

# File1

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] bring up to the pulpit the bible and would open it up and you see one or two nodding knowing nods here gene would open it up and as they did so the whole people would stand and i think that practice was actually very much based on what we just read nehemiah chapter 8 verse 5 where it says that ezra opened the book all the people could see him because he was standing above them and as he opened it the people all stood up now there are many reasons why we gather together as church we meet together to to fellowship with one another and to enjoy sharing the things of god with one another we meet in order to bring our praise to our god but certainly one of the things we must be doing is coming before god's word and sitting under it and hearing what god has to say to us and seeking by his grace to have our lives continually reformed by it sadly in that church that i went to certainly at the time really the opening up of the word at the the beginning literally was was almost the only time it really was opened up but it did symbolize something that is very very important i think this this scene that's painted for us in nehemiah chapter 8 for me is one of the most heartwarming pictures in the whole of the old testament i just think it is a a lovely lovely picture so let me just outline explain a little bit of the historical situation first of all and then we'll try to see how how it applies to us today this morning i asked the question when we looked in numbers about well who were these people and we pointed out that these were the second generation of the people who had left egypt and i pointed out this morning that they were they were a huge company about 600 000 men had left egypt along with the women and the children and roughly the same number of people would enter into the promised land we have here the descendants of those people but at this stage certainly in israel they are a much much smaller group of people they have rebelled time and time again against god and eventually they were taken into exile once again the people couldn't believe it would happen when the prophets came and said if you continue to rebel god will take you into exile they couldn't believe it where the people of god he wouldn't do that but god did that and they were in exile in babylon and they stayed there for 70 years but then there was the beginning of the return god can work in anybody he worked in the heart of somebody who wasn't a worshipper of him a king who didn't acknowledge god and yet that king decreed that the people of israel could begin to go back to their own land and so they began to go back but it's nowhere near the same number and not from they don't represent

all of the tribes we're told in the previous chapter that there were around about 50 000 this time perhaps that was 50 000 men plus others so a decent number of people but nowhere near the size that had originally gone in to the promised land and they've come back and they've had their setbacks and they've had their problems but at this stage they've been back some decades and the walls have been rebuilt of jerusalem which had been down for years and years the gates have been hung the people have begun to disperse into other towns around about according to their inheritance but on this particular day they are all called to come back together to jerusalem it's the first day of the seventh month we're told probably wouldn't mean much to us as we read it but that was the the equivalent of the beginning of the the new year for them it was an important point in their year year and we are told that they gathered together as one man what a wonderful sight it must have been you know 50 000 men plus the others gather together around the water gate imagine you know one of our bigger football stadiums and all of the people there gathered not to watch a football match but coming together standing there to listen to god's word being read we're told there was the men the women and all who were able to understand so there would have been teenagers there children as well anybody who was of an age where they could understand what was being read and isn't that a lovely description that the people assembled as one man they were coming together with a common purpose you know as we gather together tonight we don't or we shouldn't just be coming in as individuals with our own particular joys and problems listening to

what god would just say to us and then departing as an individual again we are of course all individuals and we all have our own relationship with god but hopefully we come together with a common purpose and with common desires they come together as one man something similar is said when paul wrote to the church at philippi he couldn't come to them he was in prison but he looked forward to the day when he could come back to them and he says to them when he writes to them in chapter 1 in verse 27 then whether i come and see you or only hear about you in my absence i will know that you stand firm in one spirit contending as one man for the gospel now philippi was a roman garrison town and paul there used an image from the roman army he talks about them standing together like a phalanx it was one of the the roman army's great techniques the men used to have a shield each but what they would do when they were attacking place they would all come together they would all raise their shields up and the shields would match together so that they were protected you see they were far stronger together than just as individuals and paul picked up and used that image he says i'd love to see you standing shoulder to shoulder standing as one man together what a wonderful picture it is and and that should be uh the picture of us uh as a local church together and wider than that as well and it's lovely they ask ezra the priest to come and to read the law to them i don't know whether it had been suggested to them already but you know this isn't a top-down imposition upon them this isn't ezra and nehemiah and the others saying you know we are going to read this whether you like it or not like it or lump it the people had a desire to they asked ezra come and read would you from the book of the law and he did so i wonder if you ever uh sit um on on a sunday morning or a sunday evening and if sometimes it's a bit of a lengthy reading and you think yourself a bit of a long one that this evening that reading um well what about this ezra read from the book of the law from daybreak till noon i doubt whether you've had a reading quite as long as that uh whitby have you he he read it to them all of this time uh and then we we get this lovely um description again in verse three sort of a delight to any any preacher or or sunday school teacher or young people's leader anybody who who teaches and the people listened attentively to the book of the law it was a long reading but the people listened carefully and they listened with attention i remember uh an instance where a uh quite a larger than life uh preacher uh noticed that uh one of the students in his uh congregation had dropped off to sleep and uh hoping perhaps being quite happy to embarrass him said from the pulpit or to somebody i knew gerald uh would you mind just waking up so and so and gerald very quickly replied you sent him to sleep you wake him up again so but that wasn't the case here they all listened and they listened within with attention and it's interesting to notice well there was the concern that the people would also understand what was being read and so we have this this list of people here with quite difficult names for us to pronounce i've always found that pronounce them confidently and probably there's not many people in the congregation will know whether you're right or wrong but we had all of these people here and they were helping in it and it seems that they they divided the the people up and would make clear what was being read now it's not exactly clear what what that meant it may mean that in some ways they they were translating it because the original word was written in a form of their language which wasn't generally spoken then but it may also have been that they were explaining it and in instructing the people as to what it meant for them its importance its significance to them at their particular stages in life i was thinking as i read this of the feeding of the five thousand the feeding of the four thousand where jesus told the people to to get together into smaller groups he broke the the groups up and then the disciples went round and fed them and they were all fed well that was happening here this huge crowd was there but perhaps you know part of the law was read and then these levites and others would take their group of people and say well you know have you got that did you understand that did you follow that were any of those words were you not sure of them remember this is very much an oral tradition people people people who couldn't read so they were having to listen and to listen carefully and to be attentive to it what a marvelous day it was what a wonderful picture it it was but there was something of what struck me might have struck you as an unusual response from the people as the book of the law was being read many of them broke out into tears they were weeping and ezra and nehemiah and others were having to comfort them and encourage them not to weep and not to grieve that this was to be a day of rejoicing we're not told why they wept perhaps it was because as they had god's word read to them they became a more and more aware of this the sin that had led them to have gone into exile in the first place and perhaps of areas where they were still failing god we're not exactly told and it's not a bad thing for us to at times to weep over our own failures but god does want us to stay there when we fully realize what god has

done to to rescue us and to adopt us into his family it's a cause for joy and it's a cause for generosity he says to the people don't weep it's a day for joy today and also you know eat your your feasts and drink it's a it's a joyful festival and if there are any of your people who haven't got enough share with them be generous to them so that is what happens on the first day of the feast and then we have the second day begins there in verse 13 on the second day of the month and it's interesting what he does this time it's not all of the people who are gathered together it's the priests and the scribes the levites gathering around

Ezra and also the heads of the families probably not just small nuclear families probably larger families than that but the heads of the families and he teaches them in order that they then can go out and teach the rest of the family and it reminds us doesn't it of the responsibility that heads of families have in the normal case that would be that would be the father in the house but not everybody i recognize is in that position it might be there might be a single mother it may be that there may be a believing wife who whose husband isn't a christian and who has children then obviously that person has a role to share with the children but remember what god had said back in in deuteronomy um in deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4 onwards or 5 onwards they're called love the lord your god with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength these commandments that i give you today are to be upon your hearts but then he says to them impress them on your children talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road when you lie down and when you get up in other words as part of your daily life as you go about your daily life with your children share the things of god with them as they're appropriate as they see things that is part of your responsibility if you are the christian head of the house and as he teaches them one of the things that they seem to uh to discover is that perhaps they hadn't been keeping this festival of booths as fully as they ought to have done we're told that from the days of joshua son of none until that day the israelites had not celebrated it like this now we know that they have celebrated it at times but perhaps there were things that were missing and they wanted to do it according to god's law they wanted to show their desire to please god by doing it they were eager to put it right and it wasn't just for one day it wasn't just for two days we read there at the end of the chapter that for this whole eight day feast day after day from the first day to the last ezra read from the book of the law of god so every day he would be standing there in front of the water gate and reading through the law of god and the people were lapping it up derek kidner in his commentary on this says the move to make scripture the guiding principle of jewish life was powerfully initiated let me just say that again the move to make scripture the guiding principle of jewish life was powerfully initiated well as i said this morning it's very easy then you know to stop there and say well there you are there's the history lesson for today as we did with numbers but the question of course is you know so what about us what does that mean to us and we could ask in a sense take that statement from derek kidner and ask it of ourselves are the scriptures the guiding principle

[ 19 : 33 ] of our church life our family life our individual lives as evangelicals we have the name of being people of the book the man through whom i was converted and who i love very dearly in the lord um was a minister in a in a particular denomination and he used to say that um um the toughest time in his year was the week when he went to conference where he went to meet with other ministers which i thought was rather sad when he said that and i said well i said why was that the case i says you know was it because they you know they had different views to you that they came to different uh conclusions he said well it was partly that but he said far more than that was the way that they came to these conclusions they weren't asking the question well what has god said to us about this in his word they were just asking about the sociology of the country and you know uh what what can we do to attract the young people um and it was he said it was just totally worldly in the discussions and of course he said young people recognize when they're being patronized don't they anyway and you know let's not ape the world the world does it far better anyway so that was what got to him he said you know i went and it wasn't are we understanding the scriptures are right yes he says by all means change if we've not understood it correctly but that wasn't the basis on which the decisions were made well it's easy isn't it to look outside and to look to others but but what about ourselves what about in our families what in what about decisions that we make in terms of how we spend our time how we spend our money are those based on god's word or do we just base them on our own wisdom and on our own desires do we really want to have our minds conformed to god's will rather than being put into the world's mold and i know in some ways you know many of you have been here have been christians for many many years and forgive me if tonight some of the things i i say you might say to yourself well you know you're teaching

granny to suck eggs we've known this for years and years and years well i'm sure you have as i have but we sometimes just need to be reminded of them don't we and encouraged by god again to love his word as the people here did for a while at least for a time i just want to suggest four ways in which we we in a sense can best make the bible as god intends it to be a means of grace to us and the first thing and the most important thing in a sense because everything else goes from it is that we need to recognize the bible as indeed being god's word this year will mark the uh 60th isn't it 60th anniversary of the queen's coronation she became the queen 60 years ago last year but it took them a long time to organize it

so 2nd of june of this year will be the queen's coronation and on that day during the service she was given a bible and she was passed that bible over with these words we present you with this book the most valuable thing the world affords here is wisdom these are the lively oracles of god wonderful words as the bible was passed over to her and of course that is what the scriptures say about themselves think of paul uh writing to timothy again words i'm sure that you know very well all scripture is god-breathed and because of that is useful for teaching rebuking correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of god may be thoroughly equipped for every good work and i love the the description that that peter gives of how the scriptures came into being he writes in his second letter you must understand that no prophecy of scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation for prophecy never had its origin in the will of man but men spoke from god as they were carried along by the holy spirit it's a wonderful picture that each of the 40 or so men who wrote the words that we have there in scripture they have their own personality they have their own language skills and you can tell that when you read it paul writes in a different way to peter who writes in a different way to moses it's not like dictated in the way the quran was but every one of them was carried along by the holy spirit of god so they wrote exactly what he wanted them to do it's the same it's the same verb as the idea of a sailing boat with the wind in its sails being blown along he says these men wrote these words as they were carried along by the spirit of god just as a sailing boat is carried along blown by the wind and so in these scriptures we find law to be obeyed we find revelation to be understood we find promises and warnings to evoke prayer and action and this is the way that god has chosen primarily to communicate his way and his will to us and as someone once said and i paraphrase them god's spirit did not inspire over 40 people over 1500 years to write it and people like william tyndale to give their lives to translate it into english so they that we could sinfully lazily ignore it putting it pretty strongly but it's true isn't it so do we recognize it as being god's word well if we do it will be fairly natural i think if we really recognize it as being god's word is that we'll want to read it regularly i tend to eat a little bit more on a sunday than i do the rest of the week and i guess it's the case

for many of us isn't it you know it's the only day in the week when um you know when i have my meal in the middle of the day and uh it's great enjoy my enjoy my sunday meals um we get fed god's word on a sunday and that's great but you know although i perhaps eat a little bit more on a sunday than on other days um i do eat and drink monday tuesday wednesday thursday friday saturday as well do we the bible is often compared to food to honey to the milk of god's word so we don't want to just feed on it do we once a week and again as people are growing up we expect them to have a bit of a balanced diet don't we we may have our favorite food but even our favorite food may poll if we have it every day all the time i remember working with a chap who um every lunchtime used to go up into wassit and get a fish and chip supper and i said he was about as wide as he was tall and i did say to me you must be glad when the weekend comes around he says what do you mean i have them twice on a saturday but uh that wasn't a very healthy diet we may have again favorite passages and favorite books even from the bible but again it's not good just to feed on those all scripture is god breathed and he would have us read it regularly and read different parts of it and we can always find when i say find something new i don't mean something novel but something perhaps that we hadn't grasped before something that uh really strikes us when i when i was a student there was an elderly man in the congregation who used to sometimes have the students around and on one occasion we used to get a bus out of his house and i remember getting off the bus and he was there at the bus stop ready to greet us and he said i've been having my my bible reading this morning and i found something uh i think it was in jeremiah that that i've never noticed before come on quickly quickly i want to share it with you and you know that's really stuck in my mind uh to my shame i can't remember what it was but what struck me more than what it was was here was a man who had been a christian 50 60 years and he was still seeing things in the

bible that he'd not fully grasped before and he was thrilled and he was wanting to share it with others and i remember saying to god god you know i was probably a two-year-old christian then saying you know i pray and hope that when i'm his age if i ever get to be that age i'll still be as thrilled with your word as he was so we want to read it regularly and we want to read it with understanding the people there it was important not only that they heard the word read but that they understood it and we don't need a theological degree to be able to do that yes there's there's a few there's some parts in the bible that are a little bit tricky to handle and deal with but what oh we've got the holy spirit to help us god wants to communicate with us most of it is clearly understandable again i mentioned william tyndale earlier one of a man who translated the bible into english and he said to a scholar who had scoffed at him for doing this he said if god spare my life i will cause a boy that drives the plow shall know more of the scripture than thou dost and indeed by god's grace that did happen but god has given teachers in the church as well to help us to to understand uh the bible there there's lots of literature to help us to understand it as well i love it whenever i hear and i think i've heard that some of you here do that perhaps a an older person or somebody who's been longer in the faith might meet together one to one to to to share and to to read and to explain the bible and share it with each other for the last few years we've had a almost a continuous rolling program on a saturday morning where different groups of people from the church first of all it was preachers but then it was open to anybody in the church we've looked together at a book called the big picture which just looks at the bible from genesis to revelation and we've also looked at a book called how to read the bible for all it's worth just helping people to see that the different parts of bible prophecy narratives poetry just how to handle it just how to understand it so we want to read it regularly we want to to be helped to understand it because and this is the final point we want to read it with the desire to find out what god has to say to us and to follow that see that's what you find with ezra's listeners when they when they read about this feast of booths they were keen to follow it according to what god had said and of course our great example in all that is the lord jesus christ himself what did he say about his attitude to his father's will he said it is my food it is my meat and drink to do the will of him who sent me and that ought to be our desire in reading the word not to be able to tick off oh yes i've done my reading for today or to uh or even to uh you know have an intellectual pride and being able to understand the hebrew and the greek and anything else it is because the word of god god is opening himself up to us and telling us about himself and ourselves and our relationship and because of what he has done for us in the lord jesus we want to please him we want to please him we're not obeying the word in order to make ourselves acceptable to him but because he through christ has made us accepted in the beloved we want to live in a way that pleases him i remember jesus towards the end of the sermon on the mount contrasts the wise man and the foolish man and what's the difference the difference isn't that one has heard jesus words and the other hasn't they've both heard the words they've both heard the words the difference is that one has heard his word and desires to build his life on those words and the other one just lets them go in one ear and help the other james at most practical of books even if martin luther didn't quite get it james at most practical of books even if he spoke about a danger in our reading he says to them do not merely listen to the word we have to listen to the word but do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves do what it says anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in the mirror and after looking at himself goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like well may the lord help us not to be like that but may we truly be people of the word to love god's word because we love the god of the word and may he enrich us with it as we read it and as we feed upon it and share it with others well we're going to close by singing another hymn which speaks of one thing that we find in the word of course are the great promises of god and this hymn speaks of resting on all of those promises again it's one that will come up on the screen awesome fucking [ 37 : 20 ] Thank you.