

Revitalising a Worshipping Community

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[0 : 00] led Nehemiah to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls and the way that God worked in that city to rebuild not just a community but to rebuild a spiritual community of God's people.

So let's read from Nehemiah chapter 8 verses 1 to 12. And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate.

And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly with men and women and all who could understand what they heard.

In other words those who were older children who could understand the reading. On the first day of the seventh month in other words the new year their new year.

And he read from it facing the square before the water gate from early morning until midday in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand.

[1 : 08] And the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Matathiah, Shema, Aniah, Uriah, Volkiah, and Masiah on his right hand.

And Padaiah, Mishael, Volkiah, Hashum, Hashbenah, Zechariah, and Mashulam on his left hand. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people.

For he was above all the people. And as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands.

And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also, Yeshua, Bani, Sherabiah, Jamin, Akub, Shabbathiah, Hodiah, Masiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabed, Hinan, Peliah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law while the people remained in their places.

They read from the book, from the law of God clearly. And they gave the saints so that the people understood the reading. 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.

[2 : 37] Do not mourn or weep. For all the people wept as they heard the word of the law. Then he said to them, Go your way. Eat the fat 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. So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, Be quiet.

For this day is holy. Do not be grieved. 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 through them.

Amen. And may God add his blessing to that reading from his holy word. Let's join together in prayer before we consider more of the passage.

Let's join together in prayer. Let us pray. Lord, we come before you, acknowledging in whose presence we have come.

[3 : 40] We come before the living and true God. We come before the maker of heaven and earth. We come before you, who has foreordained whatsoever should come to pass.

Even this very worship service this morning, you're foreordained. All who are gathered, all who are here, you're foreordained. The very word reign, the very word sung, the very word proclaimed.

And so, Lord, we worship you. We rejoice in you. For truly, the joy of the Lord is our strength. We pray, Lord, for those who are away from us and holiday at this time.

We ask, Lord, your blessing upon them. We ask for their safety. We ask, Lord, for their refreshing. We ask, Lord, that you will bring them back to us safely.

Lord, be with all who are gathered here this morning. The different families. The different circumstances. Lord, you know us each one. And we pray then, Lord, that you will bless us. [4 : 46] That you will answer us according to all our need. So that we might truly rejoice in you. Lord, we pray for our government at this time. We pray for our government in Westminster.

And our government in Edinburgh and Bollywood. We pray, Lord, that you will grant them wisdom to exercise the responsibilities for your praise and glory.

We pray particularly this morning for Professor Jason Leach and his responsibilities as national director, clinical director. We pray that as he trusts in you, as he confesses your name, as he knows you as Lord and Savior, we pray, Lord, that his witness and testimony, it will be true.

Hear us, Lord, as we call upon you now. Hear us, Lord, as we commit to you, all who are suffering at this time, all who are in mourning.

We pray for Lynn, as she's up in Lewis at this time. We pray for her mum, Mary Ann. We pray for the family, the wider family, as they mourn the passing of Mary Ann's sister.

[5 : 55] We pray, Lord, that you will grant them your peace at this time. And that, Lord, even through this time, that those of the family who as yet do not know you as Lord and God, will come to that saving knowledge.

of the Lord Jesus. Hear us, Lord, as we continue before you in worship, as we proclaim your truth, as we hear your word proclaimed, may we grow in grace and in the knowledge of God.

Hear us as we commit these next moments to your care and keeping. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Nehemiah 8, verses 1 to 12, which we've entitled, as you see there, revitalizing a worshipping community.

And as you'll see in the bullet points, we look at three headings, a reaction of grief, that we read in verses 9 to 9 and 11, where we saw the reaction of the people when the word was proclaimed to them.

And the word of God entered into their hearts and exposed really their sin within us. We pray that the word does for our own hearts. We'll consider the rejoicing of gladness.

[7 : 12] That great word that Ezra and Nehemiah spoke of when he spoke of the joy of the Lord being their strength. And we'll develop that word to see its implications for ourselves, of course.

And then verse 11 and 12, where we see the response of giving, where the people were commanded to give, to give to those who were in need, to give from their own generosity.

And as we consider this passage, in many ways, it's so relevant for ourselves. I mean, you know, not just ourselves as us, Livingston Free Church, but other congregations as well, very much in the process of preparing to return once more to our church building.

And that's what we've been doing as some of the deacons last week, very much considering the best way forward to get back into the building. But of course, as you know, as I know, the building in itself is not the church.

The church, of course, is the people. There was a famous Greek historian called Thucydides. And Thucydides said this, he said, it was the people, not the walls, that make a city.

[8 : 34] And of course, that was true of Jerusalem. It was the people, not the walls themselves, that made the people a community, a spiritual community. And likewise for ourselves, it's the people, not the building.

That's the church. You know, sometimes we talk about the sacred part of a building. Well, the sacred part of the church isn't, isn't the area in which we worship, or really when we return, but we've been up to lockdown.

The sacred part of the church, are the redeemed hearts of those who call on the Lord and worship. And as we consider here in this passage that we've read, of the revitalizing this community, this community of the Lord's people, then we do so, of course, to look at the immediate sense of what we've read, but of course, bring that to our own application, even in focusing our minds on what truly constitutes a church, what truly constitutes a worshipping people.

We are a people, not a building. A building, of course, is a God-given means to facilitate worship. A building is a God-given means to proclaim the word, to proclaim the word of truth.

The building is a God-given means to witness for him, not just on the Lord's Day, not just on Wednesday evenings, but for other activities as well.

[10 : 06] Mission activities, little jewels, and so on. So we thank God for the bricks and mortar that God has blessed us with, just as God blessed the people of Jerusalem with the bricks or the

stonework, the mortar that was used to bring security to that city.

But as Nehemiah knew, it wasn't the physical aspect of the walls that themselves brought to the people a true security.

He knew in his heart that that true security came from God, the one true God. And that while God certainly had sent Nehemiah to lead in the rebuilding of the walls, what was much more important was that the people be rebuilt spiritually.

That they be revitalized spiritually. And that, of course, is relevant and applicable to ourselves. What is the truly most important, most important, is that you, that I, that we are revitalized spiritually, that we grow, that we are strengthened, that we know our security that's in the Lord and grow thereby. So, as we said, three headings. Our first heading then, the reaction of grief that we read in verse nine. Let's read verse nine again. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Esau, 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.

[11 : 37] Do not mourn or weep. But all the people weep as they heard the word of the Lord. The action of grief. You know, just picture the scene there in Jerusalem.

Just picture the hundreds and hundreds of people there. And it's not a very wide area that are crammed into the Watergate Square. And they've been listening to Ezra the prophet.

Ezra is going to give the word, read the word of the law, the five books of the Old Testament.

Nehemiah is not going to do this. His work has been leading the rebuilding of the wall.

But Ezra the prophet, he has the gifts, the skills to read from the passage. And there are Levites there as well. Those priests who are helping the people to understand what Ezra is reading.

There's a certain language barrier, actually. But there's also an understanding barrier as well as to what Ezra has been reading. The word of the law hasn't been read to the people for a long, long time.

[12 : 44] And so the Levites are making clear the sense of the word. And as they're doing that, the power of God's word is touching the hearts of the people.

The power of God's word is actually entering the hearts of those who are listening. And the people are weeping. Tears are flowing down from their eyes.

They're mourning. You might say, why are they mourning? Well, they're mourning because the word of God has revealed to them their very hearts. The word of God has made known to them what they truly are before a holy and righteous God.

The word of God has revealed to them that they're sinners. They're sinners in the sight of God. And the people, when they're hearing the word of God, they know that the word is true.

And the power of God's word is so powerful that it's changed the people. It's affected the people. There is not just an emotional response.

[13 : 46] This is a response of the heart to the word of God. You know, when you and I are confronted, when we're confronted by the word of God, when we know that the word of God is true, well, that word must have an effect upon us, each one.

Ezra read from the first five books of the Old Testament. In our midweek meetings, as you know, we've been looking at the Ten Commandments that are included in the first five books of the Old Testament.

And now, whether we attended these meetings or not, we know in heart that each one of us is a sinner. The law has revealed to us the standard that God requires.

And we know that we've sinned and come short of God's glory. We know that the law, summarizing the law, tells us to love God and our neighbor as ourselves.

And we confess that our sin has prevented us from doing so, loving God and our neighbor. Paul said in Romans 7, 7, I wouldn't have known sin except through the law.

[14 : 53] And the law has made known to us that we are sinners. The word exposes our hearts. And surely then, when that happens, we grieve for our sins.

We grieve over our sins. We confess we haven't followed Jesus as we ought. We haven't given to him all that we are, heart, soul, mind, and strength.

And we have to confess so often that we've been like the prodigal son, just wanting to go our own way and do our own thing and not obey our father and not be obedient to our God, the one true God.

And so, we confess that as the word of God has made known to us the sin in our heart, we grieve, we mourn over that sin. Now, we know, of course, in life, we can be affected by many things and can be saddened by so many things, even that we see in the news, even that was shown in media. We see so much that grieves our hearts, that so much sin, so much cruelty, so much greed, so much selfishness. And it's quite right to be grieved over these things.

[16:08] What about true grief? What about that sincere grief for your sins? What about, in my own case, my own sins? Am I grieving as I ought?

Are you grieving as you ought? Are you actually weeping over your sins? Because if you don't express sorrow for sin, when you, you know, when sin just becomes just a random thing, if sin has no impact on your soul at all, then truly, we have to question ourselves and ask, are you truly serious about the seriousness of sin?

Sin that offends a holy God. Sin that Jesus bore on the cross. Without sin, Jesus wouldn't have died on the cross. that our sins placed Jesus there for our sin.

So there has to be that grieving over sin, just as the people there in Jerusalem grieved over their sin as the word of God revealed to them the true nature of their hearts.

But then secondly, as we saw on the screen, secondly, a rejoicing, a rejoicing of gladness. See verse 10 again, the rejoicing of gladness.

[17:20] Then he said to them, go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who is nothing ready for this day is holy to our Lord.

Do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength. Again, you can just picture the scene there in Jerusalem at the water gate as Ezra's been reading the word of God.

and, you know, as he's been reading, then obviously the wailing, the grieving, the sound has just risen and risen. There's Nehemiah, Ezra rather, on that platform and, you know, the sound is so intense and Nehemiah is hearing that as well.

They're aware that obviously the word of God is working in the hearts of those who are listening. Yes, they know that it is absolutely correct to grieve over sin.

But they know, of course, as we know, as we must know, that grieving isn't an end in itself because for the sinner, for you, for me, there's hope and there's that joy that comes from that sure hope of knowing forgiveness for your sins.

[18:34] When you repent of your sins, come before God with that grief of heart and you know the joy of forgiving sins. And so Ezra, the Levites, they're telling the people, don't grieve.

Why? Because, as they say, we hear again the joy of the Lord is your strength. Look at what the people are hearing.

They're being told that this is a holy day. It's from the word we get, holiday. So this was their holiday. This was the first day of their new year. This was their holiday day, a holy day.

So this was the day that had been set aside for the people to hear God's word. God had set aside this day for the people to worship him and for the people to set aside all their ordinary work, all their ordinary responsibilities and to come before God to hear his word being read and proclaimed.

And so this holy day, this holiday was a day to rejoice in, a day to remember God's goodness to the people, a day to remember his kindness, a day to worship him, just as our holy day, the Lord's day, is a day to worship God, to remember God's goodness to us, to praise him for that.

[19:52] And there in Jerusalem, that time of worship, that holy worship, then the response to the people, yes, grief, but surely also rejoicing.

Even when tears were flowing from their hearts, still to rejoice. Because the joy of the Lord is that strength that enables the people to rejoice.

You know, that joy that we speak of so often. Remember this joy, God's joy, true joy, is God's gift to you. You who know the Lord Jesus, our Savior, the joy that you have in your heart is joy that God has gifted to you.

You like, it's God's joy. When Jesus was speaking to his disciples just before his crucifixion, Jesus spoke these words that tells of God's joy being in the hearts of his people.

Jesus said this, I have told you this, Jesus was telling them of his love for them. I've told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

[21:05] So, the joy of Jesus is your joy when you remember his love for you and rejoice, be glad, rejoice, even today, even at this moment when you're considering the love of the Lord Jesus for sinners.

Yes, grieve in your heart that you've sinned against your Savior, but rejoice too. You have a Savior who loves you, who cares for you, who's willing to come for you and to die for you.

Rejoice then in the goodness of God and his salvation for you. So, grief, grief for sin and joy, joy in the Lord, if you like. They're two sides of the same experience of the Christian.

Yes, there's got to be sorrow over sin, over personal sin. Also, there's got to be that joy in knowing God, knowing God's forgiveness. Two days ago, Jim Packer, the late Jim Packer, died.

Jim Packer was such a marvelous, wonderful influence for good in the lives of so many people, so many Christians blessed by his writing.

[22 : 20] Of his most famous books, if not his most famous, was called Knowing God, Knowing God. And, you know, Jim Packer spoke about why the Christian rejoices in knowing God.

God who is there, God who's adopted his children, as his children, so that we can call upon God as Father. And so many aspects of God that Jim Packer made known through, of course, his reading of Scripture, so that we can truly rejoice in knowing God.

And I pray that, you know, that for you is your experience in the Lord, even now that you're rejoicing in God. Yes, we are to be sorrowful for our sins, but sorrow without joy.

It just makes us a one-sided Christian. We can be so introverted in examining our hearts that we don't rejoice in our Lord and Savior.

And of course, joy without sorrow, it's the opposite, again, makes one a one-sided Christian. Joy without sorrow means that we haven't truly grasped the horror, the sinfulness of sin.

[23 : 34] And so, let's seek to nurture that joy, to continue in rejoicing in God so that you truly can say that I know God, I know the Lord Jesus, I know that the Spirit has enabled me to rejoice in the Lord and to grow in knowledge of Him and to grow in grace.

The joy of the Lord is your strength. It's interesting, the word here for strength in the original language is the word for fortress, that citadel, that place of refuge.

And so, when Nehemiah is telling the people that the joy of the Lord is your strength, you can just see what he's saying. I mean, the walls have just been rebuilt, the physical security of the people is there.

I mean, he's telling them the joy of the Lord is your strength. Yes, look to the walls for your physical security, but above all, look to the Lord for your spiritual strength, your spiritual security.

He is our refuge and our strength. He is that mighty fortress, that great truth that Martin Luther wrote of when he wrote of a mighty fortress is our God.

[24 : 48] and you who know God as Lord, you who know God as Savior, well, you know that you're safe in him eternally, that you can never be loosed from the love of Jesus.

You can't lose the salvation that the Lord Jesus won for you on the cross. You're safe in him eternally. So I ask you as I ask myself, do you know that joy in the Lord?

Do you, before you came to worship this morning, even in the manner by which we're doing that, was there joy in your heart realizing that you're coming to worship God, yes, with others who love the Lord?

Do you know God? Do you know him? And in that knowledge of God, does that knowledge of God emphasize your joy and reinforce that joy? As we said, there's so much to be saddened at at this time, even as we're continuing through this pandemic, so much that saddens us when we see a loss of life and suffering in the pandemic and we see so many restrictions still in place and we see even the way that we have to say unfortunately so many people are flouting the regulations, that saddens us and it must do.

But look to God and remember this, that even through these times, God is sovereign. And yes, give him thanks and give him your thanks, give him your praise, that he's enabled you through these times, through these times even of lockdown and restriction, the more to come together with the Lord's people, the more to read God's word, the more to come before him in prayer, that God has used these times your spiritual good.

[26 : 38] Rejoice in that then. Rejoice, yes, in knowing that God is with you, that God is sovereign, that you have, that you who know pure in Christ have a sure salvation.

And rejoice then in knowing what God has done for you in his grace. Well, show that, yes, with thanksgiving and show it by practical thanksgiving just as we read in verses 10 to 12 where we read our third heading, a response of giving.

Let's read these verses again. Then he said to them, go your way, eat the fat 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.

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

So these people that had grieved continuously that day, that holiday, these people that had heard the word proclaimed, well, they've got something to do in relation to what they've heard.

[27 : 56] They're not going to grieve any further. They're going to have to be joyful. And part of that joy is going to involve celebration, celebrating God's mercies and doing that, yes, for themselves, enjoying a feast, the feast of Troy's food and drink, but also in giving, giving to the poor, giving to the needy.

What we're told they're giving portions. But as we read there, the fat, the best, the best of food, the fat, the sweet drink, the sweet wine.

And then we're told in verse 12, that's what they did. They celebrated, they had a festive meal and then they sent food and drink to those who were less well-off than themselves. In other words, the people listened to the word of God.

They, in the first five books of the Old Testament, they would have heard of God's care for the poor, God's care for the widows and the orphans and the needy, those who couldn't provide for themselves.

And so the people do us, God's word has informed them. The people obey what Ezra and Nehemiah have told them and we're told in verse 12, that's exactly what they do.

[29 : 07] They understood the words that had been given them and they respond in a practical manner. They see that there's a connection between the word of God and action, between the word of God, the word of grace and action in grace.

These are people who knew God, they knew God's love, they knew God's grace and these are people who are going to respond to that grace and the grace of giving. And if that's applicable then in Jerusalem, surely it's still applicable for us today.

you know, we're to be like Christ. When you're converted, you're given to know the Lord Jesus as your saviour. But you're to be like Christ and having compassion for others, for the poor, for the lonely, for the afflicted.

You'll seek by God's strength to show the compassion of Christ to others. You mentioned Martin Luther, you mentioned him again, Martin Luther, he said this, as our heavenly father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we ought also freely to help our neighbour through our body and its works and each one should become as well a Christ to the other.

That is, that we may be truly Christians and being a Christ, being truly Christians today, then we seek to show the Lord Jesus and reveal Christ in us in how we act in grace towards others, towards those who are poor and needy and afflicted.

[30 : 57] Listen to the words of Tim Keller and we remember Tim Keller, of course, at the moment who's undergoing treatment for pancreatic cancer. Tim Keller, again, has been used wonderfully by God and listen to what Keller says on this matter.

He says, if we know it, we are sinners saved by grace alone. We'll be both open and generous to the outcasts and unlovely. And that means that we all individually and collectively must examine our hearts and our generosity or lack of it to the poor, the outcasts, those who have nothing prepared and ask ourselves, what gifts, what resources has God given to me, to us, to be as Christ to others? As Jesus saying, he who has two coats, if to him who has none. What have we seen? Let's sum everything up. We've seen that, yes, the word of God causes, must cause a response of grief, but also of gladness and giving.

So that when you hear the word, you respond to that word, yes, in grief, but also in gladness and in giving and giving generously. Giving because God has shown his love to you generously.

God has given to you what you don't deserve, what I don't deserve. He's given to you that grace, that saving grace of his love, that loving kindness. What if you won't respond to God in grief, grief for sin, or in gladness, and having the joy of the Lord, or even of giving, even giving of self for others?

[32 : 40] What if you won't respond to God's word? Well, there's no neutral ground, there's no neutral way when it comes to responding to the truth of God's word. Either you will react with grief,

grief for sin, either you'll have that joy in your heart and gladness and give, give of self and give self for others?

Or you'll just ignore your sin and you'll know nothing of the joy of the Lord and just live for self? So where do you stand today? Do you stand with the Lord's people?

Do you stand with those who've been saved by grace? Do you stand with those who know the Lord Jesus as Savior? Or we have nothing to do with the God of all grace, the God of all kindness, the God whose love?

Would you stand? Would you turn from your sin and turn to the one true God? Turn to him now even in the quiet of your heart and come before him, Ruth, repenting of your sins in grief and know then the joy of the Lord that is your strength and will be your strength and seek to give to him all that you are in giving to the one who gave the Lord Jesus us for you.

Amen. Our Heavenly Father we give thanks for your word of truth, your word that penetrates even the very marrow of our being, the marrow of our hearts.

[34 : 08] We ask Lord that as we hear your word, as we listen to it and hear, it won't simply be hearers only but doers also and give to you and give of ourselves.

So hear us Lord as we continue in worship before you now. Continue with us we ask in Jesus name, Amen. I'm going to close now in Psalm 130.

Psalm 130. Lord from the depths to thee I cried, my voice Lord, do thou hear and to my supplications once give and I thank you you.

God's praise. If you were my chapter and to my name, I again, I cannot be into a extreme hearing. Thanks to myix word, Oh Oh Oh

[36 : 44] Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh Let's close.

And now may grace, mercy and peace from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest upon and remain with you both now and forevermore. Amen.