

TRUST & OBEY

Under Nehemiah's leadership, and Ezra's spiritual instruction, the people of Jerusalem had accomplished amazing achievements. They had not only rebuilt the wall of the city, but God had rebuilt their lives. And they were experiencing spiritual renewal, as they trusted and obeyed God and His written-down Word.

1- THE JOY OF OBEDIENCE - hearing and heeding. In Nehemiah 8:9, the people had gathered in a public square for a joyous public worship service, reading Scripture aloud. Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said, "*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.*" This was the conviction of the Holy Spirit, conveying our complete lack and emptiness before Him apart from the grace of God.

Colin Smith observes, "conviction of sin is never an end in itself, but God's means to an end, that we come to deeper appreciation of God and His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. On the Day of Atonement, they would look at the sacrifice offered and know that God would forgive the sins of His people. Today we look back at the cross of Christ, knowing that God's promised atonement has come!"

Nehemiah encouraged: "*go your way. Eat the fat, drink sweet wine, send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.*" Even potlucks and fellowship help provide mutual encouragement, to go out rejoicing, to serve the Lord. For us too, the joy of the Lord gives great strength - as we know, believe, and obey God's written Word.

2- THE JOY OF CELEBRATION - living out God's Word. Smith notes, "it is not your joy that is your strength, it is God's joy that is your strength." In Luke 15:7, repentance on earth leads to joy in heaven. "Our tears over sin are reflected in God's joy in forgiving, and that joy is our strength, as you see His hand extended to you in the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Because we know, believe, and obey His Word. Then the heads of all the houses gathered to study God's words (a model for daily family worship).

And they discovered the "Feast of Tabernacles" commanded by God through Moses, which had not been observed since the days of Joshua. So the people gathered branches and made temporary shelters or booths, as a reminder of their forefathers living in the wilderness after escaping slavery in Egypt. They kept the feast seven days, with public reading of Scripture every day. Then they held a solemn assembly. Many churches revive this practice today, as a basis for "days of prayer" for God's people to gather in repentance and prayer on behalf of families, churches, communities, our nation and world.

3- THE JOY OF CONFESSION - personalizing God's Word. Smith says, "in all our desperate searching for joy, God tells us there is none like that of knowing Him, being humbled in our sins, experiencing His grace, walking in wholehearted obedience." When you personally respond to God's Word with your whole being, heart, mind, will, this transforms your life. In chapter 9, the Israelites separated themselves, and stood confessing sins and reading from the Bible for a quarter of the day, "*then for another quarter they made more confession and worshiped the Lord their God.*" And people complain about a 1-hour service!

AW Tozer wrote, "we sin and do nothing about it. There is so little sense of need of repentance, so little burden for the will of God to be wrought in our national life. I pray often that God will send a revival of repentance and fear of God to sweep through our continent, that we may be spared and honor God." How can we know the joy of God's forgiveness without first coming to Him in repentance and faith?

4- THE JOY OF CORPORATE WORSHIP - gathering before God. In verse 5, as the service continued, the Levites stood and loudly shouted, "*stand up and bless the LORD your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be Your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.*" They praised God as Creator and Sustainer of all things, who is worshiped by the host of heaven. They praised God for making covenant with Abraham, and for keeping His promises in the Exodus and wilderness wanderings.

They rejoiced in God's provision and covenant love. And they confessed to disobedience. "*But You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast lovingkindness.*" They had cast God's laws behind their back, even killing the prophets who warned them. "*Nevertheless, You are a gracious and merciful God, who has been righteous in all your dealings, but we have acted wickedly.*"

5- THE JOY OF PERSONAL COMMITMENT - trusting and obeying. The people had fallen into the hands of their enemies, taken into exile. Now some had returned to rebuild Jerusalem, but they stated the stark truth: "*behold, we are slaves this day in the land that You gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruits. We are slaves and we are in great distress.*" Then verse 38, "*because of all this, we make a firm covenant in writing*" on a sealed document with the names of their leaders, a public commitment to change their ways.

Because they understood God's Words! As part of the covenant community of God, they made personal commitment to Him, in repentance and faith: To humbly and joyfully live out His truth in their own daily lives. Because God is true, and the joy of the Lord was their strength. Make it your strength today! ☐