**Joy**

Nehemiah 8

Every year ***Wycliffe Bible Translators*** has a celebration of the Bible translation projects that have been completed. We were able to attend earlier this year and the one word that **summarizes the completion of these projects is JOY**. To see the faces of the people who have not had access to God’s Word in their heart language as boxes full of Bibles are carried in to their village – the whole community is radiant with excitement and gratitude.

Watch this short video as the Keliko tribe in South Sudan dedicates their new Bibles to the Lord in worshipful celebration!

VIDEO CLIP - 1000th NT Translation! <https://vimeo.com/295659299>

***Hearing God’s Word brings JOY***. We see that clearly in our passage today in Nehemiah 8.

**Encountering God through His Word Produces Joy**

“And all the people went their way… ***to make great rejoicing***, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.” Nehemiah 8:12

I think we all know that just HEARING the Bible or ***just READING the Bible does not always produce joy.*** **You have to do it right**. It’s like playing golf. The game, by its nature, does not tend to produce joy – until you learn to do it right, or at least how not to be terrible. Playing an instrument can bring joy – if you practice enough and work hard at it. I played violin for seven years when I was young and I can assure you it did not bring me joy nor did it bring anyone around me any kind of pleasant experience. Sorry mom. But we see in our musicians the joy that comes from practicing enough to freely express yourself in song - they have learned to do it right!

***So how can we read the Bible and hear the Bible in a way that DOES produce joy?*** This passage shows us five principles for joy-filled Bible reading. Here is the context:



Israel was only united for the reigns of Saul, David and Solomon. The Northern kingdom fell to Assyria after 200 years. The Southern Kingdom fell to Babylon 140 years after that. King Cyrus of Persia defeated Babylon and the Lord moved his heart to allow the Jews to begin returning to their home land. The story of that return is told in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Amazingly, they were able to ***rebuild the wall*** around Jerusalem in just 52 days, in spite of fierce opposition and great danger from their enemies.

With their defenses established, Nehemiah the governor and Ezra the scribe called the people together.

**How to Read the Bible: 1) In Community**

“And all the people gathered as one man into the square... And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses… So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly… ***And he read from it***… from early morning until midday.” Nehemiah 8:1-3

The first principle for joy-filled Bible reading is to ***read and study God’s word IN COMMUNITY.*** Yes, we should also read individually but keep in mind that the printing press was a relatively modern invention and widespread literacy was not common until the last 100 years or so. So for most of history if you wanted to hear and study God’s Word, you HAD TO gather with God’s People.

This is an important corrective to the ***dominant individualism of spirituality today***. Our culture is all about personal self-expression. Whatever YOU think. Whatever YOU feel is the main thing. In other cultures and at other times in history, such as the Jews we are reading about, people were much more communal in their identity and thinking.

We need to reclaim some of this, for example, in the priority of gathering for worship every Sunday. 20 or 30 years ago a regular church attender would make it to church 9 out of 10 Sundays, even 19 out of 20. **Now a REGULAR church attender shows up once or twice a month**. We still have the die hard, come to church every Sunday no matter what believers, but that trend is increasingly rare.

Why? Because people travel; our kids have a million activities; we don’t feel guilty for missing church like our legalistic parents and grandparents (maybe we need some more of that guilt and legalism again?)… ***increasingly it simply is not a PRIORITY.***

Oakwood is an exceptional church since we have over 80% of our people involved in a small group! We not only value gathering for worship every week, but in addition to that we make it a priority to get everyone into a small group so we can study and apply God’s Word together, IN COMMUNITY. ***Our desire is to be a church OF SMALL GROUPS not a church WITH small groups.*** So if you’re not in a small group yet, use this summer to contact some group leaders and come to a couple of social events so you can find a group that will work for you!

Ezra and Nehemiah called the people together so they could ***listen to the Bible together.*** They spent the whole morning just listening to God’s Word being read. This is a new trend in church gatherings – to come together to read, for example, the whole book of Revelation. In this case they read the whole book of Deuteronomy, as the people had a few generations before under King Josiah (as we saw last week).

So first, we need to read God’s Word in community. Second:

**How to Read the Bible: 2) Humbly**

“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***.” Nehemiah 8:6

We read and study Scripture to encounter the Living God – to hear His voice. When we open the Bible we feel the “THUS SAITH THE LORD” authority of the prophets of old. **Scripture is God’s Word** - it is the full and final revelation of who God is and what God wants from us.

The reason we stand when the Bible is read is out of our ***deep reverence for God and His Word.*** Every time we open the Bible we have the opportunity to hear directly from the Creator God of the universe. So we should listen to and read the Bible HUMBLY.

Here the people fell on their faces before the Lord. This was a posture of total submission and surrender.

Is this how we read the Bible every day and every Sunday? Do we come truly expecting to encounter the Lord? ***Or have we become complacent with Scripture?*** Have we gotten bored with church? Are we so familiar with this book that we have lost sight of **what it IS?**

For nearly 2,000 years **the Dead Sea Scrolls** were hidden in caves in Israel. The community at Qumran most likely scrambled to hide them away in AD 68 as Roman legions descended upon them. Think of that. Nearly every word of the Old Testament was recorded on those scrolls – the complete Isaiah scroll is one of the most precious treasures on earth. But until 1947 when a Bedouin shepherd literally fell into a cave and found a few fragments of parchment, no one had any idea these scrolls existed.

God’s Word was hidden away in the darkness. Our most precious treasure was lost. Even today many people who visit an exhibit showing the Dead Sea Scrolls have no idea WHAT THEY ARE. ***These are the words of God inscribed on parchment*** – passed along and copied over and over to preserve every jot, every dash, every mark – exactly as it was when the first prophet had it written down. The same thing is true of this book you hold in your hand or open on your phone. These are the WORDS OF GOD. The Lord Almighty has spoken and has been faithful to protect and preserve this book throughout history.

We should read the Bible in community, with humility and third:

**How to Read the Bible: 3) Diligently**

“They read from the book… clearly, and they gave the sense, ***so that the people understood*** the reading…” Nehemiah 8:8

***Bible reading takes effort***. It takes discipline. It takes time and focus. If you’re reading through the whole Bible with us this year you are learning that, right? The Holy Spirit helps us understand what we read, but much of that assistance comes from time, reflection, discussion, meditation and detailed analysis.

Here is an example of **how I study a passage to analyze it** – looking for repetition, emphasis and thematic flow. Notice the yellow relates to the glory of God. The green relates to God’s Word. The blue shows how the people respond.



Notice this group of 14 Levites, led by Ezra the scribe, devoting themselves to teaching God’s Word with clarity, consistency and patience – “they GAVE THE SENSE.” It is the Bible teacher’s job to help people get THE MAIN POINT. This is my goal when I preach and is the goal of our teachers in Oakwood Mill and our small group leaders – to help GIVE THE SENSE so that everyone can understand what the Bible says, what it means and how we should apply it.

A simple way to remember how to study the Bible diligently is:

**How to Study the Bible Diligently:**

1. What? [Observation]
2. So What? [Interpretation]
3. Now What? [Application]

Study to understand what was said, when it was said to whom it was said. Move from what the words say observation into the SO WHAT of interpretation. What does this mean? And only when you understand the passage in context should you go ahead to application asking “NOW WHAT” should we do? All of God’s Word is relevant to us but we have to be careful in discerning HOW it is relevant to us. The USA is not ancient Israel. Not all of God’s promises to Israel apply to us – certainly not as Americans.

Paul exhorts Timothy –

**How to Study the Bible Diligently:**

1. What?
2. So What?
3. Now What?

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, ***rightly handling the word of truth***.” 2 Timothy 2:15

In verse 18 we see Ezra reading the Book of the Law ***DAY BY DAY throughout this conference*** with the people all together. In chapter 9 and verse 3 we see that he read Deuteronomy for a quarter of the day!!! For three hours, with the people standing, they listened attentively to the reading of God’s Word! There is some DILIGENCE – some real devotion, discipline and commitment.

**Are we diligent in the study of God’s Word?** I just re-read Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline* with a group of young people. It reminded me of a few principles that dramatically changed my life in college.

“The disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us… the keynote of the disciplines is joy.” Richard Foster, *A Celebration of Discipline*

The spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, Bible study and others help us SLOW DOWN and focus our attention in a very unfocused and fast-paced world. ***When is the last time you practiced the discipline of SILENCE and SOLITUDE?*** We almost don’t know what to do in total silence.

Are you like me – and whenever you have a free second ***your hand reflexively goes to your phone?*** Even if I don’t have a free second, if a notification comes in about the Rays or the Cubs or the weather there is this irresistible impulse to act on it. My wife can’t stand having a number on an app – so if Facebook has a number 3 on it, it torments her until she taps it to wipe out those notifications. I deleted Facebook from my phone years ago. She periodically deletes it for a break.

**We are often slaves to our own busy-ness and the noise of the world.** The spiritual disciplines can set us free. I think this generation needs to reclaim the disciplines – and Foster’s book is rightly a classic if you’re looking for a place to start.

We need to read the Bible in community, humbly, diligently and fourth:

**How to Read the Bible: 4) Obediently**

“And they found it written in the Law tha the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths… ***so the people went out***… and made booths for themselves.” Nehemiah 8:14,16

If we gather every Sunday to hear God’s Word but don’t leave here and apply it Monday through Friday we are hypocrites. If we say we believe the Bible is God’s Word but when we read it we feel free to ignore it, we are fooling ourselves. Knowing that the Bible is God’s Word should motivate us to read and study the Bible and then it should compel us to obey it promptly – quickly applying it as the Holy Spirit leads us.

With our kids we know that ***“delayed obedience is… disobedience.”*** James writes that “anyone who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.” He also writes that reading the Bible and not doing anything about it is like looking in a mirror and then immediately forgetting what you just saw. We’ve all done that, I’m sure – did I get that thing out of my nose? Did I get my hair to lay down? You checked the mirror for a reason – did you take care of it? Without application, Bible study is just an exercise in VANITY – a waste of time that just puffs up your ego a little – “I read my Bible today… did you?”

We saw this last Sunday with **the Passover**. Josiah read Deuteronomy and led the nation to celebrate the Passover as it hadn’t been held for 50 years. Now Ezra leads the people to celebrate another festival called ***the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles***. Somehow even the best Kings of Israel like David and Josiah had not celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles. But Ezra leads them in a new day – a fresh commitment to obey God’s Word. And look at the result:

**How to Read God’s Word: 4) Obediently**

“And all the assembly of those who had returned from captivity made booths and lived in the booths for from the day of Joshua to that day the people had not done so. ***And there was very great rejoicing***.” Nehemiah 8:17

It is not just hearing or reading the Bible that produces joy – ***it is ENCOUNTERING GOD through His Word that produces Joy.*** And God shows up when our faith expresses itself in OBEDIENCE. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey my commandments**.” God’s love language is OBEDIENCE.**

The prophet Samuel confronted King Saul with the words, ***“To obey is better than sacrifice.”*** God wasn’t interested in hundreds of animals being sacrificed when it was in violation of the instruction to destroy all the animals. Partial obedience is disobedience. Saul conquered the Philistines but didn’t devote everything to destruction – he kept the best animals, justifying his disobedience under the spiritual excuse of offering sacrifices to God. Of course, God saw right through this false piety and it cost Saul the kingdom and his legacy.

When the people obey in this time of renewal under Ezra, they experienced a fresh joy in the Lord. ***Have you experienced this in your Christian walk?*** Sometimes you can get stuck spiritually because God told you to do something or stop doing something and if you say “No,” it’s called “hardening your heart” by “resisting the Holy Spirit.”

I shared with the men a couple of months ago about an area of my life that ***for many years I had not fully surrendered to the Lord.*** I made excuses, justified periodic failure and grew content with that level of partial obedience. When the Holy Spirit (and my wife) finally broke through my pride, it was painful but it led me into one of the most joyful seasons of my walk with the Lord. It is so tremendously liberating to have a clear conscience – to have nothing weighing on your mind.

David wrote in Psalm 32

**How to Read the Bible: 4) Obediently**

“When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.” Psalm 32:3-4

***Resisting the Holy Spirit is exhausting, draining work.*** Reading God’s Word with an invitation to the Spirit to search your heart and know your inmost thoughts, to convict you of your sin and lead you into more complete obedience will unlock JOY in your life. If you are not living with **a TYPICAL posture of joy** I would encourage you to meet with your small group leader, schedule and appointment with me, go see a counselor or meet with a trusted Christian friend.

JOY is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Happiness depends on your circumstances. Joy comes from the Lord. Listen to God’s Word in Nehemiah 8.

**How to Read the Bible: 4) Obediently**

“Eat the fat and drink sweet wine… for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved ***for the joy of the Lord is your strength***.” Nehemiah 8:10

When the people first heard God’s Word they began to WEEP. Ezra had to confront them in their grief and call them to a time of REJOICING. **A relationship with God should be defined predominantly by JOY.** We should not be a people plagued by guilt or shame or sadness. I grant there are times in life we need to walk through a grieving process. And there are clinical issues, physical realities, brain chemistry things that need treatment like any other illness. But by and large the Christian’s posture should be one of JOY because we have been forgiven and set free from sin, brought into relationship with the glorious, all-gracious God of heaven and earth who loves us and gave up His Son for us.

That Gospel truth should so overshadow the sadnesses of this life that ***the joy of the Lord can be your strength*** through even the darkest valleys of life. I bet you know a few people like this – impossibly positive people. We’ve got lots of them here at Oakwood and they are contagiously happy. Please, let them infect you with the joy of the Lord – because it is contagious! Eeyore style gloom is also contagious, so be careful with gloomy people.

Here is the treatment for Eeyores:

**How to Read the Bible: 5) Gratefully**

“You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram… and made a covenant with him… ***And you have kept your promise***, for you are righteous.” Nehemiah 9:7-8

**Joy comes from gratitude.** Gratitude comes from knowing God and experiencing the fullness of His love and grace for you. Ezra led the nation in an exercise of REMEMBRANCE. He looked back on their story so far and rehearsed the goodness of God to them – the faithfulness, love and mercy of God. It started for Israel with the covenant promise to Abraham – the promise to bless him and through his offspring to bless the whole world.

The hashtag “#Blessed” is way overused these days – but Christians should live our lives under that hashtag. We are the people who are truly most blessed. This is why we learned to say at camp – ***“God is good – ALL THE TIME. And all the time – GOD IS GOOD.”*** We are always a blessed people because God promised a Savior and sent a Savior. We did not deserve this, we were not entitled to it. We deserved only judgment, death and hell. But God poured out that justice on Jesus on the cross so He could give us mercy, life and heaven.

***Are you a grateful person?*** If you want to be a more joyful person, the path to joy is through gratitude. Learn to count your blessings. Learn to remember and rehearse the goodness of God in your life. I’ve shared this story before, but **George Mueller** – the great pastor, prayer warrior and orphanage starter – prayed for his wife when she was sick and eventually died. He prayed Psalm 84 and believed it.

**How to Read the Bible: 5) Gratefully**

“The LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.” Psalm 84:11

***Mueller prayed for his wife to get better*** but he applied this verse saying – “If it’s GOOD FOR ME, she will get better. If not, she will die. Whatever God allows is what is BEST FOR ME.” That is the truth of Psalm 84:11 and it is the message of the Bible. God is good. He is the generous, faithful, all-loving God who did not spare His own Son and so we can trust Him to give us EVERYTHING we need. Mueller’s wife did die – but it did not shake his faith or his joy. He kept on preaching, kept on serving.

**How to Read the Bible: 5) Gratefully**

“They refused to obey… they stiffened their neck… But you are a God ready to forgive, ***gracious and merciful***, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them.” Nehemiah 9:17

***Have you experienced the love of God this way?*** How wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ? Just like Israel every one of us has refused to obey God, we have stiffened our necks and refused to bow to His sovereign rule. We stage a revolution every day, casting Jesus down from the throne of our lives and taking that place for ourselves. And yet God has not forsaken us. He did not abandon His people – though He did discipline them and send them into a 70 year time out in Babylon. But God, in His infinite mercy and faithfulness, brought them back to the land and enabled them to start rebuilding.

Maybe you have wandered far from the Lord. Maybe you have been in a time of discipline. It’s time to humble yourself and come back to the cross today. Stop running like a prodigal and come home to the Father.

***Three young men were here a couple of weeks ago***. All three were struggling with substance abuse. All three had been unable to get into rehab programs due to distance and expense. They heard AJ Pillai preach – “I have decided to follow Jesus” – and after the service I spoke with them and prayed with them about the situation. Out in the parking lot, I challenged them with this illustration:

**The blessing of God is on the other side of a concrete dam called pride**. The Holy Spirit chips away at our pride, seeking to humble us before Him. But every one of us has to choose to humble ourselves before the Lord, crying out to Him for help and submitting our lives to Him. When we hear His Word and respond to His voice, the flood of His mercy breaks through and we experience the joy of His love.

That day in our parking lot three young men made ***a fresh commitment to the Lord and each other*** – agreeing that one way or another they would all get started in rehab the next day. I got a wonderful phone call from one of these guys on Monday – absolutely over the moon to share that all three of them had been accepted to three different rehab programs – all totally paid for. If you know anything about programs like that you know that a triple miracle like that does not just happen.

These young guys humbled themselves before the Lord, called on Jesus in faith, and the blessing of the Lord broke through in their lives. What are you waiting for? Joy comes from an encounter with the Lord through His Word. He is speaking to you today. Won’t you respond and call on Jesus in faith?

***Let’s express our faith in this song – NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE!***