JOY AND STRENGTH IN THE LORD

Nehemiah 8:8-12

By

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An international repertory theater group performed in a small village church in Scotland. The church was packed. The program began with several short, humorous plays. No one laughed at the first one, or at the second. By the end of the third play, the leader said, “They must hate us. They’re not even smiling. We’ll cut the program short.”

At a reception following the performance the troupe was puzzled when everyone said how much they had enjoyed the performance. Then one troupe member understood when he overheard a kilt-clad gentleman say to his friends, “Oh, they were so funny it was all I could do not to laugh in the church.” (Adapted from Reader’s Digest [1/93], pp. 31-32.)

Sad to say, many people disassociate joy and gladness from church. They think of religion kind of like health food—it may not taste good, but it’s good for you so you endure it. Joy and gladness reminds them of an evening at the local pub, but definitely not of a morning in church! But the Bible declares that in God’s presence is fullness of joy; at His right hand are pleasures forever (Ps. 16:11). If we as His people are to reflect His image, then we must become joyous people.

In Nehemiah 8, a revival is in progress. Ezra and some scribes read God’s Word to the people from dawn until noon. The people responded by weeping in repentance as they realized how badly they had failed the Lord. There is a proper place for tears of repentance, of course. The Day of Atonement, on the tenth of the seventh month, was a day for fasting and repentance (Lev. 23:27-32). But Nehemiah, Ezra, and the other leaders tell the people not to mourn or weep on this day, but to enjoy the feast, adding, “The joy of the Lord is your strength” (8:10). And so the people made a great rejoicing (lit., 8:12). Our text makes the point that the rest of Scripture repeatedly affirms:
We should seek to know experientially the joy of the Lord, which yields spiritual strength.

Let me preface my comments by acknowledging that God has made us all differently. Some have temperaments that are naturally more upbeat and cheerful. Others are by nature more melancholic. God does not expect us all to be bouncy “Tiggers.” But neither should we resign ourselves to be glum “Eeyores” (my apologies to those of you not familiar with the “Winnie the Pooh” stories).

But the joy that we’re talking about is not the joy of natural temperament. It is the joy of the Lord. The numerous commands to rejoice and be glad in the Lord (Ps. 5:11; 9:2; 32:11; 33:1; 40:16; Phil. 3:1; 4:4; etc.) show that it is both possible and necessary for all believers to experience the joy of the Lord. Some may have to work at it more than others, but it’s available to all who know God’s abundant salvation. Where do we find God’s joy?

1. **God and His Word should be a source of great joy for the believer.**

   The joy of the Lord is the joy that God Himself possesses. He reveals it to us through His Word that tells us of His great salvation and the joy that it brings. Six observations about this joy:

   A. The joy of the Lord is not the joy of circumstances or temperament.

   This is obvious from the fact that it is distinctly called “the joy of the Lord.” People in the world who do not know God can be joyful when they win the lottery or get a promotion or go on a fun trip or enjoy good health. But the joy of the Lord is something that only those who know the Lord can enjoy in spite of circumstances.

   King David certainly knew this joy. The psalms are full of rejoicing and gladness in the Lord, and quite often at the most unexpected moments. In Psalm 13, David cries out, “How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever?” Four times he cries out, “How long,” mentioning his ongoing sorrow. But at the end of the short psalm, he affirms his trust in the Lord’s lovingkindness and then states by faith, “My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me” (13:5-6). This is not the joy of circumstances, but rather the joy that comes from focusing on and trusting in the Lord and His salvation.
The apostle Paul knew the same thing. He wrote Philippians from prison in Rome. Fellow Christians were badmouthing him. The Judaizers were using a subtly false message to seduce many in the churches that he had planted. But Philippians is full of joy and commands to the believers to rejoice in the Lord always. Was Paul oblivious to reality? No, he was quite in tune with reality—spiritual reality! He chose to rejoice in the Lord (Phil. 3:1; 4:4). Joy in the Lord is not the joy of circumstances or of having a naturally upbeat personality.

B. The joy of the Lord comes out of true repentance.

We can assume that the tears of 8:9 were tears of repentance, because chapter 9 is an extended prayer of confession. There is a superficial kind of joy that just shrugs off sin as no big deal and goes on its happy way. But that is not the joy of the Lord. There is an irony in Scripture in that the believer both mourns over sin and yet rejoices in the Lord. Paul said that he was “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10). A Christian will be sorrowful that he does not enjoy the kind of sweet, constant fellowship with Christ that he ought to enjoy, and yet be rejoicing in the mercies of God. We can and should weep with those who weep in grief, but undergirding the grief is the solid joy of sins forgiven and the hope of heaven.

Again, some tend to be more gloomy by nature. If that is you, I would urge you to put your focus more on the things above, where Christ is seated, having procured our salvation and where we are by virtue of our position in Him (Col. 3:1-4; Heb. 10:12). If I may be so bold, I would suggest that the famous missionary, David Brainerd, would have been better off to focus more on Christ and less on his own imperfections and sins. I know that many great saints have been profoundly affected by reading Brainerd’s life, but it was one of the few books that I began reading and did not finish. I found him to be far too introspective and morbid. It would put me in a slough of despondency to imitate him in this.

On the other hand, some Christians are too flip about their sins. They commit serious sins and just shrug it off by saying, “We’re under grace!” But if my sin put the sinless Son of God on the cross, I dare not take it lightly. The proper balance is to take our sins seriously and truly to repent of them, but then to put our focus back on Christ and our position in Him by grace. We should
visit repentance as often as needed, but we should dwell in the joy of God’s grace.

C. The joy of the Lord is the joy of God’s forgiveness and covenant love.

All the great feasts in Israel were a reminder of God’s abundant mercy to His chosen people in spite of their sin and failure. In Psalm 32, which David probably wrote after his sin with Bathsheba, he extols the blessings that are on the one whose sin God has forgiven. It’s not by accident that that Psalm ends with the exhortation, “Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous ones; and shout for joy, all you who are upright in heart” (32:11).

From David’s experience, we know that he is not talking about sinless perfection. Rather, he means the righteousness that God confers on the repentant believer and the uprightness of the one who confesses and forsakes his sins. After you have confessed your sins, rejoice that God has forgiven all your sins in Christ and that He has pledged His covenant love to you for all eternity.

D. The joy of the Lord comes from properly understanding God’s Word.

The people made “a great rejoicing” “because they understood the words which had been made known to them” (8:12). God’s Word makes known to us His “precious and magnificent promises” (2 Pet. 1:4). “As many as are the promises of God, in [Christ] they are yes” (2 Cor. 1:20)! The Bible not only promises us complete pardon for all of our past sins, it also promises God’s presence and sustaining grace in the present and the untold joy of eternity with Him in the future. It tells us that God “has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence” (2 Pet. 1:3).

When you go through deep trials, Satan tempts you to think that God does not care for you. It’s easy to quit reading your Bible because you think, “These things don’t seem to apply in my case.” But it’s especially at such times that you need to be devouring the Bible. It reassures you of God’s love and grace. It tells of other believers who have endured incredibly difficult trials by trusting in God’s Word. It gives you a much-needed perspective on trials.
Properly understanding and applying God's Word will fill you with His joy, even in the midst of excessive burdens (2 Cor. 1:8-9).

E. The joy of the Lord is joy in God Himself.

Even a great man of God like Spurgeon admits that he is dealing with a topic far beyond his ability when he comes to talk about joy in God (Charles Spurgeon, “Joy in God,” sermon 2550 on Rom. 5:11 [Ages Software], p. 5). So who am I to say anything! But I'll try.

By nature we all tend to find joy in things other than God Himself. We find joy in our health when we have it. We find joy in food. We find joy in the beauty of God’s creation. We find joy in our relationships with loved ones. We find joy in some of our possessions, such as our homes, cars, computers, and other gadgets. As long as we thankfully acknowledge that these good things come from God’s hand, that’s proper.

But all of us should be growing to know God Himself as our chief treasure. We should find such joy in the very being of God, and the fact that we are His and He is ours, that even if everything in life and life itself is stripped away, we rejoice in Him alone. Were we to be imprisoned and tortured for our faith, as many saints around the world suffer today, we should still rejoice in our God. I readily confess that it’s easy for me to say that, but it would be another thing to experience it! So I’m not saying that it’s true of me. I am saying that it should be true of me.

We should rejoice in God’s perfect attributes as we meditate on them in Scripture. Satan’s first ploy in the garden was to get Eve to view God as not good. He uses the same ploy today. He wants you to think of God as a cosmic killjoy who wants to make you miserable by His many restrictive laws. He wants you to view God as a grumpy, mean God who always says “no” when you want to have fun. But the Bible reveals God as full of joy (Ps. 16:11; Zeph. 3:17). All of God’s attributes as revealed in Scripture, whether His righteousness, His justice, His holiness, His sovereignty, or His love, should fill us with joy as we meditate on them.

We should rejoice not only in God’s attributes, but also in His actions throughout history, as recorded in the Bible and in church history. We should especially rejoice in the cross of our Lord Jesus
Christ, where God’s love and justice met and found us. We should rejoice in how He chose us and called us to Himself, and in the total acceptance that we have by grace through faith in Christ. We should rejoice in the daily fellowship that we know with God through His Word and prayer. We should rejoice that we can call Him Father and come boldly into His presence through Christ.


Hence we may learn, that whatever changes a godly man passes through, he is happy; because God, who is unchangeable, is his chosen portion. Though he meet with temporal losses, and be deprived of many, yea, of all his temporal enjoyments; yet God, whom he prefers before all, still remains, and cannot be lost. While he stays in this changeable, troublesome world, he is happy; because his chosen portion, on which he builds as his main foundation for happiness, is above the world, and above all changes. And when he goes into another world, still he is happy, because that portion yet remains…. How great is the happiness of those who have chosen the Fountain of all good, who prefer him before all things in heaven or on earth, and who can never be deprived of him to all eternity!

He goes on to ask what is it that chiefly makes you want to go to heaven? He asks, if you could avoid death and live on in this world without God, would you rather do that than leave this world in order to be with Him? He makes the point that the main reason we should want to go to heaven is to be with God, to have communion with Him, to see Him and enjoy Him through all eternity. There is no greater joy than the joy of God Himself!

F. The joy of the Lord is not at odds with holiness.

Three times (8:9, 10, 11) the leaders repeat to the people that they are not to weep, but rather to be joyful, because “this day is holy to our Lord.” This is a word of correction, which we need, too. Holiness and joy are not at odds with each other, as we so of-
ten think. Rather, they are intimately linked. The second fruit of the Holy Spirit is joy.

The world puts on a gaudy show of joy in its enticements. The Sunday paper several weeks ago ran an article on movie star Jennifer Lopez, who is living with her movie star boyfriend after two short-lived marriages. She’s rich, beautiful, and famous. The title of the article was something like, “It’s a great life.” Probably thousands of teenaged girls read an article like that and think, “Yeah, wouldn’t that be a great life!” God’s answer is, “No, a thousand times, no!” Jennifer Lopez knows nothing of the beauty and joy of God’s holiness. His holiness and our joy go together.

God and His Word should be the source of great joy for the believer. Don’t be seduced by the world!

2. **This joy of the Lord is a source of great strength for the believer.**

I can only touch on this, but you can easily expand it by meditating on these things. A person who has the joy of the Lord in his heart is strong in the battles of life. I mention just three:

A. We have strength against the condemnation of the law’s just demands.

God’s holy law brings condemnation, because we all are guilty of breaking it. Outside of Christ we stand justly condemned. But, “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1)! To say this is not to encourage licentious living. Rather, it is to say that when we think about how far we fall short of God’s perfect righteousness, we take refuge in Christ’s imputed righteousness. The joy of His salvation gives us strength to stand before God in spite of our many shortcomings.

B. We have strength against the assaults of our enemy.

Satan is the accuser of the saints (Rev. 12:10). If we try to point to our performance as our defense against his accusations, we will not do well. But if we point to the blood of Jesus Christ, we will not lose our joy in the battle, but will stand firm. Our joy does not rest on our being perfect, but rather on our being in Christ.

C. We have strength in the hope of God’s promises.
As believers, we stake everything on the promises of God. If His Word fails, we are doomed. If Jesus is not risen, our faith is in vain. But if He is risen, and if He is coming again for His bride, even in the midst “of tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword,” “we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us” (Rom. 8:35, 37). The joy of the Lord, found in God Himself and in His Word, is a source of great strength for us in the most difficult trials of life.

3. **The joy of the Lord is something to be experienced, both personally and corporately.**

Our text is both a word of encouragement and a command (“do not be grieved”). God wants His people to experience His joy. Each of us must experience His joy personally so that when we come together corporately it overflows to those who come into our midst. Again, I’m not saying that we must suppress feelings of grief when we are going through difficult trials. It is not more spiritual to put on a happy face and pretend that we are not hurting inside when we are grieving. But underneath the grief is God’s abiding joy.

The Bible offers us hope in that we can control our thoughts. We can choose to stand in the shadows or in the light. We can focus on the things of this earth or on the things above. We can dwell on the things that cause us anxiety or on the things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and of good repute (Phil. 4:6-8). In other words, as believers we have the choice to rejoice, and we must deliberately exercise that choice by faith in God’s Word.

**Conclusion**

John Piper tells of an afternoon that he spent with Josef Tson, a Romanian pastor who suffered under the Communists (A Godward Life, Book Two [Multnomah Press], pp. 358-360). One topic they discussed was having joy in the midst of suffering. Tson told about one day when the Communists came to his house and confiscated almost all of his books. The soldiers needed proof that they were getting his books from him, so they made him sit at a table and write in each book that they found it in his house, while they took pictures of him doing this. At one point in this process, Tson took down a book whose title was, “Joy Unspeakable and
Full of Glory,” with the subtitle, “Is This Your Experience NOW?” It is not a joyful thing for a pastor to lose his books!

But as he read the title, Tson asked himself that question and at that moment was flooded with great joy in the Holy Spirit. He lost his anger and fear and told his wife to get the soldiers some coffee. Later that week he had to preach. His congregation knew that he had been stripped of his books and had been harassed daily by the officials so that he had no time to prepare a sermon. He spoke that day on Nehemiah 8:10, “The joy of the Lord is your strength.” One man in the church was so overwhelmed with the sheer force of Tson’s joy in the midst of suffering that he could not hear anything after the text. He was broken in his own heart and deeply changed.

I have not known persecution anywhere near the degree that Josef Tson has. But I have had times when I was being falsely accused and criticized by fellow Christians for things I believe. At such times, the Lord has reminded me of His beatitude, “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all manner of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11-12).

Is this your experience now? If it is, dwell there! If it is not, seek to get there. There is joy and strength in God Himself and in His Word of promise to every believer.

Discussion Questions

1. Is depression a sin (always, sometimes, never)? Defend your answer biblically.

2. How can a believer distinguish the conviction of the Holy Spirit from the accusation of the enemy?

3. Why is it important for every believer, in spite of natural temperament, to develop the joy of the Lord? What is at stake?


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