

Nehemiah 8: You can Endure with Joy in the light of the Gospel

We continue our Nehemiah series today - Rebuilding a thriving church and neighbourhood.

In our story today, Nehemiah and his people, having completed their project of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, gather for a five to six hour worship service! Its time for them to celebrate how all the while God is building them together as His people. I look forward to sharing further with you a bit later on...

We find ourselves in a similar transition today, as we look back on 8 months of activity from the time that Steve unexpectedly resigned and shortly afterward hearing the devastating news of Cheryl's further complications with cancer.

We're giving thanks to God for his provision, leading and encouragement over this time.

You would have received a stone when you entered today - we'll be using them to build a little cairn later in the service. Lynette will lead us a little later. But I encourage you through this time of worship, to consider, in a short phrase or a single word, what are you grateful to God for in your church experience over this last season?

This morning we're giving thanks to God for the way He has sustained us, encouraged us and brought us together as a church during these last eight months. When we moved into this unexpected transitional time with a depleted ministry team, it wasn't easy for any of us. As we anticipate a new season starting with the arrival of David as our new team leader, it is fitting this morning to look back and give thanks, because I hope you can see that God has been at work in your life and in the life of this community through this time. I certainly can!

'Endurance is not just the ability to bear a hard thing, but to turn it into glory.'
William Barclay

True endurance is not just about plodding along through the hardship of a situation, to just keep on going. Endurance involves allowing God to express his character through our work. So what we do and how we do it matters greatly because if we are careful and attentive, God's beauty, joy and love can flow through what we are doing for all to see. That's what true endurance is.

I would describe the last 8 months as a particularly task-oriented time - like a big project. It's felt like we were the Jewish people building a wall.

I remember meeting with Lynette early on and we decided to trust, that even amidst the grief of the situation, that God is in this and that this will be a time of growth and strengthening for our church community.

We wanted to approach this as an opportunity to see God's glory shine among us rather than a reason to shut things down and lose momentum. Because its in these challenging times, these spaces where faith seems a more immediate need, this is exactly where God has been known to reveal himself in fresh ways to those who respond faithfully to the needs being faced.

Many of you have shouldered a bigger sense of responsibility and have stepped in to roles where there has been things needing doing. Some have been prepared to support CareWorks more regularly through the week. Many of you have jumped in and got involved: in music, pastoral care, prayer support, practical help, befriending new people, and all the while growing in confidence to lead in those places of ministry.

We have endured and thrived. God's presence has been tangible among us.

Nehemiah and his people had a project to do too...their project was to rebuild the wall to their city, Jerusalem. In Nehemiah 8, today's reading, having finished their big project, they gathered in the city square by the water gate and Ezra the priest enters our story, calling God's people to reflect on their relationship with Him. Ezra invites this community already pledged to faith, back to a full embrace of that faith.

There is a shift in the story, from rebuilding the city wall to the building up of the people themselves...There has been intensive work and now there is rest and reflection.

While the work has been fulfilling and good, we also need times like this to stop and sit, to restore our souls in the presence of God, to shift focus away from doing, to shift towards where God is, reflecting on the question:

"In all the activity, how has God been working?"

In work and in rest, God is showing us the truth of who we are, who God is and the gospel of our meeting.

An interesting thing happens as Israel hears the word of God read to them aloud. The people started to cry...

The gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that we are sinners, to use the old word, that we have evil in the imagination of our hearts, that when we look in the mirror what we see is at least partly coward, phoney and slob. That is the tragedy. I think that is the reason for Israel's crying...

But the gospel is also the news that we are loved anyway, cherished and forgiven, we are bleeding, yes, but also bled for. That is the good news. And yet, so what? So what if we are loved and forgiven when the very mark of our sin is that we keep turning down God's love and forgiveness because we either don't believe in it or are too proud to accept it? In answer, the news of the gospel is that even despite all that, extraordinary things happen when God meets with us.

Abraham and Sarah start their journey childless and without hope of anything changing, but end up bearing a son in old age. Moses runs from Egypt a murderer and comes back a mighty prophet and leader, the Jews have their world pulled out from under them and go in disgrace into exile, only to come back a few generations later to rebuild their city again from the ruins, Peter starts out a rowdy fisherman until Jesus transforms him to a fisher of people. Zaccheus climbs a sycamore tree a crook and a swindler, and comes down accepted by Jesus. Paul sets out on the rampage to persecute the Christians and comes back a fool for Christ. Northern Community Church in this season, lost some beloved leaders, but turned it into an opportunity to grow together. It seems impossible for anybody to completely leave behind the darkness we carry within us, but for God all things are possible.

The Joy of the Lord is your Strength

Nehemiah told them to rejoice...because "the joy of the LORD is your strength!" (Nehemiah 8:10).

It's God's joy - not ours - the joy of the Lord is our strength (his delight in us). It is God's delight over his people that is the basis for our hope that ultimately all will be made right."

The emphasis is on God's grace. Although the Jews felt the grief of falling short, Nehemiah encouraged them to celebrate God anyway because God's grace outweighs everything that hinders. Psalm 103 says God "does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him".

It is also interesting that the Hebrew word for "strength" is "ozaz" which means a stronghold, or fortress. Nehemiah is saying that the joy of the Lord is your stronghold. They just finished building a fortified wall as a stronghold around their city. One would question: "Is not the wall our stronghold?" Yet Nehemiah is reminding them that it is the Lord who is their protection. More than that, it is the "joy" of the Lord that is their protection.

So, our joy is knowing that no matter what comes our way - whether it's personal hardship for us or our family - or illness, or maybe just the routine ups and downs -

through it all, we have a relationship with a God whose joy towards us is overwhelming and limitless.

Practically, that means joy and celebration is a vital practice of our faith. We'll put God first, in all things - not merely out of duty and obligation - but because the joy of the Lord is our strength.

What has sustained me in this time, has been a simple daily practice. A few months into this season, my life began to feel like an eternal ticking jobs off a list. It started to feel like a grind - one brick after the other. Then, I got to thinking along these lines about God's joy in us, and I began to ask God each morning 'help me to be attentive to the joys you want to show me today.'

Music team, Shu De's baptism - hearing the way God has been at work in the Liu family, the paint job in here, words of encouragement, raising funds as a community, for Esmale family, countless encounters with people.

Here we are now on the cusp of something new. I'm looking forward to a more balanced, less pressured season ahead under David's leadership.

Lets continue in endurance - allowing God's glory to shine through our actions.

Lets pay attention as God shows us in our work and our rest the truth of who we are, who God is and the gospel of our meeting.

Let's find strength in God's joy for us.

Benediction

May the eyes of your heart be open
to all God's blessings which surround you;
may this awareness produce a harvest of joy in your spirit.

May thankfulness rise up within you,
not just for this season past,
but for each day ahead.

Amen.