



Nehemiah 8:13-18
Believe
Joyful

Rev. Brian North
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Scripture reading, followed by Ken Davis Video -
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKZG7PEhIv0>
We watched the first 2:30.

I love that video clip. “Send some missionaries to your face.” Such a great line! I heard this bit from Ken Davis on the radio a couple months ago and knew that this theme of joy was coming a ways down the road...and I’ve been waiting to share it with you ever since. And I believe he’s right when he says, “God is the author of joy. He’s the one who made it. He’s the one who created it.” The Bible certainly communicates that. And so as we continue our series titled, “Believe” and as we look at this question in part 3 of the series “Who am I becoming?”...today we look at the topic of joy. The statement of faith that comes to us from the *Believe* book that goes with this series, and which many in the church are reading, is this: **“Despite my circumstances, I feel inner contentment and understand my purpose in life.”** And so we’re going to be looking at how contentment and joy are related.

You know, an awful lot of people really struggle to have joy in their lives. It frequently gets replaced with an imposter that steal it from us. And it’s not that the imposter is completely different from what brings us joy. The imposter to true joy is the stuff in our lives that makes us happy. **“Happy” is “Joy” but without contentment.** So what makes us “happy” isn’t bad; it just isn’t complete...it isn’t satisfying. A new job or a new car or new home are great things...and they’ll make us happy, but won’t give us joy. They don’t give us contentment – there’s always something about them we’d like to change or fix, or eventually we get rid of them for something different. They are imposters to joy...only making us happy for a while.

And that’s why they’re so dangerous. They *seem* to be sources of joy because they make us happy, but they disappoint us in the end. This is why even the wealthiest people don’t have joy that is derived from their wealth. **If money were the source of true and lasting joy, then the world’s wealthiest**

people would be the most joyful people as well. But that certainly is not true. The Bezos family, unfortunately, is a prime example right now. I mean, I don't know them, and maybe I'm drawing some wrong conclusions, but I doubt that they have a lot of joy (or even happiness) right now in spite of their wealth, and probably hasn't been for a little while.

This morning's passage is a great example of how it can be easy to mistake temporary happiness for true joy. And it's not so much the passage itself, but our understanding of it that can lead to the mistaken source of joy. What we read about in that Nehemiah passage was God's people gathering together for a celebration. If you know the book of Nehemiah at all, you know that it is all about Nehemiah's leadership of the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem. And by the time we get to this 8th chapter, the rebuilding of the wall is complete. This is a momentous occasion.

And: **You would think that they would be celebrating this accomplishment with a big feast.** And that's exactly what they do: they have a big feast, a party to express their joy . But their celebration and their joy was not actually centered around the completion of the wall. It would be easy for us to presume that it is, because it's a great accomplishment. But what we see is that they are celebrating the Feast of Booths, or sometimes called the feast of Harvest or Feast of Tabernacles. It would last for seven days, which was the tradition going back to the days of Moses. It was a feast that helped remember their ancestors' wandering in the desert, when they lived in "booths" – temporary homes. They would literally build temporary homes similar to the ones of their ancestors, and live in them for a week, as a way of remembering how they had lived on their way to the Promised Land.

And so *God's word* and what it told them God had done for their ancestors...*that* is what brought them joy; not their great accomplishment of finishing the wall. As one commentator puts it, **"We might expect a *natural* readiness to praise God on this occasion, therefore [because of the completion of the wall]. It is interesting to find, then, that behind the thanksgiving lies, not the mere fact of the new walls, but a reading of the law. Israel rejoices in response to the word of God"** (J.G. McConville, *The Daily Study Bible: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, p. 115).

Earlier in chapter 8:2-3 we read this, “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. 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.”

Then a few verses later we get more information, “The Levites read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being said” (Nehemiah 8:8).

Did you catch how long this reading and probably the explanation was a part of it as well....did you catch how long it was? From Daybreak until noon. And they listened “attentively.” There was a Sunday when two women were walking out of church. One said, “My, that preacher certainly preaches for a long time!” Her friend replied, “No, he really doesn’t preach a long time, it just seems like a long time!” I think it was Monica Ernsberger and Linda Muilenburg who made those comments. ☺ Just kidding. I found that online...but I guarantee you neither lady would have been prepared for a several hour Scripture reading and sermon!

Then in verse 10 Nehemiah speaks up and encourages everyone to “go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks” and to share with others who aren’t prepared for it...and he concludes by saying, “**Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength**” (Nehemiah 8:10). Then verse 12, just before the passage we read this morning, says, “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.*” **Their joy was in the Lord and understanding His Word.**

Their joy wasn’t based on the wall that they had built, as great as an accomplishment as it was. A man-made security system – as necessary as it was for them – isn’t a source of true and lasting joy. Their joy was in the Lord and understanding His Word.

So then the festival continues the next day. And they are reading from the Bible again, and came across the passage in Leviticus that talks about celebrating this festival by building and living in booths as their ancestors had done before out of necessity; it's a way for them to now remember and celebrate what they did. And so that's what they did, with the comment added in verse 17 that the festival had not been celebrated like this since the days of Joshua...which would have been nearly 1,000 years. And we're told that "their joy was very great" (Nehemiah 8:17).

What we see here is that even in the good times...even in the times of celebration and great human accomplishment...true and lasting joy is found in God. They had every reason to throw a party to celebrate the completion of the wall. This is HUGE for them. But what they actually celebrated here was returning to God's Word and celebrating His grace and His presence and provision in their lives, rather than their own accomplishments. And too often, we try and find our joy in the great stuff that surrounds us or our accomplishments. And let's be honest: Here in Kirkland and in the other communities of the Eastside, there's a lot of really great stuff. Even if you aren't one of the ones driving a Ferrari and living on the shores of Lake Washington, and all that...most all of us here have more than enough "stuff" and we might be tempted to find joy in them. But all they do is make us happy. And "happy" is not content the way "joy" is.

There was once a man who worked and worked and saved all his money. Never spending any of it, just saving it. He loved money. He was a miser and he derived all his joy in life from his money.

For years he kept telling his wife, "When I die, I want you to put my money in the casket with me; I want to have it for the afterlife." The years passed and he kept deriving joy from his money and telling his wife to put the money in the casket with him. He even got a Bible out and made his wife swear on the Bible that she would put the money in his casket with him.

One day the man died. At the funeral a few days later, just as the funeral director got ready to close the casket the wife jumped up and said, "WAIT, I have something to put in the casket with him." Then she gently placed a box

in the casket. When she returned to her seat her friend she was sitting next to asked, “What did you put in the casket?”

The wife answered, “He made me promise that I would put all his money in the casket with him when he died, so that he could have the joy of his money in the afterlife.” The friend was astonished and said, “There is NO WAY you did that!” The wife looked at her friend and said, “Well, you know I'm a Christian woman and I could not lie to him... so I did as I promised.”

Her friend said, “Girl, you are crazy! I can't believe you put all the money in the casket with him!!” The wife quietly dabbed the tears from her eyes and said, “I'm a Christian, but not a fool. I wrote him a check. If he can cash it he can have it.” He was happy...but he wasn't content and filled with joy.

You see: **It's easy to let the stuff that we have, the money in the bank, and our accomplishments, try and be the source of our joy.** Even beyond the grave. It's an easy trap to fall for, but they won't satisfy. And they derail us from the purposes God has for us as we continue to seek after those imposters and quench the thirst that they only leave us with. They aren't the author of joy. But God is. The author of life and life eternal is the author of joy.

It's a gift from God. We see that here in Nehemiah 8 as their joy is centered on God and His Word and remembering what He has done. And there are so many other places where God is affirmed as the author of joy. For instance, in Galatians 5:22, Paul lists joy as a fruit of the Spirit. So we experience joy when God's Spirit dwells in us through faith in Jesus. In John 15:11 Jesus himself says, **“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).** This comes at the end of a teaching where Jesus uses a grapevine and its branches as an analogy of what it means to be connected to Jesus. We are the branches that bear fruit, but we have to be connected to the vine – connected to Jesus – in order to do that. And he shares this teaching so that his joy might be our joy, and therefore make our joy complete. Whatever level of “joy” we may have apart from Jesus is incomplete; it's only happiness. And that is a shadow of the true joy that He offers. Jesus' joy is the fullness of joy, and it becomes ours when we

abide in him.

When Jesus was born, the angels announced his birth to the shepherds and said this news “will cause great joy among the people” (Luke 2:10). If we wonder why there isn't more joy in our lives...why there isn't more joy “among the people”: maybe we've forgotten to keep our eyes fixed on the one who brings great joy to us: Jesus Christ. Jesus is where lasting joy is found. It's a joy that transcends circumstances because Jesus transcended the grave. Paul is a testament to that, when he writes in Philippians that he has great joy in the spread of the Good News even as he was in prison for his faith; he found joy in the fact that people heard the Good News even from preachers who preached with false motives! He didn't let potential jealousy, or his circumstances, steal his joy, because his joy and purpose in life was found in the Good News of Jesus Christ.

So if you're struggling to find joy in your life: let the people in Nehemiah encourage you to return to the promises of God's Word. The worldly accomplishments may make us happy, other things may seek to get us bummed out or disappointed...but true joy is found in relationship with God. Let's get centered on Jesus Christ, connected to him, the vine, so that we might bear good fruit – including the fruit of the Spirit. And then your joy will be complete, because it will be coming from the author of joy.

And then can we all just make a promise that when the need arises because the joy of the Lord is getting crowded out by other stuff...can we all promise that we will send some missionaries to our faces so the contented joy of the Lord would shine out? ☺ I think we can do that.

Let's join together in our statement of faith this morning on joy: **“Despite my circumstances, I feel inner contentment and understand my purpose in life.”** Let's pray...Amen.