

“Whoever Dies with the Most JOYS Wins.”

Nehemiah 8

Series: Coming Up from the Ruins Week 4: How to Live God’s Word

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February 6, 2022

Remember Malcolm Forbes, the legendary owner of Forbes Magazine? Malcolm Forbes spent a lifetime amassing “things.” He had a chateau in Normandy, France, an island in Fiji, a huge stable of motorcycles, a monstrous yacht, and a Boeing trijet aptly named the “Capitalist Tool.” For his 70th birthday party he flew 800 of the wealthiest people in the world to a palais in Morocco for a \$2.5 million celebration, where lavish food and wine flowed freely and the party favor was a personally engraved Rolex watch! It’s no surprise that Forbes is credited with creating the slogan: “Whoever dies with the most toys wins.”

It’s easy to scoff at such a lavish lifestyle, while patting ourselves on the back for our “prudent” ways. But if we’re being honest, don’t most of us spend a good deal of our lives gathering stuff, toys? Has anyone undertaken the really fun job of downsizing and selling your house? What do you do with all those toys, all that stuff? Two good friends of mine downsized recently. I never saw two such miserable people -- trying to get rid of all that STUFF they had accumulated. Those “toys” were not causing any winning -- just a whole lot of stressing. Malcolm Forbes' \$2.5 million birthday party turned out to be his last -- he died of a heart attack shortly after. The truth is: the one who dies with the most toys...still dies and leaves behind all those toys.

During these past two years I think many of us have gotten a sense of what’s really important. And it’s not stuff. We long for easy gatherings with neighbors, for restored health of our friends and family, to see our classmates face to face, for coming together instead of being divided. There is a deep longing in our hearts, a hunger in our spirits. I believe it is a hunger for God -- for our Father to restore our souls and our world. To end this time of uncertainty and help us move on with the comfort and security of knowing we are loved and cared for by our heavenly father. That He hears our cries and loves us in spite of our looking to the things of this world to bring us joy. A saying way more wise than Malcolm's comes from the Bible. It’s so important it is quoted by both Moses and Jesus, “Man does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Deuteronomy 8:3 and Matthew 4:4).

In our study of Nehemiah, we’ve seen that the people of Judah also had a deep hunger. They were enduring tough times -- severe shortages, political turmoil, discord and oppression. Nehemiah became the governor of Jerusalem so he could rebuild the city wall, their security, and secure the foundation of their faith. During the decades of exile, the people forgot their faith. Nehemiah showed them that a life built on prayer is the strong foundation we need. He helped them face down their adversaries with the confidence that only comes from knowing and obeying God.

The wall is complete; the enemies have slunk away. Now it’s time to complete the rebuilding of God’s people. The priest and scribe Ezra had come to rebuild the worship and religion of the Jews. The people asked Ezra to bring out the book of the Law of Moses, which

the Lord had given for Israel to obey centuries earlier. In Psalm 19 King David wrote, “The commandments of the Lord are right, bringing joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are clear, giving insight for living.” Psalm 19:8

If we want a life that truly satisfies, that is full of joys, not toys, we need to build it on the principles of God, not man. Friends, this book -- this holy book of God, the Bible, is all we need to guide our lives.

In Nehemiah 8, we see how the people of Israel received God’s Word. From their example, we can glean four keys to living God’s Word.

First, the people had Excitement/Expectation: All the people of Israel -- men, women and children gathered as one person in the square by the Water Gate. This took place on the High Holy Day known as Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. They blew the Shofar or ram’s horn and told Ezra to bring the Book of the Law of Moses -- the first five books of the Bible - known to the people as the Torah. Ezra stood high in a pulpit constructed for just this occasion with seven Levites on each side of him. And for the first time in 150 years, the Word of God was read to the people in Jerusalem. The rebuilding of the Temple, the walls, the city, the nation, was for this one purpose -- so that the people could hear the voice of their Father, so they could follow the Word of God.

The minute Ezra unrolled that scroll - the people stood. They stood out of reverence and respect for the Word. Before Ezra uttered a single word, he prayed to God and all the people lifted up their hands -- both hands mind you, not our half-hearted praise wave -- and bowed their heads in worship to the King. The word Amen means truth. But these people said “Amen, Amen, which means, “This book is truly true!” They were joyful and expectant -- ready to hear the God of the Universe speak to them through his Word. So great was their honor and respect for the Word, the people listened carefully for SIX hours as the Torah was read. Standing. Be honest -- who starts looking at your watch if the service goes five minutes over... Six hours. Can we approach God’s Word with that attitude of excitement and expectation? Before you open your Bibles, pray and prepare yourself to hear from the King of Kings, you heavenly Father, as you read His Word.

And to truly live God’s Word we need to take time to study and understand his Word. Remember those seven Levites flanking Ezra as he read? They weren’t there for decoration - they were there explaining, interpreting and helping the people understand the meaning of God’s Word. Friends -- I know I might sound like a broken record; I talk about it nearly every time I’m up here. But if you aren’t in a Growth Group -- what is stopping you? Growth Groups are an excellent place to dive in, wrestle with, and really understand God’s Word. The group I belong to discusses the sermon message. God’s Message in Sunday’s Sermon really comes alive and its application becomes so much clearer when I study and discuss with others. Do you know there are excellent study guides for each week’s scripture and message? They are written by our very own Cyndy Montes and available to all on our website. When Cyndy took her GPS Assessment this fall, teaching was one of her clear gifts. Cyndy now uses that gift right here at Woodside, giving of her time and talents to study and research the scripture each week. She’s our very own Levite!

At the Welcome Center and on our website, there is a list of Growth Groups that anyone can join. And you're not limited to those listed - grab a friend or two -- doesn't have to be someone from Woodside, thanks to technology it doesn't have to even be someone local. All the materials are provided to start a discussion of your own with friends, family or neighbors. And our Discipleship Director, another wonderful Levite teacher, Meg Smith is here to help and support you.

After we understand God's Word, the next step is to Examine and Apply-- what does it mean in my life; how does God's word apply to me? Examination is NOT a word many of us like. I'd much rather help you understand the Word than examine what God is saying to me...But if we don't take the time to examine the Word and really think about how it applies to us, our lives will never really be impacted. So what happened when the Israelites heard and understood the words Ezra was reading? They WEPT. Not polite sniffing, but bitter tears of grief. They heard the stories of how God saved their ancestors from slavery, guided them through the wilderness and brought them to the land of milk and honey. And then how their ancestors became stubborn, stiff necked and disobedient causing God to eventually cast them out of the land for continually breaking his Word. And suddenly it hit them -- God was not just speaking to their ancestors who lived eight centuries ago. He was speaking directly to them -- and to us. And they realized they too had broken God's Word as well as His heart.

You can't properly study the Bible without also studying yourself. You don't just read the Bible - it reads you. God's story always intersects with our own story. When you read the Bible, ask yourself, "is there a command for me to obey, a promise to claim, an example to follow, a sin to avoid or confess, a cause for thanksgiving or praise?"

So now what? Did the people of Judah continue to cry and mourn as they repented of their sins? Are we called to stay down in that pit, wailing and lamenting our past? No! Like the loving father welcoming the long lost prodigal son back with open arms, our father responds to our repentance with joy and calls for celebration. **We are called to celebrate God's Word.** Nehemiah said to them, "Don't mourn or weep on a day such as this! Go and celebrate with a feast of rich foods and sweet drinks and share gifts of food with people who have nothing prepared. For today is a sacred day before the Lord your God." Nehemiah 8:9 10a.

What a grand New Year's Day, the holy day of Rosh Hashanah. The people's tears of sadness turned to tears of joy as they realized that through the Bible, God spoke to them and reminded them that the Lord was their one true King who would be with them and protect them. He had always been with them- even when they failed. Nehemiah went on to say, "Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." Nehemiah 8:10b.

We have that same promise. And the joy of the Lord is still our strength. No hardship, no pandemic can kill that joy. Do you know you can smile under a mask -- really. People can tell by your eyes, by the lilt in your voice. And your actions. If we have the joy of the Lord as our strength, our actions, our lives will overflow with that joy. And people will know us by our love, by our joy.

I want that for my life. For my life to overflow with the joy of the Lord. I truly believe God talks to me, to all of us through His Word. I pray for quiet and focus to really hear what He

is saying. Did anyone participate in that trend of choosing a “word” for the year? I wasn’t planning to, but at the beginning of 2022, I clearly felt God put the word joy on my heart. Joy? As we enter another year, still battling Covid? As the weight of the world was dragging me down? And then I remembered the verse that we just read, “The Joy of the Lord is my strength.” I can be joyful in hard times BECAUSE I know that true joy comes from God. When God put that word on my heart back in January, I had no idea I would be preaching on Nehemiah -- on the exact chapter where that verse is found! And this week as I was working on my Message, I stopped to give my puppy Koda a little love -- all of a sudden I noticed a toy someone gave him - written on it was what? Of course, Joy.

Friends, there is joy all around us. The Bible is a love letter from Jesus. He says, “I will protect you. I was with you. I am with you. I will be with you always. In this world you will have trouble, but take heart -- for I have overcome the world.” John 16:33. And that’s a message of true joy, available for the Israelites, for us, for everyone.

Toys -- whatever. The truth is; the one who dies with the most JOYS wins.