

Yes, the word of God does bring conviction and leads us to repentance, but it also brings joy. For the same word that wounds also heals. Joy comes from understanding who God is and what he is about. If we understand the words of Scripture and if we hear the good news, we will be people who are infectiously excited about who God has made us to be and the opportunities we have, and we will be those who invite other people to join in. That's one of the points Nehemiah makes, he's talking about evangelism: Eat something good, drink something sweet, and give some to people who don't have it. This is a sacred day, so be joyful *for the joy of the Lord is your strength*.

The German philosopher Nietzsche once said: *If Christians expect me to believe in their Redeemer they have got to look a lot more redeemed!* Murray Watts (The Miracle Maker) wrote: *If you are a Christian full of love, joy and peace, why don't you tell your face about it!* Proverbs 15:13-15 (TLB): *A happy face means a glad heart, a sad face means a breaking heart. When a man is gloomy everything seems to go wrong and when he is cheerful everything seems to go right.* If we as Christians can't enjoy life then, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15:19 (NLT): *We are the most miserable people in the world.* And sometimes it seems as though we are! Sometimes, it seems to me, that Christians act as if Jesus was still dead buried in the tomb and not risen from the dead!

I happen to believe that it's OK for Christians to smile, to enjoy life and to have some fun when we come to church to worship the living God! As I often say, we do what we do seriously, but we have some fun along the way. Christians are called to be joyful in all circumstances. Christian concepts of joy are different from those of the world. The Joy of the Lord is the result of God's work in our hearts (Galatians 5:22). Christ didn't come that we might have sadness; He came that we might have a gladness (a full life, John 10:10). The Jews still had work to do and they needed the joy of the Lord to give them strength to do it. Thankfulness is a strong motive for serving the Lord, but celebration is even stronger. When we obey the Lord and serve Him because we rejoice in Him, then our service will be a delight and not hard work (Psalm 37:4).

**We find Joy in the Will of God (vs 13-18):** Especially when we get it right and on target. Nothing compares with knowing that we are doing God's will, as the Israelites discovered. When they learned of the feasts that God commanded, they went right to work and celebrated the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. In addition to being a harvest festival, the building of booths reminded the Jews that they had once wandered in the wilderness. Vs17: *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.* Why? Because they obeyed God's word and it is when we are fulfilling the will of God in our lives that we will really find the greatest joy. Their joy was not to be found in their past history, but in their future.

**Conclusion:** Nothing compares with knowing that we are doing God's will. The Israelites moved from a place of discouragement, sorrow, and hopelessness to becoming a community who had a strong commitment to each other, having accomplished something they thought was impossible. And it was because of this that they wanted to know God, and longed for the reality of God's presence and, in order to find God they: did all they could to understand His Word; found Joy in His Word and were Obedient to His Word. If you and I are passionate about experiencing the presence of God more powerfully, we can't go far wrong than to follow their example, because it is there that we find him and brings revival in our hearts and minds. *The heart of revival is the revival of the heart* ... does your heart need reviving? Do you need more of his joy in your life? Do you need to make a spiritual resolution for this year in order to allow Him to have His way if your life? 'The joy of the Lord' remains our strength, not only for today, but for the year ahead and, indeed, as we commit our future into His hands.

# NEHEMIAH

Text for 2010: 8 vs 1-18

## "The Joy Of The Lord Is Your Strength"



**Introduction:** The beginning of a new decade has been described by many as the beginning of a new era and our reading this morning marks the beginning of a new era in the life of Jerusalem. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the story: Nehemiah was living in Babylon when he felt God calling him to return to Israel to rebuild the broken walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah accomplished this task, but he was under constant opposition from his enemies and, more damagingly, from his own people. One of the enduring images of this book is those rebuilding the walls with trowels in one hand and swords in the other (4:17b). Nehemiah recognised that even though the walls were rebuilt, there was something missing. Whilst the city was functioning, there was something a spark that wasn't quite there. He accepted that their security wasn't only to be found in physical walls and buildings, important as they were, but in the people's relationship with God. And so Nehemiah, recognising the strategic importance of the Word of God being at the centre of their community life, calls the people together and arranges for Ezra the priest to conduct a public reading of God's Word.

Ezra and Nehemiah, though contemporaries, were very different in their approach. When Ezra first arrived in Jerusalem and saw firsthand the moral degeneration of his people, he went into a state of shock. He tore his clothes, yanked hair from his head and beard and sat down appalled. Hours later, Ezra was still weeping and throwing himself on the ground. So demonstrative was his grief and so infectious his repentance that the city leaders all agreed to change their ways. Nehemiah, however, who arrived on the scene a few years later, used a more confrontational approach. As merchants lined up outside the city wall to sell goods on the Sabbath, he threatened them with physical violence. And when fellow Jews married foreigners against God's command, he called down curses on them, beat them and pulled out their hair. Ezra a priest, Nehemiah a pragmatist, approached the same problem in different ways, however, they both agreed on the importance of God's Word being at the centre of all they did. Working in tandem, they directed a spiritual revival such as had not been seen in 1000 years.

In Ezra 7:10: ... *Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.* And so he began to teach them. The result was great joy! Nehemiah told them: *The Joy of the Lord is your strength.* Which is our text for this year and I thought it would be good to spend sometime thinking about what that means in reality. How can we find the joy of the Lord in our lives, giving us strength?

**We find Joy in the Word of God (vs 1-4 & 8):** The experience of being used by God led to the people's hunger for the presence of God. They had been his servants - they wanted to be his worshipers. They had realized God's touch - they wanted to see his face. The people assembled as one man, and they called out: *Ezra, teach us the Bible. We want to know God.* There was a realization that God himself could fill their hearts and minds and that they, in turn, could begin to know and love him, hear from him, trust him and be nearer to his heart. Ezra read the Book of the Law of Moses to them and this went on for hours/days at a time.



What took place before the Water Gate was a turning point in Israel's history. Previously, the centre of their national life had focused on the Temple or the Patriarchs. This time, however, they were a people of the Book and they had a 'new' passion to hear God's Word. This is the church as it is meant to be: gathered around, and eager to hear, God's Word. I'm sure you realise that I place a high emphasis on preaching and teaching. I want to read an extract from Graeme Goldsworthy's book: *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, where he describes, much better than I could, the reason I hold preaching in such high regard.

Ezra the priest, the scholar and teacher, read the law of Moses and the Levites helped the people to understand it, vs8. Quite what the technicalities of this were we don't know. Perhaps the 13 of them went round and created 13 home groups, or maybe it was that after Ezra read a section, one of them in turn explained it. But what was happening here was a translation of the Word of God from Hebrew into the Aramaic spoken by the people, so that they could understand it. The Levites were helping the people to understand what it meant in practice to obey/apply the Word of God to their everyday lives. They connected the reality of the people to the reality of the text. They did this because everyone needed to know God's revelation of his will and ways. The people needed help to understand fully what God had been saying. How it displays His person, His character, His aims, His beauty. How it reveals His plans and purposes for His people, His church and His world.

*God's word must be understood before it can enter the heart and release its life changing power.* So said the American writer Warren Wiersbe. Some suggest that the Bible is too hard to understand. That, in the fast and changing world we live in today, the Bible is too difficult, too different to be of any use. That we have to speak in contemporary terms, and ideologies and slip in truth between the lines. But that point of view is contradicted in this passage. These people weren't Biblically literate. They'd been living in exile. Many of them didn't know Hebrew - the language that the Bible was written in. These people weren't hearing the old stories again; they were hearing them for the first time, with new insight and were captivated by what they heard. We need to understand who God is if we are to experience true worship, because true worship is based on knowledge of God.

**We find Joy in the Worship of God (vs 5-6):** The people found the living, majestic, intimate, Fatherly God in the words of Scripture and this new experience moved them into worship, vs6: *Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, 'Amen! Amen!'* What's interesting about the worship here is that it didn't revolve around music - in fact there wasn't any at all. In ch12 there's a wonderful picture of choirs, cymbals, harps and lyres on the walls. But here the people listened to Ezra reading God's word and responded with tears and joy. Another interesting factor, here, is the physical expression of their worship, vs5. They started out seated on the ground. But when Ezra began to read from the Book of the Law they leaped to their feet. Ezra praised God, and they raised their hands. Then they bowed down and worshipped with their faces to the ground. Each of these postures is worship: sitting; standing; hands raised; head bowed; lying prostrate.

I'm sure we all have our thoughts about what is, and isn't, appropriate behaviour in worship. I don't want to start a discussion on that this morning, except to say that this chapter gives good support for all kinds of physical expression in worship that is both authentic and from the heart. But I wonder, how much does our approach to worship in church have more to do with our own attitude and lack of preparation than what we think a service should provide? Throughout the Bible, acceptable worship means approaching/engaging with God, on the terms He proposes and in the manner He makes possible. This involves honouring; serving; integrity; respect. Yes, there are some specific gestures of ritual and priestly ministrations, but worship is, fundamentally, faith expressing itself in obedience and adoration. It's personal/intimate fellowship with God in a way that is relevant to every area of our life.

Revelation 4:11: *You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being.*

God doesn't command us to worship Him because He needs our worship - though it's true that He inhabits the praises of His people. God commands us to worship Him because we need what worship can do in our lives. Worship does something to us - it makes us complete and we can only find satisfaction when we are doing those things for which we were created. In seeking after a true worshipping spirit, we shouldn't be preoccupied with perpetuating a certain tradition, but rather desiring to worship in a way that touches hearts; changes lives and is pleasing, and honouring, to Him.

**We find Joy in Repentance before God (vs 9):** It's not always easy to find joy in God's word, especially when it speaks right to our hearts and makes us feel uncomfortable. Sometimes, God's word can be offensive to the lifestyles we live, especially when it highlights our disobedience to His teaching. How many times have we voiced our disagreement when His word makes us scratch where we don't want to itch? But there's no doubt that God's word calls us into action. It doesn't do us any good if we know a lot of things in the Bible if we don't hear the One who has spoken the words. It's not enough just to hear the word of God; we must obey what it tells us to do (James 1:22-25). How do we respond when that happens?

We are to respond with prayer and worship and conscious application when the Holy Spirit draws attention to our need for repentance in areas of our lives. And this is exactly what the people did here. They responded to what they heard, which is why Nehemiah responded, vs9: *'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.* Not one of us are beyond recognising our need for repentance! But one thing we do know is that God blesses the penitent heart - and perhaps some of us need to do some serious introspection! Psalm 51:17 *"Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."*

We need to keep a humble penitent heart. We cannot find our joy in the Lord without repentance! I don't think there's anyone as miserable, unhappy, unfulfilled a person than a disobedient Christian who refuses to accept, and obey, what Jesus, and the Bible, teaches us or, worse than that, refuses to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour. *The root of spiritual revival both in individuals and in communities*, writes J.I.Packer, *was, is, and always will be vivid realisations of God's holiness, goodness and mercy, and the perversity, shamefulness, offensiveness and suicidal folly that he sees in our personal sins.*

When did you last see a congregation or synod weeping before the truth of God's Word as the Israelites did? The Revival associated with the Wesley's and Whitefield in the 1700's and the Welsh Revival of the early 1900's would be examples of this. Where many thousands came to a saving faith in Jesus. It's well documented that people fell down on their knees in the street, and in the workplace, in confession and repentance. How I long to see this in our church, and the Church of England, which is in a desperate need of reviving and renewing. I long to see it more in churches everywhere. Where we are so moved by the Spirit of God, by the Word of God and by the goodness of God, that repentance with tears of sorrow and gladness flow bringing blessing and rejoicing. Repentance doesn't lead us to depression, but joy. God forgives, his love causes him to forgive...and we are the beneficiaries of his grace.

**We find Joy in Celebration with God (vs 10 - 12):** I'm sure you remember that one of the promised fruits of the Holy Spirit is joy. But scripture encourages us to be joyful. In fact, in Philippians 4:4, Paul makes it a command: *'Rejoice in the Lord, always, and I will say it again rejoice!'* But I realise it's not always easy to do that - for lots of reasons.