

## **Building God's Way - Part 6 - Nehemiah 11-12**

### **The Oxygen for Doing Hard Things: The Serious Benefits of Joy**

#### **Fill-in: Don't Forget to Celebrate**

**Tagline: If we're going to Build God's Way to need to celebrate along the way.**

If we're going to build God's way we need to celebrate along the way.

But wait, have you seen the world? That seems at best tone deaf and at work incredibly insensitive. But in the eyes of God joy and celebration are not frivolous, and celebration does not ask us to ignore the hurt in the world.

To the contrary, if we are going to be people who stay engaged in God's mission over the long haul, we need to be people who celebrate the small wins along the way. We need to rejoice, we need to laugh, we need to not be so serious all the time. And I think it's easy to forget that celebration is a critical part of our faith tradition.

**In the Old Testament there are numerous references to feasts, festivals, and celebrations that were commanded by God.** It's clear from reading the Old Testament that it is very, very important to God that His people have lots of parties. From the beginning God designed us to be people who regularly lift our heads from the day to day and celebrate.

To give just a few examples:

- There were weekly Sabbath celebrations where from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown the people would rest from their work and spend time in worship, reflection and study. Exodus 20 and Leviticus 23 show us that the Sabbath day is meant to be a day set aside for the Lord and it's interesting to me that there seems to be a renewed interest in Sabbath-keeping in Western Christianity as we seem to be rediscovering that perhaps God knew what He was doing when He commanded a day of rest.
- Then you had monthly Feast of the New Moon where at the start of every month they would abstain from work, make offerings, and they would have music involved as Numbers 10 instructs Israel to sound the trumpet to symbolize their joy at God's faithfulness.
- There were annual feasts like the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, more commonly known as the Passover, a seven-day celebration meant to commemorate God's saving work in rescuing them from Egypt and sparking their first born when the tenth plague passed through Egypt.

- 50 days after that there is the Feast of the Weeks, also known as Pentecost, a one day feast during which, according to Leviticus 23, the first fruits of the harvest were presented to God. In the New Testament, Acts 2 tells us that it was during Pentecost that the earliest Jesus followers were filled with the Holy Spirit.
- And then during the seventh month of the Hebrew year, roughly early October by our calendar, there was the Feast of Booths, a time prescribed by Leviticus 23 where they would live in booths or tabernacles for a week as a way of remembering God's protection over them during times they had only temporary shelters because they were wandering in the wilderness. It was also a time to celebrate and thank God for the year's harvest. There is a reference to Jesus celebrating the Feast of Booths in John 7.
- My favorite Old Testament celebration is found in Leviticus 15 and that's Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement...there's a lot that would go on that day, but my favorite part is the confession of sin over a goat, then the goat would be lead off into the wilderness, and then everyone would have a big party. The cause for celebration is continual.
- And this doesn't even include other ordinary celebrations and observances but my point is simply this, God built celebration over and over again into Israel's normal rhythm of life. God loves a good party, and He wanted to make sure His people had plenty of them.

In fact, if you're using the app or you're taking notes, here is the fill-in the blank, it's really simple: **Don't forget to celebrate.**

It is not hard to find reasons not to celebrate. But I suspect that God built celebration into Israel's life because He knows how easy it is for us to stay locked into the moment, and to neglect lifting up our heads and celebrating God's goodness. He knows that if we're going to stay with him for the long haul we need to have times of celebration. That's still true today.

I know it's been a hard year, but don't forget to celebrate.

Yes, there are serious things in the world, but don't forget to celebrate. If we're going to build God's way we need to celebrate along the way.

As we turn our attention to the text we're going to see the people of Israel taking time to celebrate. So much of the book of Nehemiah centers around Nehemiah's effort to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem, and now the wall is finally built, and it's time to celebrate. So we're going spend a few minutes looking at our Nehemiah text and then

we're going to spend the rest of our time talking about the serious benefits of joy and celebration.

Just to very briefly catch you up in the story, what has just happened is the wall is finished, God's Word has been read, the people have committed themselves to be faithful to their covenant relationship with God, and chapter 10 ends with a commitment not to neglect the house of God.

**Nehemiah 11:1, "Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem. And the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem the holy city, which nine out of ten remained in the other towns. And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem."**

Now that the walls of the city have been restored, they need to decide who is actually going to live in the city and who is going to live outside the city where things that agricultural work were done.

And then if you look at the rest of the chapter, it's a very detailed list of who ended up living where. There are lots of names in there that I cannot pronounce and you do not want me to try, but again, it's a very detailed list of priests and Levites and gatekeepers and other officials and where they ended up. Then starting in verse 25 it talks about the villages where different tribes settled outside the city.

If you look over to chapter 12 there are still more names that are difficult to pronounce that I will not be reading to you, you're welcome, but there is actually something beautiful that these names represent. It says there is verse 1, **"These are the priests and the Levites who came up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua."** Zerubbabel returned to Jerusalem around 538 BC, and by the time these words are written it's about 445 BC, so a period of nearly 100 years has passed, and the list is meant to show that the priests and the Levites, who assisted the priests, continued to do their jobs even during this incredibly difficult time in Israel's history. And then we get to verse 27, and it's time to dedicate the wall.

This is a celebration of all that God has done in allowing them to build the wall, and this is also a real time of relief because the whole reason the wall needed to be built was to protect the city from outside invaders, which was a very real threat. We begin to hear about the celebration in verse 27,

**“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 thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres.**

This is going to be a party and there will be music. This scene is very similar to the scene in chapter 3 of the book of Ezra, which is a sort of prequel to Nehemiah when the temple is completed. The whole idea is that this, like all Jewish feasts and festivals was a time for joy and celebration.

**And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathites and lots of other places... verse 30, And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall.**

These singers had settled in regions all around Jerusalem, but for this occasion they were gathered together. Verse 31

**“Then I brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall and appointed two great choirs that gave thanks. One went to the south on the wall to the Dung Gate. (Why did they call it that? I don’t want to know) And after them went Hoshai and half of the leaders and Judah and lots of other people and certain of the priests; sons with trumpets...we’ve got singers, we’ve got trumpets, now we’re cookin’.**

Verse 36 says they had the musical instruments of David and Ezra the scribes went before them. And then it goes on to say that the other choir went the other direction, so you’ve got these two massive choirs walking around the city singing songs of celebration. Then, verse 40, **“So both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me, verse 43, And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.”**

Wow, what a day. They are celebrating the completion of the wall. They are celebrating that they are now safe from attack from neighboring people groups, they are celebrating that they came together and accomplished something seemingly impossible, and they are celebrating God’s grace in the midst of it all. I love that in verse 43 some form of the word “joy” is found five times: They rejoiced with great joy and the joy was heard from far away. There was music, there was singing, and it was loud.

If we're going to build God's way we need to celebrate along the way.

Now, I said I wanted to talk through this passage and that then I wanted to talk about the serious benefits of joy and celebration.

Because I'm reasonably confident that we all agree that joy is a good thing. I don't know anyone who is anti-joy. Of all the things that we as humans complain about, I've never heard someone say, "You know what the problem is in the world? There is too much joy!" I've never had someone say to me, "Pastor, you've got to help me, I have too much joy in my life and too much to celebrate. It's just overwhelming."

So I'm not going to try to convince you that joy is a good thing. I want to show you from God's Word that joy and celebration are necessary things.

And I want to return to something I said at the beginning. If we look at the world around us, doesn't talking about celebration feel a little tone deaf. And I admit it can be, but it doesn't have to be. God built celebration into Israel's life and said in the midst of a world of death and destruction and war and pain and challenges you're going to celebrate, because you need it. And maybe, instead of letting difficult circumstances be a reason to abandon joy and celebration, maybe they can be a reminder of the necessity of leaning into them all the more.

So, I have three serious benefits to joy and celebration that I want to give you.

Number one, and it's the title of the sermon. It came from a video clip my friend and colleague Heather Johnson shared with me. It was a clip of a man named Gary Haugen speaking at an event in the Bay Area a couple of years ago. And if there was ever a person in the world who could say we can't waste time on joy and celebration because there is simply too much hurt in the world it would be him. Gary leads an organization called the International Justice Mission that works to free oppressed and enslaved people all over the world. God has used Gary and IJM to do amazing things, but the descriptions of things he's seen are just devastating.

So again, if there was ever a person who could say, we can't waste our time on celebration, or if there was ever a person who could say I've seen too much to be joyful, it's him.

And yet he says in almost the opposite. He says there are misconceptions about how we can best engage the suffering and darkness in our world. He said that we tend to develop this sort of martyr complex, where we come to believe that what would really

make Jesus happy is if we do nothing but work all the time and always feel guilty when we have any fun and just become miserable in Jesus' name.

And he says in fact, Jesus does not want us to be miserable. Our lives are a gift from him and while there is much evil and darkness in the world, it remains true that God has made a world teeming with goodness and beauty.

And then he said this, he said, "Joy is the oxygen to do hard things." He said you won't last doing the work of justice unless you, as a spiritual discipline, come up for air for joy. And that's where the title of the sermon comes from. What's one of the reasons benefits of joy: It is the oxygen to do hard things. They keep us going, they remind us of God's goodness.

And I love the way he framed the issue of joy. He goes so far as to say that joy is a spiritual discipline. And I don't know about you, when I look at the people in my life who are doing great things: Who are doing meaningful work in the world, who are investing in their families, who are serving God in powerful ways whether that's behind the scenes or on a stage, they're not cynical people. If joy is the oxygen for hard things, cynicism is the carbon monoxide.

It's not the angry people. Yes, there are things to be angry about, but for some of us we've become addicted to anger. It's not the bitter people. It's not the fearful people. It's not the people who care more about what they're against than what they are for. It's not the rigid people. When I look at people who are living truly meaningful lives, there is an undercurrent of joy in their spirits. There is a sense of God's presence and His goodness that I see in them. Why does joy matter? Because it's the oxygen to do hard things. And that joy is available to you through Christ

And listen, that doesn't just apply to people like Gary Haugen who run international justice organizations. Maybe your hard thing is showing up for work, maybe it's staying present for your spouse or your kids, maybe it's pushing through midterms and finals, maybe it's navigating a significant life transition maybe it's walking through a season of grief. Hard things look different from person to person, but joy is the oxygen for all of it.

If we're going to build God's way we need to celebrate along the way. Even in you look back a few chapters earlier in Nehemiah 8, listen to what Ezra says, **"Go you 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."**

There is strength that comes from the joy of the Lord. It's the oxygen to do hard things.

A few weeks ago I had to drive down to central California for something, and the place I needed to go was near Yosemite National Park, but I didn't need to be there until the late afternoon. Yosemite is one of my favorite places in the world and I decided, 'You know what, between winter and COVID I've been spending way too much time indoors these days, I'm going to leave early so that before I do what I need to do I can spend a few hours in Yosemite climbing Yosemite Falls. For me, time outdoors is like medicine for my shoulder. So I left Lincoln before 6:00 am and I was on the trail by 10:00 am, and if you've never climbed Yosemite Falls before, it's a beast. It's not terribly long, it's only 3.5 miles to the top, but it is steep. And I start going and I'm charging up the trail making pretty good time and about a mile into it there is this overlook that gives you just a beautiful view of Half Dome and Yosemite Valley. And I reached that point and I'm breathing heavy and I noticed the view but it was amazing to me how my first impulse was just to keep going. After all, I had 2.5 miles and a lot of climbing left. And just by nature when I'm doing something physically challenging I like to really push myself. But then I stopped and I had to remind myself, "Hey, um, this is supposed to be fun. It's ok to stop and see the view. You're in one of your favorite places in the world, you might as well enjoy it." The point isn't just to get to the top, the point is to enjoy myself along the way. So I stopped and even took a picture. And I found as I started up again I had an extra spring in my step, partially because of the rest, but partially because the view inspired me to keep pushing to get to the next overlook.

And I think some of us live our lives that way, where the point is just to get through it, when God's going, I've made a good and beautiful world for you to enjoy. It's ok to have a little fun. Yes, there is work to do, but again, God built partying and celebration into the rhythms of Israel's community life. Some of us, we're really good at the spiritual disciplines of Bible study and prayer, and don't get me wrong those are incredibly important, but we need to work on the spiritual discipline of smiling. We're excellent at the discipline of service, but we need to work on the spiritual discipline of celebration.

Because what we miss is that it's joy and celebration that provide the oxygen for hard things. Teams that know how to party will be better equipped to serve. Groups and teams that know how to laugh will stick together when it's time to get to work.

So number one joy is the oxygen to do hard things and I hope and pray that you leave with a deeper desire to look for opportunities to celebrate and express joy in your life.

Number 2, Joy sustains us in hard times.

I alluded to this earlier. It's tempting to say, we can't have joy there are too many hard things in the world. And listen, if you're in a place where joy is hard, the last thing I want you doing is leaving church going, "Well, I came to church sad and I left sad, but now I feel guilty about it." That's not the point at all.

But I believe it is in these times of difficulty that we need joy the most. **Psalm 30:5-6, "Sorrow may last for the night but joy comes with the morning."** As we are in that night of sorrow, joy reminds us that the morning will come.

I think about the words of Paul, writing from prison those incredible words in Philippians 4, **"Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again rejoice."**

I think of the psalmist who wrote in one of my favorite verses, Psalm 16:10, **"You make known to me the path of life, in your presence there is fullness of joy."**

See, as one author I read this week put it, "Joy lives in the shadow of the cross." Or in another section the same author said, "Joy keeps pain moving." When the undercurrent of our life is joy, we experience pain, we feel pain, but we are not trapped by our pain.

See not only is joy the oxygen for hard things, joy sustains us in hard times. If we believe that joy is only possible when everything is perfect then we will have no joy on this side of heaven.

But God's Word says that joy is the fruit of God's Spirit in our lives. Jesus says that He came that we might have life and have it abundantly. And more than that, as Christians we have the source of all joy, and that is the gospel, the reality that Jesus has come to rescue us from our sin, that a day is coming when every tear will be wiped away, that through our faith in him our sins can be forgiven and our relationship with God can be restored, that pain will last for a moment but joy will be ours for eternity, and if we can extend out that fruit metaphor a bit further, before a plant can bear fruit it needs to be nourished.

We need to root ourselves in the soil of the gospel if we are going to bear the fruit of joy. And when we do that we can thank God for the work He is doing in us even though we're still in process. Because if we're going to build God's way to we need to celebrate along the way.

Earlier in this service we sang that song, My Hallelujah, and the lyrics of that song fit so perfectly with what we're talking about this weekend. Hallelujah literally means praise God, and the song says, "O, what can take away my hallelujah, no darkness can contain my hallelujah, your cross has made the way for my hallelujah," and here's the thing, those aren't just cute words to a song, that is literally true. That when we understand the truth of the gospel, when we understand what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross, it fills us with a sort of deep abiding joy so that we can say in every season, nothing can take away my hallelujah. It gives us the joy that sustains us in hard times.

And not only is there joy in the present, as believers can draw strength for the moment because we know greater joy is coming. One of my favorite passages of Scripture is the end of Hebrews 11 and the beginning of Hebrews 12, where there is this incredible list of some of the heroes of our faith, some of whom lived lives of incredible blessing and others of whom endured incredible hardship, and then right after that list in Hebrews 12 it says, **"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, (don't miss this part) looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, espousing the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."**

What gave Jesus the strength to endure the cross? Joy. He knew there was joy on the other side. He knew that God's work was continuing even in the midst of His excruciating agony. Maybe you're experiencing something right now where if you look at it from an earthly standpoint there is nothing joyful about it at all. Maybe the simple truth that God is present and at work even in your circumstance can bring just a glimmer of light into your darkness and give you the strength to keep moving forward.

And then third, joy and celebration show the glory of God to the world.

There is something about a celebration that is captivating, isn't it? When we see people celebrating we naturally wonder what's going on, don't we?

And I'll tell you one thing that is a major bummer, I think as Christians we undersell the value the of good party. And I realize we're in an odd time where parties aren't really a thing, but hear me out.

In my opinion, Christians should throw the best parties. Of all people, we should be most eager and enthusiastic about celebrating God's good gifts, and I think it's unfortunate the extent to which we've lost sight of this.

Too often in our culture, partying and celebrating is synonymous not with the enjoyment of God's gifts but an abuse of them, isn't that true.

God gives us the gift of good food, but too often in our culture partying equals gluttony.

God gives the gift of good drink, but too often in our culture partying equals drunkenness.

God gives the gift of laughter, but too often our attempts at humor end up being vulgar and offensive.

But here's the thing, I believe we live in a culture that longs to really experience God's good gifts as they were meant to be experienced, even if they many people don't have the language to express it. Too often we associate partying with consumption and passivity, when it's meant to be a time of enjoyment and engagement.

And all week I've been thinking about Jesus' words in Matthew 5 in the Sermon on the Mount. He says, **"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."**

Jesus says we are to be lights that shine into a dark world, and we do that in a number of ways, but here's the thing. In a dark world light is noticeable, it is distinctive, and it is attractive. Light doesn't work by reminding the darkness of how dark it is. Light shines and invites the darkness in. And if you're someone trapped in literal darkness and you see light you're drawn to it, aren't you?

There are so many in our world who are trapped in spiritual darkness, and we have the light of Christ. And what if we were people who were known in our community as people who celebrated God's good gifts? What if we were known as people who enjoyed good food and good drink, who laughed a lot, who welcomed people in and were known as being better than anyone else in town at the spiritual discipline of

having fun? Some of us need to understand that sometimes the most God-honoring thing you can do is just have fun for a minute.

Anger doesn't draw people in, arguing doesn't draw people in, fear doesn't draw people in, but you know what is almost universally attractive? Joy. Celebration. Laughter. Fun. God highly values these things.

And when we practice these things, and I know we have to be careful and creative now, but the world takes notice.

There are people who right now have no interest in coming to church, and I believe that part of their story of faith in going to be that they came to a party in your backyard.

If we're going to build God's way we need to celebrate along the way.

I remember years ago my family got really into this band called Rend Collective. And if you haven't heard of them they play upbeat Irish folk music and it's really fun. And about five years ago their tour came through town so my wife and I went to see them. The concert was so fun and so celebratory, and I'll never forget at one point in-between two songs one of the band members in this beautiful Irish accent, which I will now impersonate horribly, "One of our core convictions as a band is that seriousness is not a fruit of the Spirit, but joy is."

So don't forget to celebrate. We're building God's way that means we need to celebrate along the way.