

The joy of the Lord

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[0 : 00] Turn to our reading in the book of Nehemiah. We may read again in chapter 8 at verse 10. Nehemiah chapter 8 at verse 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. Now a few moments ago we were singing I joyed when to the house of God go up they said to me. And have you come to the house of God today with a holy joy in your heart? Or have you dragged yourself to the house of God to a building and you can't wait until you get out of it again and go back to the things that give you pleasure?

Or perhaps if you are a Christian today and you have come to the house of God with a longing and with a yearning in your heart.

Yet you think that joy or joyfulness is something that belongs to the charismatic wing of the evangelical church in the world. coming from our tradition and from our background are we not more liable to think that things like solemnity and gravity and sobriety and even despondency is more characteristic of the child of God?

[1 : 36] Well it's certainly not the characteristics of the New Testament. And it's not even the characteristics of the Old Testament. Because if you read through the Old Testament you will find that joy is very prominent in the religious life of Israel.

And it's especially prominent on our great festal occasions. The Passover the Feast of Weeks the Feast of Tabernacles and so on.

They're all celebrated with joy. And when we think of the Psalms we are singing They are Psalms full of celebration. Our opening Psalm 149 Other Psalms call us to jubilant praise to worship to thanksgiving.

And that's the note of the Bible. And that's the note of the Christian experience. Well in this chapter we have what followed the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem Jerusalem had laid waste had been laid waste and Nehemiah came to build up the walls of Jerusalem. But once he had rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem there was a need to repopulate the city itself.

[2 : 56] And so he's gathering the people together to Jerusalem. And there's this great assembly in Jerusalem. All the people gather together and they're reading out of the scriptures the word of God the law of Moses.

And from now on the people of Israel are going to become the people of a book. They're going to be the people of a book. And in the very center of their worship is going to be the reading of the law of God.

And it's interesting to see how we have this reading and explaining of the word of God. they have this platform of wood and they open the book in the sight of all the people.

And it's interesting for us to think about what we might think is a mere tradition about the church officer carrying the Bible into the pulpit. That was very common in Scotland in the past.

And what was the significance of it? Well the significance is this. It's not because the Bible is too heavy for the minister or anything like that. The significance is that the whole congregation places itself symbolically under the authority of the word.

[4 : 14] It's not the authority of the man in the first instance. It's the authority of the word. The Bible, the word of God goes before the man and the people symbolically sit under the authority of the word of God.

And that's what is significant here in this chapter. There's the word of God. And what does it lead to? It leads to worship. It leads to adoration.

The people prostrate themselves in worship, in adoration. And they fall on their faces to the ground. There's self-abasement.

There's contrition. There's weeping. Because he says to them, do not weep. And you see, these are the elements of worship. Praise and worship, thanksgiving, contrition, and the expounding of the word of God.

Reading the word and giving the sense that people may understand. And Israel becomes responsive to the word. And Nehemiah's exhortation to them, this day is holy, therefore rejoice in the goodness of God.

[5 : 31] This day is holy to the Lord, therefore rejoice. 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. And he's saying in effect to us that holiness and gloom go ill together.

They're not well matched. Where there's holiness, there will be joy. And although there'll be contrition, there must also be joy. And joy is the right response to understanding God's word. And I want to speak today about this joy. And I want to use other parts of scripture to illustrate it, but to base it mainly on what is said here. And I want to think first of the basis for joy.

And then secondly, the benefits from joy. And thirdly, the barriers to joy. Well, first of all, then, the basis for joy. What is the basis for this joy that Nehemiah is exhorting the people to in this verse?

[6 : 45] Well, we can think of joy first of all as a gift and then secondly, as a duty. Joy as a gift is the joy that is the soul's response to the goodness and mercy of God.

And that's what Israel is doing here. They're recognizing that there are people who owe their life and allegiance to God. And they're recognizing it and accepting it. that they owe everything to God. That he has given them life. That he has brought them out of bondage. That he has saved them. That he has made them his people.

And that they owe allegiance to him. And they're acknowledging that. And that's what brings joy into their life. Well, if that brought joy into the life of the people of Israel, how much more should the gospel bring joy into our life?

And when we come to the New Testament, we find that words for joy and rejoicing are used 326 times in the New Testament.

[7 : 59] And you see, joy is the soul's response to God's goodness. The gospel announces good news. And it calls on us to joy and rejoice in Christ.

And joy is the appropriate response to a saving encounter with Christ. Remember the Ethiopian eunuch that Philip instructed in the way of salvation.

And what do we read of him? He went on his way rejoicing. And that should be always the effect that the gospel has. It sends us on our way rejoicing.

Joying in God, joying in the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember Rabbi Duncan. He says, when I was convinced there was a God, I danced on the brig of D with delight.

The brig of D is in Aberdeen, for those of you who don't know. and he danced on the brig of D for delight. When he came to realize that there was a God, that made him glad, that made him rejoice.

[9 : 09] How much more should we be rejoicing when we are convinced that there is a Christ to save us? Whom having not seen, says Peter, ye love, so now you do not see him, yet you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.

Yet believing, ye rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory. You see, by faith we see the beauty and the excellency and the suitability of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And as we grow in the knowledge of Christ, as we are enlightened in that knowledge, our joy must increase. Rejoice, our Lord Jesus Christ said to his disciples, not because the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in heaven.

And Richard Baxter takes up that and he says, rejoice if your names are written in heaven, for this is a divine, a pure, a profitable, a warrantable joy.

Here is joy you need not to be ashamed of, of which you can scarcely take too much, of which you need not repent. Be as joyful and as merry as you will, oh that our souls and our assemblies did more abound with this holy joy.

[10 : 35] Rejoice that your names are written in heaven. And when we think of joy and rejoicing, I suppose a lot of us think of Billy Bray, that madman as he was before in Cornwall, who was always crude, who was always lewd, who was never sober, who was disowned by his workmates, who was

despaired of by his wife, a miserable soul.

And then one night, well early morning, three o'clock in the morning, his life turned around and the madman became the gladman and he said, if they shut me up in a barrel, I will shout glory through the bankhole.

This was Billy Bray. And he also said, as I walk along, I lift up one foot and it says glory, and I lift up the other foot and it says amen.

And here was the man who was so drunk and so wicked that everyone despaired of him. And by the grace of God, he was turned into a bright and shining saint.

That's the grace of God. And you see, joy is a gift. It comes through the grace of God, through the mercy of God, which is a gift to us.

[12:00] But then also we must remember that joy is a duty. Paul tells us in Philippians, rejoice in the Lord all way and again I say unto thee, rejoice.

You see, it's a command. It's not a description. It's not a subjective state or condition. It's something we must do. And it's not something we can do to our emotions.

There's so much of that in evangelicalism today. Playing on the emotions. We've all experienced it. We've gone into a service. And there's a bright and breezy man in the pulpit.

And he says, let's begin with a chorus. Now let's see you all smiling. Let us all be happy. And he works up the emotions. But that's not the joy of scripture.

That's not the joy of the people of God. It doesn't come by whipping up the emotions. It doesn't come in an external way. It results from a realization of our position in Christ.

[13:07] That's what it does. Joy is almost, you might say, a by-product of my concentration upon my relationship to God in Christ.

It's a by-product. As I concentrate upon God in Christ, joy should come forth. But you see, we have to nurture it.

When Paul says rejoice in the Lord, he realizes it's something that we can nurture. It's something that we can instill into people.

It's something we can help ourselves with. Remember how John writes his first epistle, These things write we unto you that your joy may be full.

You see, you can get your joy full. You can do it by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. You can do it by listening to his word. And in one sense, the whole end of the gospel ministry, as John says in that opening chapter of his first epistle, the whole end of the gospel ministry is to advance your joy.

[14:17] Richard Sibbes, now the end of the ministry is to set the people's hearts into a gracious and blessed liberty, to bring them into the kingdom of grace here, and to fit them for the kingdom of glory, to help forward their joy.

This is the end both of the word and of the dispensation of the word, work in the ordinances of salvation, in the sacraments and all, that your joy may be full.

That's the end of the gospel ministry. And we have to work at it as Christians, as people, as God's people. We have to do it.

We have to rejoice in the Lord. We have to criticize our moods. We have to criticize ourselves.

We've got to say with the psalmist, why art thou cast down my soul?

Yes, there may be reasons for it, but why art thou cast down my soul? There are also remedies for it. And we've got to look to the remedies. We can't change our temperament very much.

[15:22] We can't change perhaps our moods at a certain time, but we have to take the measures that will help us to concentrate upon Christ, upon his word, upon his promise, upon all the benefits of the gospel, and that is the way that ultimately we will be changed.

Rejoice in the Lord always. And if you're surprised, again I say unto you, rejoice. That's the exhortation and the command.

But then secondly we look at the benefits of joy. The benefits of joy. For this day is holy unto you, our Lord, neither be ye sorry for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

What's the great benefit of joy? Well it helps our obedience. It helps our obedience. It's like us, A.W. Pink says, wings to a bird.

We are happy, when we are happy, we do our work much better. And that's one great benefit from joy. John Angel James, religious joy is the oil to the wheels of obedience.

[16:35] A happy church will be a working church. Nothing great has ever yet been achieved under the sun, but by a heart glad and free. It is the joyous mind that aims at great things, expects

great things, and accomplishes great things.

Where there is despair, there is no longer power for obedience. And you see, we've got a great work before us. We've got tasks needing to be done.

We've got a service that is to be rendered to the Lord. We've got temptations to be overcome. We've got battles to be fought. And we're not experimentally fitted for these battles unless we are rejoicing in the Lord.

Unless we have something of this joy. Our souls resting in Christ. Our hearts filled with gladness in his ways. Then the work will be easier and the duties more pleasant.

You see, that's what they're exhorted to hear. They're exhorted to share with others. Go your way, eat the fat and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared.

[17:56] fear. In other words, he's talking about sharing your food and sharing the gospel. And that's what the Christian church is called to do. It's called to sacrificial service.

It's called to giving. And perhaps giving hurts you. Well, the more joy you have, the less it will hurt you. The more you give out in hospitality, the more joyful it will become.

The more you go out in evangelism, the more joyful you will become. Because you see, you're obeying, and in the very obeying, there is rejoicing.

And that's the way we spread the gospel. Sacrifice was at the very heart of Paul's ministry, as he says in writing to the Philippians. You see, and one of these ingredients of his joy was the sacrifice. He took after his master, who gave himself for us, and he found joy in doing it. For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross.

[19:06] And you see, there's joy in Christian work. And joy will help us in Christian work. And joy will make Christian work easier. And everything we do will be easier if we have this motivation of joy in our hearts.

That's one great benefit of joy. And I'll just mention one other. And that is, it will make us independent of circumstances.

And surely that's what we know of the apostle Paul. Think of Paul and Silas in prison there. In the inner prison, and our feet fast in the stocks.

And what do we find them doing? Grumbling and complaining. No. Singing praises to God.

Independent of their circumstances. A great vitality in their life.

Because of this joy in the Lord. And then Paul is writing to the saints at Philippi later on. And he's writing from a prison cell in Rome. And he says, rejoice in the Lord all way.

[20:13] And again I say unto you rejoice. In other words, he says, turn your obstacles into opportunities. Turn your setbacks into springboards.

You see a man going down. And he's going down and down and down. And you'll say, what's God doing with this man? God is putting him down in order to bring him up.

And you see that's God's way with his people. And if we can use these things that are setbacks to become springboards, then we will indeed know the blessing of the Lord.

Rejoice in the Lord always. In all circumstances. Because joy can subsist in the midst of sorrow. Joy can subsist in the most horrendous difficulties.

Because you see it's independent of circumstances. Rejoice in the Lord. Not in your circumstances. You're not commanded to do that. You're commanded to rejoice in the Lord.

[21:17] sorrowful, says Paul, yet always rejoicing. He could do it always. Because you see his joy was independent of his circumstances.

Who are the great joy stealers in our lives? Well, mainly people. People are the joy stealers in our life.

People at work, people we meet, people in the church and so on. They're the great joy stealers of our life. You know that rhyme it goes, to live above with saints we love?

Well, that indeed is glory. To live below with saints we know? Well, that's another story. And how to live in a church with people who are the people of God and yet causing difficulty?

We can rejoice, says Paul, in spite of people. We can rejoice in spite of people, in spite of circumstances because our rejoicing is in the Lord.

[22:17] And what will that do? Well, one thing it will do is this. It will prove to the world that we're genuine. It will prove to the world that we are genuine.

Our life is not trouble-free but we're able to rejoice in all circumstances. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

And you see, the Christian can rejoice in any circumstance. In spite of his circumstance, he can rejoice. And that's a wonderful thing, to have that glorious freedom that we can rejoice, however difficult the way may be.

And then thirdly, we look at the barriers to joy. And I just want to mention these briefly to try and complete what we're trying to say this morning. What are the barriers to that joy that we should have as God's people?

Well, the first barrier, as we've already hinted, is not looking to Christ. Not looking to Christ. We're looking at the world's prizes. We're carried away by the world and the things of the world, and we're not looking to Christ.

[23 : 30] Or, we also may be looking at our own trouble. And that trouble may be great, and it's weighing us down. But you see, we're looking at the trouble instead of looking to Jesus.

And we'll never get out of that trouble, really, until we begin looking to him. And then the joy will return. Joy in the Lord. Then secondly, not exercising faith, because it's faith that brings joy into our life.

Remember Paul's exhortation to the Romans, now may the God of peace, fill you, the God of hope, fill you with all joy and peace hope in believing.

You'll never get joy and peace by unbelief. The joy and peace always comes in believing. And God will fill you with joy and peace as you believe him, as you trust him.

A third barrier to joy is grieving the spirit. You know, in Galatians chapter 5, the apostle says that the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace.

[24 : 40] And you see, the Christians like a tree, a good tree, and a good tree bears good fruit. And we look to the Christian life for the fruits of the spirit.

Love, joy, peace. And joy is dependent upon us walking in the spirit. We are living in the spirit. Every Christian lives in the spirit.

But not every Christian walks in the spirit, dependent upon the spirit, moment by moment. And you see, to be joyful, we must be spiritural.

The Holy Spirit must be dwelling in us, and we must not be grieving the Holy Spirit. Because if we grieve the Holy Spirit, we lose our joy.

And then fourthly, the devil. the devil can't destroy the Christian. He can't finally bring him to destruction. But he'll do all in his power to rob us of our peace and of our joy.

[25 : 44] He'll do all in his power to rob us of our peace and of our joy. To quote Billy Bray again, the devil would rather see us doubting than hear us shouting.

The devil would rather see us doubting than hear us shouting. He would rather hear us moaning than singing. And the devil's purpose is to get the people of God defeated and despondent and get them down.

And you see, the devil is the one we have to resist. And then fifthly, and finally, we have whirliness. You see, there's a connection, as we see here in this verse, between holiness and happiness.

This day is holy unto our Lord. Neither be ye sorry, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. The most holy people are the most happy people.

There's no doubt about that. The most holy people are the most happy people. And when we look back in history, and people condemn the Puritans, and say that they were those kill joys, who wouldn't have Christmas, and so on.

[27 : 00] But the Puritans were merry men. If you knew their family life, if you knew their life, you would see and know that they were merry men. They were full of joy.

They enjoyed the good things of this life, under the favour of God. And if we have lost our joy, it's perhaps because we have allowed the world to come in.

we are no longer distinctive in holiness. That's why we've lost our joy, perhaps. The world has come into our Christian life. Someone has put it this way, all the water in the world, however hard it tries, could never sink a Christian ship unless it got inside.

And all the evil in this world, its wickedness and sin, could never sink the Christian craft unless it got within. You see, it's the worldliness within that is robbing us of our joy.

That's what's the trouble with us. It's not our circumstances, it's something within. And when we think of our Lord Jesus Christ, holy, harmless, and defiled, separate from sinners, and what does the psalm say of him?

[28 : 15] He was anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows. And in a moment we'll be singing Psalm 85, that in thee may thy people joy, wilt thou not us revive?

You see, revival always brings joy. It will first of all bring contrition and sorrow, but in the wake of that contrition and sorrow, there will be joy.

One person writing about the revivals in Scotland in the past said, Sinners wept with deep conviction as the spirit moved among them, strong men bowed a knee before you, hearts of flint by grace were broken, then hillsides rung with holy laughter, city streets were filled with singing, villages and lonely hamlets, shone with light that came from glory.

When God came in revival, there was joy in the hearts of the people. And you see, there is an indication of the measure of our spirituality as to how much we rejoice and joy in the Lord.

Well, what are we to do about it? What are we to do? Is it something that is characteristic of you?

Well, if it's not, it's something that must be marring your testimony.

[29 : 37] Again, to quote Richard Sibbes, those who do not rejoice, they bring an ill report upon the way of God, as if it were a desolate and disconsolate way, and dishearten others from entering into those ways.

How are people going to be attracted to the ways of God, unless you are an advertisement for these very ways? Unless you have joy and rejoicing and gladness in your heart?

Remember how in our ordination vows as elders, as ministers, we're exhorted to do all our duties faithfully, diligently, and cheerfully, because there's delight in the work of God, there's delight in doing the work of God, and there's a joy in doing it, if we are truly right with him, and right in our motives, and that will be a testimony to others.

Come thou with us, and we will do thee good, and if the world outside sees that there's nothing but gloom and doom, are they going to come with us and find good, no, there's goodness in God's ways, and joy and rejoicing is one of the great responses to accepting God's gospel.

And finally, may I say to those who are unconverted here, we were saying last week, as we spoke about the broken cisterns, how the great sin of Israel was it departed from him who was the fountain of living waters, and they hewed out for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that could hold no water.

[31 : 21] And is that not the way of the world? They're busy and weary in pursuing things that will give them pleasure, but they never find these things.

Why? Because their pleasure and their joy is dependent upon things that will be taken from them. Your pleasure and your joy, if it's in the world, is dependent today on things that will be taken from you.

But you see, the Christian is joying and rejoicing today in something that will not be taken from him or from her. Rejoice in the law always.

And another exhortation from Paul in Thessalonians is rejoice evermore. How can you rejoice evermore if you're rejoicing in the things of this world?

The only way you can rejoice evermore is to rejoice in the Lord. And your rejoicing begins and it continues into eternity.

[32 : 27] And you may say, look at that poor soul with hardly anything in this world and she's getting near to the end of her days. We pity her. Don't pity her. She's the happiest person upon earth and she has got the happiness of heaven to look forward to.

Her joys are growing and increasing and will increase to all eternity and your joys in the things of this world will all be taken away.

See, that's the contrast between a Christian and a non-Christian. You see, the modern idea is that he who acquires most and succeeds best is the person who is happiest and is quite contrary to the gospel.

The joy of the gospel is the joy of knowing Jesus. The joy of resting in him. O happy day that fixed my choice on thee, my saviour and my God.

well may this heart rejoice and tell its raptures all abroad. That's the choice that will lead to everlasting joy. Is he your saviour today?

[33 : 40] Is he your portion? Well, if you have him as your portion, you're beginning a joy that will never end. That's the portion of God's people. O come thou with us and we will do thee good.

Seek Christ and seek joy in him and in him alone. May God bless our meditation. Let's pray. Our gracious God, we thank thee that thou art a God who has given us things richly to enjoy.

We thank thee for the joy that thou hast given us in thyself. And we pray that we might joy in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ and in the gospel. May it be the joy and rejoicing of our hearts. May we see him and may we rejoice in him today. Take away our love of the things of this world. Show us how empty they are and how they will be taken from us in the end. And grant it we would indeed look to thee for all that we need. For thou hast a plentiful supply and we thank thee for all the riches that are in Christ Jesus. May we live upon him and may we live through him and may we rejoice in him.

[34 : 46] For we ask it in his name and for his sake. Amen.