

“GO YOUR WAY FEASTING.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

November 22, 2018, 10:00 AM

Scripture Texts: Nehemiah 8:9-12

Prayer:

Holy Father, feed us from the feast of your Word, before we go to feast from the bounty of your blessings. Increase in us a capacity to receive spiritual food and drink. Enlighten the eyes of our hearts, make us to be a most thankful people for your glory, for you are the one from whom comes every good and perfect gift.

Introduction.

Did you notice there was no time of confession in our Thanksgiving Day service? Does that mean we get a pass on Thanksgiving?

Sort of like when you can ride the WTA buses free on fair week.

Sort of like getting free shipping on Black Friday.

There is a time for looking at our sin, at what we have done. There is a time for confessing and repenting. There is a time for taking honest inventory of our souls.

But there is also a time to get our eyes off of ourselves and lift them up to God. There is a time to look at what God has done and express the gratitude of our souls.

There is a time to weep and a time to laugh.

A time to mourn and a time to dance.

There is a time for fasting and a time for feasting.

Feasting in the Bible.

God did an amazing thing in the OT. He built into Israel's calendar seven holidays or feast days which amounted to about thirty days of feasts a year. Add to that the weekly Sabbaths and now you are up to about eighty days of feasts and festivals and days of rest. Later the Jews added Purim and Hanukkah, plus all the days for births, dedications, bar Mitzvahs and weddings and the days set aside for feasts and celebrating, and worship exceeded three months a year.

What kind of God creates a world like this and makes feasts and festivals such an important part of His people's lives?

God is a God of joy and delight and pleasure. God is the happiest being in the universe and His joy overflows into creation and into us. Our joy and pleasure are a reflection of our creator.

God is a remarkable God. He created everything, and He made a bunch of it edible. Then He created us with taste buds, so we could savor and enjoy and delight in the pleasures of His edible and drinkable creation. God is good.

Then on top of just eating, God created feasts, feast days and festivals to enjoy Him and each other together and see Him more tangibly in our midst.

Feasting is not just about food. Feasting has a God-ward focus, it is a way of remembering who God is and what God has done. It was done in appreciation of God's goodness, kindness, compassion.

You know how at Christmas the purpose of the gifts is to be symbol of and a reminder of God's gift to us in Christ.

The same kind of thing happens at Thanksgiving. Tables laden with an abundance of delicious food are a symbol of and a reminder of God's abundant, overflowing, all-sufficient grace, and of all He is and all He does for us. Before you dig in, just look and taste and see how good the Lord is (Psalm 34:8).

Feasting is not our idea, it's the idea of a joyful God, to celebrate the abundance of God in our lives. The food is not just fuel for our bodies, it is fuel for thanksgiving to God.

Nehemiah 8:9-12

Let me briefly summarize the context of our text. Israel by the sheer grace of God has been brought out of Babylonian exile and returned to the Promised Land. Ezra has led the rebuilding of the Temple, Nehemiah has led the rebuilding of the walls. And now for the first time in 70 years they have just heard the Word of God read and they have been cut to heart by their sin and disobedience.

It is like a wife who has broken all her wedding vows repeatedly and now she is before her faithful husband and her heart is completely broken and repentant. And it is as if Ezra is saying, stop weeping, your husband loves you and he is receiving you back. This

day is holy because this day God is saying He is still your God and you are still His people.

The feast Ezra tells them to celebrate is the festival of booths or tabernacles. This week-long festival remembered God's protection and provision in the wilderness in the midst of their unfaithfulness. The Jews would build little booths or tents in the backyard and live in them.

Their remembrance of the wilderness wandering was considered an occasion of joy, as they remembered God's saving work on Israel's behalf. It was a feast of thanksgiving for all God's abundance of blessings and it foreshadowed the blessing they would enjoy in the kingdom of God (Keil).

The joy of the Lord is your strength [stronghold].

So, Ezra declares, "do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." That sounds wonderful, it sounds good and true. We even sing it sometimes. The words are easy to understand but what does the phrase mean? How is the Lord's joy my strength?

What is the joy of the Lord? What is God's good pleasure? It's what delights the heart of God.

- To make a plan for your salvation.
- To deliver you from your sin.
- To rescue you out of darkness.
- To protect you from all manner of evil.
- To bring you into a good land.
- To cause your boundary lines to fall in pleasant places.
- To give you a good inheritance, one kept in heaven for you.
- To rebuild His temple in your heart by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

- God expresses His joy by taking delight in His people.
- God takes great pleasure in doing good for you.
- God rejoices over you with singing.
- God considers you the apple of His eye.
- You are the one on whom He has set His pleasure.
- You are the one on whom He lavishes grace upon grace out of His fulness.
- You are the one God loves with an eternally great love.

This is what gives God joy, to glorify Himself by blessing us. So how is this strength for us?

What is their strength?

Strength here can mean stronghold, bulwark, fortress, mountain top, protection. Their stronghold is the Lord's joy in loving them, saving them, restoring them and protecting them. Who could possibly do more for us than God has already done?

Too many of us have an image of God frowning, disappointed, dismayed, wringing His hands. Like God is a "morose and miserable monarch, a frustrated and petty parent, or a policeman on the prowl" (Dallas Willard).

God is not any of those things. God already knows all things and controls all things and has everything completely in hand. Nothing catches Him off guard, or by surprise. Nothing fails to live up to His expectations because He knows everything ahead of time.

A vacation can be ruined when planes are late, or we miss one, we have an accident or get stuck in terrible traffic, when the vacation rental turns out to be terrible, or the weather is horrible. We get extremely frustrated and angry when nothing turns out the way it is supposed to.

That doesn't happen with God, can't happen.

"God has the knowledge of everything that has ever happened or will ever happen, plus, the power to make all things ultimately work together to fulfill His good pleasure. This means that He is not only happy at this moment, but that He will remain so."

Do you understand what this means? God's joy is in Himself. It is not contingent on us or what we do. And God's joy in us is not contingent on what we do or don't do. His joy is our strength because it is fixed in Him, it is unchangeable, solid, secure, strong.

God is and always will be the happiest being in the universe. God loves His universe, He made it and called it good. And even though we ruined it with sin, God is not upset or mad or frustrated. Everything is exactly as He anticipated and planned. This is how God can have joy in us. God is so joyful he finds joy even in us because He knows us perfectly and completely and He knows His purposes for us.

God's people were strengthened by the knowledge of God's joy in them and love for them.

This is where feasting comes from. God's joy in Himself and in us, and our joy in God. Joy in God leads to feasts. The food is meant to help us really taste His joy in us and our joy in Him.

That is cause for thanksgiving, that is cause for giving thanks from now to eternity.

Implications and application.

Christians and non-Christians all over our nation are celebrating Thanksgiving. It is a national or civic holiday, not necessarily Christian like Christmas or Easter. So, you can celebrate today with no thought of God at all or you can celebrate in a way that is different from the way our culture might celebrate it.

I Timothy 4:4-5 For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, *5 for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.*

The Word of God and prayer changes our Thanksgiving feast from being merely an occasion to over indulge in food and drink, to something meant to glorify God.

Make your feast holy and God-focused with a *brief Scripture and prayer.*

Psalm 100.

Psalm 103

First three verses of 106 or 107.

Isaiah 12

Colossians 1:9-14

Colossians 3:15-17

And then pray. Speak to God your corporate gratitude for who He is and for all He has done. Pray specially, pray earnestly, pray sincerely, pray thankfully to our God. Make God the recipient of all your gratitude.

You glorify God when you acknowledge that all you have is a gift from Him, you glorify Him as the giver when you give thanks to Him. What do we have that is not from God? Are we not to say thank you for every gift?

In this way you make your eating and drinking done to the glory of God.

I Corinthians 10:31 Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Then one more thing. *Eat and enjoy.*

They went to their homes and feasted with great joy, with very great rejoicing. Feast on food, drink and fellowship with family and friends. God gave you taste buds for a reason, use them to the best of our ability. In that way you glorify Him.

So now, to all of you I say, go to your homes, gather with friends and family, be filled with good food and more filled with thanksgiving. Let this day and week especially be punctuated with outburst of thanks to God, thanks for life and health and strength, thanks for your spouse, parents, children, relationships, employment, provision, church and most of all, above all else, for Jesus and your salvation. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift.

Prayer: Father in heaven, our hearts are filled to overflowing with gratitude and thanksgiving that you have opened the blind eyes of our hearts and have brought us to faith and repentance. You have saved us and have reconciled us to yourself through the precious blood of your only Son. All of our other thanksgivings are secondary to this. All of our other thanksgivings are dependent on this. And now as we go to sit at tables surrounded by family and friends, tables laden and overflowing with food and drink, give us exceedingly thankful hearts for all your good and perfect gifts. Give us eyes to see your grace in and around us all the time.

Bless us, O Lord, for your gifts, which we are about to receive from your bounty. Help us to be mindful of all our blessings, and the needs of those who have less. In Jesus name and for His glory. Amen.