

The Missing Jewel

Ezra – Under the Good Hand of God – Part VII

Ezra 6:13-22

Introduction

Let us start with the bad news!

The truth is, the church of Jesus Christ often seems to be anything other than a place of joy . . . a fellowship of joy. . . a place characterized by joy. In fact, a survey taken by the Gallop organization, several years ago, uncovered the truth that sixty percent of unchurched people considered the church, not as a place that enabled people to enjoy God, but rather as an organization that simply tried to support itself and preserve its past.

Whether we want to admit it or not, the church is its own worst advertisement. Why would anyone want to join a group of people who are characterized by one author as, “A group of people who seem to be seasick through their entire voyage of life.”? Self-centered, self-absorbed, self-engrossed with our own discouragements, aches and pains, we are a people who seem unable to contain or exude any joy at all.

Where is this life that Jesus Christ said, in John, chapter 10, verse 10, could be ours that is not just life, but life more abundantly? If you ask the average Christian, “Do you have joy?” he would, if transparent enough, hang his head and say, “No.”

That little chorus, “I’ve got the joy, joy, joy down in my heart,” is left for children to sing – because children seem to have it.

One author wrote that “worship is the missing jewel of the church”.

While I would agree in part, I believe that,

1. worship is action, but joy is the attitude behind the action, and

2. worship is ministry, but joy is the motivation that moves us to minister.

William Barclay wrote,

A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms . . . the Christian is a person of joy; the Christian is the laughing cavalier of Christ.

The scriptures tell us, in Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 2, that the cross work of Christ was motivated by joy,

. . . who for the joy set before Him endured the cross . . .

Peter wrote, in I Peter, chapter 4, verse 13, that the believer, even in the midst of suffering, could experience an exceeding great joy.

Paul implied to the Thessalonian believers, in I Thessalonians, chapter 5, verse 16, that they were capable of rejoicing continually.

He also defined the kingdom of God, in Romans, chapter 14, verse 17, with these amazing words,

for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking [material things], but righteousness and peace and joy . . .

Yet, that very ingredient, missing in many believers’ lives; a quality that supposedly sets us apart from the rest of the world, a sparkling jewel which attracts a needy, dissatisfied, unfulfilled world – is joy.

The missing jewel of the church . . . is joy!

Where can joy be found? How can it be excavated from the hard rock of human experience?

How can it be discovered when it lies buried deep beneath the common clay of life?

The answer is found in the book of Ezra, chapter 6. If you have a pencil or pen, you might underline a word that appears two times in the verses I am about to read – it is the word “joy”. Look at verse 16.

And the sons of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.

Then at the end of the chapter, in verse 22,

And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy . . .

Let me give you several clues to help you in your search for joy.

Joy Is Discovered In Our . . .

1. First – joy is discovered in our submission.

Let us start with verses 14 through 16.

And the elders of the Jews were successful in building through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. And this temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. And the sons of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.

They finished the building according to command.

The key words in verse 14 are,

. . . they finished building according to the command of . . . God . . .

When you submit to the will of God and then finish it, there is incredible joy.

“Joy” translates a Hebrew noun that denotes deep-seated gladness emanating from the heart – the soul. It is not a trivial, happy go lucky feeling, it is a deep, resonating gladness over accomplishment.

Someone stated the difference this way,

Happiness is kissing your girlfriend; joy is celebrating your fiftieth wedding anniversary.

I was on the phone, recently, congratulating a couple from our church. Six years ago, he waved goodbye to his career in finance, packed his wife and

two children up and drove to Dallas to enroll in seminary. Last night, he graduated; he finished. It has been hard and they are still living on the edge, but I can tell you, their voices were filled with joy.

Joy is not necessarily easy, but it waits for you at the end of the road called obedience. The children of Israel, in these verses, are celebrating the dedication of their finished temple . . . and they are celebrating, as verse 16 says, with joy.

Joy is discovered in submission to the will of God.

Joy Is Discovered In Our . . .

2. Second – joy is discovered in our confession.

Continue to verses 17 to 20.

And they offered for the dedication of this temple of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, corresponding to the number of the tribes of Israel. Then they appointed the priests to their divisions and the Levites in their orders for the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses. And the exiles observed the Passover on the fourteenth of the first month. For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were pure. Then they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, both for their brothers the priests and for themselves.

They offered sacrifices and the Passover lamb.

Sacrifices are offered, sin is admitted, and the grace and mercy of God is remembered. And would you note, in verse 17b,

. . . and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats . . .

the twelve goats correspond to the number of the tribes of Israel.

I point that out simply because there is an interesting theory, held by a number of cults, called the British Israel Theory. The theory basically states that, since the tribes of Benjamin and Judah are the only ones specifically mentioned after the captivity, the other ten tribes became lost. Lost, that is, until they surfaced in Britain and later came to America, eventually settling in Utah and other places. It is a theory that basically makes white Anglo-Saxons a special race and class of people belonging to God as His covenant people.

The book of Ezra puts that theory to rest – or should. By the end of the captivity, the term “Israel” had become synonymous with the term “Jew” or “Hebrew”. And throughout the book of Ezra, all twelve tribes are represented.

In chapter 2, verse 70,

. . . all Israel [lived] in their cities.

In chapter 8, verse 35,

The exiles who had come from the captivity offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel: 12 bulls for all Israel . . .

Here in chapter 6, verse 17,

. . . 12 male goats, [were offered] corresponding to the number of the tribes of Israel.

If you are still not convinced that ten tribes were not lost, the New Testament book of James puts the final “nail in the coffin” of that theory by beginning with the inspired words,

. . . to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad, greetings.

There were not ten lost tribes then, nor are they now somehow absorbed into the white race of British peoples, some of whom supposedly came over to America on the Mayflower. That theory cannot hold water any better than British ships could hold their tea outside of Boston.

Joy Is Discovered In Our . . .

My third point is taken from verse 21,

And the sons of Israel who returned from exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to join them, to seek the Lord God of Israel, ate the Passover.

3. Third – joy is discovered in our preoccupation.

They came to seek the Lord God of Israel.

They came to seek what? Joy? No! They came to seek the Lord God of Israel.

I imagine that the greatest thief of joy is our preoccupation with something other than the Lord. Some are preoccupied with the past, while others are preoccupied with the future.

Preoccupation with the Lord means that, when you remember your past, you see His blood cleansing and forgiving. When you are tempted to be anxious

about tomorrow, you look into the future and discover He has already been there and has returned to tell you that He will shepherd you through it

Lewis Timberlake was driving through North Carolina on his way to a speaking engagement. As he neared the town where he was scheduled to speak, there was a sign posted at the city limits which read,

We hear there's a recession coming. We've decided not to participate.

The world is preoccupied with everything but the pre-eminent One. The believer needs to post a sign that says, “I have chosen not to participate. I am choosing instead to be preoccupied with God, here and now!!”

David Elkind recorded this interesting moment,

I remember visiting my middle son's nursery school class, at the request of his teacher, so that I could observe a “problem child” in the class. It so happened that I was sitting and observing a group of boys, including my son, who sat in a circle nearby talking. Their conversation went like this: One child said, “My daddy is a doctor and he makes a lot of money and we have a swimming pool.” Another child chimed in, “My daddy is a lawyer and he flies to Washington and talks to the President.” Yet another boy said, “My daddy owns a company and we have our own airplane.” Then my son said something that could not be topped. With a proud look in my direction, he said, “My daddy is here!”

That little boy was experiencing joy. Joy is the product of a relationship with your Heavenly Father, Who is here.

The question then, is not, “Do you have joy?” The question is, “Do you enjoy Him? Are you preoccupied with Him?” Your Father is here . . . now!

Joy Is Discovered In Our . . .

4. Fourth – discovering joy is a matter of our perception.

Look at verse 22,

And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the Lord had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

The Lord turned the heart of the king.

Oh, do not think for a moment they had missed it. They had already learned from Zechariah that nothing accomplished for the kingdom of God is accomplished by the power of man.

Notice verse 22b again,

. . . for the Lord caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work .

..

That is the proper perception of what really happened! As Zechariah said, in chapter 4, verse 6,

“Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit,” says the Lord . . .

Joy = Good Looks

Joy has everything to do with good looks!

Hebrews 12:2

As Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 2, says,

fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith . . .

Titus 2:13

And Titus, chapter 2, verse 13,

looking for that blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus;

Joy is not syrupy smiles and “amens” all the time. We do not deny moments of sorrow and feelings of sadness, but there is a difference between sadness and grimness.

Can you celebrate when life is not perfect? Ezra, chapter 6, says, “Yes.”

As Christians, we have joy in our hearts in a mixed up world, because we know how the story ends.

Hayden Planetarium, in New York City, ran a bogus advertisement in New York newspapers. They invited those who would like to make the first journey to another planet, in order to live there, to submit an application. Within a matter of days, over 18,000 people applied. The applications were then handed to a panel of psychologists to evaluate. Upon reviewing them, the panel concluded that the vast majority of those who applied were simply so disillusioned with life on this planet that they hoped to believe they could start a new life on another one.

These were ordinary people, not society drop outs or strange fanatics of Heaven’s Gate type cults. But, as one author wrote, “These were people who had discovered that life was not producing joy and fulfillment, even as they possessed more and more things. And, when they even searched out an answer from the neighborhood church, they discovered that the church had nothing of hope to offer them either.”

We will never convince the world that we have the answer, if we are not convinced ourselves. And, even if we are, we will never sound convinced without this missing jewel called “joy”.

Walter Knight wrote,

Joy is the flag that flies over the castle of our hearts announcing that the king is in residence today.

That says it all:

1. submission
2. confession
3. preoccupation
4. perception.

Is the King on the throne of your heart? When the King is on His throne, you can . . . you will . . . fly the flag of joy.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/2/1999 by Stephen Davey.

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