

The Joy of Passover

Ezra 6:19-22

Nehemiah 8:1 “Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel. 2 So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. 3 Then he read from it in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. 4 So Ezra the scribe stood on a platform of wood which they had made for the purpose...5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6 And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. Then all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!” while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground...8 So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading. 9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, 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 nor weep.” For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law. 10 Then he said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

That is the way it is supposed to be. “Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet wine.” Those are words of joy. And the description is no different than the description of our worship

services today. The book of the law is read. There was instruction given, so that the people could understand what was being read. And we respond with our songs and prayers of praise and worship.

But is there joy in that? There should be, but there isn't always. For some, church is anything but joyful. Maybe you merely feel the sense of duty, and rather than stay home and feel guilty, you come to church. But without much joy. Sometimes you are just tired out, going through the motions because you are supposed to. And maybe the affairs of the week have simply worn you down. There is no joy left. Life is just too difficult.

For some people in our day, maybe it's just boring. Church isn't very exciting, not when compared to the constant noise and activity of a sporting event or a popular concert. And many people really are looking for an activity that resembles the entertainment that this world has to offer. Because of that, some churches feel like they have to somehow stimulate that joy themselves, inventing clever things to do in worship in order to stimulate your pleasure with good entertainment. Indeed, the churches that put on the best show tend to have the biggest audience. The bells and whistles, the dog and pony show, the three ring circus--that seems to be the modern day prescription of a healthy church. At least, the prosperous mega-church.

But that is not what is happening here in the day of Ezra. And there is a clear and useful application for us today. You can't produce joy through artificial means. You can't produce joy in by providing an entertaining show for you in church. Joy is not something you create. Instead, joy is the expected by-product of a proper relationship with the Lord. And joy is the expected by-product of the proper worship of God.

Our church would certainly be labelled, “traditional.” Unfortunately, however, there are those who would translate that as “boring.” “Dull.” We’re not contemporary. We don’t do much in worship. We sing psalms and hymns focused upon God, not upon our own experiences. We pray, at some length. We have the Bible read, and sit through rather long sermons. Not very joyful, is it?

Well, yes it is. At least it should be. For the joy of the Lord is your strength. Hear that exhortation as I begin to preach this afternoon, for it will permeate everything that I have to say. The joy of the Lord is your strength. Specifically,

I. THERE IS JOY IN OBSERVING THE LORD’S ORDINANCES.

v.19

They kept the passover. It was the Lord’s ordinance. They were supposed to do this. It was their duty. Their obligation. It was the law. But notice,

v.22a

The feast of unleavened bread was a seven day feast beginning with the passover. And the people kept that feast with joy! Not just out of duty. But in joy. They had been kept from the passover through the years in exile. There was no temple. No sacrifices. No priests. No worship. And they missed it. So now, when they could finally enjoy it again, there was great joy.

Church is a habit for us, isn’t it? A good habit. And it should be. But here’s the point, that such a habit should itself be a source of joy. That’s the way it should be. There is joy in observing the Lord’s ordinances, joy in the habit of worship. I would have that same encouragement every time I invite you to

worship, morning and afternoon, not merely of duty and obligation, but because there is joy in worship. There is joy observing the Lord’s ordinances.

I want you to think about the Lord’s Supper for a moment, because more than anything else in worship, that sacrament is an occasion for joy. It’s such a delightful thing to realize that we have fellowship and communion with Christ. It’s such a meaningful thing to realize that, in spirit, we are eating Christ’s body and drinking his blood. It’s delightful.

It’s not very exciting, at least outwardly. The bread isn’t really that tasty all by itself, and one small piece certainly isn’t going to fill your stomach. And the wine and juice is OK, but when I’m thirsty, I like the giant size glasses to drink. Those small communion cups don’t do much for my thirst. There is not much physical enjoyment in that.

But there is great spiritual joy, for there, in the sacrament, more than at any other time, we are living out the essence of our Christian faith. We are fellowshiping with Christ. We are feeding upon him. We are proclaiming his death for our sakes. And he is with us. There needs to be joy in that. Even as we have the Lord’s Supper every week, the joy comes when you realize that the sacrament is presented in Scripture as a normal part of our worship, not a special or occasional event. And there is great joy in observing the Lord’s ordinances. Especially when we do it according to the Lord’s instructions! There is,

A. Joy in obediently worshiping the Lord as he commands.

Notice again the example of these Israelites.

v.19

Precisely according to ordinance, found in Exodus 12. Somehow, sadly, in the culture of our day, we get the idea that if we are restricted, if we have to do things a certain way, according to the directions, that that means there will be no joy in it. And we just need to get rid of that idea. There is joy in doing things obediently, according to God's instructions.

In the past generation or two, churches have given a lot of attention devoted to spicing up worship services. Something other than that simple, traditional order. Yet I would propose that it is a return to the simple, biblical, traditional elements of worship that brings great joy to the people of God. When we disobey God, and invent our own means of seeking to produce that joy, it is not increased but decreased. Rather, there is joy in obediently worshiping the Lord as he commands. And I seek to communicate and express that joy even as I lead in worship. With that, we see from Ezra 6 that there is,

B. Joy in the awareness of the cleansing which God provides.

There is one great reason for joy, a reason so wonderfully portrayed by the Lord's Supper, as it was in the OT Passover. The reason for joy is that deep down, every knows he's dirty. Everyone knows, or should know, that he has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And that is discouraging. Depressing. But there is cleansing! In other words, forgiveness.

v.20

Why so much emphasis on external, ritual cleaning in the OT? As a symbol, a symbol of the cleansing which is ours in Christ. A symbol of our need for cleansing, and for the provision for that cleaning by the blood of an atoning sacrifice. The priests and Levites had to purify themselves to offer that sacrifice, demonstrating their need for cleansing themselves. But Jesus

didn't need to purify himself, for he was already perfectly pure. Perfectly without sin. And so he became the passover lamb, in his own body, as we studied a few weeks ago.

There is joy in the awareness of the cleansing which God provides! A couple verses for you this evening, to stimulate that joy within your own soul,

1John 1:9 "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Isa. 1:18 "Come now, and let us reason together," Says the LORD, "Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool."

Ezek.36:25 "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."

There is joy in knowing that whatever sin you may have committed, however heinous and offensive it might have been, there is cleansing in the blood of Jesus. That's what the Passover signified for the OT people of God. That's what the Lord's supper signifies for the NT people of God, and there should be nothing more joyous for us than to celebrate that sacrament. There is joy in observing the Lord's ordinances. Secondly,

II. THERE IS JOY IN SEPARATING YOURSELF FROM SIN.

Now, I want this to be connected to all that I have just said. There is great joy, unspeakable joy, in the promises of forgiveness and cleansing. But you won't experience that joy unless you separate yourself from sin. In other, you can't go on living in your

sin, indulging your sinful nature, while at the same time trying to claim the promises of forgiveness.

v.21

There we see the,

A. Joy from forsaking the filth of the world around us.

You know, the world that produces that filth tells us a different story. The world that produces all that filth tells us that there is joy in indulgence! Taking part in the sinfulness of the world is what brings joy, so we are told. Taking part in sexual immorality, taking part in the decadent pursuit of pleasure, seeking after all the luxuries of this life with no sense of self-denial or even self-control--that's where joy comes from. Just watch television if you want to see that portrayed.

But it isn't true! There is no joy in sin. There might be some fleeting pleasures. There might be some temporary delights and momentary thrills. But no real joy. There is joy in resisting temptation. There is joy in doing what is right and good and true. There is joy in walking away from the immorality of the world, properly called uncleanness here in our text. It could be translated "filth."

Do I need to describe the filth of the world in which we live? I doubt it. We've become all too accustomed to. And sometimes, we try to fit right in. But when the people of Israel returned from exile, when they came to worship their God, every one "separated themselves from the filth of the nations of the land in order to seek the LORD God of Israel."

There is to be a holy separation from the wickedness of the world. Can I read that in the New Testament?

2 Cor.6:14 "Do not be unequally yoked together with

unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? 15 And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? 16 And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people." 17 Therefore "Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you." 18 "I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the LORD Almighty."

Think, perhaps, of those whom you know who are the most fully given over to sinful immorality. Look at them, and I suspect that you will not find much joy. And you can be sure, they will have no joy when they stand before the Lord at the final day. So separate yourself from the filth of this world. And do whatever it takes to bring about that separation! In Jesus' words,

Matt. 5:29 "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell."

Put sin to death in your own lives!!! Don't tolerate it, not in the least little bit. Do whatever it takes to put it away. However radical the measures might be to accomplish that. And then, as you do so, there will be great joy in the assembly of God's people. For just as there is joy in forsaking the filth of the world, so there is,

B. Joy in seeking after the Lord God.

Those two things go together, of course. Turning away from sin. Turning toward God. And that defines the true nature of repentance.

v.21

Turn away from sin in order to seek after the Lord! And unless you do so, unless you seek the Lord with such intensity of devotion, there will not be joy. But if you will seek the Lord, if you will put aside all the affairs of this world, if you will deny yourself and take up your cross, then the promise of joy will be yours.

If you have that sort of joy today, I want to stimulate it and provoke it all the more, the joy of seeking after God with your whole heart. And if that joy is lacking in any way, then this challenge is all the more appropriate, to do whatever is necessary to forsake the world, to separation from the filth of the world, in order to seek after the Lord God with all your heart. And to come to him with the broken hearted repentance out of which God will grant you the joy of the Lord.

Finally, let me put all this together, from our text in Ezra 6, simply by saying this,

III. THERE IS JOY IN GOD.

Now, I've surely already said that. At least implied it as fully as I can. But let me say it directly, as we find the words written so directly in our text. There is joy in God.

v.22

Specifically,

A. The Lord alone can give us joy.

v.22a

Don't miss that. Verse 22, "the Lord had made them joyful." Not their circumstances. Not their worldly satisfactions. But the Lord. Your struggles might be profound and intense, and for some of you, I know that they are. The circumstances of your life might be disastrous, at least in outward terms. The people of Israel didn't have it so easy, either. But "the Lord had made them joyful." The Lord alone!

The Lord alone can give you joy. And if only we would really learn that! If only we would really believe it. The things of this world do not produce real joy. The pleasures of this world do not produce real joy. Success and accomplishments in the things of this world do not produce real joy. Yet those are the things which we give ourselves to, when we fail find our joy in the Lord alone.

In that joy, the principle demonstrated in the joyfulness of the people of God in Ezra 6 is that,

B. The Lord protects us from our enemies.

v.22 "[The Lord] turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them."

The Lord caused the king to protect them and promote their work. Now, the Lord doesn't always bring about that specific benefit. But he does sometimes, and I might say, rather often. And,

C. The Lord gives us strength to do his work.

The joy of the Lord is that strength, the strength to do his work.

v.22b "...to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel."

To put that in the words of the NT,

1Cor. 15:55 “O Death, where is your sting? O [Death], where is your victory?” 56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”

So here we are this morning to partake of the Lord’s Supper, the new covenant equivalent of the passover. Here we are to observe the Lord’s ordinances, just as he prescribed. It’s not very exciting, outwardly. But here, here at this table, here is the closest thing we have on earth to the experience of heaven. Here is the presence of God. Here we eat and drink from the body and blood of Jesus. In that, there is great joy!

A week ago Saturday, I enjoyed attending the wedding of one of my nieces. It wasn’t too far away, only a two hour drive for me, but 4 of my five siblings were there. Many, even the majority of my numerous nieces and nephews were there. And their children. It was a very enjoyable experience, and the bride and groom themselves were evidently and obviously just delighted in the Lord’s blessing to them as a couple. Their joy was greater and more evident even from the normal experience of a wedding ceremony.

The venue was also very pleasant, an outdoor site, and the weather was perfect. So plenty of time and room to visit with one another and to enjoy all the food that was available. That wedding banquet is an appropriate symbol of this great supper before us this morning, because this supper, the Lord’s Supper, is a picture for us, a sacrament, representing the great wedding supper of the lamb which is to come at the end of this age.

And so, in this great sacrament, there is to be great joy! This

is not a funeral banquet, but a wedding banquet. This is the foretaste of the wedding supper of lamb. So come, and eat. Come, and drink, with great joy. People of God, “Eat the fat and drink sweet wine.” May the joy of the Lord be your strength.