

## Sermon            Ezra reads The Word of God

### Intro/

I don't know how familiar you are with the story of Nehemiah, so let me give you a bit of background to our readings –

The Israelites have been in Exile in Babylon, and bit by bit they are returning to Jerusalem. Ezra, the Priest, had returned with some of the people some years earlier – and he'd overseen the rebuilding of the Temple and the Altar.

Nehemiah has also now returned with some more of the people, and he has overseen the rebuilding of Jerusalem itself – including its walls and gates.

And they're all at the stage of having finished all the rebuilding work. But it seems that instead of feeling pleased and satisfied with what they've got done – there appears to be a sort of dissatisfaction – a sort of 'Ok, we've done it, but now what? There must be more than this – there must be more to life than bricks and mortar!'

And so, at the start of our reading from chapter 8 we see the Israelites coming together in the public square and asking Ezra the Priest, to get the Book of the Law of Moses.

We're told that this happened on the first day of the month of Tishri – this falls around September/October time – and what happened next appears to have gone on for at least 24 days.

So let's take a look at what happened as we look let's think about how the people responded that day –

I've picked out 4 responses and they all begin with the letter 'C'.

1/

The first response that I want us to look at is that they 'Craved' for the Word of God!

They begged Ezra to go and get the Book of the Law and to read it to them –

Can you imagine that? Demanding almost, that the Priest read the Scriptures to them?

They were hungry for God – hungry to hear His Word –

They couldn't get enough of Him – and they wanted more and more – and that first day really only whetted their appetites for Him – even though Ezra read for at least 6 hours – we're told that he read from dawn to noon – and then the Levites did a sort of sermon session as they explained what Ezra had read –

And so this first day of Bible Study went on for the whole day! And it only whetted their appetite for more.

Can you imagine it? They'd been listening to Ezra and the Levites all day and they still wanted more – they were desperate to hear the Word of God.

Which brings us to the next 'C' – Commitment.

Because they Craved for the Word of God – they listened attentively, with their eyes fixed on Ezra – all day!

That's some Commitment, isn't it?

I mean no-one was thinking that they'd better go now – that they'd been here a couple of hours now and that surely that was enough! They weren't thinking that they had other things to do!

Their Commitment was the response to their Craving for the Word of God – and they were totally committed to hearing from

God through what Ezra was reading and through what the Levites were explaining – and this carried on all day and every day – week after week.

As that first day went on though, we see another response of the Israelites to what they heard –

This time it's 'Contrition' or Confession.

As Ezra was reading and as the Levites were explaining the Law, the people were moved to tears – they cried openly as the tears of repentance flowed freely – God's Word spoke so clearly to their hearts, convincing them of their sin.

Hearing the Word of God had a profound effect on the people of Jerusalem – it brought them to a place of repentance.

So often the Word of God does that doesn't it?

It's a bit like a plumb line or a spirit level which show whether something is level or straight and so it shows us where our lives have gone a bit off course – how they don't quite make it – how they don't quite measure up –

But there is always a way of straightening up again – of getting back on course – and that's through repentance and through receiving God's forgiveness –

And the Israelites were catching glimpses of all this on that first day – and they were moved to Contrition – to Confession.

Now Ezra and Nehemiah and the Levites could see how shaken they all were and that they needed some space to heal –

Everyone had used up a lot of spiritual and emotional energy that day and they needed to take a rest from any more –

And so we come to the last 'C' – which is for Celebration –

Nehemiah tells the people to go home and Celebrate because that day was now a sacred day – God was pleased with them – and His Joy would be their strength –

What a day that had been!

A whole day of listening to the Word of God being read to them and explained to them –

You'd think that was enough, wouldn't you?

But no – the next day they're all back again – in the square – wanting to hear more –

And they discover that they were meant to have been celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles –

Now the Feast of Tabernacles was a time to remember and to kind of relive how the Israelites had spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness after coming out of Egypt and how they'd lived in temporary makeshift shelters –

And they were desperate to start up this Festival again.

Ezra sends them off to gather up branches from all sorts of trees and bushes so they can build their shelters in their courtyards, on their rooftops, in the town squares, anywhere there was space – and boy, did they celebrate! – we're told that the celebration lasted for a week –

But they didn't just party – Oh no – Everyday was another Bible Study! As Ezra read to them day after day – they just could not get enough of God's Word!

What an amazing month that was!

Then on the 24<sup>th</sup> day – there was a dramatic change –

At the start of chapter 9 we see them gathering together again yes – but this time they're fasting and they've dressed in sackcloth and they've covered their heads with dust and ashes.

They've been challenged very deeply by what they've heard and their response has been just as deep – they've come in deep repentance and sorrow – and they spend 3 hours confessing their sins and the sins of their ancestors and declaring what God has done for His people –

3 hours – not a couple of sentences! –

These 2 chapters from Nehemiah are amazing chapters – Read them when you get home – and read on through chapter 10 as well.

End/

The Israelites had spent whole days – day after day – listening to Ezra read from the Scriptures and listening to the Levites as they explained what it all meant – and they'd responded pretty quickly – coming to that place of repentance –

Now, I don't know about you, but I find these 2 chapters hugely challenging –

I mean, how often have we spent whole days – several whole days in fact – reading and studying the Bible and getting to grips with what we've read?

Have we ever been so hungry for the Word of God that we've just eaten and eaten because we can't get enough? Have we ever been hungry to know what God says about something – and hungry to know how to put that into practice?

If you're beginning to feel these hunger pangs then speak to David about becoming part of a Life Group that is exploring God's Word in some way –

Another challenge I think, is the whole subject of confession and repentance –

Did you notice that they spent 3 hours confessing their sin and their ancestor's sin and then declaring God's goodness over it?

You see, all during their time in Exile they hadn't had the Scriptures with them – and so they hadn't heard any of this before – it was all new to them –

It's not like that for us, is it?

We all have, probably several Bibles at home and so we can read the Word of God whenever we feel like it –

The problem with that is that perhaps we are too familiar with it, and maybe we've lost our passion for it.

I believe we need to get that hunger back –

We need to hear every word – we need to know what God says about things – and we need to know how to apply it all to our lives and to our church. We need to ask ourselves questions like, 'How does this apply to me?' 'How does this apply to my church?'

Because God still speaks through Scripture –

It's all in here.

And we need to hear and understand what He's saying about our own renewal and revival

And I believe those 4 'C's' are for us too –

We need to crave for the Word of God

We need to be committed to hearing it

We need to come to that place of confession  
Because that's what leads to our own celebration.

Braintree needs renewal and revival –

Christ Church needs renewal and revival –

We need renewal and revival –

And I believe it all begins with a craving to hear the Word of God.