

Bible Sunday 2023

May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

1 all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. 2 Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. 3 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.

Nehemiah 8 is painting a wonderful scene. The people asked to hear the law. Not just one or two but all people, both men and women gathered to hear the word of God in quite the lengthy bible study. If I am to be honest, I'm glad we didn't start at 6 this morning to go on until noon. But I admire the willingness and the passion of the people in this text.

Despite their eagerness, however, their reaction to hearing the law is to weep and grieve. They realise that they have failed to keep the law. Perhaps they are filled with guilt or fear of what their punishment might be. But then the story suddenly turns.

‘This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.’ [...] ‘Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ [...] And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

I wonder how often we get stuck in fear and guilt when we ought to be rejoicing? Yes, guilt has its place, it helps us to understand when we have done wrong, but do we think that God is stingy with forgiveness? Do we hold our guilt up as a shield to keep God away? If the joy of the Lord is our strength, do we not hobble ourselves if we remain in guilt and fear? How does guilt affect our lives?

Today is Bible Sunday so I have brought my very first real bible. It was given to me by the Church I grew up in just before Christmas when I was 10 years old. I was really rather excited about it. And although I don't remember any daily devotional habit. I did read my bible, and I enjoyed it. Initially.

Somewhere along the way pressure started to build. I was supposed to read my bible and have devotion every day. I started to feel guilty if I didn't. And in my late teenage years I read this book which told me I should not only tithe my money but also my time. And so I started to try to have these really long daily devotions - preferably over two hours long. Some days, it was actually great. But you won't be surprised to hear it was utterly unsustainable. Devotion and bible reading became associated with slog, with guilt, with failure.

I was an extreme case, but perhaps I am not alone to have struggled with those feelings when it comes to reading the bible. We know that taking in God's word is truly great for us. We want to let the word of Christ dwell in us *richly* to quote our New Testament reading. We know that we are what we eat, and to be transformed by God we need to hear him. But somehow we might find ourselves avoiding it, and feeling more and more guilty about it.

As a teenager I almost left my faith. Not because I didn't believe, but because living the Christian life just seemed so hard for me. Luckily I didn't. I felt I had a clear choice, either I would go straight to University and let my faith fade into the background or I could go to Bible School first. I chose Bible School and during that year my relationship with the Bible started a journey of rehabilitation. Not only did I learn new ways of reading the Bible, but perhaps more importantly, I learned to start small, and I learned to rely on others.

However, my journey didn't end there. I still struggled. The biggest change came years later at theological college. I had this amazing teacher who really loved spending time with God and the bible.

One of the first things he said to us is that guilt is not a good motivator. You're never going to have a flourishing spiritual life by guiltting yourself into prayer and bible reading.

In fact, it does not start with us and our motivation. God is always the instigator, whether it is prayer or listening to the word of God, or becoming Christians in the first place. God is calling us, God is drawing us to him, and his Spirit is calling 'Abba, Father' within us. How amazing is that, God's own Spirit constantly

praying inside us, 'Abba, Father.' We don't have to create prayer, only join the one who is already praying within us. And that same Spirit speaks to us when we read the Bible. This is a whole other perspective, not just on reading the bible but all aspects of life. God is calling us to him, our mission is to stop running away.

I'll be honest. I still struggle with creating habits of bible reading. And sometimes I feel guilty about it. Sometimes it feels like a slog even when I do. But that often means that I have forgotten that it's not about me trying to do Christian life in my own power, but about surrendering to God. And I need to be reminded of that. We need to remind each other. And we can help each other build good habits.

There are many ways to build good habits. But start small, start where you are not where you wish you were. Just a minute or two to read a verse and to just sit with it for a spell.

You're more likely to succeed if you don't do it alone. You could ask someone to go to morning or evening prayer with you once a week. Not to pester them, but because you need someone to help you build new habits. Seek out those people which inspire you to turn to God, and spend time with them.

We have a choice. The choice to breathe in God's word and let him change us and our lives, or to run away.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,

We thank you that you are a merciful God, who forgives our iniquities. We no longer want to hold on to our guilt and fear but put them at your cross. Instead, fill us with your joy! We thank you that we don't have to manufacture this joy ourselves, as it is your joy. We thank you for your Holy Spirit living within us calling out 'Abba, Father'. Help us to stop running and fill us with longing to join in, Abba, Father. And may your joy truly be our strength.

Let us long for your words, and help us to build good habits of prayer and bible reading. And in Paul's word's: Let the word of Christ dwell in us richly; let us teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in our hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever we do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Amen.