

We have come to our last spiritual discipline in this sermon series as well as the end of our summer series, *Revive: a Summer of Blessing and Growth*. The last six, in particular, we have focused on the spiritual disciplines of solitude, scripture, prayer, community, and service. Our prayer is these blessings and spiritual disciplines have captured your soul in a new and refreshing way. I have the privilege to finish off the series and “party!” We are celebrating! Celebrating the end of summer, the end of a series, and learning about the spiritual practice of celebration! Seriously, there is a spiritual discipline of “Celebration!” Who knew!

A lot of things come to my mind when I think of celebration. I think of all the sporting events we have celebrated in the last decade in the Bay Area. It’s been pure joy for some of us as we have seen our favorite teams take it all.

Last weekend, I was with my best friend at the home she and her husband were married in, and we kept reminiscing about the most celebrated joyous day, her wedding. Pure joy!

I think about this time last year. If you were around CPC this weekend last year, you will remember that we had a huge party. A huge celebration! Anyone remember? We celebrated 50 years as a church and had the opportunity to celebrate all the Lord has done. Some of my favorite memories were watching CPCer’s who had moved away, come back and be reunited with longtime friends and celebrate. The joy on people’s faces was incredible. It was three days of pure joy celebrating transformed lives and all God has done on the Peninsula.

There is a common denominator through some of these celebrations, and that would be joy. Not happiness but joy! Happiness does not equal joy! They are two different things. Happiness is based on our circumstances; joy takes keen delight with something or someone that we value. If we take it a step further, the biblical definition of joy is this idea of having confidence God is in control. Some of you might believe your joy comes from understanding God thinks the Warriors are the best team on the planet, which is not what I’m saying! What I am saying is the spiritual discipline of celebration includes joy. John Ortberg wrote, “When we celebrate, we exercise our ability to see and feel goodness in the simplest gifts of God. We are able to take delight today in something we wouldn’t have even noticed yesterday. Our capacity for joy increases.”

All throughout the Bible, we hear about joy. We are commanded to rejoice and be glad; the joy of the Lord is our strength, and the

other 250 some verses that talk about joy. Throughout the Bible, we also hear about celebrations, which took place to remind the people what God had done for them. There was joy, and there was celebrating. So when we talk about the spiritual discipline of celebration, joy is a large part of the celebration. Our passage this morning is about a group of people led by the teacher and priest Ezra who didn’t quite get the response he was looking for. Our passage this morning reminds us God’s Word forms God’s people, and God’s joy is their strength.

...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.

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.

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, Uria, Hilkiyah 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.

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. (Nehemiah 8:1–8)

God’s Word forms God’s People

Let me stop here and give a little context. The Israelites were in Babylonian captivity and in exile from their land until the rise of King Cyrus of Persia. God moved in the heart of Cyrus

to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Some of the Israelites left captivity to return home to rebuild the temple. One of the men who went with them was Ezra. Ezra was a teacher and a priest. We do know that *“Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel”* (Ezra 7:10). Ezra had been around the building of the temple and had seen the state of the Israelites spiritual lives. Once the temple was built (about 20 years in total), it was time to construct defensible walls around the city of Jerusalem. A man named Nehemiah gathered a group of people to build a defensible wall around Jerusalem in just 52 days.

The temple was built, the walls were built, and the people wanted Ezra to bring the book of the Law. The people want God's Word. God's Word created the world. God's Word formed his people. God's Word brought them out of Egyptian captivity. God's Word set his people free from Babylon. Now the people are looking for God's Word to form them in their new beginning. As I mentioned earlier, this was the moment Ezra had been studying for! Ezra has been in the city for a long time and has been teaching the law and praying for its people. Ezra set out to change the world by studying and teaching the scripture. Remember it's been about two generations that have passed since the Israelites lived in Jerusalem. Some of the Israelites continued to worship God while in captivity, some most likely immersed themselves in the Babylonian culture and it could mean that some of the almost two generations since Babylonian captivity have grown up without ever hearing God's Word.

Look who's at the gate: men, women, and all who could understand. Most likely children of a certain age. Ezra read the Word of God for 6 hours. And we think 30–40 minutes is tough! But who is there with Ezra? 26 men are there to help people understand God's Word. Whether the people didn't know Hebrew and had to have it translated or that they needed help understanding the Word in general, we don't know. But Ezra and Nehemiah prepared for this day by having people ready to help interpret God's Word. They did whatever it took for people to understand God's Word.

I can't help but think about CPC. We have called the Peninsula our home for 50 years. For 50 years, we have faithfully preached God's Word, doing whatever it takes for people to understand it. When people talk about CPC, they say “go to CPC if you want to learn God's Word.” Two Sundays ago, we had Vision Sunday. The Elders laid out what we as a church want to accomplish in the next ten years.

In the next ten years, CPC will engage in spiritual formation at a magnitude that will propel us into thoughtful and gracious cultural engagement on the San Francisco Peninsula to ignite both personal and societal transformation.

Bottom line, the Elders feel God is calling them to get us ready spiritually and to give us the tools to better engage our culture in a thoughtful and gracious way that reflects God's grace and leads people straight to Jesus! Through spiritual formation, cultural engagement, worship, and equipping the body, we have the opportunity to see God move in the lives of people and the culture and see both transformed. It all starts with the Word. Mark Mitchell, our Lead Pastor, said it best when he preached this same passage, “The Word was taught to promote understanding. Exposition ought to make the Scripture clear; to present it in a language we can understand, and then to apply it to situations we face in real life. Through that, our minds are opened up. A person can teach the Word, but only the Spirit can open the mind to the truth. And when this happens, it's the most exciting thing in the world.”

This is what was happening in Ezra's time as well! He was ready when the people called for life change and culture change. Both Ezra and Nehemiah lived as men of God and men of the Word. They had created, through God's leading, a climate for life change.

God's Joy is their Strength

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.

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.”

The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a holy 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. (verse 9–12)

The people's response, weeping! God's Word had moved them to tears. In a lot of ways, it was the correct response. They heard the Word, the Holy Spirit moved in their hearts and they realized their need for repentance. They are overcome with the reality of their sin. They had to be told three times not to grieve, that this day was holy and it was time to have joy or to rejoice! Nehemiah said, *“Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared”* and then he says *“Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”* Nehemiah is telling them it's time to celebrate! I love what they are to celebrate; the joy of the Lord is their strength! WOW! How often do we celebrate God's joy in being our strength? Now don't get Nehemiah or me wrong here, he isn't negating their grieving, because it was important to mourn over their sin, but later in chapter 9, there will be time for it. Nehemiah 9:1–3 tells us they

"gathered together fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads"...they confessed their sins. In all honesty, when we mourn over our sin, it helps us grasp the enormity of Jesus sacrifice for us, and our mourning turns into joy from our new life in Christ. Right now it's time for joy. I don't think a lot of people think of God and joy going together. The Hebrew term for Lord here is *Yahweh*. It's one of the names of God and it's the idea of God's absolute faithfulness. How can *Yahweh's* faithfulness be celebrated? He moved the heart of Cyrus to allow them to rebuild the temple. *Yahweh's* joy is for the good pleasure of His people. They can celebrate because *Yahweh* has taken delight in restoring their land, their temple, and the walls of their city. They can find their strength in *Yahweh's* joy in saving, restoring, and protecting them.

We can have joy because we have confidence *Yahweh* is in control. We can have joy because *Yahweh* delights in us. God delights in YOU. Do you believe that? If you believe this, go and celebrate it! God delights in his people. He has good for you. He is pleased with you. How do I know this? He tells us in his Word.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only son, so whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

God loves his people. God delights in his people. Knowing this and believing this is cause for celebration! Although God's Word brought repentance and still does to this day, we rejoice in what God has done for us, and we learn this by His Word.

Let's read Nehemiah 8:13–18.

On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law. They found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: "Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters"—as it is written.

So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the

eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

I mentioned earlier that I think Ezra and Nehemiah had planned the timing of finishing the wall, they planned to have people ready to help interpret the Law, and I think they planned what they would teach the day after reading the Law. Following God's leading, their planning helped create the climate. When we come to worship here each week, there is a lot of planning that takes place. The hours we spend in meetings planning each Sunday, to create a climate for God to work in our individual hearts and our corporate worship is amazing. Believe it or not, we don't just work on Sunday!

Like Ezra and Nehemiah, we want God's Word to capture our hearts to form our hearts. The Law captured the people hearts. The Word renewed them. The Holy Spirit formed them. Because of that renewal, on the second day, they wanted to know more! It was customary during those times that the heads of the house would come to learn more, they would come to learn more so the fathers could turn around and teach the scriptures to their families. Ezra knew what time of year it was, it was the seventh month, and that meant the Festival of Booths, or sometimes it's called the Feast of Tabernacles. In fact, our Jewish friends will celebrate this festival at the end of this month. Each year at this appointed time, the Israelites were to build temporary shelters built of sticks and brush and live in them for a week. It was a reminder for them as well as a celebration of God delivering their ancestors from Egyptian slavery. It was designed so that they would never forget that their ancestors lived in tents in the wilderness as they journeyed for 40 years on their way to the Promised Land. As Jesus followers, we celebrate all God has done through communion on a regular basis.

This renewal that was taking place resulted in the obedience of celebrating the Feast. Everyone went out and gathered sticks and built their temporary shelters on their roofs, their porches, their properties. I love what verse 17 says, *"and their joy was very great."* God's Word forms God's people, and God's joy is their strength.

There is a beautiful progression here. The people wanted to hear God's Word. God's Word spoke the truth in their lives. The people's hearts were convicted of their sin. God's Word started forming, shaping, molding their hearts, which caused a renewal of the individual and the whole assembly. The people thirsted for more of God's Word, as His Word continued to form and shape them, and obedience to God started to happen. Through that obedience, they found God's joy through celebration, and they could be strengthened knowing he was faithful.

So how do we develop this spiritual practice of celebration?

Celebrate: Like the people of Ezra's day, they needed to look back on all God had done for them. They needed to look back and

see his faithfulness, and through that, they could celebrate! They could find true joy knowing and believing that God was faithful. One of the things I loved about the 50th was hearing story after story of God's faithfulness to CPC. I genuinely believe that is why the weekend was full of joy during the celebration. Don't get me wrong, in the midst of the pain and suffering we encounter; sometimes it's hard to celebrate, it's hard to find joy. The test of true joy happens in the midst of pain.

I remember the first time learning to find joy in the midst of pain in the first ministry I lead. Most of my life, I have served students. Before I came to CPC, I served at a church where going to church was the social thing to do. It wasn't life-changing or transforming. Yet, here is where God placed me. Their new pastor hired me, and later I came to find out, he and I were the only followers of Jesus on staff. I was tasked to build a student ministry that brought the life transformation of Jesus to students. They hadn't had students engaged with Jesus since the Jesus movement of the 60's! I remember my first 3–6 months, every time I opened God's Word and taught, the majority of the kids got up and walked out. It was depressing and honestly humiliating. On top of that, the staff would try and sabotage just about everything I was trying to do. I remember the first Hume Lake Winter Camp I took them to. As I sat there on decision night and prayed one of them would choose to follow Jesus, one by one they all walked out, rejecting the Jesus I desperately wanted them to know! During this time, I questioned my call; I wondered if it was worth it, entering into these kids pain, wondering if God was there. One day I ran into my friend Ron Ritchie, and he was asking me how it was going and I told him. He gave me this piece of advice, "Go where the life is!"

God used that whole interaction to help me create a climate for God to move. I'll never forget the true joy I experienced as I took those same kids to Hume Lake the next winter, and one by one, they chose to follow Jesus. Those students brought the Gospel

to their high school and by the time they graduated, a large part of their high school had heard the gospel, and many more lives were changed. These students are all in their early to mid 30's now, and it's a joy to know they are walking with Jesus, raising their kids to know Jesus and bringing the life transformation of Jesus to people in their sphere of influence. It was there I learned what true joy is. It was there I learned how to celebrate in the little things God was doing, it was there I discovered I could find joy in the pain of rejection, and it was there I learned the joy of the Lord was my strength.

So look back friends! Look at all that God has done. Celebrate it! Ask yourself these questions: Can I rejoice in knowing God is in control no matter what the circumstances? Do you believe God's joy is your strength?

Commit: Commit to being in God's Word. His Word forms us and shapes us. It transforms us into the men and women God wants us to be. It pricks our hearts, it gives us life-changing renewal, and it leads us to obedience. There is nothing more life changing than encountering God through His Word. Commit to spending 15 minutes a day. Find your joy and strength knowing *Yahweh* is in control.

Confess: Confessing our sins is so important. When we genuinely mourn our sin, we realize all God has done for us. We can find true joy and celebrate the new life He gives us. We can understand at a deeper level the good He has for each us.

Each of these points brings us back to celebrating. We can celebrate that God's Word forms God's people and God's joy is our strength! So go celebrate all God has done in your life!

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

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Catalog No. 1438-14S