

Nehemiah Chapter 12

Let's pray – may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our redeemer. Amen.

How's your joy, this morning?

A friend, and I tell you more about her later, has this image of joy like something being poured into a sponge. Do you feel soaked and overflowing with joy today or a bit dried & shrivelled up this morning?

As we come to the end of our series on Nehemiah, we come to a time of celebration and great joy! I'd love to be standing here this morning welcoming everyone into the building and having a great time of celebration.

Joy can be so hard to find sometimes, can't it? You just need to turn on the TV or mention the word Covid and it seems to sap our joy.

But today we learn about joy in the book of Nehemiah.

We've been on a journey together through this book

The first 2 chapters covers a span of about 7-8 months, from when Nehemiah heard the report of the suffering of the Lord's people in Jerusalem.

He prayed and planned and boldly asked the king and eventually the reconstruction of the wall began. Chapters 3-6 covers just around 52 days - less than 2 months to rebuild the wall a think, substantial construction involving everyone working together despite opposition.

The rest of the book, chapters 7-13 covers around 20 years...where the focus is on the reconstruction of the people...They'd built the physical walls but the reconstruction of people's hearts, well that was going to take a bit longer.

So, the book of Nehemiah is really more about being built up spiritually, than about physical building.

These chapters show us how revival came to the people of God.

They rediscovered the joy of the Lord. Two weeks ago, Andrea told us how the people rediscovered their love for God's word – listening to the book of the law being read and taking it to heart.

She mentioned that in chapter 9 they came to a time of repentance. They were determined that, if they're going to serve the Lord, they were going to have to make some changes to their own lives.

In chapter 10 they signed a commitment to keep the Sabbath – re-establishing a spiritual rhythm and doing things God's way.

In Chapter 11 Many more people made great sacrifices to repopulate the city. You see, they may have had a wall and the temple but there still wasn't much else there... Many small villages had sprung up around the ruins of Jerusalem, where they'd built houses and established their fields and crops. it would be harder to live within the wall, even though it may have been safer....

But they were listening to God and obeying Him.

And the faithfulness of the wall-builders and now the returnees were written down in this book - their commitment recorded and never forgotten.

I asked for the names to be taken out of today's reading because they are hard to pronounce – I can't pronounce them! - but the lists are there for a purpose - God remembered each one of them, all those whose hearts had returned to the Lord.

Now in chapter 12 we come to the climax of the revival.

And what we see, as a consequence of people walking with God, is a chapter all about joy, real joy in the Lord.

V 27 At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate **joyfully**

And at the end of the chapter, verse 43 And on that day they offered great sacrifices, **rejoicing** because God had given them great **joy**. The women and children also **rejoiced**. The sound of **rejoicing** in Jerusalem could be heard far away.

So, the revival of the people led to great Joy....

The Bible teaches clearly that God's will for you and me, is fullness of joy.

This is God's heart for his people. God's heart for us all

A joyfulness that that overcomes the difficulty that's in the world. A joy that is rooted in knowing God.

The people were not doing very well when Nehemiah first showed up. There have been years of neglect of the things of God but, during that period of wall building and subsequent discipleship, the people developed a deep faith, a deep belief in God, and deep trust that he was with them and they chose to trust that His ways were the way to follow.

They were assured of their position with God and although nothing outwardly in their situation other than a wall had changed, **they** have changed and the way that they had perceived life around them had changed. But the wall **was** built, and it was time to celebrate. Not to pat themselves on the back for the job they had done but to thank God for showing them His power to rebuild, his power to protect them from opposition, his power to open their eyes to his glory and his love of his people.

And so, their minds and hearts turned to praise and worship. They gathered, musicians together, those who played cymbals, harps, lyres, trumpets and of course singers.

But first the priests purified themselves, the people, the gates and the wall. And they offered sacrifices. Dedicating the wall to God. Deep gratitude for all God has done.

And we today are still called to dedicate our lives to God, As it says in Romans 12:1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. We all need to worship....and it is in worship we meet with God and find joy.

There's a chap called Mike Pilavachi, who leads a church in Watford who recounts a service he went to early in his Christian walk...

He said, I had heard about the great teaching. I was excited as I looked forward to it... But, the thing that impacted me the most was the worship. We sang simple songs, one after another without pause. They may not have been the best tunes in the world and some of the lyrics were far from Shakespearean but the thing that both unhinged me and healed me, was encountering the manifest presence of God as we sang. It really felt like coming home. God was really, really there and he took my breath away.

At the beginning we were told that we were going to worship for 30 to 40 minutes and if we did not like the songs or the style of the music or needed a shot of caffeine, they were very happy for us to go out and get a coffee during that time. Then the minister said something that really struck me. He said you see we're not worshipping for you... I was sure he was going to go on and say we were worshipping for God.... But instead he said this worship is for me and for my team. I cannot teach and we cannot minister until we have first been in the presence of God, ministering to him allowing him to minister to us....

Throughout scripture there is an inseparable link between worship and the presence of God. Of course, worship is more than just songs, but it is when we come **together** to worship – either physically or virtually as church that we encounter God.

Of course, you can meet with God anywhere. But I liken it to a doctor's surgery...well the ones I used to know...You can meet your doctor at a party or in the supermarket – but the surgery is where they make themselves available for appointments. The surgery is where you seek treatment from them. It's like that with God. You can meet God anywhere, you can meet Him in the garden, or in your own private prayer. But the church is where he has agreed to make himself available. The church is where he has covenanted to be present....'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.' The church is given the privilege and promise of the presence of God.

So do not give up meeting...

And so, the party on the wall began ... Two choirs marching round the walls and made such a joyful noise – the sound could be heard far away.

Back in the book of Ezra chapter 3, after they had laid the foundations of the temple, they celebrated, and the noise then too was heard far away – but then the priests wept for the temple would never be the same...so some rejoiced and others wept. Andrea reminded us in chapter 8 that there was praise and weeping when the book of the law was read out. Here in Nehemiah chapter 12, they all rejoiced. God turning weeping into joy – what a turn-around - God doing powerful things in the hearts of both the established church, as well as the new people, who were flooding back.

What an image of revival... And with revival came great joy...and joy in itself is contagious... It's good to celebrate and we will celebrate when things are more settled. It's good to have that joy in our hearts...

So, back to my friend and the sponge image...

She's a friend who suffers greatly with chronic pain and PTSD, and I asked her what her definition of joy is and listen to her reply...

So if hope is a sponge, joy is what soaks it. Even if you squeeze a sponge really hard, once it's been soaked, you can't make it fully dry. Joy isn't like happiness. It's not an emotion. It's not a flighty passing feeling that depends... on the boiler not breaking down no covid in the kids bubble or everyone we love being safe and well.

It's anchored in the hope we have in Jesus that we are ultimately loved, forgiven and eternally safe and it's fuelled by faith in trusting this loving Jesus to hold us and keep us through the highs and lows of life and bring us to the wide open places of God's grace and glory.

Joy can be a decision as well as an experience. It can be a warm fuzzy experience but it can also be a gritted teeth and teary eyed one. It can be bubbling wellbeing or just enough to wash off the grime of another hard day.

Joy, anchored in the hope we have in Jesus that we are ultimately loved, forgiven and eternally safe. Our reading from Luke reminds us about the heavenly banquet, to which we are welcomed- our joy comes from knowing a loving God now, and also knowing we have an eternal future with him.

Joy is a decision as well as an experience. The people of Jerusalem came together to celebrate. They chose to rejoice – remembering God's goodness – even though things were still tough and if you read on into chapter 13 there were still problems to sort. But they chose to worship.

My friends, it is in coming together in worship, where we find joy. Worship is where we encounter God, worship where our faith can be restored, worship is where our sponges can be re-filled.

Let's build our faith in God, let's get to know this awesome God who restores souls and brings joy, let's read our bibles together, repent together and come together in worship. Amen

And let's spread the good news of joy... In our Luke reading Jesus said 'Come for everything is now ready.' 'Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.' Let's not keep this joy to ourselves.

To finish I just want to read a few verses from Isaiah 61 because we have the spirit of the Sovereign Lord in us and this spirit has anointed us to proclaim good news to the poor. To bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion –to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

It goes on to say – they will rebuild.

Who are they? They are the poor, the broken hearted, those who mourn, the prisoners...Those whom we have proclaimed the good news to. Just as we have received the spirit, and the oil of joy, and a crown of beauty. We pass this on to others.

So together, as God's army unites, we will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; we will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. And we will be called priests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God.

So as we worship, as we meet with God together, as we open ourselves to the filling of God's Holy Spirit of joy, let's metaphorically throw our doors open and invite others in – Jesus said, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame."

Let's not keep joy for ourselves – lets share the joy with others – the real, gritty, lived-out joy of the Lord.

Amen