

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Laugh Therapy 2*

**Power to Cope**

April 23, 2023

**Nehemiah 8:4-12 (NIV)**

*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, Hilkiyah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.*

<sup>5</sup> *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.* <sup>6</sup> *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.*

<sup>7</sup> *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.* <sup>8</sup> *They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear[a] and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.*

<sup>9</sup> *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.*

<sup>10</sup> *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."*

<sup>11</sup> *The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve."*

<sup>12</sup> *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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Would you turn back with me to the historical book of Nehemiah today, back toward the front of the Old Testament? You hit Kings, then Chronicles, then Ezra and then Nehemiah. If you find yourself in Esther or Job, you've gone too far.

There are times in all of our lives when we need just the right word of encouragement or help or hope.

In fact, there's a Proverb about that, Proverbs 25:11. It says that the right word spoken at the right time is like "an apple of gold in a setting of silver," which is the writer's way of saying it's a valuable and precious and beautiful thing.

Just this last week, Annette, my wife, told the story of a moment like that in her life.

Though she's very dedicated to it now, back when she was in high school, she had no interest at all in any sort of physical exercise. She developed that in college at Asbury here, under the influence of Rita Pritchett, whom some of you will remember.

Her high school gym teacher was an older guy who was, once upon a time, an athlete, but over the years...well, let's just say all his muscle had settled into his mid-section. So, his idea of teaching gym was to sit in a chair and bark at the students.

One day, the assignment was to run a mile on the school track, which seemed impossible to Annette. But she strategized that maybe if she ran slowly enough, she might be able to do it. As she ran (slowly) past her teacher, who was seated (overflowingly) in a chair there

by the track, she looked to him for a word of encouragement.

His word to her? "Hustle it, slug butt."

Ah, yes, an *apple of gold*, you see?

That's an apple of gold that would probably get that coach fired today.

A similar sort of thing happened to me in high school. After a particular football practice where I got knocked around quite a bit, as I walked off the field with the assistant coach (who worked with my dad at the telephone company), I looked to him for an encouraging word.

Coach Burton looked at me, cursed—I won't repeat that part—and said, "Diddle, you're just like your dad!"

I was shocked and had no idea what he meant. He saw that and then said, still obviously frustrated, "To be good at this game, you have to want to get out there and kill people, but you don't have that in you; you're just like your dad!"

So, in the end, I think that was a compliment, but it sure didn't seem like it at the time.

Not much of an apple of gold.

We've all had them, hard times of discouragement when we've needed an apple of gold, a word from someone we respect that lifts us up and lightens our load.

That is just what the people of Jerusalem needed here in today's text. But let's set the scene a bit first.

Jerusalem had been all but destroyed when Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians invaded and deported most of her citizens, and for 70 years it lay in devastation.

I picture it as something of a post-apocalyptic, dystopian, Mad Max sort of place, where a few people—those "unimportant" people who were left behind after the deportation—rattled around in the ruins in rags.

After 70 years though (fulfilling the prophecies of Jeremiah, by the way), Cyrus, the king of Persia who had overtaken Babylon, began to resettle the Jews in their homeland.

This was a philosophical difference between the Babylonians and the Persians. The Babylonians' nation-building method was to remove people from their pasts and force them to integrate and assimilate.

Persia, however, was much more open to leaving people in their historical settings and customs. They hoped that that sort of goodwill would create peace with the peoples they overtook, which is why Cyrus even helped the Jewish exiles return to Jerusalem.

You can read about that at the end of Second Chronicles and on into the book of Ezra.

Cyrus first sent a fellow named Zerubbabel with about 50,000 Jews, and they set about rebuilding the temple.

Years later, another Persian king, Artaxerxes, sent the priest Ezra, along with another contingent of Jewish families, to help re-establish order and temple worship there in the city.

And then again, after more years pass, Nehemiah is sent from Persia to Jerusalem to take on the task of rebuilding the city wall.

Now, we read those words in our Bibles and see only print on a page. It's easy to forget the human element involved.

Those days and years were far from easy. Those first returning exiles were like frontiersmen, going to a war-ravaged land, starting from almost nothing, to rebuild society and order.

And though the prevailing power, Persia, and her leaders were *for* the project and helped over and over again in its accomplishment, the many, smaller kingdoms surrounding Jerusalem did everything they could to make it difficult for the Jews. They slandered them, sniped at them, and they tried to change the mind of Persia and her kings.

That's a big reason why Nehemiah went to rebuild the city wall: there was no peace, no security, in the city because of these local strongmen and their raiding parties. The Jewish families there were under constant threat.

Even as the wall was being rebuilt, Nehemiah, Chapter 4, tells us how the laborers all carried their weapons with them. They laid stone with one hand and held a sword with the other.

That was the environment in which they worked.

Sort of like working retail today: you never know what kind of person is going to walk in the door.

On top of that, Nehemiah, Chapter 7, tells us how, even at this date, the homes in Jerusalem had not yet been rebuilt. All this work was going on by people who were living in tents and had no real security, you see?

It's just remarkable what the people there in Jerusalem in those days did.

It's sort of like what the people of Kiev are doing today.

A few months ago, I saw a documentary on how, in Kiev, as soon as a bomb hits a street or a building or something else and it's damaged, the policy there in the Ukrainian capital is to repair the damage immediately.

That's a psychological strategy, you see, to help the people there stay strong and resilient. It sends the message that they are not going to give in to the Russians. They are going to do all they can to keep life normal.

So even under very present threat, even while missiles are landing nearby, the people are out there rebuilding what was damaged.

That's what the Jews did there in Jerusalem. Even under constant threat, they worked on to rebuild.

And they did it. Nehemiah 6:15 tells us that in just 52 days, they rebuilt the city wall. With God's help, they'd accomplished a tremendous thing.

And in celebration of this, they all assembled together and asked Ezra to come and read to them the Word of God.

Now, this tells you something about the nature of the people there, doesn't it?

They accomplish this great thing, they record a big win, and in response they gather and want to worship!

Ezra did not initiate this. He did not set the agenda or determine what should be read. He didn't even call the meeting. This was all the peoples' idea.

And so, they assembled — men, women and children — and Ezra read.

We don't know exactly what he read, some part of the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy).

Of course, most of these people had very limited reading ability, and none of them had copies of the Scriptures in their homes, as we do today.

So, they highly valued those times when God's word was read to them and then explained and interpreted by the other priests that were there, as verse 8 tells us.

We're not told exactly how, logistically, all that happened either: maybe Ezra read a bit and then the priests or the Levites explained details and answered questions in smaller group settings.

We don't know for sure how that worked, but we do know that the people did not just sit there and wait for the closing song. They were listening. They were engaged. They had come ready to worship, and as they heard the word of God, the significance of what they were hearing overcame them.

You see, they understood that what Ezra was reading and what they were hearing was nothing less than the desire, the character, and the very will of God.

They were learning of God's very person and nature. God was revealing Himself to them. As that happened, as the weight of the significance of that settled upon them and was combined with their open hearts to God, as verse 9 there says, they to begin to cry, to weep.

As they were reminded of who God really is, they were also reminded of who they really are, and they were convicted of their sin. They felt shame and guilt, and they realized they needed to repent — to make a change in their lives.

The word of God is living and active, you see? Sharper than any two-edged sword.

God was moving, doing something in their hearts.

This is every true pastor's desire — that people would gather truly ready to worship, open to God and to His word, and then honestly and unashamedly respond to Him.

But now, here's where it gets really interesting.

At this point, some religious leaders would want and would call for this sort of weeping and repentance to continue. That's not to say it's not important and worthwhile at times, but just the same, there are also some religious leaders who enjoy capitalizing on people's emotional responses and will do things to extend them.

Some presume that if a little guilt and crying is good, then more guilt and crying is better.

But this was not what these leaders did.

These leaders (Ezra, Nehemiah and the priests), they were a wise bunch. They knew all that the people gathered there had been through. They knew that this congregation was both physically tired and emotionally wrung out. They knew their lives were hard and that they had lived through much difficulty, but in spite of it, they'd accomplished a great, great work.

And then, on top of that, the leaders there saw that the response of the people was genuine. They were truly repentant, truly seeking, truly sorry; so, rather than trying to place more burdens on their shoulders, they encouraged the people now to celebrate!

They told them, "Look, you've been through hard times.

"You've accomplished a great work.

"You've sought God and responded to Him genuinely.

"He's seen your sorrow, forgiven your sin and blessed you.

"This is all good! Really good!

"So now, as the holy people of God, *rejoice* in all these good things!

As the holy people of God, rejoice in this holy day."

In other words, the leaders told them to "get up and party on!"

This was the word they needed to hear, you see?

To a tired people, living under extreme tension, honestly seeking God in a desolate, difficult place, this was the apple of gold they needed, in that moment, to hear.

"Rejoice, celebrate, play, eat, drink and be merry, *not* because for tomorrow you may die, but because God, *your* God, is *good*, and He's *heard* you and *helped* you and *forgiven* you and *blessed* you!"

There was no reason for further guilt or shame.

On the contrary, there was *all* the reason in the world to *celebrate*, because in spite of the hardships of their lives, the people there were indeed doing what God wanted them to do.

This was the apple of gold, the word they needed, you see?

This was the celebration that fed their minds and bodies and spirits. This was the party that gave them the power to cope.

Sometimes that is exactly what we need: a celebration, a party, in order to have the health and the stamina and the power to cope with life in this broken world.

Now, let me say, notice this party was not based on a lie.

Some people want to just say to others today, "Hey, don't worry – be happy!" when really, they have no good, eternal reason to be happy.

You and I, we never want God to find us guilty of lying to people just to make them feel better.

What Ezra and Nehemiah are doing here – this isn't that.

This was a celebration based in the spiritual reality of their situation and their attitude before God.

You see, for the heart that is truly open to God, there is always a measure of joy that comes from knowing His will.

Of course, knowing God's will can be a threat to those who resist Him, but to those who are willingly obedient and listening for God, knowing His will is a great relief and source of joy.

And then, even more joy comes from being forgiven of sins, to know that God has heard our repentance and has forgiven us.

Then, still more joy comes from walking with God consistently in humility and obedience. To know God is leading your life, informing your decisions, and shaping your future brings tremendous contentment and peace.

All of that brings joy in increasing measures, and that's the sort of joy that those in Jerusalem enjoyed on this day.

But of course, the *deepest joy* comes from truly knowing Jesus, the long-expected savior. The deepest joy comes from knowing that He's real, that He's there, that He lived and died and was raised again to pay for our sins.

No more sacrifices.

No more burnt offerings.

No more blood of bulls and birds.

Jesus died, once for all.

To the honest seeker, to the repentant heart, to the obedient soul, Jesus brings every reason to party, to celebrate, to laugh.

Just as the song says:

*No guilt in life, no fear in death,  
this is the power of Christ in me;  
From life's first cry to final breath,  
Jesus commands my destiny.  
No power of hell, no scheme of man,  
can ever pluck me from His hand.  
Till He returns or calls me home,  
here in the power of Christ I'll stand.<sup>1</sup>*

And not just stand, but to stand happily, joyfully, and laughing at the devil with his plans and schemes to steal, kill and destroy. Because in Jesus, though battles may still rage in our world, the war is long over and all in Jesus have already won.

King David knew this sort of release. He writes, "*The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them; but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming*" (Psalm 37:12-13).

And then of course, in Psalm 23, where David writes, "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*" (Psalm 23:5).

What does that mean? It means that even when the evil and brokenness of our world seem to surround us, God gives us a reason to celebrate!

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Townsend, *In Christ Alone* (Lyrics - Brentwood, TN: Capitol CMG Publishing, 2015).

That was David's experience.

That's what Nehemiah and Ezra were trying to communicate to the faithful people there.

And that is God's word for all who love and follow Him today.

Take time to celebrate! We have good reason to do so.

Is there something, some circumstance, some situation that has you on the ropes today?

Are you tired? Have you worked hard and followed the Lord and done as He's asked, yet still there is difficulty or conflict around you?

Do not let it get you down.

Do not give in to frustration or despair.

Rehearse God's goodness and forgiveness and blessings in your life, and choose to celebrate!

Just as it was for those under Ezra's and Nehemiah's care, and even more in Jesus, let the joy of the Lord be your strength. He can be. He will be. He wants to be.

Closing Prayer: Father, come and strengthen us with your joy – the hope and peace and promise that comes

with knowing you, all because of Jesus. Come and lighten hearts and lift burdens and seat us at Your table for a feast of joy, a party, even in the midst of difficulty. Because we know Jesus, we know how this story ends, and that brings a laugh to our heart and a smile to our face.

Closing Song: *Come We That Love the Lord*

Benediction: Now, for any here today who have not yet received the forgiveness of Jesus and who may even be actively resisting Him, please, do not continue in that behavior. Learn from these Jews of Jerusalem the importance of God's word and of being in right relationship with Him.

For you, however, who know Jesus and His forgiveness, and who are following Him with all your hearts today: ***"Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, sharing with others who have little in our world. This day is sacred to our Lord, so do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength"*** (Nehemiah 8:10).