.' Gandalf replies, 'So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All you have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to you.' We may not choose these times, but we can make the most of them by gathering around God's word and experiencing spiritual renewal.

Dr Andrew Ollerton is a theologian and pastor who created *The Bible Course* (Bible Society) and is author of a new book *The Bible: a Story that Makes Sense of Life* (Hodder & Stoughton).