

## Happy, Holy Days

Nehemiah 8

What comes to your mind when you hear these words: “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? Some people use the politically correct, “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 someone happiness and even merriment? Should you say, “Merry Christmas” to someone whose life is miserable and messed up with cocaine or cancer?

The world offers you a lot of shallow, meaningless wishes for wonderful holidays. Is that all there is? Are these just empty expressions that somehow life will have a good ending – and everyone gets to “live happily ever after!” Isn’t it as if the “fa-la-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, not to mention holiness? In the Scriptures, we read about happy, holy days. The first question that comes to mind for most people is this: *How can they be both? Happy and Holy?* Most people associate “holy” with “boring.” But the Scriptures unify consecration and celebration in a most remarkable manner. For instance, in Nehemiah 8, we can find specific steps to embrace happy, holy days.

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 (as we can see in Nehemiah 8). 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 8:8-10, **“So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused *them* to understand the reading. 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. Then he said unto them, 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: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”** In this text, we learn that this holiday was supposed to be a happy event. But how could it be? In these verses, there is a reference to mourning and weeping. What wonderful message could turn people from sorrows to celebration? If we can take hold of this, even horrid days, or days in the hospital, or days of heartache, can become happy, holy days.

### Overview: 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 devastated state of the city 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, what causes you to rejoice and 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 caused 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? Over these coming holidays, 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 “Water Gate meeting” led to historic repentance and revival!) 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 clearly to 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, explaining 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.”** In our present Sunday school series, we are studying the Psalms of Ascent. When we come to Psalm 133, we will see the joyous expression: **“Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”** (Psalm 133:1). From these verses in Nehemiah, we can learn a three great steps to have a happy, joyous holiday.

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

The meaningless message of this world will leave you empty. The message of God's Word will cause 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 this. We can use the Book of Romans like a “Romans Road” to share this good news with others.

- 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 (Matthew 5:5). 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. Then, you will hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:6). 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. Christ suffered death for us and rose again, **“that He might bring us to God”** (1 Peter 3:18). 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 in Nehemiah 8 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). This helps us to understand a second step to happy, holy days. God had given His people His Word; His people responded to Him with praise and 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.

## **II. Second Step: With other believers, worship the Lord with prayer and praise to God. 8:6**

These events in Nehemiah 8 portray the reality of the truth found throughout the Scriptures: God revives! Through the Scriptures, sinners and saints can be awakened to the precious reality of God’s truth. Zechariah predicted that there is a revival coming in Israel (Zechariah 12:9-13:1). The Lord will pour out the spirit of grace and supplication, **“and they shall look upon me who they have pierced, and they shall mourn for Him...”** (Zechariah 12:10). Returning to the Lord, they shall be revived.

But what has all this to do with having happy, holy days? The people in Nehemiah 8 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. So what can we learn from the way they approached their holidays?

## **III. Step Three: With other believers, learn to take on life with the joy of the Lord as your strength. 9-11**

### **A. 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 in 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)**

Don't forget the mistake the David made. He used his leisurely days in 2 Samuel 7 to honor God. Then God made a never-ending covenant with him, promising that the Messiah would be David's descendant! But four chapters later in 2 Samuel 11, David misused his leisurely days and made the biggest mistakes of his career: he committed adultery and murder! This should cause every one of us to think about how we use our leisure time. Are we going to live for our nerve endings or what is never ending?

**B. 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. Those who associate being holy with being boring are completely missing the point of Nehemiah chapter 8

**C. 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!”** This is why we can sing, “Joy to the World” and mean it! Don't let grief and sorrow dominate your holiday. Don't let sorrow have its sway; sing, rejoice in this holiday season!

**D. 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. They had happy, holy days and so can we. Jesus is the Reason for this season of rejoicing. Let us make merry! Merry Christmas and Joy to the World!



Pastor Gordon Dickson, Calvary Baptist Church, Findlay, Ohio

<https://www.cbfindlay.org/happy-holy-days/>