

A Holy Day to Rejoice in the Past, Present, & Future

Nehemiah 8:9-18 (NIV)

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." ¹¹ The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve." ¹² Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them. ¹³ On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law. ¹⁴ They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month ¹⁵ and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: "Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters" —as it is written. ¹⁶ So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷ The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. 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. ¹⁸ Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

When you think of holy days, what comes to mind? Hopefully Christmas is one of them, as we are just about to celebrate it again. Then Easter, Good Friday, maybe other days like Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Ash Wednesday, or Pentecost. The Jews of the Old Testament had their major holy days like Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. We heard today of a celebration of the Festival of Tabernacles.

In 444 B.C., a Jewish leader named Nehemiah had returned to Jerusalem with a third group of exiles. They were able to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in record time, despite opposition. As everyone settled in after the building project, it came to the month for the festival of Tabernacles – a week long period where the Israelites lived in temporary houses or tents and all gathered around to hear and learn God's Word to remember that after God freed them from their Egyptian slavery, they lived in tents until God settled them in the Promised Land. It was a holiday, but maybe not with the reaction you would think. "Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.' For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law." (verse 9)

On this holy day leading up to the festival of Tabernacles, people were weeping and mourning because they had been cut to the heart. No doubt as they heard God's Word they were reminded that they hadn't kept it, that they had failed him, grieved him with their disobedience. They used his Word as a mirror, reflecting on their failures against him. Maybe they were thinking about these tabernacles, these tents, these temporary dwellings and remembering that even Jerusalem and the temple weren't permanent.

Their other major holy days also gave the Jews reasons to be sad. The Passover was to celebrate God's deliverance of the Israelites from their Egyptian slavery, but on the night of the first Passover they were surrounded by death – the death of all the firstborn of Egypt. At the festival of Pentecost the people celebrated the firstfruits harvest, but then they turned around and immediately gave up those firstfruits to God; they didn't get to keep them.

Our holy days are meant to bring us joy, but they also often have sadness attached to them. Christmas is a most wonderful time of the year as we remember that God has given us the greatest gift of all time - himself, but at the same time during Christmas we are reminded that the world is often dark and that some people remain lost in darkness even though the Light of the world has come. At Easter, we rejoice in Jesus's triumphant resurrection from the dead and the fact that we are assured eternal life with him, but then we also think of the people who denied that it ever happened, those who tried to cover it up. Good Friday is called good because it's amazing to recount Jesus' sacrifice on the cross that completely wiped out our debt of sin, a total payment by him that is never charged to us, but it's also heart-wrenching to recall what he went through to do this for us, to see him suffer for me, die for me.

Have you ever sat in church and cried? Maybe it's been when you think about the people who used to sit with you, the people that God has taken out of your life. Maybe in your tears you stayed away from church. You reflected on your sins like the Jews of Nehemiah's day. You know your failures. You know that you are not worthy to come before God, to be saved. You have grieved God. So, you know you don't deserve good things – friends, family, financial security, church. You weep and mourn over your sins.

There are certainly times to weep and mourn. In the next chapter of Nehemiah, that's what they do at the end of the month - they have a city-wide day of repentance, mourning their sins and asking God to forgive them. Totally appropriate mourning. And it's appropriate for us too to mourn on days like Good Friday, Maundy Thursday, and Ash Wednesday as we think of the true and right consequence of our sins, how they have earned us death, how our sins separate us from God and have grieved God.

But right now is not the time to mourn. Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." (verse 10) Yes, I know that you are aware of your sins, but today is not the day to wallow in the muck of remembered sins. Today is a day to rejoice in what God has done. Yes, because of the sins of our ancestors, Jerusalem and our temple was destroyed. This was God's just judgment. But focus on what is here right now. God has brought us back. God has restored the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. God has kept his promises and has restored us. This is a time to rejoice! Eat choice food! Drink sweet drinks! Bring those good foods to those who don't have any prepared. Take up the joy that God has given us! The LORD is our strength and our joy! He has acted powerfully for us in the past, like when he freed our people from our slavery in Egypt. He has acted powerfully in our day by bringing us here, restoring our city, restoring his temple, giving us the opportunity to gather around his Word and remember what he has done and look forward to what he will still do for us. He is still coming to save us, as he has promised all those years ago.

That's what is pictured with this whole festival of Tabernacles. God commanded that they built temporary shelters to remember that time during the Exodus when they didn't have permanent homes in the wilderness. But it was more than just recalling the past; it also looked ahead. Jerusalem was not the permanent forever home – the end game. The Jews knew that full well now because of what the Babylonians had done to it, how they had leveled it to the ground. Their forever home was in heaven with God. Their time here on earth was temporary; they were just tenting here, even in Jerusalem. God had a forever, permanent home ready for them with him. He will take them there when their time on earth is done. And we heard their joy in this celebration: "The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. 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." (verse 17) Their joy was great as they rejoiced in the past of what God had done for them, what he was doing for them that day, and what he will do yet for them in the future.

As we prepare for Christ's coming, it's not a time for us to mourn either. This is a time to rejoice! We rejoice because the Lord has already come once to rescue us. He "tent" among us having been conceived in the Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit. He lived among us, walked among us under God's law, keeping God's law. He did this to free us from our slavery and captivity to sin and give us instead a permanent home with him in heaven, just like he did for his people in the days of the Exodus and in the days of Nehemiah. God has brought you to believe in his first coming which brought you out of the darkness and captivity of your sin and into his wonderful light of eternal life. This is the joy of our past, one reason we have today to rejoice and sing praises to God!

We also have joy in our present because we know that Jesus has taken away all our sins. We have the present joy that we are clothed with his righteousness through our baptism, that we receive his forgiveness through his Supper, that we get to be here to listen to his Word as we gather and fellowship with other believers. This is not a time to weep and mourn because you sinned again this week, because you look at the mirror of God's Word and deem yourself a failure. No, today is a day of rejoicing because your failures are wiped clean. You are loved. You are forgiven. You are complete. You are freed from the captivity of sin right now!

And we have joy in our future. Joy in gathering here next week for worship and Bible study. Joy in sharing rich food and sweet drinks and pleasant conversations with each other. Joy in going caroling together later this afternoon. Joy in gathering here for Christmas for the candlelight service – and even greater joy to come. Like the Jews in Nehemiah's day, we are only "tenting" here. This is not our permanent home. Our houses, our apartments – those are not our permanent homes. This building is not our permanent place of worship. Our permanent home is with God, to dwell with him forever because Jesus has freed us from the captivity of our sin. He has given us heaven and will take us there. No one can take that away from us because Christ purchased it and gifted it to us!

Today, on this holy day to the Lord, we prepare for Jesus' coming by rejoicing! We can rejoice because the LORD is our strength, as he has been in the days of old, is today, and will be forever. God is our past, our present, and our future. Rejoice this holy day! Rejoice with me over all that God has done for us, all that God is doing for us, and all that God will do for us as we "tent" here awaiting our permanent dwelling with him. Amen.