

Time to eat the fat and drink sweet wine

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 (January 23, 2022)

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

8All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. ²Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law

⁵And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

⁸So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

Historical Context

We cannot pinpoint the scene specifically, though it happened sometime after the return of the exiles of Israel from Babylon (539 B.C.E.) and sometime during the reconstruction of the fallen walls of Jerusalem (the middle of the 5th century B.C.E.). We cannot even designate exactly where the scene unfolds. We are told that it is in a square in Jerusalem that is bounded by a water gate. Since the only source of water for the city is the ancient pool of Siloam, fed by the spring called Gihon that faces the Kidron valley east of the city, we can guess that the square was near the reconstructed wall of Nehemiah, the Babylonian agent charged with that responsibility.

Theme: Time to eat the fat and drink sweet wine

As the Scriptures often do, the story of Nehemiah offers a counter-intuitive and counter-cultural, piece of advice: do not yield to the spirit of despair. Instead, choose the option of genuine joy. Yes, there was a proper time to grieve the devastation of Jerusalem; but there also came a time to move forward and rejoice, however modest the remnant's circumstances compared with former times. There was then and is today a time to eat the fat and drink the sweet wine.

Joy can be an ambiguous term. Many people link it with happiness and the enhancement of their circumstances—health, success, fame, wealth, pleasure, fun, or good fortune. In that sense of the word, joy is derivative, attached to and dependent upon some external source.

"The greatest honor we can give Almighty God," wrote the English mystic Juliana of Norwich, "is to live gladly because of the knowledge of his love." No matter how bleak the tragic course of

history, how unnerving our personal circumstances, or how pessimistic the forecasts of cultural historians, with joy we can expect his love to blossom even in the dust and dirt of our lives.