

# 6

## Praise



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

QUESTION 1

*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.

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# WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

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## *Nehemiah 8:9-12 (CSB)*

<sup>9</sup> Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all of them, “This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law. <sup>10</sup> Then he said to them, “Go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, since today is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, because the joy of the LORD is your strength.” <sup>11</sup> And the Levites quieted all the people, saying, “Be still, since today is holy. Don’t grieve.” <sup>12</sup> Then all the people began to eat and drink, send portions, and have a great celebration, because they had understood the words that were explained 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. 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.

These sins are not just “mistakes.” Making a wrong turn that makes you late for an appointment is a mistake. Overlooking a bill that should’ve been paid last week 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 (Jeremiah 2:22); an overwhelming flood and a burden too heavy to bear (Psalm 38:4); and a debt (Matthew 6:12) that leaves us owing an infinite amount we cannot pay.

*How would you summarize what is happening in these verses?*

### QUESTION 2

"All the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law" (v. 9). 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.

"Do not mourn or weep" (v. 9) was followed by "Go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared" (v. 10). We are to grieve over our sin, but it's useless to grieve over sin that God has forgiven and removed. Christ imparts His righteousness to us so that we can move from the grief over our sin to the peace and joy of forgiveness and restoration.

That's cause for celebration! The Jews in Jerusalem celebrated that day; the party was lavish. Verse 12 tells us, "All the people" were included. No one was left out. The people sent portions of food to those who had nothing prepared, most likely to people who were poor. Their celebration was both extravagant and generous.

### ***Nehemiah 12:27-31a (CSB)***

**<sup>27</sup> At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, they sent for the Levites wherever they lived and brought them to Jerusalem to celebrate the joyous dedication with thanksgiving and singing accompanied by cymbals, harps, and lyres. <sup>28</sup> The singers gathered from the region around Jerusalem, from the settlements of the Netophathites, <sup>29</sup> from Beth-gilgal, and from the fields of Geba and Azmaveth, for they had built settlements for themselves around Jerusalem. <sup>30</sup> After**

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

### QUESTION 3

*When has a time of worship been particularly meaningful to you?*

#### QUESTION 4

**the priests and Levites had purified themselves, they purified the people, the city gates, and the wall. <sup>31a</sup> Then I brought the leaders of Judah up on top of the wall, and I appointed two large processions that gave thanks.**

We become what we celebrate. The first church I pastored was a hurting church. They had been through a few splits, and the membership had dwindled. Rather than focus on the negatives in the past, we started to celebrate. We celebrated every person who came to Christ. Over time, the tone of the church swung from negativity to celebration. We became what we celebrated, and the culture of the church shifted back to the gospel.

The Jews in the Book of Nehemiah had a similar experience. 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.

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 was only as important as people's dedication to God. If the people had completed the wall only to remain broken themselves, they would not have been much use to God. God desired a restored people; the walls were merely a way to encourage the people to return to Him with joy. The dedication was about what God had done in them, not what they had done over fifty-two days.

In addition to thanksgiving, the dedication included purification. "After the priests and Levites had purified themselves, they purified the people, the city gates, and the wall" (v. 30). 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 people did *together*. 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. "Indeed, even if a fox climbed up what they are building, he would 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 on top of the wall" (v. 31a). 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. As the Jews obeyed, we can celebrate God's provision. We can lay aside our sadness and celebrate God's restoration. We have no reason to stay dejected because God provides victory. The joy of the Lord is our strength!

***How can we help one another celebrate God's work more regularly?***

#### QUESTION 5

"God desired a restored people; the walls were merely a way to encourage the people to return to Him with joy!"

SAM S. RAINER III

## GOD RESTORES



***There are many ways to show our gratitude to God. Using the acrostic below, identify a few ways you can express your appreciation for who He is and what He has done for you. An example has been done for you.***

**T**

**Honor Him by participating in worship each week**

**A**

**N**

**K**

**S**

## LIVE IT OUT

How will you joyfully celebrate God's work?

- » **Confess.** Write down any unconfessed sin. Reflect on how these sins offend God. Repent and thank God for His forgiveness in Christ. Shred the paper as an act of joy.
- » **Share the joy.** Meet a friend for coffee or a meal this week. Find out what God has been teaching them recently and share about what He's teaching you. Recognize and celebrate God's ongoing work of restoration in the lives of His people.
- » **Celebrate.** As a group, make plans to gather for a meal together. Invite each person to come prepared to share one thing they'd like to celebrate. This will give your group a chance to recognize God's ongoing work in the lives of your group members and emphasize the importance of celebrating those things together.

A key part of serving God is celebrating His work with praise. Every prayer, every act of service, and every moment in God's Word is a small celebration. **We can live lives of joy because of God's restorative work in us.**



*My thoughts*



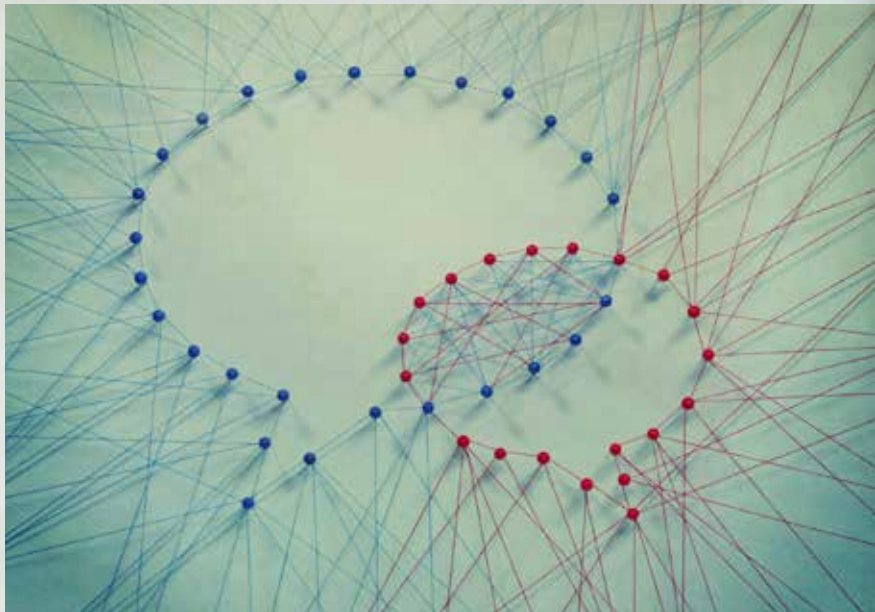
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## Endnotes

1 Kent Woodyard, "4 Giving Statistics Every Church Should Know," *Church Mag* [online] 13 August 2015 [cited 23 July 2017]. Available from the Internet at: <https://churchm.ag/giving-statistics-every-church-should-know/>

2 Daniel Akin, *10 Who Changed the World* (B&H, 2012), 29-46.

# Coming in Fall ...

## **Welcome Home: Connecting and Engaging People in Your Church**

<b>Reality Check</b>	Titus 3:3-11
<b>Open Arms</b>	James 2:1-10
<b>Gracious Hospitality</b>	1 Peter 4:7-11
<b>Intentional Love</b>	Luke 10:25-37
<b>Authentic Joy</b>	1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
<b>Going Out</b>	Acts 16:6-15

## **How to Pray**

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

