

Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,9-12

January 24, 2016

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What is the remedy for being SAD? It can be light. You could take a trip to the sunny south, lie on the beach and overcome your sadness. You could use light therapy. A light, with ever increasing brightness, can simulate a sunrise, driving away the gloom of night, overcoming depression.

That might work for some people. But here the prophet Nehemiah gives us another remedy. It's the theme for today's sermon. "The Joy of the Lord Is Your Strength." Joy becomes a descriptive word for us when we more fully understand the joy of our salvation as we become ever stronger through the Word of God.

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Nehemiah was moved to tears by his brother's description of this sad situation. And in his lament, Nehemiah prayed a beautiful, model prayer. There was no blaming God. The fault is all our own, Nehemiah confessed. This devastation of Jerusalem and the country around it was the direct result, Nehemiah said, of our sins and the sins of our forefathers. However, still conscious of God's pardoning grace, Nehemiah begged for God's mercy. Let me have the opportunity, Nehemiah pleaded with God, to ask the king for a leave of absence to return home to Palestine to assist my countrymen in rebuilding.

God granted him his request. And when the king gave Nehemiah an opportunity to make his appeal, before he asked anything of the king, he prayed again, asking God to give him the words of speak. And, when in answer to his appeal, the king granted it, Nehemiah prayed once more,

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And now with the walls in place, Nehemiah could turn his attention to his chief task, the rebuilding of the people's confidence in the Lord. And that is the scene before us in our text for today.

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As he read from a platform high above the people, scattered among the people were other priests and levites who helped the people understand what they were hearing. And, understanding what they were hearing from the Word of God, the reaction of the people was profound and sincere sorrow. They all wept, recognizing their sin and its condemning guilt.

They had obviously understood what they heard. Just like Nehemiah, they were acknowledging their sins. Their weeping was their confessions of sin's guilt. However as we learned to know it from Luther's Small Catechism, Confession has two parts. "One is that we confess our sins", as the people with their tears were doing here. "The other is that we receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the pastor as from God himself, thereby acknowledging that our sins are thus forgiven before God in heaven."

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For us to know that strength, to feel that joy, to end our sadness, as the people of Nehemiah's time were, we need to be strengthened through the Word of God. "The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."

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"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."

Celebrating with joy is work? Is it really? There is a very interesting word picture here in the original language and it goes back, first of all to the word, grieving. Grieving is hard work. When we are grieving, when we are filled with sadness and sorrow, everything we may do is hard work. Everything seems more difficult when we are sad. It's hard then to concentrate on what we are doing. Even things which normally are fun for us are no fun at all when we are filled with sadness. Grieving makes hard work of everything.

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Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,9-12

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Celebrating with joy is work? Is it really? There is a very interesting word picture here in the original language and it goes back, first of all to the word, grieving. Grieving is hard work. When we are grieving, when we are filled with sadness and sorrow, everything we may do is hard work. Everything seems more difficult when we are sad. It's hard then to concentrate on what we are doing. Even things which normally are fun for us are no fun at all when we are filled with sadness. Grieving makes hard work of everything.

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You see, for us, in this life, it's hard work to celebrate and be filled with joy. It can only really be done, as it was done here, if we remain strong in God's Word. Think, for example of these memorable lines penned by Martin Luther in his most famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress." "And take they our lives, goods, fame, child and wife. Let these all be gone. They yet have nothing won. The Kingdom ours remains."

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Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,9-12

January 24, 2016

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Are you sad? Or to ask the question another way, in winter do you suffer from SAD, Seasonal Affective Disorder? When days are the shortest, when there is more darkness than light, quite a number of people suffer a form of depression which has come to be known as SAD. They are sad, depressed. There is less joy and happiness in their lives.

What is the remedy for being SAD? It can be light. You could take a trip to the sunny south, lie on the beach and overcome your sadness. You could use light therapy. A light, with ever increasing brightness, can simulate a sunrise, driving away the gloom of night, overcoming depression.

That might work for some people. But here the prophet Nehemiah gives us another remedy. It's the theme for today's sermon. "The Joy of the Lord Is Your Strength." Joy becomes a descriptive word for us when we more fully understand the joy of our salvation as we become ever stronger through the Word of God.

Nehemiah was the trusted cupbearer; we might call him the butler to the powerful king of Persia, Artaxerxes. Nehemiah was living among the captive still remaining in Babylon but his brother had just come back from Palestine. He told Nehemiah about the sad state of affairs for the Jews living in Palestine. The wall around Jerusalem was still broken down, its gates had been burned with fire and the people living there were suffering great trouble and disgrace.

Nehemiah was moved to tears by his brother's description of this sad situation. And in his lament, Nehemiah prayed a beautiful, model prayer. There was no blaming God. The fault is all our own, Nehemiah confessed. This devastation of Jerusalem and the country around it was the direct result, Nehemiah said, of our sins and the sins of our forefathers. However, still conscious of God's pardoning grace, Nehemiah begged for God's mercy. Let me have the opportunity, Nehemiah pleaded with God, to ask the king for a leave of absence to return home to Palestine to assist my countrymen in rebuilding.

God granted him his request. And when the king gave Nehemiah an opportunity to make his appeal, before he asked anything of the king, he prayed again, asking God to give him the words of speak. And, when in answer to his appeal, the king granted it, Nehemiah prayed once more,

thanking God for having heard him.

Nehemiah, appointed governor of Palestine by the king, returned home. He was not prepared for the extent of the destruction he saw. By night he inspected the walls of the city. They were in such a state of disrepair that Nehemiah had to dismount from his horse as he sought to ride through the ruins. And yet despite all the destruction, harnessing the people for the task of rebuilding, in just 52 days the walls were totally reconstructed.

And now with the walls in place, Nehemiah could turn his attention to his chief task, the rebuilding of the people's confidence in the Lord. And that is the scene before us in our text for today.

"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 present scene has begun as part of a religious festival, the Feast of Trumpets, a New Year's Day type of celebration of joy. As one, the people had assembled in one of the city's squares. At the people's request, starting at daybreak and lasting until noon, Ezra, the priest, with the people standing before him all that while, read to them from the Law, the first five books of the Bible.

As he read from a platform high above the people, scattered among the people were other priests and levites who helped the people understand what they were hearing. And, understanding what they were hearing from the Word of God, the reaction of the people was profound and sincere sorrow. They all wept, recognizing their sin and its condemning guilt.

They had obviously understood what they heard. Just like Nehemiah, they were acknowledging their sins. Their weeping was their confessions of sin's guilt. However as we learned to know it from Luther's Small Catechism, Confession has two parts. "One is that we confess our sins", as the people with their tears were doing here. "The other is that we receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the pastor as from God himself, thereby acknowledging that our sins are thus forgiven before God in heaven."

Again, in Nehemiah's time, their weeping was their confession of sins. The celebration which Nehemiah urged upon them, with joy eating and drinking before the Lord, was the visualization of God's gracious pardon, their forgiveness. And so Nehemiah, their governor, commanded them to go, to eat and drink, to share God's bounty with others, avoiding any more grieving.

They were to eat not merely to satisfy their bodies' need for nourishment. It was to be a thanksgiving celebration, an opportunity to remember God's goodness to them. As they ate choice food, the fatness of the land, it was in fulfillment of the promise God had made to Abraham, promising him a good and fruitful land. As they drank sweet drinks, surely it was in reference to a land, as God had promised, flowing with milk and honey. And as they sent

portions of this goodness to those who did not have it, it was an ever present reminder that they, too, were undeserving of the God's bounty they were enjoying. They were not to grieve for just like the bounty of the earth they were enjoying today, one day the bounty of heaven would also be theirs, supplied by the mercy and grace of God. Surely the joy of the Lord should have been their strength.

For us to know that strength, to feel that joy, to end our sadness, as the people of Nehemiah's time were, we need to be strengthened through the Word of God. "The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."

As we heard before, as Ezra was reading the Word from above them, other priests and levites were among them, helping them to understand the Word. And now these priests and levites, were attempting to quiet the people, putting their fingers to their lips and saying to them. "Shh, be quiet, be still, stop your crying."

When our mothers or fathers, our teachers too, did that to us, commanding us to be quiet, they were telling us there was no good reason for the sad noises we were making. And here the Levites were telling them the same thing. This was a day sacred to the Lord, set apart for Him as a holy day. And because God had set them apart for himself, declaring them to be holy in his sight, forgiven by him, there was no longer any reason to grieve.

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