

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Called to Lead*, No. 4

In Perspective

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Nehemiah 8:1-12[NIV]

All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

² So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

⁴ Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

⁵ 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. ⁶ Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

⁷ The Levites – Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah – instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

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.

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We're in Nehemiah 8 this morning, if you'd like to turn there or pull it up on your phone – or just call it to memory. I'm sure you have all those guys names right up here, don't you?

I can hardly pronounce them, let alone remember them.

Although there is one sentence in this passage that – if you've memorized anything at all from the book of Nehemiah – you may remember. It's that phrase at the end of verse 10 there: "the joy of the Lord is your strength."

We've prayed it; we've declared it; we've sung it. If we didn't know before, we now know its origin – which can actually speak rather profoundly to our day today.

There is some question about the timing of the event this text describes and about whether or not the people were there to actually celebrate the Feast of Trumpets.

Some theologians question the length of time Ezra stayed in Jerusalem and whether or not it overlapped Nehemiah's time there. And, some wonder how they could have been knowingly celebrating the feast of Trumpets if they didn't know about the far greater Feast of Tabernacles, a matter which comes up later (Neh. 8:13-18).

You can read the different opinions and interpretations, but I'm going on the assumption that this is chronologically accurate.

This means Ezra was still active in Jerusalem in Nehemiah's time.

And, it means this event could have happened just days after the completion of the city wall and gates – the securing of Jerusalem. That means this would be a second time we're told of a gathering that leads to some sort of spiritual revival. The first, back thirteen years or so earlier, is reported to us in the book of Ezra, chapters 9 and 10.

We're told the people who gathered asked Ezra to read to them the book of the Law, presumably what we call the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) – the works of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, or some part of those works.

This was a momentous occasion, the completing of the wall, and the people knew it was spiritual in nature. They knew God had helped them, and so they wanted a spiritual word on this day, you see? And, since people did not have copies of God's Word in their homes, and since most were limited in their ability to read anyway, these times when someone would read the scrolls of God's holy word publicly were especially sacred and moving and meaningful.

Today in most places in our world, just about anyone can read their own copy of God's word, and in our nation, most have several copies to choose from.

But do we have anywhere near the enthusiasm about God's Word that this crowd had? Do we excitedly come together and anticipate hearing from Him?

We tend to think our culture is so much more sophisticated and advanced than Nehemiah's culture, but maybe not – not in the truly important ways anyway.

This reminds me of the account of Thomas Aquinas. It is said that Thomas once entered the presence of Pope Innocent II, before whom a large sum of money was spread out, and the Pope said, "You see Thomas, the Church is no longer in that age in which she said, 'Silver and gold have I none.'"

And Aquinas replied, "This is true, holy father, yet neither can she any longer say to the lame, 'Rise up and walk.'"

Nationally and culturally speaking, we tend to think a lot of ourselves. But we may not have come as far as we

like to think, because, even though—and maybe even because—those people in Jerusalem did not have easy access to it, still, their hearts were ready and eager to hear God’s word. Far more than most of ours.

Notice, too, that they came together on a day of celebration—not a Sabbath, a different day, a holiday, a day off work. They came together on their own and called their pastor and asked him to read God’s word to them.

How about that?

What’s that say to us in our age, when many Christians have to be convinced that they should even come to worship once a week.

And back there in Jerusalem, they called their Sunday school teachers too, to come and explain what the preacher was saying, to help them understand what it meant—what it meant for them to follow it, to keep it and obey it.

That’s what the Levites, the tribe of priests, were doing there in verses 7 and 8. That was their role: they “instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.”

How, logistically, did they do this? Did Ezra read a bit, then break everyone into small groups for discussion, maybe with questions and answers, and then return to read some more?

We’re not sure how they did it, honestly, but they did.

And you see, here’s the thing: because the people wanted to hear—they were excited to hear God’s word—and because their hearts were open and willing, God’s spirit came and acted upon that crowd. And people started weeping—because of conviction!

God showed up and touched people. He always does—if people are truly open to Him.

In our day, churches try manipulating all sorts of things to make it seem like God is present. But God’s Word and His history with people is pretty clear: 1) God can’t be manipulated, and 2) God goes where He is wanted.

God shows up where people are ready to receive Him.

God shows up where people honestly want to hear what He thinks—what His word says.

God shows up when preacher and congregation alike are open to Him.

God shows up where everyone comes willingly and gladly, not out of guilt or duty or habit or under duress.

God shows up where people want Him to show up and speak.

That was the dynamic there in Jerusalem, and God showed up. And, as His word was read, hearing it made the crowd there realize how far their lives were away from God and His ideas and standards.

They were serious about God. They weren’t there just to justify themselves and their own thinking or behavior, you see? There was an openness and a humility about this crowd, such that when they realized that they

and God were on different pages about things, they were moved—they were struck.

Like those who heard Peter’s sermon in Acts, they were “cut to the heart.” They were convicted. A great sense of judgment and even guilt came upon them. Verse 9 there says, “they began weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.”

But look, here is the confounding thing, especially to people of our faith tradition: here were all these, weeping, repentant people, but there was no altar call!

Some would say, “Ah, what a lost opportunity!”

But no, God sometimes does things differently than our rigid traditions anticipate.

You see, here, the leaders knew that repentance had already come. The people saw the error of their ways.

As the Law was read and explained to them, they saw the disparity, and they knew what they needed to do about it—how they needed to follow the Law and to live according to the character of the Law-Giver.

They were already at repentance and beyond, and all the leaders knew it. So, verse 9 there says that Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest, and all the Levites—the associate priests—all say, in one way or another, to the crowds: “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.”

They cut off the mourning, and instead, they called the people to joy.

They explained, “Hey, there’s no need for further guilt or crying or lament. No—it’s time to celebrate! Celebrate God’s grace in His giving of His law. Celebrate the fact that God has revealed His character to us. Celebrate the fact that God has shown us how to live in ways that please Him, and you have received His word!”

As it was, the circumstance was cause for celebration, not for lament. That’s what the leaders pointed out.

You see, the leaders had to change the way the people were thinking about the situation. It was up to them to change the people’s perspective, to help them contextualize and see the bigger picture.

That’s part of the role of leadership: providing perspective.

You know, even with walls and gates surrounding the city, daily life in Jerusalem was still no picnic. It was a frontier, very wild-west like—or maybe post-apocalyptic is a better way to think about it. With rubble all around: demolished buildings, rudimentary homes, destroyed wells, lands and crops and farms that were still recovering from destruction.

Have you ever lived in a house under construction, or one partly demolished? There is this ever-present, sometimes overwhelming sense of disorder. The evidence of work yet to do and things yet to finish is always before you. The people in Jerusalem lived with that day after day.

On top of that, there was a demoralizing sense when people remembered what Israel, what Jerusalem, used to be: the great city, the world power of a past age.

But now, all they could do was look around and see what it was, or what it wasn’t any more.

All of this—all of their current national situation, when stacked on top of the conviction that came from hearing God's word—it brought them down, you see? It all conspired to make them depressed and anxious and maybe even a little hopeless.

So, the leaders had to turn them around. The leaders had to remind them of all the good that was happening: the completion of the wall (the way God helped in that) and the way God would help them in days to come, now that they were repentant, and understood and embraced His word.

Yes, their nation had gone through a difficult thing. Israel had gone through nothing less than God's judgement because of her waywardness.

And no, their circumstances were not perfect.

But this was a new day.

And they were a new people, with a renewed passion for God and His word.

And God was with them. In that moment, on that day, God was with them.

Regardless of the past, God was still compassionate and forgiving and interested in working good in their lives and in the life of their nation.

And so, because of all that, they were not to mourn, but to rejoice!

They were to have a party, really.

Nehemiah tells them to indulge—to eat rich food and drinks.

To be lavish in their celebration.

And along with that, to be generous—benevolent—and give help to those around them.

They were to celebrate. That was the proper context for their situation.

Yes, times were hard, but God was present and God was good, and when recognized, God's presence and goodness are always cause for celebration.

The joy of the Lord is the strength of the God-follower.

God and His strength—all that He is, all that He brings—is always the prevailing reality, you see? Not the circumstance of the day.

That was the perspective that needed to be pointed out to the people, and Ezra and Nehemiah were faithful to do that.

Likewise, today followers of God are called to bring the perspective of God to the situation at hand.

You and I are monuments—we are living reminders to our world of the reality of God.

You and I are living reminders to our world that God is present and active, no matter the circumstance.

We are living reminders that God has a way of life that people need to embrace, that God has a word that needs to be heard and followed.

And then, we are living reminders that if a person will do that, if a person will hear and follow God's word, then nothing is ever hopeless, no matter how troubled our world, our nation, our families, or our lives may seem.

This was an encouraging and happy message to those Jerusalem Jews, because they were receptive of God's Word.

And that is the key to it all, you see?

If you embrace God and His word in faith, then there is always reason for celebration.

But, you must embrace Him and His word—which is something our nation is, more and more, refusing to do—which makes the perspective message more challenging to deliver—at least nationally.

There is great difficulty in our nation in these days, as there was in Jerusalem.

But unlike in Jerusalem, there is no clamor for God's word among our people. There is little repentance. There is little weeping. There is little conviction.

And so there is no party announcement that we can make—on a national level.

In this day and time, the perspective we are called to announce to our nation—the message of the Church to the state—is a call to repentance.

But, here within Christian community—within a community that loves and embraces and obeys God's word—the perspective is that of a party.

The Church of Jesus Christ cannot allow life's circumstances to bring us down, to make us hopeless, to fill us with anxiety or grief or fear or anger or depression. Because wherever people embrace God and His word, He is there and He is at work and He will be faithful to see us through.

Christ's church is not a place of anxiety and worry about tomorrow—whether you're fearful about COVID or about a national political collapse in our nation, or something in between.

It seems to me that there is a great continuum of fear in the church today, and lots of people, whether they realize it or not, fall onto it somewhere between those two ends.

Let me give some perspective about that, OK? We don't have to be anxious or fearful about any of it.

Now, don't put words in my mouth here, OK?

I'm not saying we just sit back and take what comes.

We have to work to pursue the right and the good.

We have to find and deal in truth and live in love.

We have to act with reason and humility and not in recklessness and arrogance and presumption.

But we do those things without anxiety or worry or fear.

The fact is, Israel experienced both ends of that continuum—disease and utter political takeover, multiple times, and yet the remnant of the faithful was always preserved.

God has His purposes for peoples and for nations, and God will carry them out.

What we have to firmly embrace is that:

God is real and present.

God is powerful and active in our world.

And God is faithful to His own—in both life and death.

So many are living in mortal fear of this virus, but I mean, what's the worst that can happen to us?

We can die of it. But for the Christ-follower, that's where real life begins, isn't it? Isn't that the foundation of our faith—resurrection to real life?

And politically speaking, there are many who live in absolute fear of the transformation, or even collapse, of America. But aren't we Kingdom citizens before we're Americans? Don't we believe, and see in history, that nations rise and fall based on their faithfulness to God, but that God's Kingdom, our true home, supersedes them all – and lasts forever?

So, you see, because of all this, no matter how troubled our world may be, for the Christ-follower, there is always a reason for joy and peace and gratitude to God.

There is always a reason for the Christian to celebrate. The joy of the Lord is our strength.

Listen, if you know Jesus – if you know God's word and you're repentant and you're seeking to do God's will, but find that you are still anxious or worried or fearful about something that's going on in our world today, would you receive the peace of God in Nehemiah's party invitation to those Jerusalem Jews?

Here – I made one up for you.

Christ is bigger than your concern, so here's your invitation to, "Consider this day holy to the Lord, so there is no need for mourning or weeping. This is the day to enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and to give

generously to others. This is the day to let the joy of the Lord be your strength. This is the day to celebrate."

And, if you're here and you don't know Jesus as your Savior and Lord, you can receive Him today. You can know, not just God's written word, but God's living Word, and He can lead your life.

That is God's desire for you: to live the life He's designed you to live without anxiety and fear. And Jesus can guide you in that journey.

Closing Song: *It Is Well with My Soul*

Benediction:

May the Lord give, today, the perspective we each need.

May He give to the unrepentant conviction and sorrow.

May He give to the repentant peace and joy.

And may His body, His true Church, faithfully reveal God in His fullness, to our broken, fearful world, for the sake of His glory. Amen.