



When great projects are completed there is usually a sense of joy. Little children are full of excitement when they stack the last block on their toy tower. Adults like the feeling that comes with finishing a project such as painting a room or roofing a house. When that last stroke or hammer is completed, we can feel as proud as a child who just finished stacking some Duplo blocks. Recall that last week we looked at the reconstruction which God works in hearts to prepare the way for his coming. Today we look at what God did for the people in Nehemiah's time to bring them joy after they completed a major renewal project. He leads us to celebrate spiritual renewal with joy.

Nehemiah had led God's people to complete a large project. He held an important position as cupbearer to the King of Persia. But his heart was not in this work. He heard of his fatherland and the city of Jerusalem lying in ruins. After securing permission and a number of men join him, he left to carry out a major project: restoring Jerusalem. He surveyed the decimated ancient walls of the city of Jerusalem. A massive project needed to be undertaken. Joined by a company of 40,000 people he began the restoration work. They faced many challenges including enemy threats. But they were so set on the task they were that they carried a sword everywhere to defend themselves. And in the other hand they never put down the hammer or stopped their restoration work. Finally, to the astonishment of their enemies, and with God's aid, they completed the project. The wall was completely restored in just 52 days!

But do you think Nehemiah felt he had accomplished his goal? Was the city of Jerusalem now restored? Something else needed to be done –and not with hammer and stone. The walls had been restored and renewed, yes. But now it was time for the real restoration work: spiritual restoration.

Nehemiah chapter eight records that spiritual restoration. They placed Ezra the priest on a pedestal and gathered all around him who could understand and hear. And Ezra began to read from the books of Moses. But these were no ordinary books. Referred to as "the book of the Law" these words were written by Moses under the command and divine inspiration of God. The reading of these words from God began the spiritual restoration of Jerusalem. Ezra the priest shared God's Word. The Levites and scribes helped by reading from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. Nehemiah essentially describes for us a large church service that ran from the break of day strait until noon.

This is how God does his building and his work of spiritual restoration. He uses his holy Word. It isn't enough simply to build a church, have nice programs for kids, youth, and adults, and fellowship halls. Even the most beautifully built or restored church is nothing without the spiritual restoration which the Word of God gives. Our Lutheran forefathers discovered this first hand. Magnificent cathedrals and building projects were going on in Martin Luther's time –that is one of the reasons why the Roman Catholic Church needed to charge people money for papers that said their sins were forgiven. They needed money from selling indulgences because of their magnificent church building projects! But the real building, Luther learned, is the one which is built with God's Word, not with stone and hammer. In fact, the Word of God is the only tool God gives us that works spiritual renewal.

The people who helped Nehemiah were no doubt happy about the newly restored walls of Jerusalem. But how did the work of spiritual rebuilding affect the people? *"Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, 'This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.' For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law."*

Their spiritual restoration began with weeping. To begin with, their lives had not been exemplary. I'm sure many were aware that they had not been living as their God-fearing parents or grandparents had once lived. They hadn't observed any religious festivals and had not even observed the Sabbath rest. Some, I'm sure, had no recollection at all about it meant to live as God's chosen people. They had been scattered and heavily influenced by the world around them. Sent from their homeland they experienced many things –including the unbelief of ancient Mesopotamia. And now they are hearing the full blunt of God's law! They responded with an "amen" to God's just commands knowing they have done anything but follow them! There is a good chance that they read God's warning given through Moses "Watch out that you do not forget the Lord your God! It will happen! And when it does you will lose the city, the temple, and your homeland." They knew, and now heard it clearly, that by their own very actions they deserved to be so lost and far off from God! God's Word cut them to the heart. And they had been weeping tears of sorrow and remorse as they listened to God's Word. "We have failed our God miserably! Forget celebrating this new city wall! Look at the mess we've caused!"

You can probably tell by all the decorations this time of year that something is up. One of the most celebrated Christian holidays is coming. Let's not forget what this coming celebration means for some. Some see Christmas and immediately realize their lives haven't been exemplary. They haven't been to church like they know their parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents often were. Some have been so long disconnected from the spiritual side of Christmas that they have lost all recollection of what it really involves. Surrounded by the culture of an unbelieving world –their lives have long reflected those around them. These are the people who feel at times that their lives have fallen far from God.

Sometimes our attempts to spiritually restore such people can leave them feeling rather down. “You have to come to church; your nephew is in the children’s program.” They might feel the same grief the Israelites felt, ruined. “I can’t really celebrate Christmas, that is for those godly churchy people.” When they should be rejoicing, they remain outcast and in despair. “How could God ever love or want me? Forget celebrating this Christmas at church. Look at my life!” Sometimes our best efforts at helping such people only toss more fuel on the fire, “Come to church this Christmas...after all you haven’t been attending like you should.” Soon Christianity is viewed simply as an obligatory showing up at a building once a week. They remain needing spiritual restoration and we remain frustrated. Like the crowd listening to Ezra in a restored city, they recognize their hearts need restoring. And what about us? If we were to reflect on the full force of God’s law, ought we not all to weep at the hearing of his Word because of our failures? Who can rightly celebrate at Christmas?

But we have the power to restore any who do not think they are welcome at God’s house this Christmas! The power of God for spiritual renewal! *“Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength, be renewed in his Word!”* When someone comes to understand the Word of God after a lifelong or extended separation from that Word, there is grief involved over sin. But there is far more reason for rejoicing! The people were to celebrate because in the “book of the law of Moses” they also found God’s rich grace for the sinner! God’s Word brought them to see their need for pardon. God’s Word would now build them to celebration of his grace. It was time for rejoicing!

Nehemiah said, *“Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”* The Levites calmed all the people, saying, *“Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve.”* Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them. And they wanted more of this Word! *“The very next day they gathered again. On the second day, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law.”*

Perfect timing! As it turns out there was a religious festival coming in under two weeks! Now they could prepare for the celebration! This was a celebration of God’s rich harvest and his rescue from slavery. They heartily carried out the preparation plans. *“From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.”* The people didn’t just stop at the point of spiritual restoration. They knew it was something that everyone continually will need. Listen to how they continued in gathering around the Word of their God: *“Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.”*

What made their joy so great at this festival? They knew their sin; they treasured their Lord’s grace. This festival, called the feast of the tabernacles, celebrated God’s rich grace for his people. They celebrated the harvest and gave thanks to God. They also commemorated the rescue from slavery as they lived in temporary booths. They were celebrating and thanking the God who rescued their forefathers—despite their rebellion and sin. And now in his grace, despite their rebellion and sin, God has restored the people once again. The walls of the city had been rebuilt. And it was done so fast and well that their enemies around them marveled, “Surely God has aided them!” They came to hear the Word of God and their hearts were also restored! They were now ready to celebrate the gracious provision of God for sinners!

We don’t celebrate this festival in the church today. It was prescribed for the nation of Israel who lived in the promised land. It was “for every native-born Israelite.” Such festivals no longer apply to us today. They all pointed and prepared the people of Israel for God’s greatest restoration! But we celebrate the same grace and deliverance of our God.

Christmas is a celebration of God’s rich provision for a world full of sinners. Just as the people of Nehemiah’s time didn’t deserve to have the city restored and their hearts restored, we didn’t deserve the restoration God has given us. But in his great love God himself came to this earth to build, not a church or temple, but an enormous undertaking—the restoration of God’s eternal kingdom. He left not just an influential position as cup-bearer to the king of Persia but left the eternal glory which he enjoyed. He took on human flesh. Facing not just enemies who threatened the repair of a wall, in our place he faced Satan who sought to stop the construction of God’s eternal kingdom. And in not 52 days, but in a single day he restored us to God. In a single day, as he suffered on the cross, he won the price of forgiveness of sins for all the world. All our sins are forgiven! Including those times we were not faithful to his word, including an extended time of separation from God’s Word, and even life-long ignorance and rebellion! For Jesus’ sake ours is now and eternal kingdom, whose foundations cannot be shaken! And when the disciples thought to grieve his death, he came to them alive to bring joy!

This is reason to celebrate! Christmas is about God coming to deal with our sin and invite us into his house. We have under two weeks now to prepare for the Christmas festival and its celebration. This event has many outward preparations, but of course we know that the real preparation and renewal is the spiritual side. We need the Word of God. This is what is necessary for renewal and joy this Christmas and for every moment and every day of our lives!

As we gather around that Word of our God this Christmas, whether we have had an extended absence, a momentary lapse, or even a life-long absence from listening to the Word of God, we will rejoice! Looking to the Word of our God we see the greatness of our sin and the greatness of his grace. He calls on us to rejoice and be glad. It doesn’t matter what your past has been. Today is the day to rejoice! This Christmas season is a time for spiritual renewal for those who grieve, and celebration for those who believe. Amen.