

God's Word (Part 1)

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Preacher: Matthew Capone

[0 : 00] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church and it's my joy to bring God's word to you this morning.

Special welcome if you are new or visiting with us. We are glad you're here. And as I say every week, we're glad you're here not because you are filling a seat but because we are following after Jesus together as one community.

And as we follow after Jesus, we're convinced that there's no one so good that they don't need God's grace and no one so bad that they can't have it. And so everyone needs to hear what God has to say and God has something to say to everyone in his word.

If you've been with us, you know that we're going through the book of Nehemiah. And the book of Nehemiah is about a man named Nehemiah who lived during the Old Testament. He was a man who lived during the 5th century and this was the time in the history of the people of Israel when they had been in exile because of their unfaithfulness to God.

And now they're returning from exile. The return from exile has started in the 6th century, so almost 100 years since we meet Nehemiah in this chapter. And it's a book I have been telling you about a man who's turned away from sin and back to God's ways to build the wall around Jerusalem.

[1 : 17] And building this wall around God's city, it was the city that he had given to his people to be a model, a light to the nations around them so that everyone in the world would know what happens, what it looks like when God's people follow after God's ways.

And I was telling you the truth when I told you that, that it's a book about a wall. And the wall is now complete and we have many more chapters to go.

And so it is not simply a book about a wall. As we talked about in chapter 5, this physical problem of the wall that had been broken down was a sign of a spiritual problem that Israel had. They had not just turned away, as we talked about in chapter 5, from God's wall, but also from God's ways.

And we're going to see here that they had not just turned away from God's wall and God's ways, but God's people had also turned away from his word. They had not just turned away from his wall and his ways, but also his word.

The last time we met, we went through chapter 7, which was a long genealogy. And I reminded all of us that even when we come to places that are difficult, that maybe seem unnecessary in our culture to our ears, we are reminded that God's word is good.

[2 : 29] That he speaks to us. That he tells us that his word is sweeter than honey. Even honey that comes from the honeycomb. That it's more precious than gold, even the finest gold. That it is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

And yet as we hear these things, it's one thing to say that. It's one thing to talk about the goodness of God's word. It's another thing to actually believe it. And when I say things like that, before we begin the reading, I would not be surprised.

In fact, I would guess that some of you wonder, is it really more precious than gold? Is it really sweeter than honey? Because there are times when I struggle to even pick up the Bible.

And there are times when the Bible is very challenging to understand. And so there's also times that I've said things like, God speaks to us in ways that we can understand.

He uses things that are helpful for us. And yet there's times when we open up the Bible and it doesn't feel like that at all. Instead, it feels incredibly confusing. We're not always sure what's being talked about.

[3 : 33] And so if God really is trying to speak to us in his word, if he longs to know us and for us to understand him, why is God's word sometimes so hard?

If God really cares about us, if he truly wants to speak to us, why can it be so challenging sometimes to listen and to know what God is saying?

That's the question we're going to ask as we come to chapter 8, because we're going to see God's people returning to his word, coming back to something that they have found hard at times.

It was because they ignored God's word that they ended up in exile. And it's now as they turn away from sin and back to God and his mission that we return to his word as well. And so with that, we are in Nehemiah chapter 8.

We're going to read the first eight verses. And as you've noticed, I've started giving homework assignments when we read. And part of that is because God's word is hard sometimes.

[4 : 34] It's hard to pay attention to. It's also because we are people who live in 2019, and so our attention spans are terrible, myself included. And so it's helpful for us to have something to focus on.

So my assignment for you in chapter 8, as we read these first eight verses, is to see if you can figure out, count how many times the word people appears. This is not random.

There's a reason I'm giving you this. How many times the word people appears in this section?

We're in Nehemiah chapter 8. And remember that this is God's word.

And God does tell us that his word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. And so we turn to it now starting at verse 1. And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate.

And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women, and all who could understand what they heard on the first day of the seventh month.

[5 : 35] And he read from it facing the square before the water gate from early morning until midday in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand.

And the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. Verse 4. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose.

And beside him stood Mattathiah, Shemah, Aniah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maseah on his right hand.

And Padmiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashem, Hashbadanah, Zechariah, and Meshulam on his left hand.

Verse 5. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. Verse 6. Please pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word.

Dear Father in heaven, we thank you that your word is good and that you give it to us. We also confess that sometimes it's hard. It's hard to want to read it.

[7 : 15] Sometimes it's hard to understand it. And so we ask for your help as we always do, that you would help us in the hardness, that you would send your Holy Spirit to open our eyes and unstop our ears, that you'd soften our hearts and that you'd clear our minds, that we would be able to see and know and believe everything that is written about you and your word.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Okay, we had eight verses and the word people showed up how many times?

Nine times. So eight verses, nine times in the entire chapter, chapter eight, the word people is going to show up almost 20 times. And it's only going to show up in the book of Nehemiah about 60 times. So in this one single chapter, we have about a third of the occurrences of the word people. And it's fitting because we find out in verse one that it is all the people who are coming together and gathering.

It's not the priests. It's not the Levites who request that God's word be read. It is the people in verse one that tell Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law out. Most likely, this is the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, that they are coming as one to ask that they would be taught, that they could know.

[8 : 34] These are people at this moment who are not finding God's word hard. In fact, on the other hand, they're actually begging for it. They're coming and saying, we need and want you to tell us what is in God's word.

Now, the word people shows up nine times, but that's not the only thing that we see here. It's not the only way that we're told that everyone is listening. In verse two, we find out that it's both men and women, and not just men and women, but all who could understand what they heard.

So this is not just adults, but children that are hearing and coming to hear God's word. We see the same thing repeated in verse three, immediately after it's men and women and those who can understand.

And then we find out that they are reading and standing up for hours. Ezra, this man that they call for to read the law to them, is someone we meet in another book of the Bible named after him, the book of Ezra. And we find out there that Ezra was someone who had special skill and ability in interpreting God's word.

He was someone who loved the scriptures, and he spent his time studying them. And not only did he know them well, but he also had a special gift and ability to be able to tell people what it was that God was trying to say.

[9 : 40] He had a special ability to interpret and apply so that the people of Israel could hear God's word, and they would know exactly what it was that they were supposed to do. Not just that we do, we have the people coming as one whole entity demanding to hear God's word, but we see how serious they are about it.

In verse three, we see that they are reading for hours. In verse seven, we find out that they are standing during this time, remaining in their places. They are giving up everything that's going on. They're devoting all of their time. They're putting everything else aside, just like they did with the wall, so that they could hear God's word. If you are familiar with Chick-fil-A, you know that if there's a new Chick-fil-A store that opens up, there's often the first 100 event.

And the first 100 event is when the first 100 people to come and show up at that Chick-fil-A receive free Chick-fil-A for an entire year. And so that means that they get one Chick-fil-A, they get 52 Chick-fil-A meals.

They get a card with those meals on it, and once a week, they can go and have their Chick-fil-A. And so this is an event. If you look it up on Google, you'll see pictures of people camping out overnight. You'll set up your tent in the parking lot of the new Chick-fil-A.

[11 : 01] You have to be very careful about how you leave or whether you leave. People come by to check to make sure you have the right number, that you're supposed to be there, that you're not sneaking in. And so people who do this, I had friends who did this in seminary when a new Chick-fil-A opened up.

You have to set aside everything else that's going on. Part of the reason I didn't do it when I was in seminary and there was a new Chick-fil-A that opened up was I had a job. And I couldn't just quit that.

I had classes I was supposed to attend. But I had friends who figured out everything they needed to do to rearrange their lives so that they could pause for a day because they were so hungry for Chick-fil-A.

And what we're seeing here in chapter 8 is the first 100 Chick-fil-A of the Old Testament. God's people set aside everything that could get in the way.

They stopped doing what they would normally do. And instead they stand for hours to hear what it is that God has for them. They're hungry in this situation not for Chick-fil-A.

[12 : 06] But they are hungry for God's word. And while they're not camping out in tents, they are willing to stand for seven and eight hours so that they can hear everything that God has for them.

And so the point is this. When God's people turn back to him, when God's people turn away from sin in repentance back to him and his mission, they also return to his word.

When God's people return to God, they also return to his word. If we love God, then we will love his word.

We will be hungry for his word. We will be willing to make sacrifices and put things aside so that we can hear exactly what God has to say to us. By the way, that's what you've done this morning.

It's daylight savings time. I don't remember if it's starting or ending. I don't keep track of those sorts of things. I just know if I'm losing an hour of sleep or gaining an hour of sleep. I know this morning that I lost an hour of sleep. And I know that you all did as well.

[13 : 14] And yet you are here this morning. And part of the reason you're here this morning is to hear what God has to say. And so this is part of what God's people do. We gather every Sunday so that we would know what it is that God has for us in his word.

The question for us then is this. Are we hungry for God's word? Are we hungry to hear what God has to say to us?

It does not mean that we have to be theology nerds. This does not mean that we have to go to seminary. This does not mean that we have to be the smartest person in the room and have a comprehensive knowledge of the Bible.

What it does mean is that we recognize that God in his word has given us the way of life. That these words that God gives to us are the very words of life.

That is the question. Do we know that? Do we hunger after it? Now there's many reasons that the people of Israel here in this chapter could be returning to God's word.

[14:22] But one would be this. They know what they've suffered. They know that they've been in exile. And the reason they were in exile is they wouldn't listen. God had come and told them the right way to live.

He had sent prophets to them over and over telling them to walk in the way of righteousness and not in the way of sin. And they had ignored him. And so these people in Israel knew how painful it had been to turn away from God's word.

They knew from real life experience. They knew from the reality of exile in Babylon what happens when they forgot and ignored the way of life. Now God's word gives us life.

It gives us life in at least two different ways. There's all sorts of things we could say about God's word. And so as I say sometimes, I'm not going to say everything, but I'll say something. And so we need to keep in mind two categories.

That when we think about the work of God and we think about the work of Jesus, there are two things. There's God as creator. And there's God as redeemer. There's God as creator.

[15:27] God as redeemer. We often tend to focus very heavily on God as redeemer. God as our redeemer is the one who tells us in his word that his wrath is being poured out on the world for our sins.

That full and final justice is coming. And so our only hope, the only way we can avoid God's punishment and his wrath for our sins is through Jesus and his work on the cross.

And so God's word is the way to life because it shows us that Christ is our redeemer. It shows us our sin. It reminds us that if we do not turn away from it in repentance, we will face God's judgment as well.

But God's word also reminds us that he is our creator. So the Bible does not just tell us about the reality of sin and God's redemption from it.

God's word also tells us about the right way to live in the world that God made. We may acknowledge that we're sinners. We may be repenting constantly every day of the ways that we offend God.

[16:32] And yet we lack wisdom. God has made the world in a specific way. And so he tells us in the Bible how it is that we can live lives that are in the grain of the world.

He tells us the ways that we honor people rather than using them. He tells us the way that we manage our resources. He tells us the right way for families to be organized and run.

He tells us how we speak well about other people and to other people. And so God's word is not just the way to life in terms of redemption, but it's also the way to life because it shows us the way that the world works.

So that we can live in a way that's wise. And so our question was, are we hungry for God's word? Our application is that we need to get into God's word.

We need to know God's word. Again, that doesn't mean that we're theology nerds. It doesn't mean that you have to go to seminary. It doesn't mean that you have to have an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible. But it does mean that we take time in our lives to hear what God is saying to us.

[17:43] Now there's lots of different techniques I could give you, different strategies. And I will give you some examples. But techniques and strategies and examples are worthless to us if we don't have some conviction.

So I'll tell you a story. I had a friend in seminary. One of my best friends. Actually, some of you met him. He was here for my installation service. And he took a Greek class in seminary.

And he got very excited about Greek. And he decided, I really want to become very good at understanding Greek. And I know that I know it well now because I just took this class. And I don't want to lose that knowledge.

I want to continue to grow and become good at Greek. So he set up office hours with a professor. And he sat down with this professor. And he said, I want to be really good at Greek.

Tell me what techniques I need. What practices. What habits I need to become really good at Greek. And this professor looked at him and he said, I don't want to give you techniques and practices and habits primarily.

[18:49] He said, I want you to have a conviction. And I want you to have the conviction that you, when you become a pastor, will never get up and stand before God's people and tell them what God has to say without first looking at the original languages.

And that's what you're going to need if you want to continue to be good at Greek. You need a conviction much more than you need any practices or habits or techniques.

And then he proceeded to tell him some practices and habits and techniques. But the point is this. We can have the greatest intentions.

We can have the greatest strategies. We can have the greatest Bible reading plan. But all of that is worthless. Unless we love God and his word. Unless we have the conviction that God's word is the way to life.

Now if we have that conviction, there are many things that we can do. We don't have to become experts. But you can come here on a Sunday morning and make it a habit that you are here every Sunday to hear what God has to say.

[19:59] We have a magazine out in our narthex called Table Talk that is meant for people who have not gone to seminary. The intention is that normal, regular, everyday people who want to hear from God can understand his word better.

We have Bible studies that we can come to here at the church where we can discuss and work together to figure out what God's word is. There's not a right way, but there's many different ways. And what we need is a conviction that pushes us towards those things. The conviction that God's word is good and his word is the only way to life. That's the conviction that these people have here. That's why the word people is repeated nine times. Because it's the people who are hungry to hear from God. Now it's not just our desire that makes the Bible hard.

The Bible itself also can be hard. Even if we have the greatest conviction. Even if we are to our greatest core convinced and know that we need to have God's word.

[21:08] There's still times we read it and we really don't know what's going on, if we're honest. And so that's why I mentioned at the beginning, sometimes we wonder if God is really trying to speak so clearly, why is it so confusing sometimes?

Why is the Bible difficult to understand? Well, that's a problem that these people encountered as well. If you look at verses 7 and 8, actually first at verse 4.

So Ezra's reading in verse 4 and he's surrounded by a group of other men. We're not told exactly why in verse 4 these other men are there, but my guess is that it's similar to the reason we see in verses 7 and 8.

Ezra is surrounded by Levites because he needs a lot of people to help him explain the Bible. Ezra's talking, but most likely these men are circulating in small groups.

They're maybe having some breakout sessions and in smaller sections helping people understand what God is saying. In fact, it literally says here in verse 7, they helped the people to understand. And then in verse 8, they read from the book, from the law of God clearly, and they gave the sense.

[22:16] So again, the people understood the reading. In other words, people in the Old Testament had trouble understanding the Old Testament.

I'll say that again. People in the Old Testament had trouble understanding the Old Testament. And God put it in His Word. So God knows that sometimes it's difficult to understand the Bible.

And He knows it so well that He put it in the Bible that sometimes it's difficult to understand. In fact, Peter, in 2 Peter at one point, talks about how he thinks that Paul is difficult to understand.

And so if you find the Bible at times difficult to understand and follow, you are not alone. Other people find it difficult to understand.

And even more important than that, God knows that sometimes it can be difficult to understand the Bible. He doesn't shame us for that. He doesn't condemn us for that.

[23:22] Instead, we have people here in this chapter of the Bible who are helping other people understand the Bible. Now that still doesn't answer our question.

We know that the Bible is difficult to understand. God knows that the Bible is difficult to understand. He acknowledges that in the Bible that it's difficult to understand. Why is it difficult to understand?

These are people who are living in the 5th century.

And they are reading books that were written by Moses. These are people living in the 5th century. They're reading books written by Moses hundreds of years previously.

The Bible is difficult to understand, partially. It's partially difficult to understand because of our sin, right? But it's also difficult to understand because God is passionate about speaking to a specific people at a specific time, at a specific place.

And so imagine for a second that there was a new book of the Bible. By the way, there will not be. But let's imagine there was one written to us at Cheyenne Mountain. And there was an apostle writing to us.

[24 : 33] Just to be clear, the apostolic office has ceased. So this is a mind experiment, a thought experiment. There are no more apostles. But let's imagine an apostle wrote us a letter. And they talked about something that was going on in our community.

And they mentioned that so-and-so had tweeted several times about this issue in our community. And we had all seen the tweets. And then we had gotten onto our iPhones to read about it.

And this was discussed. And this had become a problem. And so we need to understand how the gospel applied to this issue in our community that people were tweeting about and we were all reading on our iPhones about. And this became part of the canon.

And then 300 years later, there's a group of people reading this book. Are they going to be able to understand it clearly? No, they're going to need a Bible commentary.

And this commentary is going to have a footnote explaining what it is that people in 2019 were doing this thing called tweeting. And this is what the apostle was trying to say. And they had these things called iPhones.

[25 : 33] And there was this company named Apple. And it was very prominent. There were many people, mostly wealthy people. But the wealthy people who lived in 2019 would own these iPhones. And so this was causing trouble in the church in Colorado Springs at Cheyenne Mountain.

And it was stirring up division. And we don't have iPhones anymore in 2300. And we don't tweet. But the point is this, that God is making this point that we can apply to us today. God's word is hard to understand because God's passionate about communicating to a specific people at a specific place in a specific time.

And so if he has written to a people and we are not in that specific place in that specific time, it's going to be challenging for us to translate it. It's in a different language.

And so we're going to need people who have studied those places and those times to explain and help us to understand. And so that's true today, but it was also true in the Old Testament.

Now I've given you a bunch of bad news that the Bible is difficult to understand. Here's the good news. The Bible is difficult to understand because it is different from other religious traditions and religious books.

[26 : 50] Other religious traditions and religious books are written primarily at one time in one place in one language. Instead, the Bible has been written at many times and many places in multiple languages.

Hebrew in the Old Testament, Greek in the New Testament, some Aramaic in the Old Testament. And so the point is this.

The fact that the Bible is difficult to understand is a result of the fact that God can speak clearly one message in different cultures and different places at different times.

And so as we look at these things that are difficult to understand, that is actually something that gives us reason to believe and have faith and take confidence in God's Word.

Because God's Word is not the product of one culture. It is not the product of one way of thinking. Instead, it is the product of one God who is speaking clearly to His people over and over again.

[27 : 56] One single message. It's a message that's not tied to a specific group. And so this is part of the reason the Bible's difficulty is part of the reason that we trust it.

It's part of the reason that we have confidence in it. It's part of the reason that we believe it.

Because we know that it's not simply something for people of our socioeconomic class and our race in this specific place in Colorado Springs.

To double down on it even more, so other religious traditions, their books primarily are written at one time in one place in one language, other religious traditions are also still centered geographically in the place where they started.

But because God's Word is for multiple people at multiple places and multiple times, the center of Christianity throughout history continues to shift.

We're reading a book from the ancient Near East. The ancient Near East is no longer the center of Christianity. If you read the New Testament, you're reading a book that was written in the area of the Mediterranean in Asia Minor.

[29 : 08] That is no longer the center of Christianity. The center of Christianity right now is actually moving to the global south, which is South America, Africa.

And so as we in North America read it, we are not reading a North American book. And as people in South America read the Bible, they are not reading a South American book.

Instead, they are reading God's Word that He has given over time in different places, in different ways, in different languages. And so that is the reason we believe and have faith and confidence in what God has said to us.

Because He is the only God who is powerful enough to speak in different languages, in different places, in different times. So when we come up against the difficulty and challenge of God's Word, it is a reminder to us of God's power.

He is the powerful, multicultural God who can speak into those things. And the Bible is still hard to understand.

[30 : 18] One of my mom's favorite movies that we watched over and over growing up was called A League of Their Own. And if you are familiar with A League of Their Own, you know it is a movie about what happened in World War II when all the men went away and the women were left.

What were they going to do to fill some of these jobs? And one of the things they did was start their own baseball league. And so replacing the men who had left who were no longer playing baseball, they replaced it with women's leagues. And there comes a point at the movie when one of the main characters, Dottie, decides she wants to quit the team.

She is tired of playing baseball. And so her coach, Tom Hanks, comes up to her and confronts her about this as she's heading out and he says, sneaking out like this, quitting, you'll regret it for the rest of your life.

Baseball is what gets inside you. It's what lights you up. You can't deny that. And Dottie says, it just got too hard.

And without skipping a beat, Tom Hanks says, it is supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great.

[31 : 31] If we are Christians and we love God and we love his word, then we can say that his word is what gets inside us. It is what lights us up.

And it is supposed to be hard. But it's the hard that makes it great. It's the hard that reminds us that this is a powerful God who speaks in different languages.

That our God does not just speak English. And he's not just in North America. but he's more powerful than any of those things.

Not only is he passionate about speaking to people in different places at different times, speaking directly to people in a specific culture, but showing up in a particular time and culture and place was God's always his intention.

We've talked a lot about the word as what's been written. But if you were paying attention in our service today, you know our New Testament reading talked about a different word. Not about a word that was written down, but about a word that came and became flesh.

[32 : 45] God's not just passionate about speaking in a specific time and place. But he actually sent his son to be a real human in a specific time and a specific place so that he could speak to us and we could understand.

The incarnation, Jesus becoming man, is the greatest example of God taking his word and giving it in a specific way to specific people.

It's God's pattern to always pursue his people and speak to them. And so that's why we find out in Colossians that Jesus was God's greatest communication to us. It was the way that he made himself visible to us that we could see him.

Paul says this in Colossians 1.15, he is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. In other words, as one person has put it, God does not hide from us in the ways that we hide from him. God has shown himself to us, he's revealed himself to us, that Jesus is the way that we know who God is. And so God doesn't just put his words into our language and our time.

[33 : 57] God also puts himself into our place and our language and our time. Jesus spoke a specific language. He lived in a specific place at a specific time.

And that is our hope. That is what gives us reason to believe and have faith and confidence in God's word. Not just because the words itself were in different places and different times, but because God gave us his word at a specific place and a specific time.

And that word was Jesus. Jesus is the one, while we've talked about creation and redemption, he's the one who provides redemption, that God speaks to us because we are not alienated from him anymore.

He speaks to us because Jesus has taken the full penalty for our sins as God pours out the wrath and justice on this earth. He does not pour it out on us if we're following after his word, if we're following after Jesus who became flesh for us.

God continues to do that even today. Jesus is still interceding for us, but God knows we need specific things at specific times, things that are physical that we can understand.

[35 : 05] That's what we're going to transition to now. The Lord's Supper is one of the ways that God speaks to us clearly. It's one of the ways that he communicates to us. It's one of the ways that he reminds us of who Jesus is and the fact that he is the one who brings our redemption.

And so we're going to go to our closing hymn for a couple verses and then we're going to come to the Lord's table. And I'm going to pray for us now first, so please pray with me. Dear Father in heaven, we thank you for your word that you have spoken clearly to us.

We ask that you would stir up a desire within us that we would long to return to you and your word. That you remind us of your power, that it's your word that gives us confidence and faith and belief in you.

We ask all these things in the name of your son. Amen.