

How to Have a Happy Holiday

Nehemiah 8:8-12

Consider these words carefully: *“We wish you a Merry Christmas!” “Happy Holidays!” “Happy New Year!”* Each of these expressions portrays happiness and hope. But is this happy hope real? Maybe you have wondered is you should just say, *“Seasons Greetings,”* and that way everyone can interpret it any way they wish.

After all, how can you say *“Happy Holidays!”* or *“Merry Christmas!”* to someone whose loved ones just died? How is it that in the midst of tragedy, misery and grieving, it’s the right thing to do to wish them happiness and even merriment?

Lately in media, there has been a lot of talk about “fake news.” Some reporters believe that “fake news” twisted the results of the recent elections. But as we approach the Christmas season, we know that a lot of “fake news” has left people feeling empty. The world offers you a lot of shallow, meaningless wishes for wonderful holidays. That’s “fake news.” Is that the best we can do? Are these just empty expressions that somehow have a good end – and everyone gets to “live happily ever after!?” Isn’t it as if the “fa-la-la-la-la-la-la” is folly? If the most exciting part of the season is, *“I saw momma kissing Santa Claus, underneath the Christmas tree,”* then is there any real hope of happiness?

Holidays

The term “holiday” came to us from the expression “holy day.” In some cultures, it merely means “vacation.” But Scripture can help us fill our upcoming holidays with new meaning. The seventh month of the Jewish calendar was replete with holidays (see 8:2, 13-14, 18; 9:1). These remind us of our “holiday season” with special days including Thanksgiving, Christmas Day, and New Year’s Day. But how should we use our holidays, and how can they be happy? Consider the words of Nehemiah 8:9, **“And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha [governor], and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the LORD your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law.”** In this text, we learn that this holiday was supposed to be a happy event. But how could it be? In this verse, there is a reference to mourning and weeping. What wonderful message could turn people from sorrows to celebration?

The Book of Nehemiah

The name, “Nehemiah” means *“Jehovah comforts.”* Knowing that gives us a glimmer of hope in God. Nehemiah was the king’s cupbearer (1:11). This godly man wept and mourned for days (1:4-11) over the dilapidated state of Jerusalem. He confessed that God had rightly destroyed the city because of the sins of his fathers (1:6-8). The Chaldeans had destroyed Jerusalem seventy years before. But this man took heart in the promises of God (1:9). Nehemiah chapters 1-6 record the amazing transformation of the city. The walls were built by God’s people in fifty-two days (6:15-16) with the help of God! Chapter 7 described the census of God’s people and the gifts that they gave to the Lord. Then, in thanksgiving for God’s great blessings, the people longed to hear more of the Word of God (8:1-2).

When you look back on this year, or the last few years, what do you regret? How did your rebellion, and the consequences for your rebellion cost you dearly? Perhaps it is not your sins that are causing you grief. Perhaps you are suffering the consequences of sins committed by your fathers and grandfathers. Maybe you have been victimized by the sins of others. If so, how can it be that *“all is calm, all is bright”* when you

see only heartache? How can you sing, *“Joy to the World”* from your heart when you are weary with the weight of sin and the curse?

The Basics for Blessing

When you hear that command to rejoice from Governor Nehemiah and Ezra the scribe, doesn't it stir up a longing in your heart? Wouldn't it be great to turn from heartache to happiness, from sorrow to celebration? So how does one make this move from mourning to merriment? Jesus taught us, **“Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted”** (Matthew 5:4). Nehemiah illustrates how to do this.

Look at Nehemiah 8:1 to see what the people did. They gathered in unity **“as one man”** in the large public square near the Water Gate. (In the U.S., the term “Watergate” reminds us of a public scandal, leading to the resignation of President Nixon. But in Nehemiah 8:1, the “Watergate meeting” led to historic repentance and rejoicing!) But why did they gather at the Water Gate? What purpose did they have in mind? Verses 1 and 2 tell us that this unified group of people longed to hear the Word of God.

Let's see if we can set this up to clearly understand what happened. Verse 9 tells us that **“all the people wept when they heard the words of the Law.”** Why? Well, put yourself in their sandals. Think about their recent history. The Jewish people had rebelled, again. They had been punished by God, again. As a consequence of their ongoing rebellion, their capital city, Jerusalem, had been destroyed. All of these things were recorded in the Word of God. But the Scriptures also recorded God's promises to them, and they had seen God's grace with their own eyes. Out of the rubble, they had been able to rebuild. God had given them **“beauty for ashes”** (Isaiah 61:3). According to verse 8, they wept because they had clearly understood the Scriptures with the help of God's ministers. **“So they read in the book in the Law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.”** This ministry of the Word is vital for God's people. When God's messengers deliver the Word of God distinctly, giving the sense of the passage, their messages help people understand the reading. If we can attach all of your loving loyalty to the Word of God, then you can continue to serve the Lord long after your ministers are in heaven. And in the words of Nehemiah 8:3, **“and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the Book of the Law.”** Verse 1 says they gathered **“as one man.”** Something wonderful happened (according to verse 12), **“because they had understood the words that were declared unto them.”** From these verses, we learn a great steps to have a happy, joyous holiday.

❖ **With other believers, come together in unity to give careful attention to the preaching and teaching of God's Word. 8:1-5, 8, 9b.**

The meaningless message of the world will leave you empty. The message of God's Word helps you to rejoice, even in a world full of regret. How can this be? Remember that you can sum up the emphasis of God's Word and the Gospel with the acronym, “G.R.A.C.E.” The Old and New Testament Scriptures give us the Gospel of Christ which explains

- G – The Glory of God (Romans 11:36)
- R – The Rebellion of Mankind (Romans 3:23)
- A – The Awful Penalty for this Rebellion (Romans 6:23a)
- C – The Christ Who Paid the Penalty for man's rebellion (Romans 5:8, 6:23b, 5:17)
- E – Embrace Christ by Faith Today (Romans 10:9,13)

Yes, the message of the Word of God will cause you to mourn over sin (Matthew 5:4). When you remember the rebellion of mankind and the awful penalty for that rebellion, it brings you to the place of meekness and brokenness. But you will be comforted by the message of Christ. Ecclesiastes 7:3 reminds us, “. . . **by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better.**” When you understand the pitiful corruption of mankind, you understand how essential the promise of Christ really is. At Christmas time, we celebrate God’s **“unspeakable Gift”** (2 Corinthians 9:15). Jesus Christ showed us the greatest love when He **“lay down His life for His friends”** (John 15:13). His death, burial, and resurrection brought us through sorrow for sin to salvation in Him. With Him, we are now alive from the dead. This is the reason we can sing, *“Joy to the World!”*

How did the leaders and the people respond to the Word of God? **“And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with *their* faces to the ground”** (8:6). God had given His people His Word; His people responded to Him with heartfelt worship. Their “Amen” confirmed their determination to humbly obey God’s Word. When they heard the preaching and teaching of the Scriptures, they repented. Through instruction in the Word, they learned how to worship.

❖ **With other believers, worship the Lord with prayer and praise to God. 8:6**

But what has all this to do with having a happy holiday? The people had become reacquainted with God’s special revelation (the Scriptures). They had responded to that revelation with personal and national repentance. These events occurred on the first day of the seventh month, the day set aside for the Feast of Trumpets [*Rosh Hashana*] (now in our month of September). (See Leviticus 23:23-25.) The people were determined to obey God, and God had commanded that this day would be a feast day. It is considered to be the Jewish New Year’s Day. So what can we learn from the way they approached these holidays?

❖ **With other believers, learn to take on life with the joy of the Lord as your strength. 9-11**

■ Honor God with your holidays. 9

“This day is holy unto the LORD your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law.” If you want to have a truly happy holiday, give your days to the Lord. In the words of Proverbs 16:3, **“Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established.”** Give Him your holidays, and watch Him transform your heart. When you give yourself as a **“living sacrifice”** (Romans 12:1-2), you find *the “joy” of “Jesus and Others and You.”* From the Lord, you will learn to take joy from serving rather than always being served. **“For the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28)**

■ Make plans to make merry with good food and gifts. 10

“Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for *this day is holy unto our Lord:*” It is the Lord’s will for humbled people to have a joyous holiday with delicious food and beverages. And it honors God for us to share these good things with those who have very little. Those who are rejoicing in Christ at Christmas should do likewise – making merry with good food and gifts. This is not a Scriptural approval of gluttony. This is the God-honoring celebration of a special day.

■ Don’t let sorrow swallow up your celebration of the holidays. 9-12

Carefully consider these phrases in verses 9 through 12: **“Mourn not, nor weep,” . . . “neither be sorry,” . . . “neither be grieved.”** Instead, because **“the joy of the Lord is your strength,” . . . “make great mirth!”**

- Make these holidays the best ever -- rejoicing in your understanding of the Word of God’s Grace to you. 12

Now here at the end of the message, let’s raise the question again: how was this possible? How could the people turn from their national and personal sorrows to joyous celebration? **“because they had understood the words that were declared unto them.”** Through the promise of their matchless Messiah, they could meekly turn from their mourning to make merry. Jesus is the Reason for this season of rejoicing. Let us make merry! Merry Christmas and Joy to the World!

Immanuel, God Dwells with Men

Immanuel, God dwells with men
The Miracle of Bethlehem
For God gave us His Son, His Lamb
The sacrifice for sins of man
To save poor sinners, just like me
To save for all eternity
To bring His new adopted sons
To glory through His Promised One

How wonderful, this Counselor
The Mighty God and heaven’s door
The Everlasting Father: Christ
Who paid our sins’ most awful price
For unto us a Child is born;
The Son we greeted with our scorn
But His great reign shall never cease,
The everlasting Prince of peace

This King of kings and Lord of lords
Is Jesus Christ, the Living Word
His government shall never end
Through peace that He alone extends
Because He died for sins of men
And conquered death and rose again
So, He alone can end our strife
The Christ: the Way, the Truth, the Life.

Pastor Gordon Dickson, Calvary Baptist Church, Findlay, Ohio