

The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength

By Matthew Black, Pastor

Text: Nehemiah 8:1-12

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Serve the Lord Sunday

Tabernacle Baptist Church

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Open your Bible to the book of **Nehemiah 8**. Today is "SERVE THE LORD" Sunday. Our emphasis this year is to "Serve the Lord with Gladness". Service is not difficult for a Christian because we are going to find today that when you know Christ as Saviour, He lives and walks in you and through you. There is great joy in serving the Lord because He dwells within us empowering us to "will and to do of His good pleasure" (**Philippians 2:13**).

In **Nehemiah 8**, we find a group of people that go from deep discouragement to deep encouragement in their service for the Lord. I want to take us on that journey this morning. The title of our message is "The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength".

There is a joy of DIVINE origin. Nehemiah said, "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (**Nehemiah 8:10**). It is Christ alone that gives joy. This joy is not the "power of positive thinking" or "learning how to live your best life now". All of that is entirely possible through our own human power. Divine joy is beyond our reach. People are looking for joy in all the wrong places. If you are to have the "joy of the Lord", it flows directly from God's heart to your heart.

There is great joy in Jesus. Yet, this morning, there are some—perhaps more than I know, that have come here without that joy. Some are broken hearted. Others are apathetic. Others are confused. Some Christians have lost their joy because you have lost your focus on Jesus. Some of you have no lasting joy because you are not a true believer in Christ. However you have come here this morning, understand that there is joy in Jesus alone. Joy does not ultimately come from cars, human relationships, your job, your health, or your prosperity. If you are looking to these things for ultimate joy, you will be weak because all of those things will fail you. But when you can say "everything in this life is like a heap of refuse compared to my walk with Jesus" then you have found joy! I want everyone here to know the ultimate joy that is found only in Jesus. It will carry you in your weakest moments.

Nehemiah 8:1-12, "And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel. 2 And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. 3 And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law. 4 And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, and Shema, and Anaiah, and Urijah, and Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pedaiah, and Mishael, and Malchiah, and Hashum, and Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam. 5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up: 6 And Ezra blessed the LORD,

the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground....” Verse 7 says that several of the priests “and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place. 8 So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. 9 ¶ And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the LORD your God; **mourn not**, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law. 10 Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for *this day is holy* unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength. 11 So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; **neither be ye grieved**. 12 And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had **understood the words that were declared unto them**.”

[Prayer for Guidance]

Introduction: Before anyone can serve Christ with true joy, that person must be **saved**. You cannot serve Christ with gladness with a cold heart of formalism and duties. Religious formalism does not please Christ. Service to Christ is always joyous because it is Christ in us! All true joy comes from being in fellowship with God through a relationship with Christ.

The Bible tells us everywhere that there is no lasting joy apart from Christ. **Psalm 16:11**, “Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.”

How does a person obtain lasting joy in Christ? We find out here in the book of **Nehemiah 8**. I want to first take you on a journey to Jerusalem. We’ll look at this again later, so I will be brief in explaining the situation, but you know that by Nehemiah 8, the people had just rebuilt the walls. They had every cause to be joyful, but instead they were weeping! So here is the first thing we need to realize about “the joy of the Lord”.

I. **Weeping** for sin always precedes joy in Christ. The people of Nehemiah’s day had a preaching session with Ezra the priest, and they listened to the Word of God. Their response to God’s Word was weeping! **Verse 9**, “all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law”. There was deep grief, sorrow and fear. Their sorrow would be soon turned to joy, yet for now, there was a purpose for the sorrow.

Context: Though the people had just finished building the walls of Jerusalem, something happened to make them completely miserable. They became blind and dead to their accomplishments in this world because of an event that we find in **Nehemiah 8:3**. What we are going to see is that...

II. The **Word of God** is the only tool powerful enough to soften and break a heart of stone so that Christ we might have full joy in Christ. We see this in **verse 3**.

The people of Israel asked for Ezra the priest to read from the first five books of the Bible. **Verse 3** records that “he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday”. For *at least six hours* Ezra read Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.¹ This was not a casual Scripture reading for Ezra’s hearers. **They were being dealt with by God. Hebrews 4:12**, “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” They were undergoing major spiritual surgery!

¹ Matthew Henry comments here, “those mentioned here were thus employed for six hours”.

A. When a person is being dealt with by God through the Word, **time stops**. **When someone hears the voice of the Almighty in their heart hours seem like only minutes**. God's Word was penetrating their heart. So much so that they were utterly broken by it.

The goal of our constant reading of the Word is not to become scholars or even to have correct doctrine. If we stop at that, we are nothing more than Pharisees. Our goal is to meet with the living God through His Word. His Word is a catalyst that brings us to Him! But in order to come to Him, we must see our sin as He sees it.

B. So we see secondly, when a person is being dealt with by God through the Word, **sin** is dealt with and it brings us to great grief. Why? Because you realize all this time you've been so blind! So it was for the people of Nehemiah's day. **Verse 9**, "all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law". The people had all their lives been blind to the holiness and majesty of God. They had lived their lives essentially with God only as a token part of their lives. Now the people were being awakened.

C. Thirdly, when a person is being dealt with by God through the Word, **fear** increases. This is seen by the action taken by the Levites in **verse 11**, "So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye grieved." The people were now unsettled, seeking relief from the weight of their sin. The people realized they were **condemned** according to the Law of Moses.

Ezra summarized the books of Moses in **Ezra 8:22b**, "The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him". The people had ignored what God had commanded them, and now they realize they have transgressed against God all these years. This is a good thing! We must remember **Proverbs 9:10**, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding". God is not looking to save the righteous, but to call sinners to repentance. This was a good thing!

The people of Nehemiah's day realized that the God of Scriptures would not be trifled with. They read how He judged the angels and Satan. He judged Sodom and Gomorrah. And they read how He would judge them if they did not obey, and they were judged—sent to Assyria and Babylon.

Richard Sibbes asks, "Can we think that He that threw the angels out of heaven will suffer dust and worms' meat to run a contrary course, and to carry it away always so?"

The answer to Sibbes' question is absolutely not! We are told in **Psalms 2:9** that Christ shall one day "dash [unbelievers] in pieces like a potter's vessel". He will take all the ungodly, those without a Saviour, and He will dash them in pieces like a piece of pottery.

Remember Ezra summarized the books of Moses in **Ezra 8:22b**, "The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him".

- There are some here—and you are burdened down with your sin. God has a purpose for such intense conviction. If you feel the weight of your sin, understand that you do not feel the **full weight** of your sin. God is merciful to you even now. Only those in hell understand the full misery of their sin.

- ***The curse of sin is such that it renders people numb and blind to their condemnation so that they have no desire to leave it.*** Yet God will allow those He loves to be awakened and feel the condemnation and misery of sin so much so that that they despise even the hint of sin and flee to Jesus. God will allow you to see sin in such a way that you want nothing more to do with it and your only desire is Christ! Only when the disease of sin is properly diagnosed will the sinner desire the right cure. Only when sin is seen in all its horror will we truly turn to Christ. The revelation of the awfulness of sin is a work of God Himself in your heart. When the Comforter comes, "he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (**John 16:8**). Before He comforts you, He will reveal the true misery of your sin so that your comfort is treasured all the more.

There is pleasure in sin "for a season" (**Hebrews 11:25**), but the wages of sin is not for a season. The price tag of sin is eternal death and torment in the Lake of Fire "where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched" (**Mark 9:44**). It burns forever. That is the full misery of sin. There is pleasure in sin for a season, but there is misery in sin FOR EVER!

It is the deep misery and grief we remember before salvation that makes Christ all the more precious to those who know Him. We have been delivered from "everlasting burnings" (**Isaiah 33:14**)!

Nothing has changed since then. People today are asleep to the fact that they are going to stand before God very soon. Yet the vast majority of humanity live as if Jesus Christ does not exist. He is not someone any one can ignore. We learn in the New Testament that Jesus Christ is the Jehovah of the Old Testament. He was ignored when He came into this world. He couldn't even get a place in the Inn. He was not only ignored, but despised by His own people. "He came unto his own, and his own received him not" (**John 1:11**). He is ignored by millions and perhaps billions at this very hour. But He will not be ignored for very long. For "he is Lord of lords, and King of kings" (**Revelation 17:14**).

People go on every day living according to their own way, disobeying God every moment, with no thought that they will give an account to Him. There is great reason to fear. Yet the great majority of people alive today do not fear or even think of Judgment Day.

God will never turn a blind eye to my sin or yours. For just one sin we are everlastingly cursed along with the devil and his angels. If God did not excuse the devil himself, how can He excuse any of you or I? God is just and holy.

⇒ Yet ultimately, it is not weeping or the Word can bring us joy in Christ.

III. Ultimately, it is the **Worth** of Christ that brings us joy. Our sorrow for sin and our conviction by the Word prepares us and leads us to joy in God. How? **Nehemiah 8:9b**, "This day is holy unto the Lord your God; mourn not, nor weep..." He says in **verse 10**, "Go your way eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength".

Matthew Henry says of this verse, "After [the people] had wept, they rejoiced. Holy mourning makes way for holy mirth; those that *sow in tears shall reap in joy*; those that tremble at the convictions of the word may triumph in the consolations of it."

In **Psalm 30:5**, we read, "weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning".

A. There is great joy for sinners who esteem the very **Person** and nature of God. The source of joy is found in the Person God Himself. It is the "joy of the LORD" (**verse 10**). There is great reason for rejoicing and joy when we look at the person of God.

1. We see Christ that Christ's nature is tender and loving to sinners.

a. He came into the world **not** to stir up our sin before our minds in order to **condemn** us. "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved" (**John 3:17**). Behold His majesty. The One Who is so great became so little because of His love for worthless beings such as us. We are condemned already. He awakens us to our sin so that we might heal us of all our iniquity.

God's purpose in giving you deep conviction of sin is not to leave you in your sin. God stirs up your sin in order to present you with a Great Saviour! He wants you to treasure Christ infinitely.

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!
Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured,
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilled.

Refrain

*Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin.*

b. Christ came to save people bruised and broken by their sin. Do you find yourself broken hearted today and anxious over your sin today? **Isaiah 61:1** tells us that Christ was sent to "bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound". Christ Himself says in **Matthew 12:20-21**, "A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory. 21 And in his name shall the Gentiles trust." The bruised reed and smoking wick are pictures of the bruised and broken sinner. There is one in whom the Gentiles trust that works justice and gains the victory for them. Who? Behold the Lamb of God on the Cross. God's Justice came upon Him for your sins. Look at Him and consider how infinitely evil your heart is that it took this to forgive you. Behold "the Man of Sorrows" there! No wrath was spared for Him. He took it all. He drank the cup of wrath completely. Not a drop was left.

c. It is not until Christ is understood as Merciful Saviour and believed upon in this way that a person is relieved from the burden of sin. When you see how great Christ's mercy is, your love for Him will explode. ***To whom much is forgiven, the same loves much*** (**Luke 7:47**). The greater you see your sin to be, the greater you will see Christ as the amazing and loving and merciful Saviour that He is.

2. We see God the Father's nature in **Psalm 103**. Turn there if you would. "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: 3 Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; 4 Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies; 5 Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's" (**Psalm 103:2-5**). This is the source of all joy! "He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. 11 For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him.

12 As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. 13 Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. 14 For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust" (Psalm 103:10-14).

God is good. He is gracious. "O taste and see that the LORD is good. Blessed is the man that trusteth in Him" (Psalm 34:8).

3.The **Spirit** is called the "Comforter". He is sent forth to gather sinners for Christ and to forgive and comfort them.

B.There is great **strength** for saints who live in the joy of Jesus.

1.For the **saints**.

a.Christians are strengthened in joy by **meditating** on all we are in Christ: forgiven, joint-heirs with Him, united with Him, loved with an everlasting love. In Christ you are justified—no matter what happens you will never face the wrath of God! We are loved and guided every day by His providence and plan.

b.Christians are strengthened in joy by **spending time** with Christ. **Psalm 16:11**, "Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore."

c.Christians (who have the joy of the Lord as their strength) are well-armed against **temptation**. When a man is already rich and satisfied in Christ, why would he need the "pleasures of sin for a season"?

d.Christians (who have the joy of the Lord as their strength) do great **service** for Christ. Those who are happy in God find Christ's yoke easy and His burden light. Self-sacrifice is desired. Faithful service is addicting. Paul and Silas in Acts 16:25 found the joy of the Lord as their strength after being beaten. "at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them. 26 And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed."

2.If you are here as a **sinner** without Christ, run to Jesus for joy! May the "joy of the Lord be your strength". As Nehemiah said, "Mourn not" (**vs. 9**). Weep no more! "Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye grieved" (vs. 11). Today is the day of salvation! God says in **2 Corinthians 6:2**, "I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

Why wait another minute? Who is it that gives us joy and delivers us from hell? It is Christ! How does He do it? How does Christ deliver us? He does it in His offices for us as prophet, priest, and King.

a.Christ as **Prophet** reveals to us the way from misery to joy in Him. You may say, that you are such a sinner that you cannot conceive of a way that Christ will deliver you from your sin. Christ is the only prophet who has infinite knowledge. Not only as prophet does He have such wisdom as to know the Way, He is preaching to you even now that He *is* the Way, the Truth and the Life! Christ as prophet SPEAKS to us that He is the way of wisdom. You say, it does not make sense that Christ should forgive me. Reject your prideful knowledge. What is impossible with man is possible with God. And Christ even

now preaches to you that there is a way to God. Look to Jesus. Trust His promise. Believe Him and thereby love Him!

- b. Christ as **Priest** has compassion on us right where we are. Christ has made Himself as one of us. He is "the man Christ Jesus" (**1 Timothy 2:5**). **Hebrews 2:17**, "...In all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest...to make reconciliation for the sins of the people"—the people He had purchased! As Priest, Christ has such compassion for you. If you doubt Him, behold Him on the Cross. Behold the Man of Sorrow. See Him high and lifted up, not in His majesty, but in misery for you. Look into His compassionate eyes.

Ah, but listen to this. You might say, but I am not willing to come to Jesus just now. I hate my sinful life, but I am not ready.

- c. That is why Christ in His office as Almighty **King** can subdue even the rebellion. He is willing to enter into your life, and by His POWER to make His people "willing in the day of [His] power" (**Psalms 110:3**). There is a specific day or time when God breaks our chains free and looses us from sin.

Christ says to the Father in **John 17:2**, "As thou hast given Him power over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as Thou hast given Him". Christ as King could echo His fierce voice in your soul. His hatred for sin. He could destroy us all in a moment. But listen, as the most merciful, gracious King, He uses His omnipotence to make all the riches of His grace available to you. He bids you to come to Him and lay down your weapons before His Kingship. If you will do this, He will accept you as His own child and invite you to dine at His table, like Mephibosheth, with Him forever—not as a servant, but as His very own son or daughter.

Conclusion: Sinners—Come to Jesus! "When you were without strength, Christ died for the ungodly". Saints—Rejoice in Jesus! The joy of the Lord is your strength. He has delivered from sin, hell, death, and the grave. In Him is life! Let us set our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Let us serve the Lord with gladness and run the race with patience. The joy of the Lord is our strength!

Sermon

Matthew Black (Pastor), Tabernacle Baptist Church
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Notes...

June 7, 2009

Title: "The Joy of the Lord is My Strength"

Text: Nehemiah 8:1-12

Introduction: There is great joy in serving the Lord because He dwells within us empowering us to "will and to do of His good pleasure" (**Philippians 2:13**). How does a person obtain lasting **JOY** in Christ?

- I. **Weeping** for sin always precedes joy in the Lord (**vs. 9**). The people of Nehemiah's day had every cause to be joyful (they finished the walls), but instead were weeping! Why did they weep?

- II. The **Word of God** is the only tool powerful enough to soften and break a heart of stone so that Christ we might have full joy in Christ (**vs. 3**; cf. **Hebrews 4:12**). For at least six hours Ezra read Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. They were undergoing major spiritual surgery!
 - A. When a person is being dealt with by God (through God's Word), **time stops** (**vs.3**). When someone hears the voice of the Almighty in their heart hours seem like only minutes.
 - B. When a person is being dealt with by God through the Word, **sin** is dealt with (**vs.9**). Why? Because you realize all this time you've been so blind!
 - C. When a person is being dealt with by God through the Word, **fear** increases (**vs.11**). We must remember **Proverbs 9:10**, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding".
 - Ezra summarized the books of Moses in **Ezra 8:22b**, "The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him".

- Richard Sibbes asks, “Can we think that He that threw the angels out of heaven will suffer dust and worms’ meat to run a contrary course, and to carry it away always so?”
- We are told in **Psalm 2:9** that Christ shall one day “dash [unbelievers] in pieces like a potter’s vessel”.
- Only those in hell understand the full misery of their sin.
- The curse of sin is such that it renders people numb and blind to their condemnation so that they have no desire to leave it. The Word of God awakens sinners out of this numbness and blindness.

Yet ultimately, it is not **Weeping** or the **Word** that can bring us joy in Christ.

III. Ultimately, it is understanding the **Worth** of the LORD that brings us joy (**vs. 9b–10**).

A. There is great **joy** for sinners who understand the very **Person** and nature of the Triune God (**vs. 10**). The source of joy is found in the Person God Himself. It is the “joy of the LORD”.

1. We see Christ that **Christ’s** nature is tender and loving to sinners.

a. Christ came into the world **not** to stir up our sin before our minds in order to **condemn** us (**Jn. 3:17**). We are condemned already. He awakens us to our sin so that we might heal us of all our iniquity.

b. Christ came to save people bruised and broken by their sin (**Isaiah 61:1; Matthew 12:20–21; Psalm 34:8**).

c. God stirs up our sin before our minds in order to **reveal** Christ as the Merciful Saviour. This is only in this way that a person can be relieved from the burden of sin (**Luke 7:47**).

God’s purpose in giving you deep conviction of sin is not to leave you in your sin. God stirs up your sin in order to present you with a Great Saviour! He wants you to treasure Christ infinitely.

2. We see God the **Father’s** nature in **Psalm 103** and **Psalm 34:8** is compassionate and good.

3. The **Spirit** is called the “Comforter”. He is sent forth to gather sinners for Christ and to forgive and comfort them.

B. There is great **strength** for those who find their joy in Jesus.

1. For the **saints**.

a. Christians are strengthened in joy by **meditating** on all we are in Christ: forgiven, joint-heirs with Him, united with Him, loved with an everlasting love. In Christ you are justified—no matter what happens you will never face the wrath of God! We are loved and guided every day by His providence and plan.

b. Christians are strengthened in joy by **spending time** with Christ. **Psalm 16:11**, “Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.”

c. Christians (who have the joy of the Lord as their strength) are well-armed against **temptation**. When a man is already rich and satisfied in Christ, why would he need the "pleasures of sin for a season"?

d. Christians (who have the joy of the Lord as their strength) do great **service** for Christ. Those who are happy in God find Christ's yoke easy and His burden light. Self-sacrifice is desired. Faithful service is addicting. Paul and Silas in Acts 16:25 found the joy of the Lord as their strength after being beaten. "at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them. 26 And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed."

2. If you are here as a **sinner** without Christ, run to Jesus for joy! May the "joy of the Lord be your strength". As Nehemiah said, "Mourn not" (**vs. 9**). Weep no more! "Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye grieved" (**vs. 11**). Today is the day of salvation (**2 Corinthians 6:2**)! Christ as prophet, priest and king can save you!

Conclusion: Sinners—Come to Jesus! "When you were without strength, Christ died for the ungodly". Saints—Rejoice in Jesus! The joy of the Lord is our strength!

Amen! Now go