

# WHAT MAKES A DAY HOLY? – NEHEMIAH 8:1-3, 5-6, 9-10

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<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> He read it aloud from daybreak 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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."



This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

Have you ever thought about that opening phrase I just spoke? It's the most common way that I start out my sermons. The phrase actually comes from Psalm 118:24. But have you ever stopped to ponder what it is saying, or is it just a little bit of time to settle in for the sermon? Let's take a moment to think about it, "**This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.**" It is the wonderful acknowledgement that our God, the one who created the universe, has also given us each and every day in which to live. Because of this, and all of his other blessings upon us, we should rejoice, give thanks, and have the best possible day we can, because it is the Lord's day.

This phrase is not just something that you can say on a Sunday, but you can say it on a Monday, a Tuesday, and in fact every day of the week. Because every day is a day the Lord has made. And while it's something that we know, while it's something that we are reminded of, there are still many days that pass in our lives where we might not give a second thought as to the day being special. Maybe we've got certain deadlines and obligations to meet that take us away from the specialness of each day. Maybe we're excited for different reasons, other than each day being the Lord's day. This is what happened to the ancient Israelites, not only turning their backs on God's Sabbath, but God himself, not thinking any day was his doing.

It was only after God took them away from the Promised Land that they realized what they lacked, what they missed, and when given an opportunity to return to the promised land, they took it and rejoiced in each day. They saw each day as holy and sacred to the Lord. May it not take a catastrophic

event for us to see each day as holy to the Lord. It is also good for us to remember WHAT MAKES A DAY HOLY?

*(Read Nehemiah 8:9-10)*

The Israelites gathered around the Water Gate of Jerusalem in 450 BC or so, had a good idea of WHAT MAKES A DAY HOLY. These were men, women and children who had returned from a Babylonian exile, some only a few months before. They had been taken into captivity as a punishment for rebelling against God. And although their captivity was not as harsh as some might have expected, they were separated from their promised land, they felt separated from their God. And so returning to Jerusalem, and specifically the Temple they had just helped rebuild, was significant. This certainly was a HOLY DAY.

Even though the people had returned with the assurance they were allowed to rebuild Jerusalem and their temple, it was not an easy task. In fact, a decade earlier, they attempted the very same thing, but were thwarted in their attempts by the new local people. It was only when Nehemiah came as a governor of sorts for the Persian Empire that the wall of Jerusalem were rebuilt and the temple was restored. With the help of the Lord, they were able to complete these tasks within two months. Now came time for the reading of the Law.

This verse should not be taken lightly. For when they were in Babylon, their reading of the Torah had probably slipped a little bit. It certainly appears from the description here that the people were eager to hear the Word of the Lord because they had not heard it for a long time, and that this would help connect them back to their historical ancestors. **“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 here was a great number of people clamoring to hear the Word of the Lord. They gathered in a large area, in which Ezra, the Scribe and Priest, read from an elevated platform so that everyone could hear.

And this wasn't just your typical hour-long Lutheran church service either. Nehemiah records, **“He read it aloud from daybreak till noon.”** So for a span of about six hours they listened to God's Word. Now certainly it doesn't appear he just read nonstop. He would pause and explain what verses meant, what certain Hebrew words meant to a crowd that was unfamiliar with the Torah and rusty in the Hebrew language. Levites who were with Ezra helped in the explaining to smaller groups.

It's quite interesting to note that the people stood when the Word of God was being read, similar to how we stand when the gospel is being read. They voiced their support for the Word by crying out **“Amen, Amen.”** Through the course of the morning, a few things became very clear to the people from hearing God's Word. One thing that became clear was the specific day it was. Nehemiah records it was the first day of the seventh month. The Lord ordained that this was to be a special holy day, a day called the Feast of Trumpets – a day that was to be set aside to the Lord. A day devoted to hearing God's Word and sharing possessions with the poor.

You would think that this being a HOLY DAY would make the people rejoice and be glad, but that isn't what Nehemiah and Ezra found. Instead, we are told they were mourning and weeping. What in the world could cause them to mourn and weep? It was the very word of God they had been listening to all morning. The same Word of God that declared a day holy, also declared that his people be holy. You don't have to read Scripture for six hours to find how far you have strayed from the Word of God.

Especially for these people, some of whom may have been hearing these words for the first time. They would have heard all of the things that made them unclean, they would have heard all of their sin which separated them from God.

Unholy people cannot partake in a holy day. It was this which caused the people to mourn and be sad. But it was Nehemiah who 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.”** What did Nehemiah know that the people did not? Did Nehemiah know WHAT MAKES A DAY HOLY? Did Nehemiah just think that God wouldn't care about the perfect way of life they had not lived up to, or that God would just sweep it under the rug? Maybe it was the sacrifices they would make, that could give them a cause for rejoicing.

It was indeed the sacrifices that played a role in the cause for Nehemiah and Israel's rejoicing. But not just that they sacrificed and could then enter God's presence. The New Testament records, **“the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sins.”** And that really is the whole issue. The Israelites' sins, our sins, which separate us from God, that make anything we touch unholy, that makes any day we live in unholy.

So, WHAT MAKES A DAY HOLY? It isn't anything we do that MAKES A DAY HOLY, but it's what God did that MAKES A DAY HOLY. It would be just nine days later that the Israelites would celebrate one of their high festivals – the Day of Atonement. This day, to a greater degree than any other day of the year, God pictured what he did for the people. The High Priest would sacrifice a bull and take the blood into the Temple, into the heart of the Temple – the Holy of Holies, before the presence of God, and sprinkle the blood over the altar as atonement for sins. But all of this was a picture, not of the bull's blood taking away sins, but of a substitute to come – a Messiah.

We know that Messiah as Jesus Christ, and we see how his life fulfilled the picture of the Day of Atonement. He was that perfect sacrificial lamb whose blood was sprinkled on the atonement seat of God as a payment for all sins – sins committed before his birth and sins committed after. It was the Messiah's blood which would MAKE A HOLY DAY, which would make people holy for a HOLY DAY. This is how Nehemiah could say, **“This day is holy to our Lord.”** He even adds on, **“Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”** Nehemiah could tell the people to rejoice not because they had done anything to deserve it, but because of the Lord – the compassionate and gracious God – had invited them into his presence and made them holy.

Just as it was necessary for the Israelites to be holy to come into the presence of God, it is necessary for us to be holy to come before the presence of God. Maybe that's not something that crosses our minds too often when we come to church. But it should. It should cross our minds that we need holiness to come into the presence of God. It's not holiness that comes from the fine clothes that we wear. It's not holiness that comes as a result of our offerings to the Lord. It's not even a holiness that comes because we believe what the Bible says. It is holiness that comes from God himself, a holiness that he drapes over us like a robe.

And his holy day is not just limited to one day per week, but his HOLY DAYS are every day. For every day is a day the Lord has made. It is something we can be mindful of as we live our lives every day. It's true that every day we may not dress up in a suit and tie or a nice dress, but every day is a holy day, every day is a day we are draped with the robe of Christ's holiness. And we can help honor each day as

holy in the way we live. The way we live doesn't negate God's holiness, but the way we live gives glory to God's holiness.

We honor God's holy days when we listen to his Word regularly. For it is only in God's Word that we are strengthened in our faith, comforted in our distress, and calmed in our troubles. It doesn't have to be an expanded Bible reading and study plan, but taking a few minutes of your day to be with God in his Word – maybe that's in the morning, maybe that's in the evening, maybe that's during a lunch break.

We honor God's holy days in the way we conduct ourselves. Think about conducting yourselves in the way you conduct yourselves at church, except do that every day. We don't do it to make God's day holy, but to glorify God's holy day. The Israelites did this when they shared their possessions with those who had none. You can do this in any number of ways – in the words you speak to your family, with your coworkers. You can do this in the actions you take. Because remember, the actions you take aren't to give glory to you, but to give glory to God.

Oftentimes we just view holy days as days that happen just a few times per year – Sundays, Christmas, Easter. Certainly those days are holy days, and we remember specific things on those holy days. But every day is a day that is holy to the Lord. Every day is an opportunity for us to remember what he has done and to give glory to him. Every day is a holy day, because every day is a day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.