This is the seventh message of eleventh in this series of “Amazing Things Can Happen.” So far, we have learned how Amazing Things Can Happen when we pray, when we plan, when we work together, when we overcome antagonism, when we stop strife, and when we stay steadfast.

Today’s message is about moving from shame and guilt to joy by not dwelling in or staying captive to hurtful experiences or memories in our lives.

Most of us probably already know how shame and guilt cause deep grief in our hearts and take over our thoughts, constantly telling us how bad or unworthy we are.

How many of you have done or said something wrong and hurtful, and you deeply regret it? Then you know what I am talking about. Those are haunting memories. But that can change when grace and forgiveness are spoken into our hearts, and we allow ourselves to look forward to a future with hope.

So, today’s message title is Amazing Things Can Happen When Welcome Joy.

How does it happen? Let’s see what Nehemiah has to teach us today. Here is chapter 8:1-7 of Nehemiah,

“When the seventh month came—the people of Israel being settled in their towns—all 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. Accordingly, 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. He 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. The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. And 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. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.”

As we have been learning, the context of this story is that the city of Jerusalem was in rubbles for over 100 years after being destroyed by the Babylonians. Many of the Jews were taken as slaves to a foreign nation. But over the years, some were allowed to go back to their homes. However, there was not much to go back to since the city remained in rubbles. But that changed with the arrival of Nehemiah. Through his leadership, the people were united in rebuilding the city.

So far, the first six chapters of the book of Nehemiah have covered the rebuilding of the wall. But after chapter 7, it moves from rebuilding the city to rebuilding the people. And that is where we are today.

Chapter 8 highlights another main character next to Nehemiah: Ezra. Who is this man? Ezra had come to Jerusalem 14 years before Nehemiah. He was a priest, scholar, and teacher of the Law. Ezra was the man responsible for having the temple rebuilt. Just as Nehemiah was called to lead the rebuilding of the city and walls, Ezra was called to teach God’s Word and return God’s people to worship.

And that is precisely what is happening in the Scripture we read. As people gathered on the first day of the seventh month, which was the Jewish equivalent of our New Year’s Day, they came to Ezra asking him to read them the Book of the Law—the first five books of the Bible. This was Israel’s instruction manual for how to walk before God.

Now, verse 3 tells us that Ezra read God’s Word from daylight to midday—that is about six hours. We know from verse 18 that this continued for a week. (And that is what I am going to do today! Jk)

Why are the people so excited about listening to the Word of God being read to them? They are witnessing a revival in their city, within their own families and friends, and they want more from God—all they can get. That is what is moving them to want to be closer to God. They were excited because it had been too long since they heard good news and experienced any good around them. That is why when Ezra read the Book of the Law to them, they were engaged, listening attentively, and responding positively. As we read,

“[Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people everyone stood up.] Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.”

As Ezra was reading and praising the “great God,” the people stood up, lifted their hands, shouted “Amen! Amen!” and “bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.”

What is happening here is a move of the Spirit of God in these people. I mean, how could we explain them gathering from dawn until midday to hear God’s Word for seven days! Because they were hungry for it. They remembered who they were and who was God to them, and in a moment, they were filled with hope. In other words, this was the beginning of a revival in them.

However, as they remembered their story and calling as God’s people, they also began to grasp the gravity of their sins. After hearing the Word of God, they realized they had not been faithful and failed to keep God’s commandments. Verse 9 explains,

“[And Nehemiah 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.”

As Ezra continued to read the Word of God throughout the day, the people experienced conviction of sin and grief due to guilt and shame. They knew they were guilty of neglecting their relationships with God and the natural reaction was grief. So, they wept.

We may think this isn’t good, but it is actually a very healthy thing. By listening to the Word of God, they understood and acknowledged their wrongs and brokenness. They wept because they knew they needed to change and heal.

This means that there is no way we can get better, healed, or make things better for others unless we are honest about the things we do wrong, acknowledge our own brokenness, and then welcome healing.

Conviction of sin or acknowledgment of brokenness is the gateway into a new life. That is because it is the process we need to heal from the inside out so we can move on into a new life.

Think about it. How can we move into a new life if we are not willing to accept things are not right? How can we welcome new life if we don’t take responsibility for what we did? How can we experience the joy of healing if we allow ourselves to be held back by sin and guilt, denying ourselves any hope? How can we be free if we hold tight to grief as if saying: I don’t want to be healed?

Experiencing grief and weeping was necessary and important so they could be honest about their needs and sins, but that was just a station along their healing journey, not the final destination. God did not give them the hope of new life to keep them shackled to guilt.

Instead, Nehemiah told them to wipe their tears, saying, “[F]or this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.” (10, 12)

Do you realize what is happening here and its implications for us? Nehemiah invited the people to stop grieving and start rejoicing and celebrating as if saying, “Now that you have come to realize your sinfulness and brokenness, now welcome grace and hope and celebrate God’s mercy!”

The Word of God brought conviction and led them to repentance, but then it also brought the joy of forgiveness and reconciliation. The same Word that calls out our darkness calls us out of it.

This means that grief and joy are not far from each other. This is what grace is, how it looks like, and what it does to us. It is the same as when Jesus told the sinful woman, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” (John 8:1) Jesus saved her and gave her encouragement to move forward with a new life.

You don’t “rebuild” people by telling them they are a lost cause, but by reminding them they are loved and giving them hope. And that is what God wants to do with us and everyone else: move us from grief to joy, from shame to gratitude, from death to life. It is God who makes this possible by first making us aware of our needs and shortcomings and then providing us with healing and encouragement.

My friends, God does not want our shame to be greater than his grace. We miss joy when we focus more on what is wrong than what God is doing right. Our grief of sin should never be bigger than our gratitude for what Jesus has done for us as our savior.

I am aware some of us may be shackled to grief and paralyzed with guilt. I say to you: believe in Jesus and trust his grace. Jesus is not against you but for you. You can stop dwelling in shame, guilt, and grief if you listen to Jesus and follow him into a new life.

This is how Ezra began to rebuild the people with the hope of a new life, by reminding people of what God has said to them and about them. It happened to them; it can happen to you too.

I invite you today to let “the joy of the Lord be your strength” by knowing God forgives, heals, loves, and gives us new life.

Welcome God’s joy into your life, be glad in it, and celebrate!