

**Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is sacred 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 sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”**

**<sup>11</sup> The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve.”**

**<sup>12</sup> Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.**

**<sup>13</sup> On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. <sup>14</sup> They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month <sup>15</sup> and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths”—as it is written.**

**<sup>16</sup> So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. <sup>17</sup> The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.**

**<sup>18</sup> Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly. (NIV84)**

Theme: Rejoice and Celebrate

1. Rejoice in God’s grace in giving us forgiveness
2. Celebrate God’s grace in giving us his Son.

Intro: The book of Ecclesiastes says that there is **a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.** There are times when it is right and appropriate to contemplate our sins and its results and mourn because of them. We have days to do this throughout the Church year such as Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. But the Church year also offers us the opportunity to laugh, dance, and rejoice because of the forgiveness of sins. Easter and Christmas come to mind.

The season of Advent is a season of remorseful repentance. Yet, at the same time it is a season of joyful anticipation. We repent of our sins as we wait for Christ to come and judge the world. And yet today, the third Sunday of Advent, is known as *Gaudete*, or Rejoice, Sunday. We rejoice at the coming of Christ and the forgiveness he brings. So today we rejoice and celebrate. We rejoice in God’s grace in giving us forgiveness and we celebrate God’s grace in giving us his Son.

The religious calendar of the Jews was (and still is) filled with all sorts of festivals. Some were minor festivals, others were major. They had three major festivals. During these festivals every male was supposed to travel to Jerusalem in order to celebrate and worship the Lord. We too have three great festivals. You probably thought of Christmas and Easter—the third is Pentecost. Then we have major festivals like Palm Sunday, Transfiguration, or Ascension. And finally we have minor festivals. These are days like Reformation or All Saints Day. The Jews also had different levels of festivals. They had a Day like Yom Kippur—or The Day of Atonement. They also had the feast of trumpets.

This minor festival was held on the first day of the seventh month of the Jewish Calendar. Their Calendar was a lunar calendar so it varied a little as to when the seventh month was—but it was sometime in September or October. The specific date when the first part of our text took place was October 8, 445 BC. This is the Jewish New Year. Today they call it Rosh Hashanah. Trumpets were sounded at day break to signal in the first day of the new civil year. They offered

special sacrifices and worshiped the Lord. On this particular feast of trumpets, the governor, Nehemiah, had everyone gather in front of Ezra, a priest and Scribe. He wanted to reform the people's spiritual lives. And after he does that, he turned his attention on rebuilding the spiritual lives of the people.

So Ezra read to them from the from the books of Moses—the first five books of the Old Testament. We don't know exactly what Ezra read. But it must have been harsh. For when they heard what God said through Moses, they were cut to the core. They realized that they were sinners. They knew that they hadn't kept God's commands one bit. They hadn't followed his festivals either. They constantly sinned against God's will. And they were on their way to eternal damnation. They may have heard what God said through Moses in Deuteronomy 28, **If you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you.** This made them visibly upset. Not at God, but at themselves. They began to weep and mourn. They grieved over their sins.

Our reaction should be the same when we hear the law. For we realize that we are nothing but sinners. Consider the 10 commandments. Let's start with the first commandment. How many times have you failed to put God first in your lives? You did this or that instead of worshiping Christ or studying his Word. Or the second commandment How many times have you used God's name in an inappropriate way? From the cursing to the damning. What about some other commandments—do not murder, commit adultery, steal. It's not just the actions we do—it's also our thoughts and desires. Lusting after someone, desiring to have something that isn't yours, that feeling of hate that dwells within you whenever you see or hear someone. They are all condemned by God.

And whenever you sin against God you condemn yourself. For this you mourn. For you have no one to blame for your sinful actions but yourself. You know that you deserve nothing but God's wrath and punishment. You realize that eternal damnation is the price you ought to pay. At times you may fall into despair. You begin to wonder if God really loves you. How could he? How could he die for you—you

are a horrible miserable sinner who does nothing but rebel against God. You deserve death. And so you mourn.

But there is a time to mourn and a time to rejoice. When Ezra got done reading God's Word, he told them not to mourn or weep. Even though they were sinners, God was not going to count their sins against them. They would be forgiven. They were not to mourn because that day was a holy day—the feast of Trumpets. They offered special sacrifices to God on that day for the forgiveness of sins. They celebrated another new year of God's blessings. They rejoiced with good food and fine drink.

We too rejoice. For our sins have been forgiven. Although we are sinners, God does not count our sins against us. We don't mourn over our sins. Instead we rejoice in our forgiveness. We rejoice that God has washed away our sins through the water of baptism. We rejoice today because we, sinners, get to kneel before our God at his table. And he gives us his body and blood together with the bread and the wine for the forgiveness of sins.

We do not mourn, but rejoice along with the people of Jerusalem because God has sent someone to forgive us. And that someone is Jesus Christ. This is exactly why we are going to celebrate Christmas. As the angel told Joseph about Jesus **he will save his people from their sins.**

The next day after the feast of trumpets the people went back for more. Every head of the household wanted to learn more about God's Word. It wasn't any special feast. They weren't commanded to. But they got a taste of what they missed. They wanted to know more of God's grace. They wanted to know what to do in order to please him. So they sat at Ezra's feet once more.

We too want to learn more about God's Word. But we don't have to go to the temple and stand at the feet of a Scribe in order to hear God's Word. We have God's written down for us in the Bible. We can read his Word whenever and wherever we want. We get to hear his Word in sermon, readings, hymns, and much more at least every Sunday. We are able to gather together in order to praise our one and only Savior. We have three opportunities a week to do what the people of Jerusalem did: learn God's Word. Through Bible Classes we learn

more about God's grace and how to live a God-pleasing life. God's Word is precious to us so we make the most out of the opportunities we have to hear it.

When the Jews gathered before Ezra he told them about another festival coming up. The feast of booths or tabernacles. They found out that the Israelites were to live in booths or tents for a week. This festival started two weeks after the Feast of Trumpets. They made makeshift, temporary shelters to live in. It was kind of like one large Jewish camp-out. They did this to remember how their ancestors lived in tents during the 40-plus years they wandered in the wilderness. It was during those years that God took care of his children by protecting them against their enemies, giving them food to eat, water to drink, and never allowed their shoes or clothes to grow old and get holes. They also celebrated the that God had blessed them with another year. And with another fall fruit harvest of grapes, figs, and the like. This feast was started off by a holy day of worship and sacrifices to God. And after the seven days were over they got together on the eight day, for a grand send-off to the festival as they worshipping and offered sacrifices to God.

It had been awhile since they had celebrated this festival as it should have been. I mean, really celebrated it. Under Ezra, it seems about 10 years before they celebrated it to some extent. They did the same under King Solomon and other kings as well. But they had not celebrated this festival as they really should have since the time of Joshua—since they entered the promised Land. It had been almost 1000 years since the celebrated it right. So they finally did. Everyone went out, cut some wood, and made their booths. And on the fifteenth day of the seventh month they began this great feast. Any place they could find a spot—from their front yard to the roofs of their house, there were booths. And for seven days they went and stood in front of Ezra to hear more from the Word of God. And we are told, **their joy was very great.**

I'm guessing that you already know that we have a major festival coming up. I don't have to inform you that in just over a week Christmas will be here. I'm sure you have already done some preparations for it. The decorations are probably up. Perhaps you have attended a party or 10. Maybe some, if not all, of the presents

have been bought. Your kids have had their school programs. You are shoring up on their recitations for the Christmas Eve service and you are working on them to get the songs down. You prepare a lot for Christmas. Sure, some of your preparation is for the secular side of Christmas—but not all of it. During the Advent season, for instance you prepare your heart and mind for Christ's coming. In repentance you recall why God had to send him in the first place—to save us from our sins.

And because that is what his Son did just that, we celebrate. We celebrate the fact that God sent his Son for us, even though we were his enemies. That while we were dead and our transgressions and sins, Christ died for us. On Christmas we just don't celebrate any birth. But it is the birth of our Savior. It is the birth of the one who would ultimately die for us in order to take away our sins. It is the birth of the one who would rise from the dead and assure us that because he rose from the dead, we too will rise. God's Son did what we couldn't do, what we were helpless to do—he saved us from our sins. So we don't mourn, but rejoice and celebrate.

We celebrate each and every day. We celebrate forgiveness each Christmas. Everything else is superficial. The Israelites had a great festival to thank God for a harvest and to remember how he took care of them in the wilderness. How much greater of a reason do you have to celebrate? You have a week to prepare for this feast. As the Israelites prepared for their festival, prepare yourself for ours. Get everything else out of the way. Focus on the birth of the Messiah. Celebrate forgiveness.

There is a time to mourn and there is a time to rejoice. During the advent season, we do both. But Christmas is not the time to mourn, but a time to rejoice. It is time not only to rejoice, but also to celebrate. For God has sent us his Son to be our Savior. So get ready, prepare yourselves. For it's almost time to rejoice and celebrate. Amen.