

6

PRAISE



What's a memorable celebration you've been a part of?

QUESTION #1

THE POINT

Serving God includes celebrating His great work.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Right before Easter, a news reporter asked me a simple question: “How do you tell the same story every year and keep it fresh?” She wanted to know how our church celebrated Easter every year without it getting old and tired. For the outsider, that’s a valid question. All over the world Christians reflect on their sins and Jesus’ death each year on Good Friday. Then on Sunday they move into a celebration of Christ’s resurrection. It’s the same story year after year: Jesus died for our sins and rose again to give us the victory of life.

I answered her question. “Every year my wife and I celebrate the birth of our children. It’s the same story, the same celebration, on the same day. Celebrating our kids’ birthdays never gets old. We look forward to it. It’s the same with Easter. We never tire of sharing the greatest story of all time.”

In the Book of Nehemiah the people moved into a time of worship and celebration. It never gets old to celebrate God’s work on our behalf.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Nehemiah 8:9-12

⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and 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 or weep.” For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” ¹¹ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.” ¹² And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

I like to watch TV shows about restoration projects. I enjoy the programs that show master mechanics and body technicians going through the process of restoring a classic car to showroom quality or craftsmen restoring a historic piece of furniture. But those programs are misleading because they take a long and difficult restoration process and reduce it to a thirty-minute or hour-long episode. I can just sit on my sofa and watch everything quickly fall into place.

Restoring the wall in Jerusalem took time, and so did restoring the people. Spiritual growth and discipleship cannot be rushed. It is God’s divine work, and it is carried out in His timing.

Restoration began for the Jews as they heard God’s Word. The reading of God’s Word convicted the people and they felt the weight of their sin. Scripture exposes our sin. When we focus on a holy God, as revealed in Scripture, we become aware that we are not holy. We become conscious of both the things we have done but should not have—sins of *commission*—and the things we should have done but didn’t—sins of *omission*.

What captures your attention about these verses?

QUESTION #2

These sins are not just “mistakes.” Making a wrong turn that makes you late for an appointment is a mistake. But sin is anything we do that is against God’s revealed plan and character. Sin is seen in actions and attitudes that place us ahead of God. The Bible describes sin as a stain that we cannot wash away (see Jer. 2:22); an overwhelming flood and a burden too heavy to bear (see Ps. 38:4); and a debt (see Matt. 6:12) that leaves us owing an infinite amount we cannot pay. Ultimately, our sin is an eternal betrayal against a holy God.

“All the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.” God’s Word prompted a collective realization that they had sinned against God. In repentance, the people began to turn away from sin and back toward God. They did not hate just the consequences of their sins; they hated the sins themselves.

God did not leave the Jews to wallow in guilt. His grace is evident in this passage. The people surely needed to grieve over their disobedience to God’s Word, but God did not leave them there. He forgave and restored them.

How do we know God forgave them? Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites instructed the people to do two things: Stop weeping. Start celebrating. God’s peace soothes the restlessness of ours sins.

That’s cause for celebration! The Jews in Jerusalem celebrated that day. The people understood the impetus by the call to celebrate, and their celebration was described as “great.” And “all the people” were included. No one was left out. The people sent portions of food to those who had nothing prepared, most likely those that were poor. Their celebration was both extravagant and generous.

This celebration represented big, bold steps for Nehemiah and the Jewish people. They had built the wall out of obedience to God, but this celebration was all about fellowship with God. We should celebrate too. As we turn from sin and turn toward the grace and forgiveness of Christ, we turn from sorrow to joy. We can celebrate the work of Christ.

***How can the joy
of the Lord be our
strength?***

QUESTION #3



Nehemiah 12:27-31a

²⁷ And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres. ²⁸ And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathites; ²⁹ also from Beth-gilgal and from the region of Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem. ³⁰ And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall. ^{31a} Then I brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall and appointed two great choirs that gave thanks.

In Nehemiah 12, the walls were dedicated with a large celebration, but recall what brought them to this point. When the process had begun, most of the walls were rubble; now the walls stood complete. The people stood restored as well. They had pushed back threats from enemies. They had resolved a major internal conflict between the rich and poor. They had worked tirelessly for fifty-two long days, at times with a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other. The presence of the Word of God moved them through grief to forgiveness and joy.

When has a time of worship been particularly meaningful for you?

QUESTION #4

And now they were dedicating the wall, but their celebration was as much about God's work in their lives, as it was the work on the wall. They became what they were celebrating. This dedication was as much about their spiritual condition as it was the condition of the wall. The broken walls at the beginning of the narrative represented their own spiritual decay. Now, the completed walls demonstrated their complete commitment to God.

The dedication of the wall included thanksgiving. Because of our human nature, we don't thank God enough. We can never fully appreciate or understand the depth of His work in our lives, but the more we see God's work, power, righteousness, and holiness, the more thankful we become. When we properly worship God, we are consumed with joy and thanksgiving. The people who are most focused on God are typically the ones who are the least irritable in their demeanor.

In addition to thanksgiving, the dedication also included purification. This purification process was a symbol of something occurring in the hearts of the people. The point of this dedication was not only to celebrate the completion of the walls, but a time for the entire community and everyone in it to be purified, set apart for God, and dedicated fully to Him.

The purification, the dedication, and celebration were things the believers did together. We cannot fully express the depth of our thanksgiving to God and then keep it to ourselves. Our worship has a richness and beauty that comes through the gathering of God's people. We see this at the wall dedication as the believers came from all over and sang together, accompanied with many different types of instruments. The people did not celebrate individually in their homes; they came together to praise God.

When they came together, they showed just how great is the One they worshiped. Earlier, during the building process, Tobiah had criticized their efforts. "Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!" (4:3). Yet, Nehemiah didn't bring a fox to the finished wall to prove Tobiah wrong; he "brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall." A group of leaders was praising God on top of the wall! It was a testimony to the sturdiness of God's promise.

God works through the obedience of His people. We can lay aside our sadness and celebrate God's restoration too. The joy of the Lord is indeed our strength!

How can our group incorporate this kind of celebration into our community?

QUESTION #5

WORDS OF PRAISE

Complete the acrostic with specific things for which you can praise God:

P-

R-

A-

I-

S-

E-

Write a brief prayer of praise for who God is and what He has done in your life.

*"The family of God is the choir,
and God is their audience."*

—KEITH GETTY

LIVE IT OUT

Every prayer, every act of service, and every moment in God's Word is a small celebration. How will you joyfully celebrate God's work?

- ▶ **Confess.** Write down any unconfessed sin. Reflect on how this sin offended God. Repent and thank God for His forgiveness in Christ. Shred or burn the paper as an act of joy.
- ▶ **Talk.** Talk with a friend, family member, or acquaintance who recently had reason to celebrate. Talk about the work and presence of God in what he or she experienced. Share a moment of joyful thanksgiving with him or her.
- ▶ **Invite.** Invite a neighbor or coworker to your home for dinner, someone who has never been to your home. Make a lavish dinner and demonstrate God's joy in your extravagance.



We can live lives of joy because of Christ's work in us. We have God's joy because the Holy Spirit sustains us. A key part of serving God is celebrating His work with praise!

My thoughts



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COMING IN FALL

Welcome Home: Connecting and Engaging People in Your Church

SUGGESTED FOR
THE WEEK OF

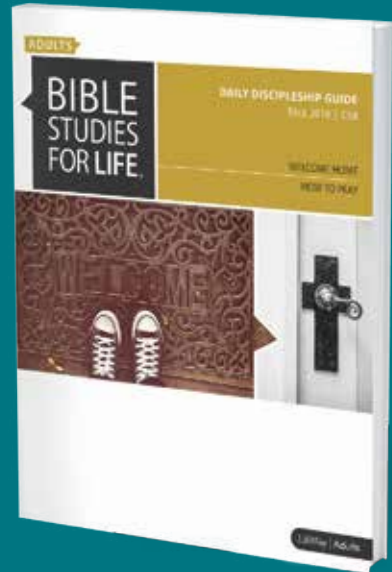
September 2	Session 1	Reality Check	<i>Titus 3:3-11</i>
September 9	Session 2	Open Arms	<i>James 2:1-10</i>
September 16	Session 3	Gracious Hospitality	<i>1 Peter 4:7-11</i>
September 23	Session 4	Intentional Love	<i>Luke 10:25-37</i>
September 30	Session 5	Authentic Joy	<i>1 Thessalonians 1:1-10</i>
October 7	Session 6	Going Out	<i>Acts 16:6-15</i>

How to Pray

October 14	Session 1	The Object of Our Prayer	<i>Matthew 6:9a; Psalm 103:1-5,11-13,19-22</i>
October 21	Session 2	A Prayer of Praise	<i>Matthew 6:9b; Psalm 96:1-9</i>
October 28	Session 3	A Prayer of Surrender	<i>Matthew 6:10-11a; James 4:6-10,13-17</i>
November 4	Session 4	Praying for Ourselves	<i>Matthew 6:11b; Isaiah 38:1-6,15-17</i>
November 11	Session 5	Praying for Others	<i>Matthew 6:11b; John 17:11-23</i>
November 18	Session 6	A Prayer of Confession	<i>Matthew 6:12-13; Psalm 51:1-7,10-12</i>
November 25	Session 7	A Prayer of Thanksgiving	<i>Psalm 138:1-8</i>

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Why Are We Here?

As adults, we would do well to keep asking “why” questions. Too many adults sink into an attitude that life is “just the way it is.” But *why* is life the way it is—and can we do anything about it? God’s Word provides answers—and with those answers comes hope and purpose.

Ken Braddy is manager in Groups at LifeWay Christian Resources and provides leadership to the teams that create LifeWay’s ongoing studies like *Bible Studies For Life*.



Nehemiah: Building a Life of Service

Following Christ is a life of ministry and service. This is a call for all believers. But what does that look like? How specifically do I serve? How do I practically carry out that ministry? Nehemiah gave us a great example of what serving looks like. He started a task, prayed and depended on God, and saw it through to completion, giving us a pattern for our own lives of service.

Sam S. Rainer III serves as senior pastor at West Bradenton Baptist Church in Bradenton, Florida. He is also the president of Rainer Research and co-founder of Rainer Publishing.

Coming Next Quarter

Welcome Home: Connecting and Engaging People in Your Church examines several principles from Scripture that move the church family to be a group that clearly and authentically communicates, “We’re glad you’re here.” This study was written by Thom S. Rainer, President and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources.

How to Pray is a seven-week study of the Model Prayer given to us by Jesus. The study is written by Kie Bowman, senior pastor of Hyde Park Baptist Church in Austin, Texas.

