

The Gift of Joy

Luke 2; Nehemiah 8; Psalm 51

This is a special time of year for our families and for our church families. Last night's Progressive Dinner was a wonderful opportunity for people to re-connect, for new friends to meet, and for all who attended to spend time with one another. A special thanks to all those who helped plan, cook, host, and make this night possible.

Christmas-time is a time filled with joy, with family, with hope... and a time when many are frazzled and nearing a state of exhaustion as they try to make sure everything is "just right."

Today begins a series of lessons (three) about some of the special gifts given to believers by God.

Gifts are not just about "getting." God has given us gifts even as we have the opportunity to give to others. Those who participated know the joy you experienced as you purchased and wrapped gifts as a part of our Church Christmas Project. Many will be meeting this week to put together food boxes (Christmas Dinners) to be given when the gifts are picked-up. And don't forget the Christmas dinner next Sunday evening.

(Aside: Only 12 days until Christmas or you could convert to Orthodox calendar!)

Dick Long often refers to his Community Group as the J-O-Y group (Jesus, first; Others, second; Yourself, last-servant heart). The gifts that we'll be looking at in the next three weeks are gifts which come to us because Jesus Christ gave them to us as a result of his being placed on a tree. For the manger has its ultimate meaning only in the shadow of the cross (or, as Paul would put it, the tree). What are these "gifts on the tree"? This week, we begin with the gift of joy.

- I. Grief and Joy** (Background on Nehemiah 8; Israel & Judah, defeated, exiled...)
 - A. A word from God (with Nehemiah's leadership, a physical rebuilding of Jerusalem has been initiated; However; Ezra's leadership is revealed during a needed spiritual rebuilding/revival)
 - 1. Amos 8:11-12... still a hunger (believers & non-believers)
 - 2. God's word is explained (Language? Concepts?)
 - B. The people's response (grief, tears... Why? Exile's cause was Sin)
 - 1. Feast of Tabernacles (reminder of their deliverance from Egypt; neglected God's leadership and warnings)
 - 2. This Feast emphasizes their status as pilgrims – leaving Egypt and going to a land promised to them... following and trusting God ("hold 'things' lightly" – not life's treasures)
 - C. The power of understanding (when they understood-grief to joy; "The Joy of the Lord Is Your Strength")
 - 1. Joy came... after being confronted, convicted... Acts 2, "Repent!"
 - 2. Their past... now, their future (changed): Joy made them strong!

II. Fear and Joy (Luke 2)

- A. A messenger from God
 - 1. Perhaps these are tough times for you... savings, retirement plans, and jobs aren't what they use to be...
 - 2. The shepherds understood, some suggest they were among the "lowest of the low"-all times were "tough")
 - 3. These are chosen by God to receive his messenger!
- B. The shepherds' response (Terrified! "Let's go!" From fear to fascination!)
- C. When you've seen Jesus (Had to tell others! As physically poor as they had been before; As low in society as before; returned to fields)

III. The Power of Joy

- A. The Word (Amos' warning concerning a famine of the word.
 - 1. Still a need: "Gospel" is good news
 - 2. Word is powerful; Hebrews 4:12, "Sharper than a two edged sword"
 - 3. Bible classes, CG's, etc.
- B. GC's response (Easy to be overwhelmed; tired; discouraged)
 - 1. Like those in Jerusalem, Remember our deliverance
 - 2. Like shepherds, so excited we tell others (not about physical—Jesus, Others, You... A message which needs to be heard...)
- C. Changed by joy (gospel changes who you are... Jesus calls it being "born again"-Paul, "newness of life"-The joy of the Lord