



FIRST THINGS

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
November 1 2009*

Picture a quaint English church like this one. It's the stuff movie weddings are made of – a stone exterior, wooden pews, high arches, even a bell tower. It's everything you would expect it to be – EXCEPT the fact that it is located on the 21st floor of a high rise hotel in Osaka, Japan.

It's all the rage right now for Japanese couples to have a traditional English wedding, so a hotel developer built a replica of the real All Saints Church of Brockhampton, England on two top stories of the hotel. They were meticulous about all the details, getting the lights and pews exactly the same, even scuffing up the stone work to match the original.

The only thing glaringly different is the ceremony itself. Weddings performed in the replica are strictly civil, with no pastor officiating and no Christian message. Apparently, most of the couples want the look of a church wedding without what really makes a church wedding a church wedding. It was a smart developer: The cost is roughly 20 times as much to rent the replica as the original, and it is booked solid into next year.

Now I'm not here to pick on young Japanese lovebirds. They can get married however they want. But when I heard about that story, I thought, here's a great metaphor about focusing on all the external things and missing the heart. So much attention to the form without the same attention to the substance. And that is what was going on with the people of Jerusalem back in the time of Nehemiah. As we've been talking about over the past few weeks, they were focused on rebuilding the city wall – getting all the stone work right down to the last detail. And they were doing a great job, overcoming incredible obstacles and opposition. But they had been neglecting something important, which was their relationship with God.

Chuck Swindoll says, "The purpose of the wall was not just to have a wall, but to contain, to protect and to identify the people of God...It is not enough to have a well-constructed superstructure if there is little or no life on the inside."

Fortunately, the people took it upon themselves to change. Whether it was sparked by the reforms we talked about last week or something else, the people began to have a hunger once again for the things of God.

Nehemiah 8:1-12

All the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

At this point in the story, the people have finished the work on the wall. The great project is complete. Anytime people go through something like that together, a certain amount of bonding takes place. You see that after mission trips, camps, reality TV shows...people who have shared an important experience look for a way to stay connected afterwards.

And the people of Jerusalem all come together down by one of the gates in a reunion of sorts. But for them, it's not just a chance to reminisce about memories from the wall. Something has been awakened inside of them. They are regaining their identity as the people of God, and they're ready for the next thing.

And they know just what that has to be. Even though they've been out of practice with spiritual things, there's a command from the book of Joshua that has been ringing in the back of their minds:

Joshua 1:8

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

The people realize that they have not been living up to that at all. So they call for the book to be brought out and read. You'll notice it wasn't Nehemiah ordering this to be done. It wasn't Ezra the priest telling the people "You've got to read God's word." The call for this action rose from the people themselves. There was something going on for them internally that prompted them to reach for God's Word.

Spiritual change can't be forced from the outside. The desire for it has to come from within. No preacher or teacher can put that in somebody's heart – it has to be a work of the Holy Spirit inside us.

One of my favorite things on the show Man vs. Wild is when Bear Grylls starts a fire from scratch. It never gets old. I am always amazed to see smoke become a spark which becomes a flame as he blows on the tinder.

It's no less remarkable to see how the Holy Spirit builds a fire from scratch in somebody's heart. We may not think there's anything but a tiny spark for God in our lives, if that. But as God's Spirit breathes into us, he lights a flame that only he can get going.

But the bottom line is this: If we're hoping for change in our lives, we can't depend on someone else making it happen for us, or someone else telling us what's required. The

work needs to begin from within. It is a direct interaction between each individual and God.

There's a woman I met several years ago named Penny. Penny wasn't relating much to what I just described. There didn't seem to be a whole lot going on in her heart that indicated any connection between her and God. Honestly, she didn't even know how much she really wanted something like that. So she began to pray, "I want to want the will of God." She prayed that for months. And then one day, she was brought to her knees realizing she DID want the will of God. And it was in that moment that she committed her life to Christ and began a new journey.

Maybe you're not really feeling on fire today. Maybe you don't sense God doing much of anything right now. Have you told God lately that you want to know him, or that you want to want to know him? Because we have a God in heaven who loves you and wants you to know him.

Something was happening internally for the people of Jerusalem, and they were eager to see what God had for them. I hope the same thing is happening here, too.

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

There are a few things I'd like to point out about this section. To begin with, Nehemiah tells us this took place on the first day of the seventh month. If I told you something happened on the 25th of December, you would catch on that I was saying it happened on Christmas. That date is so fixed in our culture that everybody knows it. And when Nehemiah says this happened on the first day of the seventh month, any Jewish person would have recognized that as being the Feast of Trumpets. It was a national holiday God had instituted back in the book of Numbers. We'll talk more about the significance of that in a few minutes. For now, just hang on to that bit of information.

The second thing worth noting is who came to this gathering, because Nehemiah mentions it twice in two sentences: It was the men, women and all who were able to understand. That means that kids took part in what was happening that day.

To me that highlights the fact that there is no age limit on who can desire to grow spiritually. If you can understand what's being said, you're old enough to have a genuine, meaningful relationship with God. And kids, I would challenge you the way Paul challenged Timothy: Don't let anybody look down on you because you're young, but set an example for the believers in life, in love, in speech, in faith and in purity.

Everyone in Jerusalem came together with the same desire: To hear God's word. And look what they did: They built a special platform for Ezra. This text is for all of you who laugh at my little wooden boxes I stand on. There's a precedent for it right here! Actually, Ezra's platform was more like a tower, specially built for the occasion.

This platform really did two things: First, **it put God's Word in the middle of life**. It was in a highly visible, prominent place where it can be easily seen. There's no chance anyone is going to walk past it without knowing it is there.

Up until this time, the Book of the Law had been around, but it hadn't been out in public. It was packed away in the priest's quarters or somewhere in the Temple. It was off in buildings devoted to religious occasions. Now it is being brought out into the much more heavily trafficked square, right in the middle of everyday life. They physically moved the book from the religious fringe to the center.

The second thing the platform did was **it put God's word above everything else**. The people are literally under it and have to tip their necks back a bit to look up and see Ezra as he reads to them.

Here's where I'm going with this: If we want to move deeper into the things of God, if we desire to grow in our identity as his people, it's going to come back to what we decide to do with the word of God. Not because that gives us rules to live by, but because that's what reveals Jesus to us – God's living word.

Our relationship to that word needs to reflect the same attitude the people had in this story. First, we move Scripture out of the religious fringes of our lives and into the public square. We give it a spot right smack in the middle of everything, where we keep bumping into it and can't get around it. Is it in our sights no matter where we are or what we're doing? Do we filter our thoughts and actions through the words of the Bible? Is that our touchpoint for the decisions we make and the way we treat other people?

It goes beyond giving more room to Scripture, because it also means placing ourselves under it the way the people did. By that I mean coming under its authority. Do we let God's word have the final say? Are we willing to submit to what we find there, even when it is uncomfortable and difficult?

I know one friend who had been listening to Scripture on CD when he became convicted that the practices of his company were unethical, and he needed to quit his job. It was a radical and risky move, but he was committed to letting the word of God serve as the

standard he measured his life by. And God totally honored that decision by providing for him and his family with a new job.

What platform are we giving to the Word of God? Does it have center stage in our thinking? The people of Jerusalem got it right by giving it their full attention.

The Levites -- Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah -- instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

There's something very comforting in knowing that even people who lived back while the Bible was still being written had trouble comprehending what the Bible said. It wasn't immediately clear when they heard it -- they needed help unpacking it. So you have all these Levites in addition to Ezra who are helping clarify what is being read.

I will tell you right now, there are plenty of places in Scripture that are mystifying to me. I don't understand WHY God included some verses. And when you come to a passage in the Bible that is hard to grasp, the normal tendency is to move past it in search of something easier.

But part of letting Scripture have authority in your life is committing yourself to really wrestling with what it says until you come to a place of greater clarity. Because if you genuinely believe the whole Bible is relevant to your own life in some way, then it means taking the time to figure out what exactly the connection is and why that passage is difficult for you. And often even the frustrations we feel over certain passages can reveal a lot about where we're at.

Just like all the Levites in that story, this church has all kinds of people who would love to help clarify Scripture for you. If you're needing resources, come talk to me. I'd be glad to make some introductions.

As the words began to make sense to the people of Jerusalem and the full weight of what Scripture said began to hit home, it had an amazing effect on them.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

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 Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."

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.

There was a story in the news about a month ago about a woman named Petra Hoffman. 38 years ago, she had a baby girl in East Germany. But because the father was an enemy of the communist government, the Stasi secret police came and stole the baby and gave her to another family.

For decades, Petra did everything she could to try and track down her daughter, but with no success. Then just this year, she got a call from her daughter, saying, "I think you're my mother." The two met for the first time and just cried and cried and cried. They were so glad to find each other, but there was also so much to grieve over what they had missed in each other's lives.

Can you imagine what finding each other after nearly 40 years of separation must have felt like? In the middle of the celebration, the sense of loss would be overwhelming. I think that is a somewhat similar emotion to what the Israelites experienced as they listened to the Law again for the first time. They were glad to reconnect with who they were, to hear God's special covenant with his children, but they had been living apart from it for so long. As wonderful as it was to be getting back where they belonged, there was this deep grief over just how long they'd been separated and how far they had strayed away.

It's a very understandable response. It makes sense that they would feel remorse and regret. In fact, that seems like EXACTLY the kind of response God would want. I know as a parent you always like to see signs that your kids are really sorry when they've done something wrong, and a few tears can be a welcome indicator of a soft heart. So Nehemiah's words to the people seem totally mystifying when he goes around saying, "Stop crying. Don't grieve. Today is sacred for the Lord." You would think that weeping would show that the people knew this was a sacred moment.

Instead Nehemiah tells them to celebrate and eat a big meal. Why would he reverse things so strongly?

I think there's a clue in the reference he made earlier to the calendar. Remember that this was the Feast of Trumpets, on the first day of the seventh month. That was marked off as a day of celebration and feasting and resting. They offered good smelling sacrifices, with the emphasis being on God's pleasure and enjoyment. The Feast of Trumpets was followed ten days later by what is known as the Day of Atonement. That was a day of fasting and repenting for sins. That was the day for confession and the sadness that goes along with it.

That was the order on the calendar, so the proper sequence of events was celebration first, repentance second.

Okay. So that may have been the calendar. Big deal, right? Why should it matter? Who really cares if the order of sadness and happiness gets flipped around?

I think it matters a great deal. When I was a kid, my dad was a big believer in spanking. Now I know some of you probably disagree with spanking and probably even more of you find it hard to believe that I ever needed correction of any kind as a child, but I did somehow manage to get my share of swats on the backside.

But I remember kind of thinking that if I could up the volume on my crying and screaming, I could probably get the punishment to end sooner. Maybe if I showed how much I was hurting it wouldn't go on so long. Little did I know that my dad always knew how many spanks I would get each time, and it was not many. He purposely would set a number so he would never be punishing out of anger. There was compassion in those swats. But my screaming wasn't the cause of his mercy.

Here's what I think is the crux of the matter: When we emphasize our own repentance and sadness as the top priority, then we get it in our heads that how much we grieve over our sin is going to determine God's forgiveness. If we can cry a little harder, maybe he'll go easier on us.

As the people of Jerusalem wept and mourned, it was running the risk of becoming a show to God of how deserving they were of his mercy, when that had nothing to do with it at all. Nehemiah pointed it out clearly when he said.

Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.

One commentator I read this week drew my attention to the fact that the word for strength there is migdal – which is a fort or stronghold for safety. So a more specific translation of that verse would be this:

Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your protection.

The joy of the Lord is your protection. God's own joy – not ours. It's not up to us to muster up feelings of joy so that we can feel stronger. It's his joy in saving his people that will shield us from destruction – not the intensity of our turnaround from sin. If the God of the entire universe delights in you, who can possibly steal you from his grasp? He guards us fiercely, and it is rooted in his joy.

How do you think about forgiveness when you sin? As you confess what you did to God and say you're sorry, do you think of him as making up his mind on the spot as to whether or not he will forgive you this time? If so, then it makes sense to focus on the intensity and sincerity of your own sorrow. Because a time might come when your apology isn't good enough and he will turn you down. That's a pretty precarious understanding of God's forgiveness.

But God decided long ago to secure our forgiveness once and for all. It doesn't hinge on us fully grasping the depth of our despair. Incredibly, it doesn't depend on our repentance at all. God tipped over the whole bucket of his mercy on the cross. Everything required to put us back in right relationship with him happened right there.

God's forgiveness of us lies in his choice to do so because it pleased him. Not because we asked him nicely and humbly enough. Not because we changed our ways, but because it gave him joy. It is the JOY of the Lord that is our protection.

Hebrews 12:2

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross...

There's a popular Christian worship song that talks about when Jesus was on the cross he was thinking about me above everything else. But that's really not quite true. He was thinking about his Father and the joy that came from doing his will and making the impossible possible. Me and my sin are not at the center of the plan – God's joy is.

If we get the order wrong, we miss out on just how radical and huge grace is. The shocking truth is that God chose to save us before we even thought to start crying over our sins.

Romans 5:8

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

God loved us first, just because he did. So repentance, that act of turning around, can't be an attempt to win God's acceptance. He's already given it. Instead, repentance is the follow up. It's the natural response of gratitude after the fact. The Day of Atonement comes AFTER the Feast of Trumpets, not before.

God always sounds that trumpet of grace before we feel compelled to change, not the other way around. That's why Paul told the Roman church,

Romans 2:4

...God's kindness leads you toward repentance...

It was good for the people of Jerusalem to feel the weight of their own sin. But it was better for them to realize that God was the one in charge of their redemption, not them. Being reminded of God's joy brought them back to the amazing reality that God loves us for no good reason at all, other than that he wants to and it makes him happy to do so.

Do you know and trust that God enjoys you? As P.T. Forsyth once said, "...do I know not merely that God is willing to forgive but that He has forgiven, that what is so incredible is equally unalterable?"

Nehemiah had a simple piece of advice for the people of his day to help them keep their focus on God's joy: Go eat.

Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared

The Parks family introduced us to a special Australian dessert experience called the Tim Tam Slam that involves these amazing cookies and hot chocolate. It's an over-the-top experience of chocolatey goodness that melts in your mouth. It's so good that we save it for special occasions and guests.

That's what we would have busted out on the Feast of Trumpets. It's choice food with a sweet drink. The food that makes our family happy and makes us think of celebration.

I think it's perfect that Jesus would choose to associate his death on the cross for us with a meal. Not just a meal, but a feast. And despite the sorrow that lay ahead, a feast always brings us back to joy – his joy as he willingly gave himself for us.

Just like God was calling the people of Jerusalem back to himself through his word, Christ is calling us back to himself. He hands you the choice food and sweet drink and says, "This is for you. Do not grieve. Today is a sacred. The joy of the Lord is your protection."

Zephaniah 3:17

*The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you,
he will quiet you with his love,
he will rejoice over you with singing.*

God is singing over you this morning. You might feel like those people of Jerusalem – distracted by good things that aren't the main thing. Maybe you've pushed God's word to the sidelines. You may be feeling the burden of guilt over all the ways you've let God down. Maybe you even feel that he is WANTING you to feel that way to pay for what you've done.

But in the words of Nehemiah, "Don't grieve. Not today. Today is sacred to God. His joy is where our healing begins. His joy keeps us safe. His joy gives us strength."

Are you needing strength today? Are you needing God's protection? Then come to the feast. Tell God you want to want to know him. He delights in you, he sings over you, and he's inviting you to join the song.