

“Experiencing Joy in Life”

Nehemiah 8:1-12

How many of you desire to experience joy in your life? Not just a joy that is here today and gone tomorrow. Not a joy that is seemingly impossible to attain or sustain. I think we all know that from a secular, worldly perspective the attaining of joy in life can be very elusive in our culture today.

So much of a person’s efforts to secure some joy and happiness in life are ineffective and, when seemingly attained, are not long-lasting at all. The new car is soon the old car, and it needs repairing. The new house suddenly needs remodeling. The new job is quickly boring and not fulfilling. The big raise or bonus is soon all spent and gone. The exciting, joyful vacation is over and now back to the old routine.

Is there really, then, a joy that is available to us that can be experienced today and that will be long-lasting? A joy that has powerful, long-lasting impact on a person’s life? I believe that there is, and I want to share that with you this morning. In the scripture text for today we have the prescription for attaining joy and even sustaining it over the course of our life.

As we look at these words of Nehemiah in the Word of God we see this wonderful truth that **Christians, God’s covenant people, will experience true joy in their lives when they worship God with eager anticipation and expectation and have a sincere focus on the preaching and teaching of God’s word.**

Hopefully, you will see that attaining this high degree of joy is centered in a person’s worship of God. To be more specific, this wonderful joy is a by-product of and is very closely related to how a person approaches his or her worship of God; that is, your mental and spiritual attitude and mind set when you come to church on Sundays.

- How you worship God in church.
- What you desire to experience when you come here on Sunday mornings.
- What anticipation you have as to your faithful blessing of God as you worship Him as well as receiving all He will have for you in that time of worship and teaching.

It is not only the physical time you spend here each Lord’s Day with God’s people that is significant. It is also extremely vital that you are open to truly engage wholeheartedly in that worship. It will help us now to have an historical context of what was occurring as the Israelites gathered for congregational worship that day in Jerusalem. They had returned after 40 years in Babylonian captivity. They had rebuilt the temple and the walls around Jerusalem. Under the leadership of Nehemiah the governor and Ezra the priest, their enemies had been thwarted and Jerusalem was being rebuilt and renewed by God’s people.

In preparation of the Feast of Booths the people assembled to praise and worship God for His many blessings.

It is in the context of this activity of worship that it is here recorded in Scripture that we can learn some important lessons about worship that both honor and bless our Holy God and bring immeasurable blessings of joy to us His people at the same time.

First of all we see in this text that there must be for each of us **a heart's desire to assemble and worship God**. Verse 1a: All came to the gate called Watergate located near the rebuilt temple. The call went out to the community and the many who made up that "all." The "all" included men, women, and all who were able to understand, even young children, and the whole family worshiped together.

We see throughout scripture that in God's sight the assembling of His people together to worship Him is very important. He is our Heavenly Father. Just as a father rejoices when the whole family gathers together on special occasions, similarly, God is blessed even more when we all come together to worship Him.

In the eight years I have been here I have thanked God that so many of you make that special effort to have your whole family worship with you. Because of the hectic schedules of so many families and the fast-paced world we live in, all of us must periodically, even every Sunday, check our heart attitude as we prepare to worship God.

If those preparation hours have been filled with anxiety, anger, and strained relationships, then confession and repentance are vital. Certainly confess and repent during the time set aside for that in the service, but then you must follow up after the service with sincere efforts of reconciliation. Ideally, for all of us, the anticipation of looking forward to entering into the presence of Almighty God should truly humble us and overcome us with sincere joy, knowing, as we do, that it is only through God's gift of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and His finished work on the cross that we have such a privilege and joy!

Secondly, as we assemble together we must have **a heart's desire to hear and learn God's word**. Verse 1b, 2, 3: God's people told Ezra, the priest, to bring out the Word of God, the five first books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. They had a heart's desire to hear the Word read. Time was not a factor. Comfort and ease were not a factor either. According to verse 3 and verse 5, he read for at least six hours or more, and that whole time the people were standing. Verse 3 also says, "They were listening attentively," really paying heart-focused attention to every word and phrase read. This was God's Word, infallible, inerrant, the very words of God Almighty Himself, and they took it seriously and personally.

I know that in our culture today of 30-minute TV shows, with periodic commercial breaks in between and only one-minute sound bites on significant political and social topics, people can be very challenged to focus for a long period of time on significant subject matter discussions. **Consequently we all must make a special effort to readjust how we prepare for the hearing of the preaching and teaching of the Word!**

Also, we need to look at our heart attitude when, at times, the worship service may go over the allotted time and we become frustrated or even very upset, thus quenching the Holy Spirit as He is in process of ministering to us.

To help you put this in perspective, during the Reformation and the time of the Puritans, pastoral prayers could last an hour and the sermon could go on for at least two more hours. Plus, you would be sitting in pews with no padding!

I hope, we, as God's people today, have that same heart desire to sit under the preaching of God's Word. To look forward with great expectation to what God's Spirit will teach us during that time. As you know, it is His Word applied to our lives and circumstances that enables us to have a scriptural perspective of all of life. Such biblical understanding of God's unchanging and unconditional love for us centered in Jesus, Who indwells us, certainly can and does result in a joy unfathomable and eternal.

A third area we must be aware of as we come to worship is that we have **a heart's desire to experience balanced worship**. I want to say first of all that I have been an ordained Presbyterian minister for 30 years. I am committed to the reformed faith and to the essentials of the Christian faith. I am also aware that for various reasons, a church's tradition and misunderstanding or misinterpretation of scripture can cause various aspects of a congregation's worship to be hindered and not fully expressed.

That said, I hope to help us all understand from these verses how we should be coming expectantly, with grateful anticipation of what God's Word can do in our lives as we assemble to worship Him in spirit and truth. It is interesting to note that they expressed both emotional worship of God as well as humble reverence. They raised their hands in sincere, joyful worship and praise and shouted "Amen!" and "Amen"!! They also reverentially with great humility bowed down before their holy and awesome God with their faces to the ground. What a beautiful picture of worship balance. In one instance an emotional expression of adoration and praise and then later a quiet, humble acknowledgment of reverential awe to a Holy God!

May each of us come to our worship of God with similar openness to be moved upon by the Holy Spirit during our worship as we respond with joyful singing and praise as well as be humbly broken as we come into His presence in confession and prayer.

Included in balanced worship is the faithful exposition of the Word of God from the pulpit, the engaging of the mind with the wonderful life-changing words of the Gospel, and the whole counsel of God from Genesis to Revelation. In verse 7-8 we have the account of how the scribes and Levites helped the people understand the implications of God's Word.

When there is such balance of emotion and humility and the effective preaching and teaching of the scriptures, the Holy Spirit moves upon the congregation and true confession and repentance occurs. Verse 9: The people were experiencing deep conviction. They were emotionally overwhelmed by God's Word being read and explained. They were broken, contrite, excited, and deeply moved to the depths of their being. So much so that the Levites had to console them. Oh, my friends, that our stubborn and prideful hearts would be so affected by balanced worship and the power of the preached word that we would evidence such a deep level of sincere worship of our Holy God! Be prepared and be expecting such a move of God as He, in His perfect timing, brings us the answer to the many prayers that have been uttered for a revival and renewal in this church. Now, finally, I want to share this truth, that as you come to each worship service with the expectation and anticipation we have been describing know that **a Christian's faithful heart involvement in such experiential worship leads to renewed and dynamic joy in this life.** Verses 10-12: As a result of their in-depth and balanced worship of God, with tears rolling down their faces, they went away to celebrate with great joy. The joy was not just for them personally, but with sincere generosity it was shared with each other and those who may not have been present to worship with them. This joy was real. This joy was active. This joy was fulfilling. Why were they so joyful? Because they had been with God, they had been moved by His Word, and they had been renewed in their relationship with Him. Their lives had been changed. A true joy filled their heart, mind, and soul.

Remember when I said earlier that the joy the world seeks is fleeting and quickly gone? We who trust in Jesus Christ have access to a joy that is eternal. It never fails. Nehemiah declared boldly that day, "The joy of the Lord is your strength!"

How much more should we who have the fullness of the Word of God and the reality of the risen Messiah and the outpoured Holy Spirit, be filled with even greater joy. If we come to Sunday worship with an expectation of God's powerful presence and an anticipation that He will not only receive our worship through Our Savior Jesus, but also bless us bountifully with an outpouring of His Holy Spirit, we then have the assurance that true joy will flood our souls, a joy that is supernaturally given and which the cares of the world and the challenges of living and the attacks of the enemy can't permanently steal or destroy. Therefore, I urge you to think on these things and begin to more consistently come with great expectation to worship God on the Lord's Day. And may the joy of the Lord be your continued source of strength every day of your lives.