

Nehemiah: Joy and Strength

Nehemiah 8:9-12

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

*The Lord's Day Evening
December 14, 2008*

Now tonight we come to Nehemiah 8, and we're going to read together just four verses of text, verses 9-12. Before we do that, let's look to God once again in prayer. Let's all pray.

Lord our God, we bow in Your presence, acknowledging You to be the author and giver of Holy Scripture. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine and reproof and correction, and instruction in the way of righteousness, that the man of God might be thoroughly furnished unto every good work. We thank You, O Lord, for the gift of the Bible, the Law of God, the light to our path, the lamp unto our way. And we pray tonight as we read it and as we study it together that You would come by Your Spirit. We want once again to be affected by Your word because we want to be men and women of the Book, of Holy Scripture. We want to love this word more than any other word. We desire tonight to have dealings with You. Come, Holy Spirit; move us, challenge us, empower us, invigorate us, convict us. Grant that in this hour of worship we might once again know the joy, the holy joy of being in the presence of God, of knowing that sweet assurance that You are our covenant Lord and we are Your people, and thus it shall ever be. Now grant Your blessing, we pray. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now, this is God's word, Nehemiah, chapter eight, and verse nine:

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and 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 or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." 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.

Amen. May the Lord add His rich blessing to that reading of His holy word.

The Westminster divines summed up religion — our faith, Christianity, the gospel, what it means to be a Christian — this way: “Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” For the Westminster divines (those dour Puritans!) joy was at the heart of what it means to live the Christian life—joy in God, joy in knowing that we are the Lord's, joy in experiencing the gift of salvation, joy in knowing a sense of wholeness and integration that we are now complete in Jesus Christ, as Paul tells the Colossians.

It has been God's plan from the very beginning, of course. You see it in the Garden of Eden...that beautiful picture, Adam and Eve and God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they're together and they're in fellowship, and there is a sense of wholeness, and a sense of integration and joy, and peace and fellowship. And then sin enters into the world, and Adam and Eve are driven from the garden and angelic creatures with flaming swords guard the entrance now to Eden's perfection and bliss and glory. The only way back is through the blood of Jesus...covered by the blood of Christ.

It's fascinating. In the so-called high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17, on the eve of His betrayal, in an hour or so from saying these words He would be betrayed. He would be handed over to Caiaphas, and then to Pilate and then to be crucified. And do you remember what the last burden on Jesus' heart was — not for Himself, but for us, for His people, His children? “That they might have My joy fulfilled in themselves.” That's what He prayed for: “That they might have My joy fulfilled in themselves.”

Jesus wants us to know that joy, the joy that the Westminster divines speak about, that man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

It's September, 444 B.C. Gathered at the Water Gate — well, in the courtyard before the Water Gate — in Jerusalem, are perhaps thousands of people. Many of them are the men and women who had been engaged in rebuilding this wall. They've been back in the city six months. The work is done. They'd gone home for a few days, but Nehemiah had summoned them to come back — bring their wives, bring their children, to assemble here in Jerusalem. It was an extraordinary day.

I doubt that you or I have ever witnessed anything quite like this. There are friends of mine who say they have experienced something very similar to this. In parts of Scotland, I know, where God's Holy Spirit has come down in an extraordinary way, and hundreds (and perhaps even on occasions thousands) of people have been influenced all at once.

On this day Ezra and thirteen of his helpers are on a pulpit, a platform, a wooden structure, and they've read from the Law of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament. They have read it in Hebrew. It's hard to know how much of the Bible many of those who heard the Law being read that day...it's hard to know how much of the Bible they actually knew. One imagines that some of them knew some of the Old Testament, for sure. Fathers would teach their children. Priests and scribes even in Babylon would teach. Probably that's where the synagogue began, in Babylon.

But there was something extraordinary about this day. They read from early morning until lunch time — five, perhaps even six hours. We read in the text in the earlier part of Nehemiah 8, you remember, they stood for the reading of Scripture. And there seem to have been thirteen others who moved among the people, and during perhaps intervals in the reading, or perhaps even as the reading went on, they would translate from Hebrew to Aramaic, the language which they now spoke, and perhaps even give an interpretation or two — a little homily, a little sermonette or two — for five hours...six hours.

And then evidently there was weeping. I don't know whether you've been in a setting - I'm sure you have — you've certainly been at funerals, for example, and you've detected among those all around you an overwhelming sense of sorrow, grief. You can hear people begin to weep a little. I was giving an exam this week and one of my teaching assistants tells me he overheard one of my students begin to weep as I gave them the exam! I don't mean that kind of thing. *[Laughter]* I mean something much, much more profound than that. This isn't a piece of emotionalism. This is something extraordinary. This is something of the Spirit, you understand.

They were hearing God's word. They were conscious that this was God's word that they were hearing. I'm not always convinced that we are conscious of that. We can be so dismissive of the reading of God's word. Our attention span is so mis-focused at times; our body language often conveys our lack of interest.

But not this day. God came down this day. He moved among them. He touched this one and that one, and then another. And as the Law of Moses was read with all of its commandments and all of its explanations and amplifications of God's commandments, it touched them. It convicted them. It spoke to their consciences. They were sinners. They've come back from Babylon, but the whole reason for Babylon was their sin — their sin and the sins of their fathers, and the sins of their grandfathers.

In 1917, in a revival that broke out in Korea, a very famous revival that broke out in Korea, this is the account of one who witnessed it:

As the prayer continued, a spirit of heaviness and sorrow for sin came down upon the audience. Over on one side someone began to weep, and

in a moment the whole congregation was weeping. Man after man would rise, confess his sins, break down and weep, and then throw himself on the floor and beat the floor with his fists in an agony of conviction.

You might dismiss that. You know Presbyterians don't do that sort of thing. Well, they did that on the Day of Pentecost, you remember, when the Spirit came down and Peter began to preach. You remember how Luke describes it in Acts 2? "They were cut to their hearts." They were convicted. God was in this place, and this was a holy place.

"My sins, my sins, my Savior,
They take such hold of me
I am not able to look up,
Save only, Christ, to Thee."

But into this weeping, this profound sense of conviction that has overtaken the entire congregation as the Law of God is read, Nehemiah steps in.

Now, before we examine what Nehemiah says here (and it's counterintuitive...it's not what you think he's going to say...unless, of course, you know what he's going to say!) But before we do that we need to pause, I think, and just ask ourselves that question. Ligon asked it this morning when he was dealing with Gabriel's message to Zechariah and Elizabeth — the sense of the awe, the sense of the holy. What is the response that we should have if we really thought God was in this place? Friends, you believe that, don't you? That God is in this place?

You hold a copy of the Bible in your hands. It's God's word, written by the finger of God. You'd be overwhelmed...you'd be coming to me if you had a letter from the President written in his own hand. You'd come and you'd show it to me. You'd have it wrapped up in cellophane perhaps, so no grubby fingers would be all over it. You would guard it as the most precious thing that you have! You have a copy of God's word in your hand, written by the finger of God, and it breaks us up. It shows us for what we are. It reads us like an open book. It shows us warts and all that we are sinners, you and I. We are transgressors of God's Law. We have broken God's Law. That's what Isaiah felt in the temple: "Woe is me, for I am undone! I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell amongst a people of unclean lips." But when John, the Apostle John, was in the presence of the holiness of Christ, he fell down on his face to the ground as though he were dead.

Have you ever experienced that? You were asked that question this morning. Let me ask it one more time. That's not where this passage is going, you understand, but I want you to ask that question to yourself.

All the more surprising what Nehemiah now does, because he steps in, and Ezra steps in apparently, and the Levites also step in and repeat it, and you heard it

repeated several times: They were not to weep. There is a time for weeping, and you'll come to that in chapter 9. Get ready for chapter 9 when they begin to confess their sins. But it's not now. This was not a day for mourning, this was a day of celebration.

It's the seventh (you see it in the last verse of chapter 7, right at the end of chapter 7)...it's the seventh month, that is, the first day of the month. The seventh month in Israel was festival time. Forget about work projects demanding a great deal of your time — you would just never get them done. There were festivals in the seventh month: the Feast of Tabernacles, for one; the Feast of Trumpets for another; the Day of Atonement for another. Now surprisingly, there's no mention of the Day of Atonement here. It is unthinkable that they did not celebrate the Day of Atonement, and we'll come to that in a minute. But it's the Feast of Tabernacles just before them, and the days following this day would be Tabernacles.

Now we're going to look at Tabernacles the next time we look at Nehemiah, but let me just give you a little taster. Tabernacles was family time. Tabernacles was the festival that all the children looked forward to. Who doesn't like camping on the roof of your house for a week in makeshift tents? There were special foods that you ate during Tabernacles, just like Thanksgiving and Christmas in our experience. We associate them with certain foods. Somebody gave me a tin of some exquisite delicacies this morning. It was a reminder of Christmas. They were for Rosemary, but she is far, far away, and ...they're gone! *[Laughter]* Of all the celebrations in Israel, Tabernacles was a time of celebration. It was a time of thanksgiving. It was a time to remember the goodness of God during the wilderness wanderings, how God had not forgotten them or left them.

So Nehemiah steps in, and Ezra steps in, and the Levites step in. You notice in verse 11, they calmed the people. This almost sense of spiritual hysteria had overtaken them, so they calmed the people. Notice in verse 10 these extraordinary words: "...The joy of the Lord is your strength."

You know, Adolf Hitler in the 1930's took those very words and made them the motto of the Hitler Youth Movement. Grotesque, of course, but the psychology was sound enough. You want to be strong? You want to be collectively strong? Then joy brings that, not sorrow. Sorrow brings paralysis. You know it individually. When you grieve, when you're sorrowful, when you hurt, you cave in. You tend to become introspective. You become lethargic. You lose physical energy, you don't want to do anything. These are all symptoms of grief and sorrow. Joy, on the other hand, brings energy and vitality. Just watch a football crowd when their side is winning — there's vitality! There's energy...there's strength! There's a collective sense of unity and purpose for you.

This, then, is Nehemiah's word to them for this day. It's a Sabbath day, it's a day of rest. Leviticus 23, the first day of the seventh month was a solemn day of rest

in preparation for what's about to come: Tabernacles. On the fifteenth, the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. Sukkot is before them. Yom Kippur is before them. Trumpets is before them. But this day is a day of rest and a day of celebration and a day of eating and feasting.

And everyone was to feast! Oh, do take note. It's not one point I wish to dwell on tonight, but do take note of the mercy ministry involved in this text. No one was to go without. They were to make sure that those who had nothing ready...they were to give to the poor. There was a diaconal concern among the people of God for the poor amongst them.

But it's this phrase I want us to think about tonight: "The joy of the Lord is your strength." Where does this joy come from? Let me suggest to you tonight it comes to you from four — at least four — different sources.

I. We are loved by God.

It comes first of all from an assurance that we are loved...loved by God...yes, loved by this holy, righteous God. What do you think they were to be thinking about as they gathered in that Water Gate square in Jerusalem? That God loved them. God had punished them; God had chastised them; God had sent them into captivity. God had driven them for seventy years into Babylon, but He had brought them back. He had restored the temple. He had now rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. They were the people of God. They might be a small, insignificant people of God, but they were the people of God. And all around them there were the tokens of God's love for them, His care for them in providing for them, in promising to them, in giving to them His word. Strength comes...strength comes from knowing that we are loved, loved by God. He hasn't forsaken us. He hasn't abandoned His covenant. He hasn't broken His promise despite all that they had done...despite the wretchedness and faithlessness of their behavior.

I was teaching a Sunday School class this morning on Jeremiah — Jeremiah speaking just before the Babylonian captivity. And in that second chapter of Jeremiah, he likens Israel to a prostitute. The language is coarse, way too coarse perhaps for this meeting tonight. And yet in that third chapter His arms are open. 'If you come back, I will receive you,' He says. That door will not be shut. He waits with open arms to receive those who repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, as the little children were hearing tonight. That's the kind of God we have. There's joy for you. God loves us. He's loved us from before the foundation of the world.

That's what Nehemiah and Ezra and the Levites are conveying to these people. It's a time to rejoice in God's love for you. It comes from having something that is supremely worthwhile. What did these Israelites have? I mean, think about it. What did they have? Not much. Many of them were living in fairly poor

circumstances. Evidently there are poor among them who had nothing at all. Their net worth was minimal. They weren't seemingly now living in fine palatial houses. In terms of the things and baubles of this world, they may well have had nothing at all. But they had the assurance of fellowship with God.

II. They had the assurance of a relationship with God, and that was everything.

Do you know, my friends, when we have Christ, we have everything. They may take away everything, but if we have Christ, we have joy. If your joy is in material things, if your joy is in what's in your bank account, if your joy is in the luxury of your home, if your joy is in what kind of car you drive, if your joy is in the job that you do...what if they're taken away from you? Moth and rust corrupt, and thieves break through and steal. Can you say tonight with John Newton in that marvelous hymn of his,

Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God...
Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.

Solid joys and lasting treasure...that's what I think Ezra is trying to tell these people — and Nehemiah and the Levites. You've got lasting treasure. It's not the treasure of material things. It's not the pomp and show of Babylon or Assyria, or Greece or Rome. They're a tiny, insignificant little band of people in a small little city in the Middle East, but they have God. They have the Lord.

In a few days time they're going to celebrate the Day of Atonement. What a day that is! It would turn your stomach. Hundreds, perhaps on some occasions thousands, of animals would be slaughtered ritually — their throats cut, blood spilt. The high priest would sprinkle blood on the Most Holy Place, representative of the very presence of God, to make atonement...to make atonement for the sins of God's people. It would speak of the possibility that there is a way back to God from sin and despair through shed blood, through atonement, through propitiation, through substitution and satisfaction. And they would know what is the most exquisite thing imaginable to know: My sins are forgiven. Though they be red like crimson, they are as white as snow. That is something worth having. That's joy for you. Whatever it is you've done, whatever dark spots there may be in your life, in Jesus Christ we are as white as snow. Joy comes from knowing that we have something that's supremely worthwhile.

III. Joy comes from knowing that our circumstances are ordered by God.

Don't you think that as they stood there, as they listened to the Law being read, as they looked around them at the familiar sights and scenes of the city of Jerusalem and the temple before them, they knew they were God's covenant people; God had ordered their steps. God had marched before them. They could say with the assurance that Paul could say in Romans 8, that all things work together for the good of those that love Him. Do you think there were widows there, engulfed by sorrow? Of course there were. Do you think there were orphans there who had lost their parents? Probably so. Do you think there were some there struggling with sin and disease? Of course. But they could stand collectively as the people of God and know with absolute certainty that God was ordering their lives; He was planning everything for them; there was a divine purpose; that things weren't happening haphazardly and chaotically. There was a plan here. There was a purpose here. And on this day something of the mystery of the unfolding purposes of God was clear to them, and they were to rejoice in it. What a joy it is to know whatever is happening, however dark things might seem to be on the surface, that God orders all things for His own purpose and for our good.

IV. And joy comes...joy comes from an awareness that the best is yet to be.

You know, as they stood there that day, I sort of wonder...did they begin to reflect on what the purpose of God might be? Not only that there was a purpose, but what that purpose was? Some of them, I imagine, as they read the Law, might have paused perhaps where the Law might have begun to be read. I wonder did they begin in Genesis. Did they begin with Genesis 1, and 2, and 3? Did they hear that ancient echo of a promise that God had made that a seed of the woman would come who would crush the very head of Satan? That God had a plan and a purpose to send a Messiah, a Savior, a Deliverer, a Redeemer? Perhaps they began to reflect on the history of their people down through the exodus, down through the ancient history of Israel and Judah, right down to this very moment. Where is this promise? It is yet to be. Perhaps it began to dawn on them. I imagine it did begin to dawn on some of them that God had brought them back to Jerusalem and to this very location for this reason: that through them Jesus would come. Messiah would come. That the announcement of Gabriel to Zechariah and Elizabeth about the forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptist, that the announcement of the angels to the shepherds in Bethlehem...yes, the Christmas story...it's the purpose of God. It's the plan of God. It's the story of God running through the Old Testament. Joy comes in knowing that the best is yet to be, because when Jesus comes we'll sing joy to the world! The Lord has come! Let earth receive her King. O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant!

V. Jesus is coming again.

But you know, that's not the end of it, is it? Not for us, that is. Because the joy for us is not just in looking back; the joy for us is not remembering that Jesus came in Bethlehem; the joy is that He's coming again. He's coming again! He's coming in a Second Advent. He's coming on the clouds of heaven this time. He's coming as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He's coming in splendor and glory. He's coming to bring into fruition the new heavens and the new earth.

I was reading this afternoon something by C.S. Lewis, and there's a little quotation that he made, a little remark that he made that,

“The human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given, and in some senses...” [Lewis says] “...can never be fully realized here and now in this spatial, temporal context in which we live. There's something more.”

And there is. There's heaven and glory, and a new heavens and a new earth, and eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man what God hath prepared for those that love Him.

Joy comes from the assurance that we are loved. Joy comes from having something that is supremely worthwhile. Joy comes from knowing that our circumstances are ordered by God, and joy comes by knowing that the best is yet to be.

You know, when you have that assurance, it's powerful. That gives you strength, come what may — come wind, come weather. Come disease, come death, come bereavement, come loss, come pain—whatever it is, we are the Lord's. We're on the Lord's side, and nothing and no one can separate me from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord. The joy of the Lord is your strength, my friend. Be strong in the Lord.

Let's pray together.

Father, we are amazed by the monumental way in which You have dealt with us. You have not dealt with us according as we have deserved, but You have bought us with the blood of Christ and washed us and cleansed us and brought us into union and communion with Christ. And here we are tonight, anticipating what shall be. Fill us with holy joy, the joy that anticipates what is to come: that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Make us then a people strong in the Lord. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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