

+ Nehemiah 8:9-18 + Prepare with Great Joy + 3rd Sunday in Advent + 14 December 2014 +

Imagine for a moment one year from now—Sunday, 13 December 2015, the Third Sunday in Advent. It's a time of joy—a time to rejoice in God's grace in the coming Savior, but 2015 is different. You see, we're not meeting here. Well, technically, we're here, but really we're over there on the other side of that wall. After 40 years of waiting and watching, the building expansion and renovation is finally done. It's been dedicated to God's glory and we're settling into our new facility.

Every Sunday since the dedication is a time of joy, but this particular Sunday—the Third Sunday in Advent, the Sunday of joy—is a special day. As part of our congregation's 40th anniversary celebration and in commemoration of the historic event of our expansion, the leadership decides that we as a congregation are going to study through the key, basic teachings of God's Word in worship and Bible study. We're going to get to know our Bibles and what our God has to say to us in those Bibles to equip us for another 40 years of mission and ministry work, if the Lord wills, beginning in a newly expanded and renovated facility.

It's truly a time of great joy. We're in the new building. We're giving thanks for 40 years of God's grace on our congregation. We're going to make a concerted effort to dig into the Word as a family in Christ week in and week out. The Lord has opened all kinds of new opportunities to take that Word out, but what do you hear one year from now?

Instead of the sounds of joy and celebration, you hear...weeping. You hear grieving. You hear quiet sobs and even the start of some wailing. You hear the sounds of sadness. It's not because the Orange lost to Georgetown or Duke. It's not because a pipe broke and flooded the bathrooms. It's not even because the building turned out a little differently than we originally anticipated. No, these are tears of sadness, tears of grief, tears of guilt.

As you look around the congregation, you ask yourself, "Why is everyone crying?" You pause to listen further and suddenly it hits you. **"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."** (Matthew 5:48) **"Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."** (James 2:10) **"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."** (Romans 3:23) **"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins... Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath."** (Ephesians 2:1,3b) **"The wages of sin is death..."** (Romans 6:23) It's God's holy Law, and it's crushing every one of us.

Rather than rejoice, we weep. Rather than celebrate, we grieve. Every single one of us has failed to keep God's holy Law absolutely perfect. Every single one of us has fallen short of the holiness that God demands. Every single one of us is dead by nature, hostile by nature, and ignorant of God's holy will by nature. Every single one of us deserves God's holy condemnation in hell—eternally separated from his love and mercy. It's no wonder that you start weeping too, but then you hear something else.

"This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep... Do not grieve for the joy of the LORD is your strength... Be still..." "On this sacred day, remember who your God is. Remember what your God has done. Remember what your God has given you not only in all these earthly gifts, but above all, in the One who dries your tears, in the One who turns your grief to joy and your guilt to forgiveness. Yes, you deserve God's wrath and condemnation. You deserve punishment from God himself, but in his free and faithful grace, he gave you Jesus! God gave you the Source of true, lasting joy in your Savior Jesus, for he is **"the joy of the LORD."**

So you remember Jesus and you rejoice. You remember God's grace. You remember God's mercy. You remember God's forgiveness through Christ your Savior and you rejoice. You remember how he fulfilled all those Old Testament prophecies, and kept God's holy Law perfectly for you—and you rejoice. You remember how he willingly endured the punishment that you deserved, how he was condemned to save you, and you rejoice. You remember how he gave his life and conquered death, and you rejoice.

You remember how he has controlled and guided all things for your good. You remember how he was in control of the life of this congregation all these years, and how he will be in control for years to come. You rejoice in how he provided all the blessings of grace and mercy that you and this congregation needed. So you rejoice with **the joy of the LORD**, who **is your strength**. He has been your refuge, your strength, your stronghold, your peace all these years. So we all rejoice. We celebrate God's grace and forgiveness, and that impacts our Christmas celebrations. We celebrate Christmas like never before—and our joy is **"very great"**.

That's something the remnant of God's people had to learn about 500 years before the birth of Christ. They had to wait 70 years before their building and renovation project on the walls of Jerusalem finally got done.

They had some major problems during the process—hostile neighbors who literally wanted to destroy them, turncoats and informants within their midst who tried to undermine the process, and a collection of people who weren't builders. Yet the Lord in his grace enabled them to rebuild the burned-out walls of Jerusalem in about two months under the leadership of a governor named Nehemiah. Working with Nehemiah was a faithful priest and scholar named Ezra, and the Lord blessed his people through their work.

Yet as wonderful as it was for the city of Jerusalem to be restored, what was even greater was the restoration of God's Word to God's people. When their New Year's Day rolled around in the fall, they celebrated an ancient harvest festival called the Feast of Trumpets. As part of the festivities, God's holy Word was read, specifically the Law that God had given through Moses.

It was a festal day worthy of great celebration as the people were reminded of how God had renewed his covenant or agreement with them, but the longer Ezra read, the more people wept and grieved in repentance for their sins. They wept over their ignorance and disobedience.

So Nehemiah and Ezra and the other religious leaders calmed the people. They didn't tell the people that their grief over sin's guilt was no big deal, but they did remind them of the joy they had in the Lord of free and faithful grace—the Lord who had delivered their people and given them that land, the Lord who had forgiven their sins and had brought back the remnant of believers. ***"This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep... Do not grieve for the joy of the LORD is your strength... Be still..."*** So they went home and celebrated that day.

Yet that wasn't the end of their celebration in the Lord. Their celebration continued with the ongoing study of God's Word, but rather than weep this time, they found another way to celebrate God's grace. ***"They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month..."*** It was an ancient festival of remembrance. God's people were to remember how the Lord had poured out his grace on his people during 40 years of wandering in the barren wilderness. The ***"booths"*** were little structures that reminded the people of the temporary homes where their ancestors lived during those years wandering in the wilderness.

It was a particularly fitting festival for the remnant who had come back from 70 years of exile. Like those Israelites of old, the Lord had given them a real home in the old Promised Land. The Lord had blessed his people with grace and mercy and forgiveness. Plus a day would come when the Messiah himself would walk through the gates they had rebuilt. Everyone built a booth and lived in it, and their celebration was like no other. ***"From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great."***

So what about us today? We've attempted to look ahead a year from now, and we looked back to 500 years before Christ's birth, but what about now?

As sinful human beings, you and I need to be reminded again and again who we are by nature—condemned, hostile, dead enemies of the holy God. We deserve his wrath and punishment, but we also have a Savior who took on our human flesh, who put himself into our world, into our situation, and conquered sin and death and hell forever. We need to be reminded of that over and over again because each of us falls back into old sins and sins of weakness, new sins and sins of ignorance. Every one of us desperately needs to know that God loves sinners, including you and me, and therefore forgives every one of our sins for the sake of Jesus our Savior. So every one of us needs to hear and study the Word of God to be reminded of that.

Now how do we respond? How did the Jews respond when they were reminded of the joy of the Lord of free and faithful grace? They took the first opportunity to follow God's will and celebrate with all the joy in their hearts. We respond with joy-filled lives, with service to others, and heaven as our goal. We rejoice in the Lord of free and faithful grace with all of our might.

If you're wondering where that strength will come from, especially when things in your personal life are painful and difficult or when things in the life of our congregation are frustrating and difficult, look no further than your Savior Jesus. ***"Do not mourn or weep... Do not grieve for the joy of the LORD is your strength..."*** In him, you have real joy that will last.

To be honest, I really can't tell you where we're going to be in a year individually or as a congregation. Whatever the Lord of free and faithful grace wills will take place, yet in all things we can rejoice, because he is our strength. He is our peace. He is our joy this Advent and always. Amen.