

Nehemiah 8.5–12

A Joyful Life

Amington

Sunday 19 May 2019

In a hurry

A husband and wife interrupted their holiday to go to the dentist. 'I need a tooth pulled, and don't use any Lidocaine because we're in a big hurry,' the woman said. 'Just extract the tooth as quickly as possible, and we'll be on our way.'

The dentist was impressed. 'You're certainly a courageous woman,' she said. 'Which tooth is it?'

'Show him your tooth, dear,' said the woman to her husband.

I wish it didn't, but sometimes my life feels like a blur. When I get my diary wrong, I move from one thing to another, sometimes without even a break to eat – days like that mean I have failed.

Many retired people say they are busier retired than they ever were when they worked – why? – because they have many commitments and spend their days moving from one thing to another.

Does that sound familiar? Modern life – with all its conveniences and machines – seems to get more hectic and more exhausting year by year. Is this really the best, most abundant way to live? To be honest, some days it feels like I'm just trying to get through my to-do list so I can relax for half an hour before going to bed – and that is no way to live.

John Ortberg, who wrote the book our current series is based on, says, 'Most of my life is spent in transit' – moving from one thing to another, waiting in line, trying to complete a task. He describes almost missing his young daughter's joy at bath time, because he was so focused on getting through the task of drying his children and getting them ready for bed. This is no way to live.

Jesus did not die and rise again so we could be miserable. He died – and rose again – to show us that life and love are stronger *even than death*. His death and life show the truth in the words of the psalm:

weeping may stay for the night,
but rejoicing comes in the morning.

Psalm 30.5 (NIV)

In other words: we cannot escape pain and sadness, but *they never have the last word*. And the last word? Joy.

Joy

God's plan for us is joy. Why? Because that's how he lives!

Think about it – our world has what I would describe as 'endless monotony': morning-evening-night, morning-evening-night, morning-evening-night... *repeat for billions of years.*

And yet the psalmist says the sun rising and setting day by day is **like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course** (Psalm 19.5). This is God's joy.

In some ways we might think of God as a child – what does a child say when they see or do something they like? 'Again, again!' Why do they say that? Because it brought them *joy*, and they liked it, so they want it again. There is a deep lesson in God's joy here.

Sometimes joy will be elusive. Sometimes we have every reason *not* to be joyful. In our reading from Nehemiah, God's people were slowly coming back to Israel from exile.

[Ezra and the other priests] 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.

Nehemiah 8.8 (NIV)

It must have been a powerful sermon, because the people wept **as they listened** (9) – why? Because they realised how great was their sin, how much they had failed God.

And then Nehemiah told them to put a solemn, devout face on and go back to their homes to sit in silence and contemplate their sin and misery.

No! That would be worldly sorrow – which leads to death.

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.’

Nehemiah 8.10 (NIV)

Was their sin real? Yes. They had abandoned God, worshipped other gods (mostly themselves), and had refused to follow the Law.

Did they have reason to be miserable? Yes. They were surrounded by enemies, in fear for their lives – those who carried materials for rebuilding the city walls had to carry their load with one hand, holding a sword in the other, and the builders had to have a sword by their side as they worked (Nehemiah 4.17-18).

The people had a choice.

They could wallow in self-pity because of their situation, because of their sin.

Or they could rejoice **because they now understood the words that had been made known to them** (12).

The situation was the same – what changed was how the people looked at it. And that made them stronger. Here is the truth I want you to remember if you forget everything else I say today: **the joy of the Lord is your strength** (10).

Why is it **strength**? Because when we taste *true* joy, that comes from being satisfied with and enjoying what we have, we will be less tempted by what we *don't* have. God created pleasure – the problem isn't that we like it too much, the problem is that we settle for fleeting shadows of pleasure. Forget what the world says about pleasure and joy – we need *God's* joy.

Yes, but how?

I don't know where it comes from originally but I often write in my sermon notes: yes, but how? This might be true, but so what? How do we actually *do* this?

Remember, this series isn't about *trying* it's about *training*: how do we *train* ourselves to be full of God's joy?

Deliberately... celebrate.. together... today.

1. **Deliberately**

My mentor once asked me, 'Ben, do you ever *taste* your food?' Make yourself stop and deliberately look for and notice the good in the supposedly trivial things that God has given you – take time to enjoy them. Remember the joy God takes in the daily rising and setting of the sun, the joy a child has in repeating something again and again.

2. **Celebrate**

The Old Testament is full of regular holy days – *holidays* – and festivals. In fact they celebrate the festival of tents in Nehemiah 8, immediately after our reading. Nehemiah tells the people: **enjoy choice food**. What are the special things that you love to do, to eat, to drink? There's nothing wrong with them – as long as we celebrate with gratitude to God, and avoid being greedy and selfish.

3. **Together**

Who are the people who bring you joy? Spend time with them, learn from them, enjoy them. God made us not to be alone but to celebrate and enjoy life *together*. Now, we all know people that in my family we call a ‘fun sponge’. I often describe them as ‘every silver lining has a cloud’ people. They deserve to be loved as much as anyone else – but we need to be careful we don’t become like them.

4. **Today**

Some people are stuck in the past, with rose-tinted glasses they long for some idealised long-lost time when things were better. Some people want to hurtle into the future: when *this* happens or I do *that*, *then* I’ll be happy. God is behind and before us – but joy is only found *here and now*. ***This day is holy***, Nehemiah said. The psalmist said, ***let us rejoice today and be glad*** (118.24). If you don’t find joy *today*, you’ll never find it.

Joy is not about seeking after things we don’t have, but deliberately choosing to enjoy and be satisfied with what God has given us, celebrating what we love, with one another, today and every day.

Joy is ‘contentment with gratitude’ – and *that* is our strength.