

THE JOY OF THE LORD AND HOLINESS

Nehemiah 8: 1—10

Focus Statement of Sermon: God has acted faithfully to his covenant and we must rejoice in that.

Function Statement of Sermon: To encourage followers to renew their commitment to God and rejoice in his faithfulness.

SCRIPT

Introduction

New beginnings are exciting. We are at the start of a new year and we are excitedly looking forward to it. We make resolutions for the year... and... God knows what happens to them. Have you ever asked yourself why some people don't usually achieve most of the resolutions they make at the beginning of the year? I remember some years back when I wrote down my resolutions in my diary. I remember that by the time we got to June, I had forgotten some of them. New beginnings are exciting! When it comes to the people of God...

Move 1

Every new beginning must be accompanied by covenant renewal.

- Coming back from exile was a new exodus that required remembering God's faithfulness.
 - In Exodus 12, we read a story of Israel preparing to be freed from being slaves in Egypt.
 - On the night of their freedom, God commands them to observe Passover as a celebration of their liberation.
 - He then tells them that the seventh month will be the first month of their year.
 - At the start of the seventh month, they must remember God's powerful act of liberation, and celebrate.
 - In the text we just read, the people had just come back from exile in Babylon.
 - In Babylon they were treated as slaves in the same way as in Egypt.
 - They were taken away from their homeland where they could worship freely.
 - The exile in Babylon was like slavery in Egypt.
 - Coming back from exile was very much like coming out of Egypt all over again.
 - So, on the seventh month of their coming back, they observed a new beginning because it was a new year.
 - They must begin the new year with a celebration of God's faithfulness in the past.
 - This history of God's faithfulness is what must lead them into the future.
 - The God who was faithful before is the same God will be faithful even now and forever.
 - Because God has been faithful, we can trust him to be faithful even moving forward this year.
 - Today is a day of remembering God's powerful acts of salvation and liberation.
 - He did all that because of his faithfulness... so that his name may be honoured.
- New beginnings must be marked by a commitment to not repeat the mistakes of yesterday.
 - The exile happened because the people were not faithful to the covenant with the LORD God.
 - They were unfaithful to the covenant in two ways:
 - They worshipped other gods.

- Failed to promote justice and love for each other, especially the poor, widows, orphans, and foreigners.
- These two things are the cornerstone of what the whole message of Scripture is about.
- Jesus summed it up by saying the two greatest commandments are to love God with everything you are and love the next person as you love yourself.
- Israel failed to do that... and God allowed Babylon to wreak havoc on them.
- When they come back from exile, there seems to be a commitment to become better than before.
- They tell Ezra, the priest, to bring the book of the instruction which God had given to Moses.
- The people are committed to learning again what God requires of them so that the exile would not happen again.
 - Their commitment is also shown in that they brought everyone—both men and women—who could understand.
 - The phrase “men and women and all those who could understand” is repeated twice in this passage.
 - The children old enough to understand may have also been included.
 - Because it takes everyone in the community to be faithful to God.
 - When the reading was done, Ezra and the Levites explained what the reading meant.
 - In verse 8 we are told that the people “understood the reading.”
 - It is not important that people hear the word of the Lord.
 - People must understand what is being said.
 - Those who can understand must give themselves time to learn so that they can understand.
 - Studying the Bible alone is good...
 - But studying it with others who are gifted and skilled in explaining is even more important.
- We must be people who constantly remind each other what covenant faithfulness looks like.
- We must know and understand what God requires of us.
- We must be committed to not go back to the mistakes of the past.

New beginnings offer us an opportunity to renew our covenant with God so that we can become better covenant partners than we were before.

Move 2

Choosing to be a better covenant partner means confronting ourselves about who we currently are.

- When Ezra read the book of instruction, the people wept.
 - The text does not say why they wept.
 - We are not even told from which book Ezra read.
 - What we know is that when the reading and explanation were done, whatever they heard brought them to tears.
 - It looks like the reading brought the people face to face with how far they were concerning their faithfulness to the covenant.
 - As much as we don't know the exact text from which they read, Deuteronomy 31 seems most likely the place.
 - The whole book of Deuteronomy happens when Israel is about to enter the Promised Land.
 - The book is like a collection of sermons Moses gave to Israel as they were about to inherit the promise of God.

- The book is a reminder of the kind of people they must be when they receive God's promise.
- Chapter 31:10 says, "*Moses commanded them: 'Every seventh year, in the scheduled year of remission, during the festival of tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this instruction before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women, and children, as well as the aliens residing in your towns—so that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God and to observe diligently all the words of this law and so that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess.'*"
- If the reading was from Deuteronomy, the people must have heard:
 - "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*"
 - They also must have heard, "*The LORD your God you shall fear, him you shall serve.*"
 - Also, they could have heard, "*Do not put the LORD your God to the test.*"
- Is it any wonder that Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy many times in his life?
- This is the book of remembering who we must be as a people.
- Hearing these words may have made them realise that they had not done this... and that they were not doing it even now.
- When we commit to becoming better covenant keepers, we must also be open to realise the ways in which we are unfaithful covenant keepers.
 - True transformation happens when we realise our failures.
 - God's word confronts us face to face and we realise our flaws, mistakes, acts of rebellion, and stupidity.
 - We must face this... and not run from it.
- But, we must also not stay there... because life and communion with God is a life of joy.

Move 3

Holiness and faithfulness are not marked by sorrow and weeping.

- Becoming better covenant keeps does not mean we must always be gloomy, sad, and sorrowful.
 - Realising our failures is a means to an end, not the end itself.
 - We are not called to stay at the place where we realise how unfaithful we have been.
 - We are called to the place where we rejoice in the faithfulness of God.
 - When Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites realise that this covenant renewal activity is becoming like a funeral, they tell the people to stop crying.
 - They say, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep."
 - The central part of covenant renewal is focusing on how God has been faithful.
 - You will remember that the seventh year was a year of remembering the exodus—how God had freed Israel from slavery.
 - Now, the ceremony was for remembering how God had brought them back from exile in Babylon.
 - There is no need to mourn or weep.
 - This is a moment of celebration... even though they may also realise their unfaithfulness.
 - The whole point is that God has been faithful.

- How thankful am I that God is more faithful than I am.
 - If it all depended on my faithfulness, many things would not happen.
 - If it all depended on my faithfulness, many things would go wrong.
 - I am grateful that God is faithful to his word... and I can celebrate that.
 - The people are told to *“Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”*
 - In essence, they are told to go and throw parties.
 - In their parties, they must also invite those who do not have anything to feast on.
 - Holy parties are based on God’s generosity to us as we extend that generosity to others as well.
 - Holy parties are not self-centred but are “other-centred.”
 - When we have fellowship meals, we relive God’s grace for us outward to others.
 - We remember that there was a time when we did not have... and God gave to us.
 - Now we extend the same grace to those who have nothing.
 - It is only then that a party becomes holy.
 - Where there is the joy of the LORD, there is holiness.
 - The holiest people are the most joyous.
 - Their focus and strength are not in their faithfulness but God’s faithfulness.
 - That is why they are joyous.
 - Even though they must be faithful, they don’t base their lives on their faithfulness.
 - They keep their minds on God’s love and faithfulness.
 - As you sit here, you may have remembered how unfaithful you are to God.
 - I know I saw that in me as I prepared for this sermon.
 - When God’s word reminds us of our unfaithfulness, that’s good.
 - But... we must not live our lives focused on how horrible people we are.
 - Rather, we must live focused and celebrating God’s faithfulness.
 - We must choose to live joyously because God has been great.
- The Table of the Lord is a place of celebration and joy.
- This evening we are invited to the Lord’s Table to remember his faithfulness.
 - This is not the time to remember our sins and cry over them.
 - This is not the time to “examine ourselves” to see how many sins we committed this week.
 - This is not the time to examine ourselves to determine whether we are worthy to sit and eat with King Jesus.
 - This is the time to honour the invite of the King to sit, eat, and drink with him.
 - This is the time to celebrate what the king has done for us.
 - This is the time to celebrate his faithfulness.
 - So, I invite you:
 - To eat together.
 - To laugh together.
 - To celebrate together.
 - To drink together.
 - And after you have done that, to look for ways in which you can share with those who are not here.
 - Look for opportunities to give those who do not have because God has given to us when we did not have as well.