

A time to celebrate

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[0 : 00] What do you rejoice in? What is it that gets you really excited? Perhaps it's planning for your holidays this summer, or the extension you're building on your house.

Perhaps it's the prospect of getting top marks in your exams at school, or the prospect of going to university, or maybe it's the restaurant that's just opened up at the end of your road, or the latest blockbuster from Hollywood.

But Jesus, is he something to get excited about? Perhaps you're here this morning and you're not sure. Some people seem really excited about Jesus, but other people give the impression that he's really rather dull.

Well, so which is it? Perhaps you joined him with some of the songs this morning, and as you sang you were wondering, is this really something to rejoice in?

Is the good news about Jesus something to get excited about? Well, for the past few weeks we've been looking at the book of Nehemiah in the Bible, in the Old Testament.

[1 : 04] God's people had been exiled, they'd been thrown out of the land. But once they return, Ezra helps them to rebuild the temple, and Nehemiah helps them to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

And in our passage today, they rejoice. They get really excited about a wall. It's the climax of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The dedication of the wall.

So what's all the fuss about? Why is the wall so important? Is it really something to get excited about? Now all of you will know that Donald Trump has promised to build a wall across the border with Mexico.

But few people are rejoicing in that. Whether it's Hadrian's wall, the Berlin Wall, the Great Wall of China, walls keep people out. They're something that divides people.

So what's so good about a wall? Well, Nehemiah didn't build a wall to keep people out. He built a wall because of the promises of God that he'd made to his people.

[2 : 10] I wonder if you remember God's promises to Abraham back in the Old Testament. God promised that he would make a great nation. A place where God would dwell with his people.

And he promised rest. And now the people are back in the land and the temple, the place where God dwelt with him, is rebuilt. But there was no city wall. They were vulnerable to attack.

Building the wall meant that God's people had rest. What's the point of building a wall in a house? It's not because you like building walls, is it?

Otherwise you just kind of build a maze. It's so that you can rest. So that when they're built, you can rest. You can enjoy your house. And the theme of rest is a theme that the Bible comes back to time and time again.

It's part of God's promises. Part of his covenant or agreement that he makes with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Noah and Moses and David.

[3 : 09] He says, I will be your God and you will be my people. And I will give you rest. In a chaotic and turbulent world, isn't that what we long for?

Rest. To be restored to the relationship with the God who made us forever. And the promise of God's rest still stands today. In Hebrews chapter 4, it says that God promises eternal rest to all who trust in Jesus.

The whole of the Bible is pointing towards the new creation, the new world that God will make. And how is it described? Revelation 21 verse 12.

A new Jerusalem with a great city wall. So do you see why the dedication of the wall in Nehemiah's time is so exciting?

Why it was something to rejoice in? It represented God's rest. But there's still a problem. The walls are rebuilt, but the people are still rebellious.

[4 : 13] They're still living for themselves rather than for God. Back in chapter 9, as we saw last week, the people confess their sin. There's this perpetual cycle in the Old Testament of people turning their back on God.

As a result, being given over to their enemies. They cry out to God. He's merciful to them and saves them and gives them rest. But then they turn their back on him again.

And the whole cycle starts again. If you've got your Bibles open, do turn to Nehemiah chapter 9 verse 33. Before our passage, which we read last week.

Nehemiah chapter 9 verse 33. Talking about God, he says, Even though God's people are faithless, he is still faithful.

God remains faithful to his covenant, even though the people turn away from him. So the beginning of chapter 10, the people sign the covenant.

[5 : 24] It's not a new agreement. It's the same covenant God made with Abraham. I will be your God and you will be my people. The problem is, I guess, people often want the first half, but not the second, don't they?

They want God to be their God. They wanted him to fight their battles, to give them rest. Without them being God's people. That is, without them turning to live his way.

I wonder whether you ever feel like that. You want to be part of the new world that God will make. You want to be restored to the relationship with the God that made you, but you don't want to change. You don't want to turn back to him.

You want to keep living your own way. And that's why in the passage that we read today, that people renew their commitment to the covenant. And we'll see that turning back to God is for all people in every area of life.

And that's the first thing I want us to see from this passage today. Turn back to God. That's from chapter 10, verse 28 to 12, verse 26. Turn back to God.

[6 : 32] So have a look with me at chapter 10, verse 29 in your Bibles. It says that the people enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law that was given by Moses, the servant of God, and to obey all the commandments of the Lord.

In other words, it was a call to return to the covenant. The people weren't earning their way to God's family. God had already saved them from Egypt when he gave Moses the law, but they were to live as God's people.

They were to turn around. They were to live differently. Now perhaps you're thinking here, and you're kind of thinking, well, I knew it. There's always a catch.

You know, it was sounding great. A restored relationship with the God who made me. Eternal rest of the new creation. Fantastic. But now you're telling me that I have to turn back to God and change the way I live.

No thanks. Imagine you're in a car driving from London to Bristol, something I do not infrequently. And you're on the M4 and you're driving towards Bristol.

[7 : 40] And you get to kind of around Oxford or Swindon. And suddenly you realise that you've got to get back to London. There's an emergency. You need to be back home. Now in that situation, there is no way you can get back to London unless you turn around.

See, however much you want to be back in London, or imagine yourself being back in London, you will never get to London if you keep driving towards Bristol. It's physically impossible. And it's like that with God's covenant.

It's like that with turning back to God. It's not a catch. It's not a small print. It's the invitation. If you want to be back in London, you've got to turn around. And if you want to be restored to God and to enjoy the eternal rest which he promises, you've got to turn back to him.

It's not that you earn your way back to God. God's rest is a gift from him. But you have to receive it. You have to turn around. It's what the Bible calls repentance.

I guess many people reject Christianity today, not because they don't think God exists, but because they don't want to turn around. They don't want to change. Perhaps that's you here this morning.

[8 : 55] You don't want to change. You don't like the idea that the God who made you has the right to tell you how to live. Living for him is not slavery. It's freedom.

It's the thing you were created for. So turning back to God is for all people in every area of life. And one of the areas which God's people reaffirm their commitment to turn back to him is in the area of marriage.

Have a look at chapter 10, verse 13. The people say, we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.

Now God had commanded his people back in Exodus 34, verse 12, to be careful not to make a covenant with the nations around them. And not to get married to them. Not because they were kind of insular and not very outward looking.

But because the nations around them worshipped foreign gods. And their intermarrying would mean that they would drift away from God. Now the commands in the Old Testament were specific for that time.

[10:01] And the new covenant that Jesus brings is not focused on a geographical location or a particular nation. Instead it's focused on the church, on all people from all kinds of backgrounds, ethnicities and cultures.

But the New Testament is clear that Christians should only marry Christians. Again, not because God's not outward looking. But because of the danger of drifting away.

Now away is a difficult and very sensitive area. And it doesn't apply, crucially, if you're already married. So if you're already married, God tells you to stay married. Fantastic. But if you're thinking about who to get married to in the future.

And you're tempted to start a relationship with someone that's not a Christian. God says don't. Because they're likely to turn you away from God. It's not against them personally. It's just that they're going in a different direction.

If they were driving to Bristol in a car. And you're driving to London in a car. You can't be in the same car. Now perhaps what you're hearing, you're kind of thinking that it's outrageous.

[11:08] How dare God tell me how to live it in such a personal area. Like who to marry. But remember, turning back to God is for all people in every area of life.

And we'll think a bit more about marriage and family life next week. When we'll look at it in a bit more detail in chapter 13. Now in addition to marriage, people also affirm their commitment to turn back to God in their priorities.

Have a look at chapter 10 verse 31. The people promise not to buy food on the Sabbath. Instead, they're supposed to be different from the nations around them.

Now again, the covenant with Moses that God gave in the Old Testament is a specific requirement for that time. Different from the covenant that Jesus brings. Jesus says that he's Lord of the Sabbath.

And that he fulfills Old Testament law. Hebrews chapter 4 speaks of God's eternal rest as a Sabbath rest. Something that the Old Testament Sabbath pointed forward to.

[12:16] Now although Christians disagree about how exactly we should treat the Sabbath or Sundays. Think about what's behind the Sabbath commands.

Imagine you're a Jew in the time of Nehemiah. The walls are rebuilt, but the city is underpopulated. There's not many people around. Economically, things are difficult. God has told you not to work on the Sabbath and not to trade on the Sabbath.

So in obeying him, you're showing him that you trust his provision. And that you're looking forward to his eternal Sabbath rest. And that obeying God is more important than your stomach or your bank balance.

But then the nations around Jerusalem, they kind of come in and they sell their grain. They're offering their grain and you're tempted to buy it. Your family are getting hungry. They're offering a buy one, get one free deal.

And you're tempted to prioritise your finances or your stomach over your relationship with God. I wonder where you're tempted to prioritise your bank balance or food over your relationship with God.

[13:24] The New Testament doesn't command us not to buy food on Sundays. But it does tell us to serve God rather than money. And to prioritise loving his people.

And the next few verses are all about loving God's people. Chapter 10, verse 32 and onwards to verse 39. It's about loving God's people by giving tithes and offerings and first fruits to the temple so that it can continue functioning and allow God's people to worship him.

Perhaps the equivalent for us today is to give our time or our money or resources to support God's church. It's not about following specific Old Testament laws about tithing, but about being generous towards our love for God's people.

So we've looked at God's people turning back to him in marriage and in their priorities and in how they love other people. But in chapter 11, which we read, we see that people are even willing to move house to turn back to God.

I wonder if you saw that. Have a look at chapter 11, verses 1 to 2 with me. Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem and the rest of the people cast lots to bring out one, bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while nine out of ten remained in the other towns.

[14:50] And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem. See, even though the temple is rebuilt and the city walls are rebuilt, the city is underpopulated, it's a shadow of its former self.

And Jerusalem doesn't work without people. And in verse 2, some of the people agree to move into the city in order to serve God's people. Perhaps they were nicely settled in a nice rural village outside Jerusalem.

Perhaps they'd made good friends with their neighbours. They'd found a good school nearby. And it seems that lots of people, they didn't really want to move back to Jerusalem. But some volunteer. They uproot their lives in order to serve God's people. I wonder if you've ever thought about moving house for the sake of God's church.

Perhaps you can move for a church plant or a church abroad or in another town or city in the UK. Obviously we need God's wisdom to know where to live.

[15:55] But what are your priorities? A good school? Friendly neighbours? A bigger house? God's people in Nehemiah's day moved house for the sake of his people.

They turned back to God and for some of them that meant moving where they lived. The rest of chapter 11 and chapter 12 up to verse 26 contains a long list of names that we haven't read this morning.

But people who lived outside Jerusalem, including the priests and Levites. Now you might remember from Nehemiah that we get a list of names in chapter 3, in chapter 7 and again in chapter 10 as well as in our passage today.

The reason Nehemiah includes all these names that we are perhaps not as interested in is because people do matter. Jerusalem without people is not Jerusalem.

And God's church without people is not God's church. And it's not just some of God's people that needed to turn back to him. It was all God's people. All of the people mentioned in these lists.

[17:01] There's lots of details of names in the passage that we don't have time to look at. But what the writer's doing is emphasising how Jerusalem was being restored to how it was before.

So just briefly in chapter 11 verse 4, the two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, are both back in Jerusalem. As they were before.

In chapter 11 verse 20, flip on to that briefly. The priests and Levites were in the towns of Judah, everyone in his inheritance.

And in chapter 12, the writer mentions all the priests and Levites who were back in Jerusalem before Nehemiah's time, at the time of Zerubbabel and Jeshua the high priest. He's emphasising the continuity of the priests in the Old Testament in Nehemiah's time.

The point is that God had not forgotten his promises to his people. I will be your God and you will be my people. So we've seen that turning back to God is for all people in every area of life.

[18:14] Whether it's marriage, priorities or even where you live. But I wonder how you feel about that. Does turning back to God, is it something that makes you want to rejoice?

Is it something to get excited about? Well, the second thing I want to see from this passage is that we should rejoice in God's rest. And that's in chapter 12 verse 27 to 47.

See, the dedication of the city walls really is about rejoicing in God's rest. And rejoicing in God's rest, remember, is not something separate from turning back to him.

It's the result of turning back to him. You can never rejoice in being back in London if you don't drive towards it. So it's by turning back to God that we rejoice in his rest.

So if you think that kind of turning back to God is a joyless chore, it's because you haven't seen the rest that he offers those who belong to him. So have a look with me at chapter 12 verse 27.

[19:22] In the dedication of the wall. And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, they sought the Levites in all their places to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgiving and with singing, with cymbals, hearts and lives.

God's people celebrate. He's brought them back from exile into the land and into a city with city walls. Finally, they can have rest.

And so in chapter 12 verse 31, they make two choirs. One kind of goes to the south and the other to the north. And just as Nehemiah inspected all the different parts of the city back in chapter 2 when he wanted to rebuild the walls, so now they celebrate the completion of the wall by going around it. And in verse 43, it climaxes in the temple. Have a look at 12 verse 43. They offer great sacrifices and rejoice, for God had made them rejoice with great joy.

The women and children also rejoiced, and the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. They're full of joy. Reminiscent of when they completed the temple in Ezra 6 verse 16.

[20 : 37] They're full of joy because God has finally given them rest. In chapter 12 verse 44, Nehemiah starts getting people to appoint, people to gather tithes and contributions to the temple in order to obey God's law.

Again, the writer emphasizes the restoring of God's people to what they were before. Chapter 12 verse 45, Verse 46, For long ago in the days of David and Asaph, there were directors of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Remember what we said at the beginning. It wasn't so much the wall that was what they were rejoicing in as what it represented. Being restored to God and enjoying his rest.

One of the writers of the book called Two Chronicles, in chapter 14 verse 6, says of Aser, one of the kings of Judah, that he built 45 cities in Judah for the land had rest.

There's this connection between city walls and rest. Our neighbours downstairs had an extension built in their garden in the past year, and we saw it being built, and it was really quite impressive.

[22 : 00] The foundations had to be dug, and they were filled with concrete and poured in through a mixer, which was outside the front of our house, through their downstairs flat and into their garden.

Bricks were laid and the roof was fitted, and it really was quite amazing to watch. But since that time, neither they nor we have kind of stood looking at the walls and marvelled.

Because it's not for looking at, it's for living in. Their walls were only a means to an end. And the walls of Jerusalem were only a means to an end.

I wonder if you can turn in your Bible to Psalm 48, if you're able to. Psalm 48, verse 12.

Psalm 48, verse 12. Psalm 48, verse 12.

[22 : 58] We don't know what the people of Nehemiah's day sung as they kind of walked around the walls, but you can imagine them seeing this, can't you? Psalm 48, verse 12.

Walk around Zion, that's Jerusalem. Go around her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is our God.

Our God forever and ever. See, the walls and the towers, they point to something greater, God's faithfulness to his people from one generation to the next, and ultimately to the new creation.

Hebrews 13, 14 says, we have no lasting city, but we do seek the city that is to come, the new world that God will make. Now perhaps you're kind of sitting here thinking, well that's fine, that's fine for them, great for them, God helped them restore their city walls and they had rest.

Brilliant. I mean, even just for a short time. You know, of course they rejoice, but what about me? What about today? I'm finding life hard. I'm finding it hard to rejoice.

[24 : 10] Is God going to give me a house? Is he going to give me rest from all the brokenness and pain in the world? And of life today? Well the place that we go for rest is not a city today.

It's a person. Jesus says in Matthew 11, verse 28, come to me all who you have had labour and a heavy laden and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. The rejoicing in God's rest today means rejoicing in Christ.

The sacrifices that God's people offered in the temple in Nehemiah's day are fulfilled in the sacrifice of Jesus. He was crucified outside the city walls so that we could be inside them.

The new city that God will make is only ours by rejoicing in Christ. So how do you rejoice in Christ? I mean how does the rest that Christ gives us become more exciting than our holidays or the university we're planning to go to or the latest blockbusters from Hollywood or our children's exams or our house extension?

[25 : 23] How do we get excited about Jesus? Well how do you get excited about a holiday? You look at photos of it you imagine yourself there you talk about what you'll do when you get there

about all the things that you will do and experience.

And it's the same with Christ and the eternal rest that God promises to us. Look at him in the pages of the Bible Ezra read God's word in Nehemiah chapter 8 and the people both wept and then rejoiced.

Talk about Jesus with others. Join a small group. Imagine yourself in the new world that God will make. Think about all the things that you will do. Think about how secure you are in Jesus safer than inside city walls and nothing can take him away from you.

Not illness or death divorce or death can take away the rest that Jesus gives. Isn't Jesus far better than a Hollywood blockbuster?

Far more exciting than a lost extension. He gives us eternal rest which nothing in this world will outlast. Rejoice in him and the rest that he gives.

[26 : 41] Augustine of Hippo the 4th century bishop found that turning away from God made it really hard to rejoice in his rest. And he's famously quoted as saying you have made us for yourself O Lord and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

God's covenant still remains. He calls all people to turn back to him in every area of life by turning back to Jesus. In him we find everlasting rest an eternal city that God will make and a relationship with God now which gives us every reason to rejoice.

Let's pray. Father forgive us for turning away from you and living for ourselves.

Thank you that you call us to turn back to you in every area of life. Thank you that living for you is to find true rest. We pray Father you'd help us to look again at Christ and the rest that he offers so that we can truly rejoice in him.

Amen.