

Most Joyful Christmas Ever

Best Christmas Ever Series Week 3: Celebration and Feasting

Nehemiah 8

December 13, 2015

[Movie clip bumper video: "A Christmas Carol" scene where Scrooge wakes up after 3rd ghost and realizes he's still alive and it's Christmas day and he can make amends]

Welcome/intro/vision

This is week three in our Christmas series we're calling the best Christmas ever and the idea behind this series is that all of us are doing the same things around Christmas time

We're decorating and we're celebrating and we're buying presents and spending time with family.

So what we're doing throughout this series is taking those things that we're already doing around Christmas time

and connecting the dots between those things and who God is and what God made us to do.

And our hope is that as we do this, we'll go through this Christmas season with eyes wide-open to a God who is waiting for us with joy at every turn

Next week we'll be talking about family—almost all of us have family as some part of our Christmas experience and for most of us that's a mixed bag

But what we'll be talking about next week is how Christmas is God's design for a family experience that is designed for blessing

But this week we're talking about CELEBRATING! In the scene from Christmas Carol, Scrooge wakes up and realizes with great relief that he's not quite dead yet!

That there is an opportunity for him to do what is right and he unleashes a celebration that includes gift-giving and making things right

Most of us will have some sort of Christmas party or gathering of some sort and for some of us we grew up in a church tradition that was always looking suspiciously at parties

As if this impulse towards celebration always led to morally corrupt behaviors.

And on the other hand, some of us spent plenty of time in our lives at the kinds of parties that actually DID lead to some rather questionable behaviors thereby confirming the suspicions of those suspicious church people!

Today, as we talk about celebration.

what I want to do is chart a 3rd way between the suspicious religious people who feel like all parties are bad

We have a hard time reconciling huge chunks of the Bible if we think that all parties are evil

But at the same time, we're going to avoid the opposite mistake of a celebration that leads us further away from who God is and the kind of life God would have for us

Because just like we said last week that generosity is God's idea and is at the core of his very nature, so, too, are joy and celebration

C. S. Lewis writes, "Joy is the serious business of heaven."

So what we want to do is chart a course that connects our celebrating that we're going to do this holiday season

God loves to pour out real joy, real love, real life into those celebrations to make them not just a nice diversion

but something that lasts, something that's substantive

Some of us love gatherings and celebrations and parties, others of us we sort of just endure them

Or perhaps you avoid them like the plague!

But what if you could enter into a celebration this Christmas that was filled with God and it wasn't just filled with God in a sort of "God's watching you so you better not drink too much" kind of a way

But it was filled with God in such a way that the celebration that you experienced actually planted seeds of life that sprung up days and weeks and months later and bore good fruit?

What if your office party or family gathering or neighborhood event was an opportunity to meet God and build something that lasted and was a gift to you long after the event was over?

That's what happened in the passage that we're going to look at today as we look at the Old Testament book of Nehemiah

We actually did a series on this great book about 2 years ago but for those of you who forgot or slept through it or had the great mis-fortune to NOT be here during that series

Let me give you a little bit of background as to what's happening here in the book of Nehemiah

The book of Nehemiah is written about the same time and covering just about the same period of history as the book of Esther was that we studied earlier this fall

The Jews are an over-run people, first by the Babylonians and then later by the Persians who over-take the Babylonians as king of the hill

And Nehemiah is a Jew serving in the Persian capital as the cupbearer to the king.

The cupbearer's job was to taste the king's wine before he did to make sure that it wasn't poisoned!

And you thought your job had occupational hazards!

So Nehemiah is in Susa, the capital of Persia, and it's about 450 BC

and a group of men come from back in Jerusalem and tell him that the city is in disgrace, it's walls are in ruins and the people are very discouraged

This strikes a deep cord in Nehemiah, he is overwhelmed with grief for his people and so he asks the king if he can go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the city of his people

The king, incredibly agrees to this request and gives Nehemiah permission to get resources that he'll need for the project like timber and such

And so Nehemiah returns to this over-run, dis-spirited city and rallies the people into a building project of rebuilding the walls around the city

And Nehemiah is such an incredible leader and the people are so moved by his call to action that the entire wall around the city of Jerusalem gets rebuilt in just 52 DAYS!

No bulldozers, no cranes or forklifts, just manual labor for 52 days and it gets done!

After decades of the walls being ruins and the people being a conquered nation, the walls being restored is a hugely significant marker in the history of this people and this nation

And we're going to drop in right after the completion of the wall as the people gather for a worship service

And at this worship service, many of them are going to hear the Scriptures read to them for the very first time in their entire lives

In the chapter just before this, they take a census and there's over 40,000 adults in and around Jerusalem

And all 40,000 people gather together for a big celebration—the re-birth of a nation!

This generation has never known what it meant to be a people—this whole generation has lived as a conquered people, with a broken down wall around Jerusalem

This wall is the first time as a people they've had a sense of national joy and unity and gladness in being a people together.

That's where we're going to pick up today in Nehemiah chapter 8

1 ...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...

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 [and some of you think that a church service that goes about an hour is long!] ... in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law....

7 The Levites...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.

When I was in 10th grade I had a biology class with a teacher who was very smart but who was not very good at teaching biology to 15-year-olds.

And every day in class he would talk about stuff and all of us sat there a bit confused as to what he was talking about

And every night, after school was done and dinner was over, my dad and I would sit down with the chapter from my book, and whatever I could remember from my class

And he would go over the material with me to help me really understand what was going on

In this scene, you've got a huge group of people, possibly tens of thousands of people, who are all hearing the Scriptures most of them for the very first time

And what's happening here is that Ezra is up front on this big wooden platform reading these texts and every so often he's pausing

And sprinkled throughout the crowd are these other levites and priests that would maybe re-state it loudly enough for people in their section to hear it

But what they were really doing was what my dad was doing after dinner each night:

explaining what was being read to the crowd, maybe answering questions, helping everyone to grasp and understand fully what was going on in this text

The word “understand” is repeated several times throughout the passage
it’s not just that they read the Scriptures but that they were really understanding what they meant for the very first time!

Now, let’s step back a little bit: these people have been a conquered and over-run people for a couple of generations at this point
they’ve been discouraged and beaten down

And here, they do something for the first time that’s a point of national pride, they re-build this giant wall in just 52 days

And for their big celebration, what do they do? They read the Old Testament Law, most likely the book of Deuteronomy!

They’ve gathered together to have a great big party and they don’t sing the national anthem, they don’t shoot off fireworks, they read the book of the law from the Old Testament

Now, if you’re planning your own Christmas party this year, I wouldn’t suggest doing this for your party!

But the goal of this celebration is simply this: they are re-building to last. And re-building that wall is a big part of what that means for them as a people

But if they re-build their wall but do not re-build their faith in the God who is Lord over that wall, then none of their work will matter

If they re-build their physical wall but the wall of their hearts and minds in relation to God is still in shambles, then it will just be an empty façade, a shell, a work that will not last.

And so the people, gather together, and as they celebrate their re-birth as a people and a nation

They want to re-build something that lasts, and in order to do that, they not only have to re-build the wall, they need to re-build their faith

This is hard for us, because for many of us, we can identify the stuff in our lives that’s broken down: families, friendships, marriages, careers, budgets, neighborhoods

And tackling those building or re-building projects in our lives takes up a ton of our energies and resources

and maybe as you close out 2015 you're feeling like there are some things in your life that just like the wall around Jerusalem need to be rebuilt or fixed or corrected

But we're often blind to the spiritual side of things, aren't we? Because it's quieter, because our relationship with God is often more subtle, not as obvious, sometimes we neglect it, don't we?

It's like the person who hits bottom on their addiction or in their marriage or with the kids, and they're so desperate for help for this thing

So in desperation they go to church and they start to see some things change in their lives and they're so grateful

But then the crisis passes, and they're sort of satisfied with re-building the wall of their marriage or their lives

And they neglect the corresponding work of the Spirit—to not only re-build earthly things but eternal things

For every single earthly building or re-building work you could ever engage in, there are an infinite number of spiritual realities that correspond and relate to it

If we do not do this work, we are in danger of gaining the whole world and forfeiting our very souls,

In fact, we talked about this in the Esther series back in September, why did God allow Israel to get over-run by foreign powers in the first place? Because they had drifted from God, right?

Was the wall around Jerusalem any help to them previously when Babylon had come up against them and destroyed them?

No, it was not!

A physically re-built Jerusalem wall without a re-built faith in the God who was Lord over that wall

was a sitting piñata, just waiting for the next superpower to come and knock it back over again

Your rebuilt marriages, budgets, families, businesses, without a re-built faith, is just a piñata.

It's there, but it's just waiting for the next storm to hit and knock it all down again or knock some OTHER part of your life over

Nehemiah and Ezra are looking to re-build a people who will last, so as they are done re-building their wall, they are seriously engaging the work of re-building their faith

And as they do so, it takes an unexpected turn ,let's keep reading

⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.

¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go your way. Enjoy choice food and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

¹¹ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved."¹² And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Last week as we were talking about how good and how GENEROUS God is, we had some really sweet moments in here

And at one point in one of the services there were several people in tears over the generosity and goodness of God

Here's my true confession as a speaker, when I see people being moved by something that we're talking about, I keep at it!

If people are crying, there must be something good happening here and I'm going to go off-script and keep working that idea, I'm going to linger here! I'm going to drive this puppy home!

If people are crying then I'm doing something right!

I'm not going to pull the plug on that, I'm going to stay right there!

So the people here in this text are crying, weeping as they're hearing the law

Generally throughout the Old Testament when the law is read and people weep, it's because they're convicted about their sin.

They realize that they have neglected the Lord, missed the Lord, disobeyed the Lord

They feel exposed, cut to the quick, they see where they've fallen short and how far they've fallen short

So this is likely what's happening, as they're all hearing and understanding the book of the law for the first time.

"Yikes! This is our book, this is our God, these are our promises and warnings and this is what we've forfeited! This is WHY we are a conquered and over-run people! God warned us, we neglected his word to us!"

And so they begin to weep. And then Ezra and Nehemiah in concert do something that those of us who do this kind of thing for a living would never do!

They slam the book of the Law shut immediately! They call off the reading of the book of the law just as the people are really feeling it!

Don't weep! Don't cry! This day is HOLY! Three times they tell the people to not cry because of the holiness of the day

Now if you're like most Americans, the thought of a holy day generally has the vibe of maybe a reflective day
maybe a quiet day, maybe a day to reverent and maybe even a day to cry over brokenness in your own life or the world around us

But Nehemiah and Ezra are emphatic: because the day is a holy day, they are not to cry or weep. In fact, they are to go and party.

They are to go and party because this day is a day DEDICATED to the Lord

Holiness means set-apart, this is a day that is set apart to be about the Lord, unto the Lord—this day is to be ALL ABOUT THE LORD

See, the crying and weeping was about THEM. It was about their sin, about their shortcomings, it was about their failures as a people

And those things were REAL and they mattered, and Nehemiah and Ezra are definitely going to deal with those eventually

But that's never where we start in our lives with God. Life with God is first and foremost about who God is and what God is up to

And if we're talking about a day where we first discover or re-discover the core of who God is, what God is about

his holiness, his beauty, his goodness, his kindness and his love

If we're going to bracket off US out of this equation and really just make it a day all about discovering who God is, then there's ONLY one possible sane response once we see how GOOD God is!: throw a party.

Throw a big party. All day long. And make sure that everyone gets in. Make sure that everyone gets plenty so that all are taken care of

Just like Ebenezer Scrooge wakes up from his night with the ghosts where he saw himself as he truly was and his life as it truly was
And then woke up and celebrated with joy because there was still time to do so

So also, the Israelites are waking up after a long slumber and they're being invited to celebrate!

This past week I got one of those emails you live for in my line of work—from a woman who started coming a year ago, she'd been out of church for a long time, feeling disconnected from God and from community

And she wrote how being a part of Chatham Community Church and getting plugged into a small group have been life-changing for her

She wrote this: "For many years I have not felt a sense of belonging and love from the people around me. This last year is like waking up from a deep sleep."

If you're here this morning and you've been sleep-walking through life, feeling disconnected from God or from real community, if you've been in a deep sleep relationally or spiritually

Hear the good news! Love has come! It's time to wake up and celebrate!

We throw the party and celebrate why? Because as Nehemiah says, "the joy of the Lord is our strength"

Earlier today we read the advent reading from Zephaniah 3:

***The Lord your God is with you,
the Mighty Warrior who saves.
He will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing."***

This is a prophecy written about what God will do with his people AFTER the exile is over, AS God is rebuilding his people a rebuilding the nation
God will no longer rebuke you but will rejoice over you with singing!

And so what's just happened in Nehemiah 8? They've done this massive rebuilding project that's a sign of God rebuilding his nation!

So what is God doing over these people right now as they're in that gathering and assembly?

He's taking delight over them. He's rejoicing over them with singing.

And so if God is rejoicing and celebrating over them, if that's God's agenda for that day

And IF that day is a dedicated, set-apart day unto the Lord and if God's the one setting the agenda, then what should the people be doing?

Celebrating WITH GOD! Feasting WITH GOD! Rejoicing WITH GOD!

And if the Scriptures are telling us the truth, then the good news for us is this:

Jesus Christ comes a couple hundred years after this, so that God might always be able to do what he longs to do

And that is to REJOICE and SING with JOY over his people.

If you're here this morning and you are forgiven in Christ, washed clean in Christ, reconciled to God because of Christ

Then hear this good news: God rejoices over you! God is ALWAYS celebrating over his redeemed, forgiven, rescued people!

And so whenever we celebrate rightly, we are entering into God's perpetual and perfect ongoing dance and celebration!

How do we connect the dots between our Christmas celebration and God? God is the original and biggest partier in the cosmos. He is always celebrating and singing over his people all over the globe

There is perpetual joy and gladness in heaven over God's people, and when we celebrate, we are invited to enter into his ongoing, 24/7 celebration and joy!

The single biggest question over the entire cosmos, over all humanity for all of history, the most important question over our lives is simply "who is God? What is God like? What's his nature?"

From this scary-big question comes all sorts of downstream, subsequent realities. If God is primarily angry, then we'd better get busy keeping him happy.

If God is primarily squishy and doesn't really care what we do, kind of ambivalent or apathetic about humans and not really all that involved

Then we can just do whatever we want and it's kind of on us to figure it all out on our own

But if at the core of all things God is joyful, if he's a joyful, happy being, if the Scriptures are telling us the truth that joy is at the core of God's character

This is the best news we could possibly hear and it calls for celebration.

How many of you have ever gotten a new boss? How many of you remember the day before school started in elementary school?

Your big question is: "what's the new boss like? What's the new teacher going to be like?"

Because in many ways, you know that the quality of your environment will be dictated by the temperament of this one human being

Much of your day-to-day experience will be utterly shaped by this one person, by their temperament and their personality

How many of you have had a teacher or a boss who were miserable human beings? How fun was that? SO MUCH POWER to shape your day-to-day experience, isn't it?

BUT if you win the boss or teacher lottery and your new boss or TEACHER is an OUTSTANDING, quality, warm, professional, kind, excellent human being

It's a GIGANTIC relief, isn't it? Your future looks bright. This is the environment that you're going to spend your days in and it is good, and the future looks good

And in fact, the other kids at school or other people in other departments might even be a little bit jealous

And when you first discover it, you first realize that you've got a good one, what happens internally? RELIEF! Celebration!

My daily experience is in the hands of someone who is good, who is for me, who will be good to work for and good to work with

The Israelites have just discovered that their God, the God that they had neglected for several generations, that he's a GOOD GOD. That his basic, base-line disposition is love and JOY

And they're crying because they've neglected and dismissed this good and loving and joyful God, which is sin and they're going to have a massive repentance party

But the first thing, the core thing, the most important thing to do on this day is to celebrate this great discovery:

Our boss is good. Our God is GREAT and he LOVES us.

His disposition is wonderful. His love is enormous. His rules are just and good.

He treats people with kindness. He has high standards but helps us to meet them.

He is generous. He makes huge promises and follows through on them over and over and over again

And in fact, he's singing over us right now with joy and gladness!

And if we really get and understand that this is the boss we have, the God we have, then there's only one reasonable thing to do: celebrate. Throw a party.

The Being who has the most power to influence our lives and shape our experiences is better than we could have ever asked or dreamed or imagined

And this boss loves to party. This boss loves to celebrate.

He has no character flaws, no faults; he is nothing but perfect goodness. If this guy was your boss at work, it would change everything about your job

As it is, he's your God, and it changes everything about every aspect of your life if you'll let him

If you do not yet know this God, hear this good news: he has sent his Son and spent all of his own Son's blood so that you might be reconciled to him

In order that you might gain entrance to HIS party where he might sing with joy over you, too.

And so Nehemiah and Ezra call the people to celebrate. And so today, this Christmas season, we are called to celebrate, too

Because the story and the hopes of this great, kind, loving, promise-making and promise-keeping God, all the hopes that we might ever have for a good and generous God

All the hopes we have for a God who is joyful at his CORE

All those hopes and dreams for a good and kind and loving God
are BLOWN OUT OF THE WATER by the unexpected, extravagant giving of his son Jesus to rescue us from our lost-ness

That first Christmas morning is God's definitive word to you and to me today that he is a joyful, glad, self-giving God who has come to invite you into his great, big party

This season is holy unto the Lord. We see in Christmas the very essence and nature of the goodness of God. Do not grieve. Go and party, celebrate.

Because of who God is, your life just got way, way better.

The joy of the Lord is your strength.

In the text we're looking at this morning, a half day of reading the Scriptures turns into a day-long impromptu feasting and celebrating and eating and a party that goes on all day but it doesn't stop there

13 On the second day [the next day] the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law.

So Excited! New discoveries, can't wait to see what's next!

14 And they found it written in the Law that the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, 15 and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, "Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written."

So way back in Exodus with Moses, the people had wandered in the desert for 40 years and God had taken care of them.

So this festival was to commemorate how God took care of his people as they wandered in the desert.

So they were to set up temporary shelters and live in them just like nomads to remember and celebrate that God took care of them in the desert.

Now the cool thing about that is as they're reading about this festival that they're supposed to have in the 7th month, it's actually the 7th month! Their reading this and saying "we're supposed to be doing this right now!"

16 So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim.

The people are on the front-end of re-building a FAITH that matters and you know what they do? They obey the Scriptures

The first thing that they come upon that is relevant to them then and there, they just do it, they just put it right into action.

It's a little crazy, it's a little bizarre, but they don't care

They are leaving a life of ignorance of God's word and his ways and they're entering into a new way of life of trusting him and living as his people

And so they're just going to get to work—they read this command to live in huts for a couple of days during the 7th month, it's the 7th month now, boom, right now, drop everything, we're doing this

At some point when we're in times of building or re-building a faith that matters, and sometimes, too, when you're in a bit of a funk or flat place spiritually
there's going to come a point where you're going to have to decide to obey or not to obey God

There's going to come a call on you to take a step of faith and obedience

Even if it's a little weird or inconvenient—and sometimes it's going to be A LOT weird or inconvenient

And what you do in that moment is critical for your faith building or re-building project.

Some of you need to sit down this week, start reading the Scriptures, and then do or not do the first thing that applies to you.

17 And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing.

18 And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule.

This is a half-day party that turns into a week-long party all because they really knew and experienced and saw the character of God and the goodness of God

My friends, whether you know him deeply and intimately or not, hear this good news:

The God over the universe is deeply, deeply happy, good, joy-filled, generous, loving, kind, just, loving

He is the best boss you could ever, ever, ever dream of. He rejoices over his people
And in Christmas we celebrate his great gift given to us

And so we are invited to celebrate, to feast, to eat, to laugh, to enjoy this life

And we are told to care for others, to make sure they get enough—thank you to all of you who helped us to do this with the Shoebox several weeks ago and the Holiday Cheer gifts this morning!

Today, as we really see God, we celebrate. We celebrate and feast and eat and drink in the light

Because joy is the serious business of heaven.

A couple of suggestions for making this **the most joyful Christmas ever:**

1. Pray for ears to hear God rejoicing and celebrating over you and/or someone around you

Just ask to hear the sound of God's laughter and music and shouts of joy over his people!

2. Look at gatherings on your calendar as a way to enter into God's ongoing celebration!

If you're attending someone else's party: not just obligations at the office or with the family or neighbors, it's a chance to enter into the cosmic dance God has over his kids!

If you're hosting a party: this isn't simply a chance for you to show off your house to your neighbors or make sure your kids behave for your inlaws.

This is an expression of joy at the wonder of God's goodness. You can be generous in your hospitality because God has been generous to you

You can delight over your guests because God himself is at work either already delighting over them before you got there if they know him OR he's longing to sing and delight over them if they don't know him!

3. Remember that all gifts have right use and the potential for abuse

God gives us great gifts with great potential for blessing: gifts of friendships, food, drink, sexuality, family, money, all kinds of gifts

And every single one of these gifts has the potential to be a blessing to you and everyone around you OR a curse to you and everyone around you

It's all in how you use it.

So be aware that there are right and proper uses of God's gifts and then there are abuses and mis-uses of God's gifts

And some of the ways that things can go wrong with God's gifts are very specific to our own issues and struggles like addictions

So if celebration, food, and drink are all gifts from God, and if God is singing over you as he gives you these gifts

Let me encourage you to match pitch with God, to not abuse or misuse the gifts he's given to you

4. Look for ways to bless others in your celebrations this Christmas

The one caveat in the celebration in Nehemiah was that the people should make sure that everyone got taken care of

God's celebrations are always looking to meet the needs of the least of these

What if the office Christmas party creates a different kind of context where someone might be more willing to open up about an issue at home or in their marriage?

What if God is putting you there to care for someone and bless them?

What if there's someone at your parents or grandparent's family gathering who is coming into Christmas after a miserable year?

Is God singing over you so that you might sing his song and speak his word over someone else?

Who could you invite to the Christmas party that you're hosting at your house who might not get another invitation?

How might God's dance of joy over you spill out over into the party at your house this year?

My friends, as we enter into a time when the calendars get a little more full with gatherings and celebrations

My prayer is that as we might hear the Lord celebrating over each of us, and from that place, you might go and party and celebrate, feast and drink, with great, incredible joy!

The Christmas season is HOLY! Set-apart for the Lord! Therefore, GO! Eat and Drink and Celebrate! For the Joy of the Lord is your strength.