

Good Times!

Nehemiah 8.1-12

Rev. Jon Dunning, November 20, 2005

CHRISTMAS IS COMING

What is it that you are most looking forward to over the next month-and-a-half? What is it that makes you most anxious? Most of us feel a mixture of emotions regarding the holidays: we're excited about the possibility of new Legos, dolls, clothes, or tools, yet we're anxious about time with family, or annual feelings of loneliness and loss.

The events described in the book of Nehemiah took place around 450 BC. 140 years before this, God's people were conquered by Babylon and once again they had become slaves. When Babylon was conquered, they were released from their captivity, and are returning to Jerusalem. This once great city lay in ruins. The book of Nehemiah recounts efforts to rebuild the walls of the city, and to bring religious reform

NEHEMIAH 8.1-12

1 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. **2** So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. **3** 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. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. **4** And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. **5** 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. **6** 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 worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. **7** Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. **8** They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

9 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; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. **10** 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." **11** So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." **12** 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 to them.

T.O.'S "CATCH"

It was only one catch, in one game, on one Sunday, in one season. Is it really that big of a deal? If you've been following recent sports headlines, you probably have an opinion about Terrell Owens. He's the guy who carried a sharpie in his sock during a football game so that he could autograph a touchdown ball. He's said in an interview a year ago: "I'll watch the highlights every now and then but, as far as watching the game, I feel like I am the game." Few would argue about the ability he brings to a game.

Recently, though, his team had enough, and suspended him for 4 games citing "conduct detrimental to the team" as its reason, and planning on benching him for the remainder of the season. In late October when, in an interview, he said that his team, the Philadelphia Eagles, displayed a "lack of class" when they didn't recognize his 100th career touchdown catch. Owens has appealed to the league, and arbitration is still underway to determine what will happen in the rest of this season. The significance here is that only 1 other player currently playing has hit this mark. Putting this in greater perspective, in the nearly 80 years of professional football in the country, with this one catch Owens became only the 5th player to reach this accomplishment. And his current team did nothing to even note it.

Regardless of our opinion of T.O., we can understand his frustration, can't we? Celebrating and honoring significant events, accomplishments, and anniversaries are a part of each of our make-up as human beings. Whether it's the public recognition of an accomplishment, or the annual celebration of a holiday, these are ways that we break down the vastness of life into digestible chunks, to mark the beginnings and endings of periods of time, and to reflect. For most of us, we don't have to be told to honor occasions; it comes naturally.

In the text before us, we find God's people gathered on "the first day of the seventh month." In the Hebrew calendar, this month was full of celebration. We find the people gathered knowing the significance of the coming weeks, and seeking God's Word for guidance as they celebrate. Even though their city was in ruins and their way of life forever marked by 70 years in captivity, they didn't have to be commanded to celebrate; they were acknowledging the patterns instituted hundreds of years previously.

In our day, the next month and a half mark the most significant days of the American calendar. We could critique the world in which we live for the way it has turned eternally significant events into excuses to spend money and fill our calendars, but this is still our fallen world's way of granting worth and value to significant events. The lingering question for us, then, is how do we celebrate this holiday well?

PEOPLE . . . WHO NEED PEOPLE

One of the things we most look forward to and most struggle with is the increased focus on relationships that these days

bring. Some of us will see family members we haven't spent significant time with for a year—or even longer. This may mean times of great excitement as we relive shared memories and catch up with what's been happening since the last time we were together. This may also mean having to face patterns of dysfunction that we've known for years, and even grown comfortable with. For others among us, we may find the very opposite to be true—the increased focus on relationships (even from TV commercials) only reminds us of an ever-present sense of loneliness, or even recent loss. At times it becomes too much to bear.

An aspect of celebrating the holidays well, though, is that celebrating with other people is part of who God has made us. In the text before us, it runs throughout these 12 verses, as we see the actions of the community described. They “gathered as one man” to hear God's word [1]; “all the people” listened attentively [3]; “all the people answered” [6]; “all the people wept” [9]; and “all the people went their way” [12]. Both the times of feasting, and the times of mourning over sin that God had set up for His people hundreds of years earlier were times of corporate reflection and celebration. The actions of these exiles reflect that God made it clear that these celebrations were to happen throughout the entire community take place in the context of relationships.

Reality is, though that it doesn't always feel this way. God's call to us is that we need to acknowledge the importance of relationships in our celebration. So much of the struggle we face in this world is rooted in (or at least strongly connected to) the brokenness of our relationships. If it's obvious to you that celebrating the holidays needs to include other people, maybe the challenge is to consider how you involve others in your life. Neglecting, pretending, faking, and lying may give temporary relief, but will ultimately leave us in no better of a situation than when we started. While it's often the last thing we want face, a key part of celebrating well is learning to face this hurt in our lives, and work to move forward through it.

MEMORIES

A second part of our celebrating that happens very naturally is the sharing of collective memories. Over the course of a meal, an afternoon, or even a whole day, spent with family and friends, we relive the past year and dream about the next one. We hear a lot of “now the last time we were together . . .”; the holidays mark time for us, and spur us to remember.

We see this collective memory happening in these verses through the actions of Ezra the priest/scribe. We're told in verse 1 that the people asked Ezra “to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel” and that the next 6 hours were spent listening to these words and hearing explanations of them. Ezra read from what for us are the first five books of the Bible—Genesis through Deuteronomy. We know from verse 9 that these words brought the people to tears. Commentators agree that these were tears of repentance that flowed from a clear understanding of sin before their holy God. But it would seem that there is more to these tears. This Book of the Law was a record of the story of where these people came from. Beyond outlining the details of the way of life for God's people, it is filled with the promise of nationhood and a land “flowing with milk and honey.” It's a book recording past hope for unity and dignity. But the hearers had the

perspective of hundreds of years. This was a sober reminder of the hope that was lost and of their disobedience. It would have reminded them of what their ancestors were looking for, and how nothing had turned out for them as they had expected or planned—even though it was in line with what God had declared. The tears shed were tears of guilt, but also tears of shame and grief over what had been lost.

This has been an eventful year for many of us; celebrating well includes our spending time considering how God has been at work in our lives. Part of the grace of this holiday season is that we have opportunity to reflect on the past 12 months, so face with honesty both the good and the bad. New relationships getting started; well-worn relationships facing new challenges. Job changes; family dynamic shifts. There is much that we would rather forget ever happened; there is much about the coming year we would love to procrastinate thinking about. And yet, this is not an option for us. We need to be willing to take the time and consider our past hopes and expectations, and be honest with ourselves and with God about both our disappointment, as well as our excitement.

DON'T CRY FOR . . .

Thinking about the past year and the coming months may seem too much to bear. The last few months in particular have been a time of mourning for many in our midst, and this holiday season may be extra difficult as a result. The last thing you may want to do over the next month-and-a-half is spend time with family and friends thinking about this past year. But if that is celebrating well, how do we move forward?

In Verses 9-12 we find an example of what John Piper refers to as “the God-given duty of joy in God.” We've already noted that the people's rightful response to hearing God's Word is that they wept [9]. But notice the response of the leadership: “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep” [9]. Taking it a step further, they instruct the people to celebrate with a great feast [10]. According to the calendar, this first day of the seventh month was a God-provided-and-commanded day of rest and rejoicing. It was not to be a time for mourning. How interesting that the gloom that many associate with the church (both within and without) is the very thing that Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites command the people to reject. They call the people to celebrate—they call the people in the midst of their tears to be joyful.

For us, this is the rest of the Gospel: God holds out for us eternal joy, a joy that comes not from our crafty assessments of life that make lemonade out of lemons. The Gospel offers to us the “joy of the LORD” as our strength [10]. To say that the joy of the Gospel—the hope we have in God's faithfulness—is our strength, is to understand such joy as our refuge, our place of safety and protection. It's our protection from discouragement and self-condemnation. For the believer in and follower of Christ, the Gospel does not end with our acknowledgment of our sinfulness.

What is it, then, that holds it all together so that it's not mere clichés and happy thoughts to help us survive the holidays? Celebrating well, involves embracing the brokenness of our lives by being with other people, remembering together that God has been at work and continues to show Himself faithful, and clutching to the entirety of the gospel, that even in our time of mourning, by faith in Christ we have a great reason for true joy, and a immovable foundation to celebrate.

