

# The Dynamic Power of God's Word

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning, everybody. And thanks so much for your welcome. I'm glad to have had correspondence with Graham.! It's lovely to be back here. We've been a few times, Margaret and I, and lovely to be with you. Thank you for allowing me to operate down here.

Can you manage okay? I'm not much to look at anyway, so it's good. And I don't have this huge platform that they built in Nehemiah Chapter 8. Did you hear that? Fantastic platform for the preacher, just like you have immediately behind me.

Thank you.

In Weakness during those three weeks. Fantastic children's program, youth program, seminar program, Bible teaching and worship. So if you haven't been, you're very welcome.

We'd love to see you. It's free of charge. You can commute up and down every day, or you can find somewhere to stay. We'd love to see you there. It's one of about 80 events around the world, and Margaret and I help with what's called the Keswick Fellowship because it's rippled around the world to different countries in Africa and Asia and Europe, and there are events running all through the year linked to the Keswick family.

[ 1 : 31 ] So that's the advert over, but we'd love to see you in the summer. And the reason for the choice of this passage, Nehemiah 8, is because in correspondence with Graham, I understand you're looking at a wonderful psalm, Psalm 119, which is, of course, a great song, a great poem, all about the Word of God.

So we thought maybe it would be good looking at this very dramatic story in Nehemiah 8, which tells us about the dynamic power of God's Word and the importance of hearing and responding to God's Word.

Now, of course, you're seeing that all through Psalm 119, but here's a particular event which illustrates it. Now, I recently read a comment from the retiring General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance, and he addressed the biggest crisis facing evangelicals all around the world. You might want to guess what the biggest crisis is. Well, you could say it's secularism, or you could say it's the advance of Islam, or you could say it's persecution.

But on the screen, you'll see what he felt was the biggest challenge facing Christians like us all around the world. The biggest crisis is the growing lack of biblical literacy worldwide.

[ 2 : 53 ] Beyond all theological differences, financial problems, and political questions, he said, our biggest problem is that Bible knowledge is fading away. I don't know if that's your assessment of the biggest challenge that we face.

It's true that around the world, the church is growing rapidly, especially in the majority world of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. But despite growing numbers, that doesn't always mean there's going to be growing understanding or knowledge of the Bible.

And even here in the West, where we have a much stronger tradition of having the Bible and having it taught, Now, the latest figures that I've read are that 70% of Christians in this country and Europe, 70% of Christians only read the Bible when they're in a church meeting like this.

And that's a slightly worrying statistic because what we see in Psalm 119, and certainly in this story now, is that this word of God is dynamic. It's life-changing.

It's essential for us to live as we should as God's people. At the same time as that crisis, you know as well there are new opportunities. And this is something I read just a week or two ago in the Evangelical Alliance Idea magazine.

[ 4 : 09 ] It's written by Paul Woolley, who works for the London Institute. And he says that those coming to church today are not simply looking for community. He's writing about the growth, the number of people who are deciding to go to church.

We're in a very small church in a rural area, but people are coming. And they don't quite know why, but they want to be in a church. It's an interesting phenomenon in different parts of the country. And he says, increasingly, they are looking for truth. They want a moral compass to navigate complexity. They long for clarity in a world of shifting narratives.

They want scripture to shape everyday life in work, in family, in relationships, and in society. And of course, the good news is that that is what the Bible does.

That is what scripture does, because God's word is dynamic and life-changing. Martin Luther once said about the Bible, here's the phrase, the Bible is alive.

[ 5 : 10 ] It has hands and grabs hold of me. It has feet and runs after me. And that idea of a dynamic word, which can change us, is picked up many, many times in the scriptures.

As you know, there are lots of dynamic descriptions. Jeremiah said that the word of God was like a fire in his bones, or like a hammer that would break rocks. And you'll know Paul, of course, described God's word as the sword of the spirit.

That's repeated later in the New Testament. Jesus said that the seed, the word was the seed, which could produce a phenomenal harvest, just a small, vulnerable seed, has a great impact.

And maybe you remember the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. And they were joined by Jesus. They didn't recognize him. And Jesus chose not to introduce himself, but instead to introduce himself through the scriptures.

And Luke tells us, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself. In other words, it's through the Bible, through the scriptures, that we come to encounter the living Lord Jesus.

[ 6 : 19 ] That's why it's so important that we give our energies to understanding what God's word has to say. That's true in this series in Psalm 119. And right now.

Well, in Nehemiah 8, we have a great story about the impact of this living word on the community there in Jerusalem. Now, God's people had returned home after years and years of exile, away from Jerusalem.

And now they were back home. What really mattered was that they truly became God's people. They truly understood God's word for them. So very quickly, let me just give three bullet points which introduce and explain this story.

The first thing to notice is the foundation of God's word. The section we're looking at is right at the heart of Nehemiah's memoirs. The whole book is his account of how things were going.

And right at the heart, of course, is the story of the foundation of God's word. They rebuilt the walls all around Jerusalem, but the real foundation for them as God's people, as the community of God, would be his word.

[ 7 : 27 ] Three things to mention. First of all, it was central. The seventh month, which is referred to in the passage, was a month of great religious festivals.

And the first thing they did was call for the book, call for the law of God. They wanted to hear God's word. And you'll notice there, verse one, all the people came together as one in the square before the water gates.

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. And verse three says, everybody listened attentively.

Now that they were back home in Jerusalem, and now they were there with the word of God, this was going to be the new constitution. This was going to be the thing that would shape them as God's people.

So it was central. And that's how it should be for every congregation, every Christian congregation and church, for every believer. It should be central to our lives because of its dynamic role in introducing us to Jesus and to God's purpose.

[ 8 : 32 ] Second thing to notice is it had authority. 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.

So he mentions the human author, that's Moses. But do you notice he also refers to the divine author, the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

So it had authority because it was the law of God. It was the revelation or the teaching which God had given. And that, of course, is vital for our own understanding.

So when we open the Bible, as we are now, or when you do at home or on your phone on the way to work or wherever you access God's word, it's very important to remember two things. And this is

a verse in 1 Thessalonians on the screen, which helps us.

It's in 1 Thessalonians 2 verse 13. We thank God continually because when you receive the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.

[ 9 : 43 ] It's a fantastic description of why we take the Bible so seriously. First of all, it's authoritative, he says. It's the word of God in your Bibles. You can really underline that because he says it with emphasis.

He writes it with real emphasis. It's the word of God. But notice that the other phrase which follows, it's not only authoritative, it is powerful. He says, it is at work in you who believe.

I found that hugely encouraging that when we read the Bible here in the church or individually or in groups, it's not simply taking in information. It's the word of God, which is at work in us.

It's powerful to change us. I have a good friend who's a pastor in Harare in Zimbabwe. And some years ago, I was with him and he just had a visit from some of Robert Mugabe's security forces. Robert Mugabe was a previous president in Zimbabwe. And the security forces had gone around all institutions, including churches, just before the elections because they wanted to cover all bases.

[ 10 : 50 ] And so they asked the pastor, Gary, do you have any explosives, any arms, anything explosive in the church? And my friend said, yes, come on in.

And he brought them in. You'll know where I'm going probably. And he went into the church office and he gave them all Bibles. And then he prayed with them that they would experience the power of this explosive book.

And I quite like hearing him say that because that is the truth about God's word. It is powerful. It's authoritative because it's from God. It is powerful because it is at work in you who believe.

It's another good reason why it should be central in our lives and our church. And the third thing to mention about this foundation was that this word was for everyone. When Margot read the passage, I'm sure you noticed how this is repeated so many times because if it's going to be the foundation for their families, for their life together, for their economic activity, for their new constitution as God's people, it was essential that it was clear and accessible to everyone.

So for one thing, verse one, everyone was present. All the people came together as one. Then Ezra read before the whole assembly, verse two, which was made up of men and women and all who could understand.

[ 12 : 11 ] That's repeated in verse three. Verse five, all the people could see him with this fantastic pulpit that they built. And it was read, notice it was not read in the temple, which you'd expect, wouldn't you, in Jerusalem, read the Bible in the holy place.

It was read downtown in the city center. It was for everyone. And then the story also underlined several times, everybody understood. They made the law clear, verse eight, giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

And then the reason for the response of the people, which we'll look at as we finish in a few minutes, verse 12, because they now understood the words that had been made known to Israel, made known to them.

It's possible, I think we should applaud Margot for all those names. I mean, she did a great job, didn't she? Repeated twice. They were Levites and they were mingling there with all the people. The reason why they were doing that, possibly they were translating because there would be multiple languages and maybe they were translating. Some people think maybe they were just holding small discussion groups, making sure everybody in that huge crowd downtown Jerusalem really understood what was being read.

[ 13 : 24 ] So that was a big concern and I know that's exactly your concern here, that what we teach and how we understand the scriptures should really sink into people's hearts and minds and truly be understood.

It's because the word of God leads us into God's presence. We come to know Jesus in that way. One other illustration also happens to be from Zimbabwe. There was a general secretary of the Bible Society in Zimbabwe and I did hear him tell this rather remarkable story.

He was, I should have jumped ahead, Margaret, I'll probably come back later to that. I'll give you one example of accessibility I noticed I should have said. It's for everyone. I'll come back to my story in a moment.

Just a couple of weeks ago we received a video and I thought it's worth mentioning what's happening in terms of the Wycliffe Bible translators, this idea of it being for everyone. They're working, coordinating Bible translation in Nigeria and there are 500 languages in Nigeria and in the message that they sent us just a week or two ago they said if they carry on with the translation into 500 languages they won't have a complete New Testament in these many languages until 2180. That's more than 150 years. So they're appealing. We need to make the Word of God accessible. We need more workers. We need more funds. And that's true of many agencies trying to make God's Word accessible around the world.

[14:58] And of course it's true in our own culture. We want more people to engage and understand and live by the Word of God making it accessible for families and for adults for those with learning difficulties for those that are visually handicapped every way we can to make the Word of God accessible.

Well that's the foundation of God's Word. Let's come to a second big theme which is really interesting to see the hunger for God's Word when you read this passage.

The account tells us a good deal about the people who were in Jerusalem when this event happened. First thing is they were expectant. They were eager to hear the Word.

You can see that from the very first verse. They were the ones who called Ezra to bring out the book. In fact, ages ago, I think maybe 20 years ago, a man called Jim Packer who's a British theologian wrote a book and he commented on this verse and he said it was rather like going to a pop concert, a big music event, he said.

It must have been like the crowd. And they said, this is Jim Packer suggesting, we want Ezra. We want Ezra. Saying it over and over again, louder and louder and you get some idea of the feelings being expressed in Jerusalem that day.

[16:20] Well, it takes a bit of imagination but he's right that there was a large crowd longing to hear the Word. They appealed to Ezra, bring out the book of the law. And the same sense of expectancy and eagerness is expressed in verse 3, all the people listened attentively as I've mentioned.

Now, verse 5, all the people stood up as they opened the book. They wanted to pay attention to this Word and it reminds us, of course, that when we come to open God's Word, whenever we do so, we must have the same sense of faith and expectancy which these people demonstrated.

It's interesting that even Jesus' own ministry was frustrated when there was no sense of expectancy or faith in his audience. He was in the synagogue he began to teach but people were not listening. So this attitude of expectancy is so important and expectant faith is the soil in which God's Word will produce good fruit.

It's the lesson for a church congregation. It's the lesson all the way through our lives, listening with that kind of expectancy and faith. And the second thing is to notice that they were really committed.

[17:34] You can see their spiritual hunger when you read it through. They were ready for all kinds of inconvenience. And if you just analyze the text you see that they stood from daybreak till noon.

Verse 3. So that's probably about five hours they were standing to listen to this word without a coffee break in sight. They were totally committed. And again, this kind of response is to do with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

That's what we must pray for. The expectancy and the commitment which realizes we long to hear what God has to say. We want to be changed by the dynamic power of God's Word.

And the third thing we notice about them is their humility. Verse 6. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God and all the peoples lifted their hands and responded Amen, Amen.

Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. I do wonder if there is something to learn from the attitude of the people that day which is recorded in verse 6.

[18:39] All the people lifting their hands. All the people bowing down to touch the ground. There was a reverence, a humility, a desire to hear what God has to say.

And again, these are prerequisites for truly being impacted by the Word of God in our own lives. In fact, I think those verses are a good example of the fact that we don't venerate the book as such, the Bible.

Martin Luther again used to say that the Bible is the cradle in which we find the baby. In other words, we come to the Bible in order to encounter Jesus, as we've said, so that he will have preeminence in our life, so that we live our lives shaped by knowing the Lord Jesus.

So the Bible is the cradle which introduces us to the baby, to Jesus himself. And here I come back to what I was just about to say about the General Secretary of the Bible Society in Zimbabwe. His name is Gaylord Camberini, and he once offered a man a New Testament. And the guy said, no, I'm not interested. I don't want to read the New Testament.

[ 19 : 53 ] He said, in fact, if you give me the New Testament, I'll roll up every page and make cigarettes. So Camberini said to this guy, well, let's do a deal. I'll give you the New Testament if you promise to read every page before you smoke it.

And so that's what happened. Well, some years later, 15 years later, this man who was rolling the cigarettes actually had become a believer, and he was speaking, giving his testimony, and Camberini came into the conference.

And so the speaker said, well, that man gave me a New Testament 15 years ago. And he said, I smoked Matthew, and then I smoked Mark, and then I smoked Luke.

But when I came to John 3.16, my life completely changed. We read it in the Breaking the Bread service just early before this service. God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

he encountered Jesus through reading those pages. And that, of course, is what's happening the world over. And that's what happens to us if we read it with the humility and the reverence and open hearts and expectancy we meet the Lord.

[ 21 : 10 ] Well, the final section, the final thing I want to mention is just to see what was that impact. How did it influence the people in Nehemiah's day?

So what about the impact? And there are three, again, three simple things which I want to underline. What's important to remember, of course, is that the scriptures themselves are given not just to inform or to instruct, although they include that element, but as we've said, they are to change us.

It's so important to see that the Bible is powerful and dynamic to change our lives. I love the illustration which Isaiah gave, which you might remember. he was talking about the water cycle. I used to be a geography teacher so it appeals to me. The rain falls, waters the earth, it germinates the seeds, the harvest begins to grow and then the water evaporates back up.

That's the water cycle that Isaiah was telling people about in Isaiah 55. And then this is what Isaiah adds after that illustration. It's on the screen.

[ 22 : 18 ] So is my word that goes forth from my mouth. It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

God will fulfill his purpose through the word which he gives. It's authoritative and powerful as we said a moment ago. And certainly in Jerusalem there were several responses to God's word being read over those hours.

And perhaps you identify with these as well. First of all they were celebrating God's grace. Verse 9 shows their first response. For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the law.

In other words they realized as they heard God's word that they'd failed that they'd sinned they'd disobeyed God. But Ezra and Nehemiah moved pretty quickly to set that failure within the context of God's good purposes for his people.

So verses 9 and 10 This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep. Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared.

[ 23 : 32 ] This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength. So they were saying the first response to God's word should be joyfully to accept everything which God has done for them.

It was a special day a day to recall God's grace towards them and so the people went to celebrate and they went to eat and drink with great joy is how this little section ends in verse 12.

And I think that's a lovely way to approach the Bible. if you're not motivated to read Scripture day by day then it's worth remembering God has good purposes for us.

He has plans for us and they are to completely change our lives and make us who we really were made to be and therefore all of his actions towards us are for our well-being.

So coming to Scripture celebrating God's goodness and God's grace is a very important response when we open the pages of the Bible. Then secondly we come to another confessing their sin.

[ 24 : 42 ] We can understand this because their understanding of what God had said to them did lead to confession. We haven't time to look at it but if you have a moment later today just to look into chapter 9 Nehemiah chapter 9 you discover that there is a long confession of faith.

It's beautifully written there's a statement about God's goodness then there's a statement about the people's behavior their failure their sinfulness and then there's a statement about God's mercy and grace and that little cycle is running all the way through chapter 9 and it reminds us of the way in which Paul does the same in the New Testament where he's talking about the gospel.

He does explain our sinfulness he does explain the consequences of God's judgment but then he says this is from chapter 3 verse 24 but we are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

So just as God's people confessed their sins and remembered God's grace and mercy we must do exactly the same and God's word helps us to do that not only to understand our own sinfulness but it's the mirror to our hearts but also then to understand God's grace and forgiveness he sets us free from those things of the past just as the people in Nehemiah's day experienced that nothing should hold us back despite those failures God is the one who's faithful we can count on his grace all of that comes from hearing God's word and then the third and the final thing to mention is very interesting it's a commitment to obey again if you have time to read chapter 8 9 and 10 that's the flow of what's written in Nehemiah's memoirs celebration confession and then commitment so if we've experienced God's forgiveness we've experienced his restoring grace then we'll want to commit our lives to live for him and so Nehemiah in chapters 8 to 10 moves from that confession and celebration to a commitment to obey God's word it's an agreement that all the people made there in chapter 10 they said we will obey carefully all the commands regulations and decrees of the Lord our God and that's the significance of this story this movement from hearing

God's word celebrating God's goodness knowing God's grace and then obeying God's laws that is what God is looking for in our lives as well it is truth in action in fact you might say well I find it very difficult to understand the Bible at times but I always remember Michael Wilcott who wrote a couple of commentaries on the New Testament and he had a lovely phrase and here it is on screen our understanding of God's word has to do with our obedience not our brains as we obey what God calls us to do so we truly begin to understand God's purpose for us and for our families our church our society for the world at large understanding comes truly from obeying God's word we're not called simply to hear the truth but to do it in fact authentic Christians I think are those who speak this message but whose lives embody the message and I have a good friend

[ 28 : 19 ] I finish with this and he sometimes uses this illustration as we look at God's word and he said well I've been looking at you in Edinburgh and you're reading the Bible like this but you should read the Bible the Chinese way which is like this we read it and as we do so we're saying Lord I'm willing to obey I hear what you're saying I'm willing to change I'm going to obey your word so I hope in these few moments looking at this remarkable story and as you go through this fantastic Psalm 119 we'll learn from the people of Jerusalem and the Old Testament believers who listen to Psalm 119 eager to respond to this dynamic power of God's word and to obey everything which the Lord says to us thank you very much for listening patiently through that let's pray together dear father we thank you for the wonderful gift that you have given us in your word especially for the way in which we have it in our own language we have it in so many different formats it's accessible to all of us 24 hours a day and so we ask you'll forgive us for those times when we've neglected to take it seriously we fail to see that this is the dynamic word through which you're able to change our lives and our families and even our society so we thank you for the lovely story of your people in the Old Testament who were eager to hear that word ready to put up with all kinds of inconvenience to ensure that they truly understood and then they were willing to obey we pray that here at Brunfield as we go through

Psalm 119 as we personally read your word day by day you will transform us by the Holy Spirit as we understand your word more fully we pray too that you'll help us to make it accessible to everyone we pray for all the families here at BEC we know it's a challenge to introduce your word to children and teenagers we pray that our families will take seriously the living word of God which will shape the lives of their families we pray too for those in our neighbourhood who need to hear the good news of the gospel need to hear your word please bless every effort that we make here to open up the good news of the gospel and by your spirit please win people for the Lord Jesus we pray for Wycliffe who we've just mentioned and many other agencies around the world who are

working hard to make this word of God accessible to people of all languages we pray you'll bless their efforts and continue to win people for the Lord Jesus through all that they're doing we pray for Scripture

Union in Scotland for those who are working hard not only to produce materials but also to help in schools and in other settings so that the word of the Lord will speed on and triumph we ask dear Father that your word will enter hearts and minds even today and change us and change Scotland and change the world for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ in whose name we pray Amen Thank you.