

"The Joy of the Lord Is Your Strength" Nehemiah 8-9

So far in the book of Nehemiah, we've seen Nehemiah come from Persia to Jerusalem and in a matter of just a few months, take the piles of rubble and turn them into a secure city wall. He has formulated and carried out a plan. He has organized people and assigned functions. Jerusalem has gone from chaos to order in an amazingly short period of time.

HOW did he do this?

-Was it Nehemiah and his leadership abilities alone? NO.

-We recognize that God was working through all of this...

...God gave Nehemiah the passion for the project.

...God moved the heart of the King of Persia.

...God moved in the hearts of the people of Jerusalem so they were willing to take on an overwhelming task in the face of strong opposition.

...God convicted the hearts of the wealthier residents of Jerusalem so that they stopped taking advantage of their poorer countrymen, and led them to give a generous "free will offering" to the work of the temple.

...God even worked through the opposition as they saw the project completed in record time and knew it was God at work.

HOW DID GOD DO ALL THIS? Remember that the book of Nehemiah is volume two of the story of this time in the history of Israel. Before Nehemiah, comes the book of Ezra. God first used the faithful ministry of Ezra, a man who had been sent by King Artaxerxes 14 years before Nehemiah. According to Ezra 7:6, he was, **"a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given."** And verse 10 says **"For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel."**

Ezra probably didn't realize it at the time, but he was preparing the hearts of the people for the building project Nehemiah would lead. Ezra was a scribe and a priest who had been sent to Jerusalem by God with ONE primary responsibility: To teach the Jews God's law, to teach the Word of God. God even moved the heart of the pagan king of Persia to instruct Ezra to teach God's Word.

In Ezra chapter 7 is a letter that king Artaxerxes of Persia sent with Ezra when he went to Jerusalem. In Ezra 7:25 he says **"And you, Ezra, according to your God-given wisdom, set magistrates and judges who may judge all the people who are in the region beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God; and teach those who do not know them."**

When Ezra first arrived in Jerusalem, the moral and spiritual condition of the people was terrible, but as he taught them God's Word, they began to respond to and obey the laws. Now Nehemiah comes years later and challenges them to trust God and build the walls, and they are able to respond in faith! Nehemiah came to Jerusalem and found that God had already begun to prepare the hearts of the people.

Now in Nehemiah 8 the walls of Jerusalem have just been completed. The physical building is complete, but the spiritual building is still on-going. They have finished rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, but their spiritual lives are still in shambles. Their condition is revealed in the words of Nehemiah 9:36, **"Here we**

are, servants today! And the land that You gave to our fathers, To eat its fruit and its bounty, Here we are, servants in it! And it yields much increase to the kings You have set over us, Because of our sins; Also they have dominion over our bodies and our cattle At their pleasure; And we are in great distress."

Their lives were in great distress. These people see the connection between the sins of their own hearts and their distressful situation. They see their slavery as a result of their own sin. They see the relevancy of sin to their own lives. They have experienced its destruction. As they lay there on rock bottom flat on their backs looking up, they began to realize that God has a wonderful message of salvation. It is in His joy that they can find strength to put their lives back together.

And it was through the hearing of the Word of God and applying it to their lives that they saw clearly their sin and God's solution. A key word in chapter 8 is **joy**. We are going to see it three times in this chapter, the key verse being verse 10, where it says, **"the joy of the LORD is your strength."**

What brought such joy in the midst of their distress?

I. The Joy of Returning to the Word of God (8:1-6).

1 Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel.

2 So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month.

The people gather...This itself is evidence of the impact of Ezra's teaching ministry- The people recognize that the **"first day of the seventh month"** is the beginning of a special religious observance. It began a trio of special religious festivals. The first of these is what is called the "Feast of Trumpets," Leviticus 23:23-25:

23 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

24 "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbath-rest, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation.

25 'You shall do no customary work on it; and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD.'"

It is here that they ask Ezra to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses and read it to them. They wanted to hear what God had to say to them. They had a hunger for God's word.

3 Then he read from it in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.

4 So Ezra the scribe stood on a platform of wood which they had made for the purpose; and beside him, at his right hand, stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Urijah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah; and at his left hand Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam.

5 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.

6 And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. Then all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

Notice their joy at hearing the Word of God. It's a family event...all the men, women and children old enough to understand. They give it significant TIME...from daybreak till midday (5 or 6 hours!).

They honored the Word of God as Ezra read it. **"when he opened it, all the people stood up"** (8:5).

They paid attention to the Word of God. **"the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law"** (8:3).

They worshiped the Lord. (8:6) They recognized the SOURCE of the book and they praised God...they get excited!

Look at how they worshiped in verse 6:

1. Verbal Praise: **"Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God."** The word blessed comes from a word meaning to kneel. It means to praise God as an act of adoration. The people responded with praise from their own lips, **"Then all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!"** They affirmed all that Ezra said and let it become their praise to God as well. As they honored God and verbally affirmed their praise, it prepared them to listen attentively to God speaking to them through His Word.
2. Humble submission: **"And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground."** That sentence using three phrases all describing how they humbled themselves before God so they would hear His Word. Their worship was both a response to God's Word and a preparing of their hearts to hear and apply it.

Think about it and be a little bit ashamed...They are not awaiting a reading of the Sermon on the Mount or any of the powerful Parables of Jesus. They are not about to hear the powerful doctrinal writings of the Apostle Paul...they are waiting to hear the Law of Moses read and they are SHOUTING with joy and FALLING on their faces in worship. Even with that LIMITED portion available to them, they recognize it as God's POWERFUL and LIVING Word.

2. The Joy of Understanding God's Word. (8:7-8).

7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law; and the people stood in their place.

8 So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.

Ezra probably read LOUDLY from the platform, but would PAUSE and the Levites would take and read that same passage for smaller groups, would "make it clear and give the meaning" (translation). They probably listened and

responded to the questions of the people hearing the Law... "What does that mean?"

Notice their goal: "So that the people could understand what was being read." They spoke the message of God in a language the people could understand. Ezra's helper, the Levites, went through the crowds giving the sense of the message. God's word begins to make sense to them, for they see themselves in it. Maybe they read all of the blessing and curses that God promised in Deuteronomy 28 and how they had all happened just as God had said through Moses. Maybe they heard Deuteronomy 30 where God promised to return them from their captivity and to bless them again if they returned their hearts to Him.

3 that the LORD your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the LORD your God has scattered you.

4 "If any of you are driven out to the farthest parts under heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you.

5 "Then the LORD your God will bring you to the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it. He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers.

6 "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

As we read or hear the Bible we should see God and come to know Him more deeply. And that usually happens as we see ourselves in God's word. How do you know you have the sense of God's word? Can you see God more clearly, and see yourself and your sin more clearly? Do you see yourself in the Bible?

Jeremiah had prophesied the very captivity and return that these Jews experienced. Jeremiah describes how they will return from captivity.

Jeremiah 31:16,17 " Thus says the LORD: "Refrain your voice from weeping, And your eyes from tears; For your work shall be rewarded, says the LORD, And they shall come back from the land of the enemy.

17 There is hope in your future, says the LORD, That your children shall come back to their own border.

What a relevant message of care and hope God's word reveals. The book of Nehemiah reveals the fulfillment of Deuteronomy and of the prophets. These Jews are experiencing the joyous realities of the fulfillment of God's word. They are experiencing the relevancy of the message.

And God has a relevant message for each of us today from His Word. Worship, Listen, and take it to heart. God is speaking to you today.

3. The Joy of the Applying God's Word (9-12).

9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, 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 nor weep." For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law.

10 Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our LORD. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is

your strength."

11 So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved."

12 And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them.

God's word did it's work in the people's hearts. The people really responded to the Word of God. THEY LET IT GET TO THEIR HEARTS and it convicted them of their sin. As the Words of the Law are being read, Ezra, Nehemiah and Levites see people becoming emotionally broken by the Scriptures.

Now it seems strange to me (does it to you?) that the leaders would begin to COMFORT and even COMMAND the people not to "grieve or weep".

BUT REMEMBER (Leviticus 23) this day is The Feast of Trumpets. This is a day that is devoted to the worship of God, marked by sacrifices, feasting and joy. It's a reminder that the "Day of Atonement" is just 10 days away when they will celebrate that God has made a way for their sins to be forgiven.

It's understandable that they feel CONVICTION. But God is also honored when His people CELEBRATE all that He has done for them. The joy of the Lord becomes our strength as we realize that we can only come to God from where we are.

As they stand there with their lives in shambles they are mourning over their sins. They were not told "I told you so" or "you should have known better" or "look what a mess your life is in" or "the next time you had better do better." But they are told, **"Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our LORD. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength. . . . Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved."**

When they understood the message was one of joy and salvation, Nehemiah says, **" And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them. (8:12)**

This day is sacred to the Lord. It was the joy of the Lord that made this such a sacred day. God had deliberately led them to this moment in time. ***It wasn't a day of good fortune or good luck. It was the day of the Lord!*** The Israelites were returning to God on this special day.

4. The Joy of Living God's Word (8:13-18)

13 Now on the second day the heads of the fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, in order to understand the words of the Law.

14 And they found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month,

15 and that they should announce and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the mountain, and bring olive branches, branches of oil trees, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written."

16 Then the people went out and brought them and made themselves booths, each one on the roof of his house, or in their

courtyards or the courts of the house of God, and in the open square of the Water Gate and in the open square of the Gate of Ephraim.

17 So the whole assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day the children of Israel had not done so. And there was very great gladness.

18 Also day by day, from the first day until the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day there was a sacred assembly, according to the prescribed manner.

They all come back the next day for more. Turning to God in repentance always creates a joyous hunger for more. When we understand the relevancy of God's word and the joy it is seeking to bring to our lives, we began to hunger and thirst for more. The joy of their salvation was so great that they wanted to hear more.

As heard the Word of God they obeyed it. As they obeyed it they found even more reason to rejoice in their salvation. As read through the Word of God, they began rediscovering how God had led their fathers out of Egypt into the wilderness.

There he sustained them as they lived in makeshift booths for forty years. It was there that the Feast of Tabernacles came into being. Their fathers, in accordance with the Law of Moses, had set aside a week each year when all the Israelites would dwell in booths as a memorial to God's sustenance in the wilderness. As they were reading the Law, they realized that the Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated at this very time of the year. So they began, right then and there, restoring the worship of God through a celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. They celebrated for seven days and on the eighth day according to the Law there was an assembly of all the people.

As we read the Word of God, our understanding and appreciation for God increase. You can't celebrate what God has done for you without appreciating what he has done for you. You can't appreciate what God has done for you without celebrating. The deeper the appreciation, the greater the joy.

Conclusion:

"The joy of the Lord is your strength." Think about that phrase for a moment. It is the Lord's joy that is our strength. It is His rejoicing that gives reason to rejoice. It is His joy that fills us with hope. It is His joyous desire to save me just as I am, in spite of all my sins.

"The joy of the Lord" remains our strength today. Spiritual renewal comes when God's people return to the Word of God, understand God's Word, apply God's Word, and live God's word. The result is joy in living with Christ.

Do you have that Joy?