

The joy of the Lord

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[0 : 00] Turn with me please to the chapter that we read together from the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah chapter 8, in the words of the 10th verse.

When Nehemiah said to 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.

The events recorded in this book in Nehemiah's journal refer to the year 445 B.C. 2,500 years ago. And this part of the history, of the Old Testament history of God's dealings with his people, is a very interesting, a very encouraging, and a very exciting period in that history.

And from the book of Nehemiah, and Nehemiah and Desire, they're really twin books, they relate to the same story.

[1 : 28] There are many wonderful spiritual lessons recorded in these two books, that have an abiding relevance. And there was an all-doing story, it still speaks.

Our God is a God who speaks. And therefore, we are duty-bound to listen to what he says. And perhaps one of the greatest lessons that are taught in these two books is this, that of God's covenant faithfulness.

Way back at the dawn of redemption history, God entered into covenant with his people, determined to save and to bless them.

Although Adam and Eve forfeited God's fellowship and his favour and his blessing by virtue of their disobedience and defiance, nevertheless, there was within the heart of God a purpose and a determination to save.

And so, he is the God of covenant faithfulness. And when he chose Abraham, the man from the other side, and called him and asked him to leave his home, and to go to a place that he would afterwards show him, the land of Canaan, he promised him not only a land, but he promised him also a seed.

[3 : 08] And he would have issued from Abraham, would be a vast number of people. And Abraham, as we know the story, and as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, Abraham left his home, and he went out, not knowing where he was going.

And he looked for a city, not an earthly city. He went out by faith. And that reminds us that, along with him, we too are strangers on the earth, with pilgrims and sojourners.

And this is not our rest, it's not our home. We are merely passing through. We know the story, how it unfolds, and then, as long as, how God led his people, across the river, and then across the sea, and then into the wilderness, and finally to the promised land, and to the blessings that they received, and enjoyed from his hand, blessings that were contingent, consequent upon their obedience, as long as they were obedient, they enjoyed his blessing, and his favor, and they prospered.

But it wasn't always so. There were times when they sinned, and when they rebelled, and when they defied the Most High.

And he had no option but, to give them over to their enemies. And so came the Babylonian captivity, and Nebuchadnezzar's armies, they invaded the Holy Land.

[5 : 03] And God's people were led away captive. Only the aged men and women were left. And as these exiles tramped, one thousand miles eastward, to an unknown future, when they looked behind them, there was their city in ruins.

And the smoke of the city rose up in the sky. The defences had been breached, the walls broken down, Solomon's glorious temple raised to the ground, and off they went, not knowing what was to happen.

There are modern parallels. And if I had time to tell you, how I met some people in Serbia, whose homes and villages had been torched, who had lost all their possessions, and some of them their families, and how they had to leave in a hurry, escaping by whatever means possible, perhaps never to return again.

Yet they would say this to us, that although they lost everything, they found Christ. But the Lord's people here, as they had to leave home, and had to endure 70 long years of Babylonian captivity, they knew fully well, that it was their own fault.

The prophets had warned them what would happen, should they be disobedient. And they pursued their disobedience, and they worshipped the gods of the heathen nations, and now they're paying the price, and it's a very heavy price.

[7 : 01] And so for 70 long years in captivity, I wonder what their thoughts were. They couldn't sing the Lord's song in a foreign land.

And Psalm 137 reminds us, that they hang their harps on the willow trees. As they reflected on what could have been. God gave them over, to their enemies.

Where was his covenant faithfulness now? Had the Lord forgotten to be gracious? They would have reminded themselves, that he heard the cry of their ancestors in Egypt, and he raised up Moses. But Moses had been taken home. Would there be a deliverer for them? Now we can apply their plight, to perhaps our own condition, and certainly the condition of the Christian church, in the Western world today.

To all intents and purposes, given over to their enemies. And many of the pulpits in the West, particularly in our own land, are occupied by men who are strangers to grace, and to God.

[8 : 20] This gospel is a social one. And to say to the people, peace, peace, and there is no peace. And perhaps even amongst ourselves, and maybe ourselves indeed, God has given us up to our heart's desire.

He did that to his people long ago. And to their soul he sent leanness. We cannot have a fruit in the world, and a fruit in God's house.

It's either or. He demands the exclusive devotion of our hearts. He is a jealous God. He will not tolerate another to be set up on the throne of the heart in which his spirit dwells.

And we're confronted daily by choices. And if we choose to go down the road of self-pleasing, he may very well give us what we desire.

But to our soul he will send leanness. Is there a way back? Of course there is. Said Peter one day, and Jesus said to them, will you also go away?

[9 : 45] Said Peter, to whom else shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. God has covenanted with his people to be their God, and they will be his people.

And he will never break his part in the covenant. He has betrothed himself to his church. We may break our part in the covenant, but he will be faithful to his promise always.

And so he invites us, whatever our condition this morning, to return to the one who is faithful to his own word. And so in time he raised up a deliverer in the shape of Cyrus, an unknown Persian prince whom Isaiah describes as the servant of the Lord, the Lord's Messiah, not the Messiah.

God raises up deliverer. He will always find his men. And in process of time, Cyrus and the power of Persia, they have overcome Babylon.

And they're now the dominant power in the world, and permission is given to the Jews to return home. And so Sarebubal returns, the temple is repaired, Esther also returns the scribe, the educated man, the priest, and then Nehemiah, the king's cupbearer.

[11 : 29] cupbearer. And so wave after wave of returnees, leave Persia and return to Jerusalem. And the site is a depressing one.

The walls are in ruins. The gates have been burned. And Nehemiah, like a knightish, he takes a small band with him and he sees with his own eyes the plight of the people, a depressed people, economically depressed, emotionally depressed.

And the story of how Nehemiah sets about the repairing of the walls is a thrilling story. Read it when you get home. It can be read in one sitting.

And so in 52 days, the walls are repaired and the gates are hung in place. The people have been mobilized.

no one is redundant in the church of Christ. And no one is retired in the service of the Lord.

[12:40] Here is one master who commands and who demands all the energy of his people. and when his people work together and when he works with them, great things are accomplished.

But there were, there was opposition. And the church of Christ is never short of its opponents or its enemies. there was Tobiah and Sanballat who poured scorn on the people's efforts.

And as they took the rubble, the stones, and they began to repair the walls, they would say this to them, why, if even a fox wound up on these walls, they would crumble, they would collapse.

And there are modern days and Balaz and Tobias. But the people had a mind to work. and under Nehemiah's brilliant leadership, the last gate is hung in place.

I wonder what his thoughts were. Little did Nehemiah expect what would happen the following day, not in his wildest dreams.

[14:04] God is a God of surprises. Nehemiah's work wasn't simply one of physical restoration of broken down walls.

There was a people to be restored, the city to be rebuilt, and the people shattered lives to be rebuilt as well.

And so, the next day, the first day of the new year, a public holiday. The people gathered in the square down there by the water gate.

And Nehemiah asked for the scrolls to be brought. And Osra, the priest, the preacher, would read from the books of Moses, more than likely the book of Deuteronomy.

And Nehemiah had with him men on either side of him. And as he read, the people stood. And they weren't there for entertainment purposes.

[15:16] They were serious. There was an anticipation that God was going to do something wonderful that day. And before God works in reviving power, there are those here and there who catch that sense of anticipation and of excitement that the Lord is going to do a wonderful work.

And that's what happened down at the water gate that day. Hundreds of men and women and children gathered to hear God's word read.

And they stood. And that's the practice certainly in Eastern Europe when God's word is read. The people stand. Such is their reverence for the word of God that they stand while it has been read.

And hour after hour Nehemiah reads from this book. And the people give out a sense of the distinct meaning of what he says. And the effect was explosive.

The people began to weep uncontrollably. What was taking place? Nothing short of conviction.

[16:40] And when God's spirit is at work and convicts a soul or a people of their guilt, it shows. And this was a deep work of God's spirit.

It wasn't emotionalism. It was a genuine work. And as the word was read, the effect was simply that.

Weeping. And confession. They had married outside of the covenant community. And they knew their guilt.

But Nehemiah stepped in and said, stop your weeping. This is a time for joy and a time for rejoicing. It was the feast time.

And they pointed them forward to the guilt registers in the human heart. And the only way that that disturbed, guilty conscience will get peace is when something else will happen.

[17:53] It's rather like getting a piece of grit or sand in your eye. And you rub your eye. And the more you rub it, the more painful it is.

Not until a foreign object is removed from the eye will you get peace. And so it is when the soul is under conviction of sin.

Not until God pronounces peace, the peace of forgiveness, will there be rest in the human soul. And so there's conviction but there's cleansing.

And the cleansing of the blood, the blood of bulls and goats will never take away sins. They typified the blood that does, the only blood that does take away sin, even the sin of the world.

And the time did come when God's own son was delivered up and he endured the curse of God against our sin and absorbed it and exhausted it in his own body by taking our sins and nailing them there to the tree.

[19:10] But there was more. Not only was that conviction and cleansing, but there was something else. there was to be celebration.

And for seven long days they would celebrate the feast, the feast of booths, the feast of tabernacles, an annual reminder to them of God's covenant faithfulness to their ancestors as they

wandered through the wilderness.

Their shoes did not wear out. God cared for them and sent them food and protection and so on. But this had lapsed and they had forgotten.

And then the world reminded them and so they observed this feast. Now we too can forget. And it's not difficult under the pressures of 21st century living to forget our obligations to the Lord.

A former generation among us, they honoured God and he honoured them. How did they do that? Well in this way, among other ways.

[20 : 33] Every morning they began the day with family worship. And they closed the day also with family worship. A very good practice.

One that we would do well to follow. Our little ones leave for school in the morning. Do we send them off to school by covering them with prayer or simply send them off another day?

And when they return and before they go to bed in the evening, do we bend our knee beside them and give thanks for God's care of them and protection?

Beslan. Many of the children who perished in the school, the tragedy of Beslan, they were covered with prayer before they left that morning not to return home again.

Children are God's heritage and God has given children to us and as a congregation we are duty bound to pray for these little ones as they're brought here to have the mark of the covenant, the outward mark of the covenant applied to them.

[21 : 48] And how we ought to anticipate a day when that mark will become an inward mark and they'll be born again genuinely of the spirit. And so they collect the branches and the leaves and they make these booths and they live there, a practice that the Jewish people still follow to this day.

And it's interesting where they set up these booths in four different areas of witnessing opportunity.

First of all the booths are set up on their own rooftops in the home.

And that's where Christian witness is to be observed or should be observed first and foremost in the home, in family life. But then they set up their booths in their courtyards where neighbours would come.

I wonder if our neighbours know that we're different, that we are Christians. We are to witness to those around us. But then they set up their booths down there at the temple in the church.

And coming to church ought not to be a one-in-seven activity. And finally the booths were set up down at the water gate in the public square. Business life.

[23 : 20] Thomas Chalmers, one of the founding fathers of the free church once said every inch for Christ, every inch, every area of the Christian's life, not just here in church, but in school, in the office, in the workshop, wherever, we are to live for him.

After all, if he has given his life for us, surely we can do that for him. And Knox is reputed to have said, give me Scotland or I die.

Without prayer, Lord, give me Stornoway or I die. There are many, many people out there and they never come in here.

Well, if they don't come in here, surely we are obligated to go out there and tell them. Show to them by the way that we live and tell them by word of mouth.

Come, come, she said, this woman whose life was so messy. come, she said, see a man who told me all that ever I did is not this the Christ.

[24 : 56] And so Nehemiah has the joy of seeing not just the walls rebuilt and the gates rehung, but a people reborn. And he says to them, go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, send portions to those who have nothing prepared.

The poor, said Jesus, will always be among them. So there was joy not just for those who gave out of their abundance, but joy also for those who received.

There was widespread joy at that time. Joy is that wonderful commodity that God gives.

It's altogether different to happiness. The whole world chases after happiness. It's a fleeting experience.

And happiness occurs, as someone has said, when things happen. As long as things are favorable, they're happy. But the moment that the providence changes, happiness goes out the window, disappears like the morning dew.

[26 : 15] Joy is different. Joy is deep set. Joy and sorrow are not mutually exclusive. Paul and Silas were in prison, their feet fast in stocks, and at midnight, they sang praises to God.

The joy of the Lord is your strength. And the joy of the Lord has nothing to do with me. The joy of the Lord has all to do with him, who he is, and what he has done.

Robin Duncan, I've said this before, but it's a wonderful quote, at least I think it is. Robin Duncan said this, in describing Christian joy and the Christian life, he said, I don't know whether to call it a grievous joy, or a joyous grief.

There's grief in repentance, sorrow for sin. at all these two sides of the one page, sorrow and repentance.

But there's joy there too, the joy of forgiveness. And what joy is equal to that one? Knowing that your sins are blotted out, and that you're justified in God's sight, and that you have peace with God. [27 : 46] Go your way, he said. Eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared. The joy of the Lord is your strength.

And incredibly, and this is a magnificent version, Zephaniah, it speaks of the joy of the Lord himself. The Lord your God in the midst of you, says Nehemiah, Zephaniah, the Lord your God in the midst of you is mighty.

He will save, he will rejoice over you with singing. Think of it, the almighty rejoicing over his people with singing.

He will rest in his love, and the day will come when their joy will be complete, and there will no more be troubled by sin, never again to fail or to deny the Lord.

On that day they shall see his face and they shall be like him. And what people is so blessed as the people of the Lord?

[29 : 00] Let me ask you, are you among them? Are you one of them? Well, if you are, no matter what providence may hold for you in the future, all will be well with you.

If you're not, let me ask you, why not? Why aren't you the Lord's? It's not that he is unwilling, the unwillingness is with you.

You ask him, and seek him, while he is to be found, and call upon him, while he is near, and he is present, right now. Let us pray. O Lord, we give thanks for your covenant faithfulness that shines throughout the pages, not just of the Old Testament, but particularly in the New.

God spared not his own son, but delivered him up for us all, and how with him will you not also freely give us all things?

And we pray, not for small things, we pray, Lord, for eternal salvation, that not one of us would be lost, that we would all experience that joy that really is inexpressible, and that peace that passes understanding.

[30 : 29] You are extending that invitation to us this day, to seek your face. Help us then to do just that. Accept our thanks for your goodness to us, and meet with us for the remainder of the afternoon, and come out with us in the evening, and help us yet once more.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Our closing psalm is 126. When Zion's bondage, God turned back, as men had dreamed, were we, and filled with laughter was their mouth, our turn with melody, then on the heathen said, the Lord great things for them hath wrought.

The Lord hath done great things for us, whence joy to us was brought. The whole psalm, when Zion's bondage, God turned back. When Zion's bondage, was in grand, as he ordaineth forth, to us and if I'm a leader, send the Lord, make me forever more.

Love, love, bring me forever, and join me until I.

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