

We end our Summer Series called *Revive: A Summer of Blessing and Growth*. In our series, we looked at five spiritual practices, one each week. Five spiritual practices God gives us with which to arrange our lives that lead to spiritual formation. Practices that help us to be present with Jesus, equip us to become more like Jesus, and that helps us to do things Jesus himself did when he walked the earth. Here is a list.

Spiritual Practices that Help us Grow

The practice of **Solitude**—Our challenge was to set aside extended times to be alone with God. Powering down from tech, disconnecting from people and spending even one hour alone with God on a regular basis. Going to a place to be silent and available to hear from him.

The practice of **Scripture**—We learned Scripture is alive. We learned the importance of being in God's Word regularly, to read it, meditate on it, and invite the living word into every corner of our lives. We learned Scripture is not intended to be informational; it's intended to be transformational. When we open God's living word and open our hearts, the Spirit of God takes biblical truth and applies it, so Scripture literally changes us.

The practice of **Prayer**—We learned the importance of talking to God as well as listening to God. We learned the practice of prayer aligns us with the will of God and prayer changes things. God chooses to move and change outcomes through the faithful prayers of his people.

The practice of **Community**—We learned we are meant to live life and practice our faith in close relationship with a smaller group of fellow followers of Jesus. We can't form spiritually unless we are connected to a smaller group in a safe place, a genuine community where we work out issues of faith and life together in a smaller community group setting.

The practice of **Service**—We learned the greatest servant was Jesus. And we are called to serve others as he served us. And we grow spiritually when we practice service using our gifts and talents to serve the church and the wider neighborhoods up and down this peninsula.

We end our series with something called the spiritual practice of **Celebration**.

You might be asking why on earth would we devote an entire teaching to developing the spiritual practice of celebration. Isn't celebration something we do naturally? Who doesn't want to

celebrate? The idea of needing to practice celebration doesn't seem to make sense.

Let's think about why anyone celebrates. What makes a celebration really pop is when we have a compelling reason to celebrate. Otherwise, it's just a party. We celebrate milestones like birthdays or anniversaries. We celebrate holidays because of the meaning behind them. We celebrate accomplishments like graduations or job promotions. We celebrate those who overcome great obstacles or adversity to achieve something wonderful. We need a reason for celebration. We love to help others celebrate their achievements.

So what makes a celebration truly joyful? When our celebration is rooted in some compelling reason to celebrate. In Nehemiah chapter eight, we learn about the practice of celebration. We learn celebration is a directive from God and celebration rooted in a compelling reason strengthens our faith.

The book of Nehemiah was one of the last books written in the Old Testament, about 450 years before Jesus was born. Years earlier, the Babylonians invaded and defeated Israel and exiled most Jews to Babylon. Later, the Babylonian empire fell to the Persian Empire under King Cyrus the Great. Cyrus began to let Jews return to their homeland and rebuild the city of Jerusalem and even rebuild Solomon's Temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians. It wasn't as fancy a temple as Solomon's, but it was their temple. After King Cyrus died, another Persian King allowed a Jewish priest and scholar named Ezra return to Jerusalem to rebuild the people and teach them their history from the Law of God.

After Ezra went to Jerusalem, Nehemiah, another Jew, who served as cupbearer to King Xerxes heard the city of Jerusalem was in danger and he asked his king if he too could go to Jerusalem and build a wall around the city. The king agreed, and Nehemiah managed an amazing construction project that erected a wall around the entire city of Jerusalem in just 52 days. While the people worked on the wall, they had to keep one eye on the wall and the other eye watching out for attacks from their enemies. Under all this adversity, God brought completion of the task, and they came together to celebrate.

[When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns,] all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. (Nehemiah 8:1)

Scholars would tell you that there were between 75 and 150 thousand people gathered around the newly built Water Gate on the east wall of the city by the Gihon Spring. Of the thousands of people gathered together, most were raised in pagan Babylon or Persian cultures; they had likely forgotten the Law of Moses, or never even heard it before. Most were two or three generations removed from regular worship in the temple. But they knew God had shown up in their generation, and they saw a new wall, a new city, and a new temple. They were hungry to learn more about Moses, Joshua, the Judges, and the kings who ruled over their ancestors, so they insisted that Ezra teach them.

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 day-break 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. (verses 2–3)

There was more than a wall that needed to be rebuilt in Jerusalem. The citizens needed to be rebuilt spiritually. Their ignorance was killing them. Unless they would learn their story through their Scriptures, their identity as a nation could never be re-established, and they risked melting away into the cultures around them. They would have no religious and national identity without the Scriptures.

Ezra the teacher of the Law 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. (verses 4–6)

Ezra likely opened a scroll probably containing the book of Deuteronomy, which described the covenant with the children of Israel. A covenant established by God when they first entered the Promised Land. Imagine how these exiled people who had sunk into the pagan cultures around them, must have felt to know because God loved and chose them, they truly had a future, an identity, a purpose, and a hope. Their minds were being renewed by God's Word, their hearts were softening, and their wills were turning toward obedience to God.

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 understood what was being read. (verses 7–8)

The people must not have understood what Ezra was preaching, so the Levites broke them down into smaller groups, oh let's just call them community groups okay? So in these "sermon based" community groups, they unpacked the Law of Moses, discussing, explaining, and answering questions. They were patiently trained by Ezra and the Levites to be followers of God. Ezra and the Levites were helping the people to become spiritually formed.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy 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. (verse 9)

God's Word moved them to tears. Weeping isn't always a sign of repentance, but it was in this case. These people were weeping because they had "finally understood" God's holy standard and applied it to their lives and in response, they mourned their sin.

So after a time of weeping and mourning, Ezra told them to stop. I could see him saying to them, "You now know you need God to save you. Let me tell you about God's faithfulness to you, his children, whom he loves, whom he provides a way to grant you forgiveness and peace with God through worship and sacrifice in this temple over here."

So Israelites, people of God, understand what God did to deliver you. Understand what He delivered you from, and what He delivered you to! Understand, He allowed you to return to the land of your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Understand what God sacrificed to save you, understand the adversity He endured to win the victory. Understand his patience with your disobedience. So just as there is a time for mourning your sin, there is also a time rejoicing because now you understand God's Word, and you see the greatness and goodness of your God. So Celebrate!

Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." (verse 10)

The people of Nehemiah's day acquired this joy because the Lord once again become the center of their universe. They felt secure in the land. This security gave them a sense of well-being, protection, approval, and freedom from worry. They became conscious of their worth before God, with His blessing on them, and they felt equipped to face an uncertain future. The result was strength. And this strength enabled them to be obedient to His will. Such joy leads to another outcome, they became generous and were to share with others who had nothing.

We have Permission to Celebrate God Together

Remember, for us to truly celebrate what God has done for us, we first need to know what God has done for us. We need time with God to hear and respond to the Word, to confess our sins, and to repent of our sins precedes a time of celebration. But our time to celebrate is just as holy to God as our time to mourn.

I think some of us are like a dog. There is a treat from God on our nose, and we are waiting for permission to eat it. We are waiting for a command to take the treat and celebrate. I saw something like this on the pet channel on TV. The fun part of this is after the dog gets permission to eat the treat it celebrates. God has given all of us permission to eat the treat and celebrate. And it is fun for God to watch us eat the treat and celebrate! Are any of you waiting for permission to experience joy? You have permission from God. Enjoy! How different might your walk with Christ be if you took time to enjoy him?

We have a Process for Celebrating God Together

Back in verse 10, he said literally, "Go your way..."

In effect, he is saying to leave the setting of mourning, and be free. Be free to move about as you see fit. You are no longer held in the bondage of captivity. Go to places that bring you joy. It's a beautiful picture that reminds me of the prodigal son returning to his father expecting to beg, and instead, his Father slaughtered the fattest lamb. God is telling us, "Here is how you can celebrate."

Eat—Literally, eat of the fat, or in my translation—Go ahead and eat fatty foods.

Drink—can be translated, sweetness. It's a call to consume a drink that is satisfying and in line with a celebration.

Nehemiah is calling us to have community, and that there is a time to splurge and enjoy each other. What is our process? Eat, Drink, and be Merry. And let us remember it brings God great joy when we fellowship together.

And to complete the process of celebrating God together, bless those who have nothing. Make your joy complete by giving to those in need. Give to those who have such great need; they have no ability to enjoy God. Give to them so they also may join the celebration!

The Spiritual Practice of Celebration means to separate ourselves from circumstances and take a moment to breathe. Take the time to eat and drink things that bring pleasure. Have some courage to enjoy the liberty and freedom you have been given as a Christian.

We have a Promise when we Celebrate God Together

Nehemiah didn't call people to celebrate for its own sake, but knowing the difficulties that lie ahead, he promised finding joy in the Lord would renew the strength of the people. Like Jesus, who mournfully told his disciples at the last supper they would desert him, and his life was to be poured out as the sacrifice for their sins. But then also promised joy afterward. He said he would

drink the cup again with them in the kingdom and their sorrow would turn to joy.

For the joy of the Lord is your strength. Joy is the strength of the Christian. A great celebration would be a reminder that the joy of the Lord is our strength.

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. (verse 12)

What makes a celebration truly joyful? When our celebration is rooted in our understanding of the greatness and goodness of the Lord. When I try to comprehend the joy in the heart of God, I try to think of the most joyous expressions on earth. And they are found in the joy in my children at their happiest moments. Christmas mornings, birthdays, or giggling as they played pet store with Beanie Babies. Then I think, the joy I see in the happiest child is but a fraction of the joy that resides in the heart of God. G.K Chesterton said, "It may be that our Heavenly Father has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we."

CS Lewis wrote, "Joy is the serious business of heaven." In Philippians 4:4, the Apostle Paul said, "*Rejoice in the Lord Always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*"

So how do we get more strategic in our practice of celebration? Celebration involves activities that bring us pleasure. Eating, drinking, singing, and dancing with people we love. Spiritual celebration means doing these things while reflecting on the greatness and goodness of God.

I think of holidays or Holy Days. At the end of Nehemiah eight, he speaks of a Hebrew holiday called The Feast of the Booths. It's the perfect example. For a week, the people of God would make up these temporary shelters from branches and palm fronds, and they would live in them. It's kind of like tent camping. The temporary shelters reminded them of their wandering in the desert for 40 years with no permanent home and how God was faithful to deliver them. There they stood on a permanent wall in their city with permanent buildings and a temple made of stone; not cloth. They were to celebrate. Celebration and participating in pleasurable things actually became a discipline for them to develop, which was to be as important as the discipline of fasting for their spiritual formation. We expected Nehemiah to hand out locusts and eggplant; instead, he handed out dark chocolate and cheesecake.

It's the discipline of taking the time to take delight in those things you and I take for granted. Set aside time for joy. It could be a couple of days exploring in a trailer with your spouse, or it could be a couple of hours to enjoy the beautiful bay area scenery God created, and sees, and enjoys all the time.

Pursue Joy. Place yourself around joy-producing people regularly.

How does the joy of the Lord become our strength? When we regularly engage in the spiritual practice of celebration by enjoying the good and pleasurable things the Lord has given us., especially in seasons of hardship and suffering.

Dallas Willard, in his classic book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* writes, "Joy is strength, then the lack of joy will create weakness." In other words, it's easier to stand up to temptation when we have joy in our lives. When we arrange our lives so sin no longer looks as attractive to us. And that takes us full circle on these spiritual disciplines we have studied in our summer series. Sin no longer looks as attractive to us when we become fluent and regular in the spiritual practices of solitude, scripture, prayer, community, and service.

So how do we have joy in seasons of hardship and suffering? I'll answer this question with a personal observation. The people in my life who seem to have the most joy have experienced the most pain. Joy in this world is always joy "in spite of" something.

The New Testament writers get this. It wasn't that they were positive thinkers about the world, giving them more and more joy in their lives. No, and here is the key, they were joyful because of their "end times" thinking. They and we need to view all events in our lives and in our world in the light of the resurrection and the ultimate triumph of Christ.

I want to end with a great story in John Ortberg's book, *The Life You Always Wanted*, told by Robert Fulghum, which expresses this kind of joy making thinking:

There is a wedding that was produced on an epic scale by an unhinged character known only as the Mother of the Bride (MOTB). The logistics—from an eighteen-piece brass and wind ensemble to gift registries spreading across most of the continental United States to twenty-four bridesmaids, groomsmen, flower-petal-throwers, and ring-bearers—were of a scale usually seen only during the military invasion of a sizable country. But the plans were all working—until the climactic moment of the processional.

Ah, the bride. She had been dressed for hours if not days. No adrenaline was left in her body. Left alone with her father in the reception hall of the church while the march of the maidens went on and on, she had walked along the tables laden with gourmet goodies and absentmindedly sampled first the little pink and yellow and green mints. Then she picked through the silver bowls of mixed nuts and ate the pecans. Followed by a cheeseball or two, some black olives, a handful of glazed almonds, a little sausage with a frilly toothpick stuck in it, a couple of shrimps blanketed in bacon, and a cracker piled with liver pate. To wash this down—a glass of pink champagne. Her father gave it to her to calm her nerves.

What you noticed as the bride stood in the doorway was not her dress, but her face. White. For what was coming down the aisle was a living grenade with the pin pulled out.

The bride threw up. Just as she walked by her mother.

And by "threw up," I don't mean a polite little ladylike urp into her handkerchief. She puked. There's just no nice word for it. I mean, she hosed the front of the chancel—hitting two bridesmaids, the groom, a ring-bearer, and me

Only two people were seen smiling. One was the mother of the groom. And the other was the father of the bride.

Fulghum explains how they pulled themselves together for a much quieter, gentler ceremony in the reception hall. And how "everybody cried, as people are supposed to do at weddings, mostly because the groom held the bride in his arms through the whole ceremony. And no groom ever kissed a bride more tenderly than he."

But the best part of the story is that, ten years later, everybody was invited back for another party to celebrate this disaster. They watched the whole thing on three TV sets—the MOTB had three video cameras going at once during the wedding. And this party was thrown by the Mother of the Bride herself.

How could all these people rejoice when everything had gone wrong? Because, in spite of all the mess, the bride still got the groom. At the end of the day, that was all that mattered. The bride got the groom.

How is it possible to become a joyful person in a pain-filled world? Look at the promise that comes right near the very end of the Bible:

**Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;
(Revelation 19:7)**

Heaven's groom gets the bride.

The joy in store for God's people is so great, the only thing that can do it justice is the joy between a lover and his beloved. Then we will see the wedding of which the greatest weddings on this earth have only been a dim foreshadowing. Then God will dance with his people. Then joy will reign undiminished and uninterrupted. We look forward to the celebration waiting for us on that future day, which will never end. May the hope of that future day bring us joy and may this joy be our strength!

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1438-14FC