

THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH

Nehemiah 7:73b-8:18

Key Verse 8:10

“Nehemiah said, ‘Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.’”

Thanksgiving is upon us. So what does Nehemiah 8 have to do with that? As it turns out, Nehemiah 8 is one of the few detailed accounts in the Bible of how the Israelites celebrated a time of national gratitude and victory. This morning, my prayer is that Nehemiah 8 will inform how we celebrate Thanksgiving. Even more, as we walk through Nehemiah 8 together, we can learn about God who restores his people and how the joy of the LORD can also be our strength. Our journey this morning will take place in four sections: 1) Background, 2) God’s word is read and explained, 3) God’s word is understood and received and 4) God’s word is put into practice.

1. Background

To better appreciate Nehemiah 8, we need to get into a time machine and go back almost 150 years before this chapter begins. In 586 B.C., the last Judean king was dethroned and then executed by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. The Babylonians proceeded to burn down the temple. They tore down the walls of Jerusalem and left the city as a pile of rubble. Most of the people were deported to Babylon. This period in Israel’s history is referred to as the Babylonian exile. This is at the end of 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles and parts of Jeremiah and Daniel.

In 539 B.C., God moved the heart of King Cyrus to allow the Israelites to return to Judea and rebuild the temple and Jerusalem. A large group of courageous Israelites, led by Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the priest, left Babylon and resettled in Jerusalem. They focused on rebuilding the temple but there were all kinds of delays. Finally, under the preaching of Zechariah and Haggai, the Israelites finished the temple in 516 B.C.

Then for the next 60 years, nothing really happens in Jerusalem. The Book of Esther occurs during this time but the Bible is silent about the Israelites in Jerusalem. After rebuilding the temple, the Israelites seemed to have given their attention to settling down. Jerusalem was neglected. Without adequate Bible teaching, the faith of the people languished. The temple was improperly used. It seemed worship and devotion to the LORD became superficial.

Around 458 B.C., Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, led a second group of sacrificial and courageous Israelites to resettle in Judea. He taught God's Law as an attempt to restore the faith of the people. God used him to bring about spiritual reforms. Still, during this time, no work was done to rebuild Jerusalem.

Then 13 years later, in 445 B.C., Nehemiah stepped onto the scene of history. He was originally a cupbearer for King Artaxerxes of Persia. One day his brother told him that the Israelites were neglecting Jerusalem. They were disgraced and in trouble. God moved Nehemiah to ask Artaxerxes for permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls and gates. The king granted him permission, gave him supplies, and protection and appointed him as the new governor.

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem to find that there was opposition to rebuilding the wall from powerful Gentiles and some Jews. But God helped him and the families to persevere. They fully armed themselves with weapons as they worked on the wall. Finally, almost one hundred years after the Israelites first returned to Judea, they rebuilt the entire Jerusalem city wall in just fifty-two days. The wall's completion was a miracle from God. This doesn't mean life became perfect. Hostile enemies continued to threaten and intimidate Nehemiah and the people. A long, uncertain road lay ahead to restore the rest of the city. But God had given his people this collective, monumental victory. It was a time of thanksgiving to God. It was now time to celebrate!

2. God's word is read and explained. (1-8)

Less than a week after the wall is completed, the Israelites gather as one people at a large square before the Water Gate. There is no ribbon cutting ceremony nor political speeches nor fireworks as we might expect today. The completion of the wall is not celebrated with backslapping and handshakes and shouts of, "Woohoo! We did it!" There will be a wall dedication later, but not now. Instead they tell Ezra, the teacher of the Law, to bring out the book of the Law of Moses and to read it to them. The Israelites celebrate this major milestone by turning their attention, not on themselves nor the wall, but on God and his word. They celebrate with Bible reading and a worship service.

The worship service begins with Ezra standing on a high wooden platform. The platform was constructed for this occasion, so that the people could see him. He faces many thousands of people. There are men, women and even children. Anyone who could understand is invited. They show up at daybreak, waiting with bated breath and rapt attention on Ezra to hear God's word read out loud.

On the platform with Ezra are prominent people in the community, six on his right and seven on his left. When Ezra opens the book, the people all stand up. Ezra praises the LORD, our great God. All the people respond by lifting their hands and

shouting, “Amen! Amen!” Then they all bow down with their faces to the ground and they worship the LORD. It is whole-body worship. The Israelites worship with thankfulness, humility and surrender for what the LORD has done for them.

The Israelites do not remain on the ground. They stand up. Then, for the next six hours, Ezra reads from the Book of the Law and explains what it means. Because so many people are there and because for some, Hebrew is likely not their first language, a group of Levites assist Ezra in bringing God’s word to the people. These Levite Bible teachers go throughout the crowd and further instruct the people. Look at verse 8. “They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.”

By our standards, this celebration worship service is sparse. There is no praise band or orchestra. There are no slick videos or fancy visuals. There are no testimonies from the wall builders. It seems that there aren’t even any chairs. But what they had is the word of God. At the core of their praise and worship is listening to, understanding, and receiving what God was saying to them as revealed in God’s book. They know that the best way to celebrate the completion of the wall is to worship God with thanksgiving and to listen to God with humble hearts altogether. They know that more than anything, they need the word of God.

Our times and circumstances are far different from Nehemiah’s time and circumstances. We may not be able to relate to the specifics in the book of Nehemiah. But there is one very important thing we have in common with them. They needed God’s word then and we need God’s word now. So the first main point this morning is: make listening to God’s word a priority, especially in a time of thanksgiving and celebration. They needed to hear from God then and we need to hear from God now. As we read our Bibles at home quietly or with our families and friends, ask God to make his word and its meaning clear so that we all understand what he is telling us. Let’s pray for each other and for all at any worship gathering, that we would have such eagerness to hear from God and to praise him. Let’s pray for those who stand in pulpits every Sunday across this land, including this pulpit, to make God’s word clear and to give its meaning so that people everywhere may understand what God is telling them. Let’s pray for every Bible study, that God’s word may be clear, and its meaning given so that everyone there may understand what God is saying to them and humbly accept it.

3. God’s word is understood and accepted. (9-12)

As the Book of the Law of God is read out loud and the meaning made clear, the response is incredible. Although the Holy Spirit is not mentioned, he is obviously working. Not only do the people understand, they are convicted by what God’s word says. They openly weep over what they hear. Look at verse 9. “Then Nehemiah the

governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, ‘This day is holy 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.”

“For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.” Why were they weeping as they listened? Because God’s Law revealed their brokenness, rebellion and disobedience. The Law is specified in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. It gives detailed instructions on who to worship, how to worship and when to worship. It also has a very rich moral and ethical code governing relationships, diet and cooking, clothing, washing and many other things and all the consequences for not keeping the rules. As the people listen to the Law, they are convicted of their sins. They weep because they realize the extent of their disobedience.

Yet there is something deeper here that made them weep. God wanted more than perfunctory or robotic obedience to rules. God’s heart was to have a covenant relationship with his people. In the Old Testament, this special relationship was offered through the Law. For example, Deuteronomy 7:12-15a says, “If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your ancestors. He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers. He will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of your land... the calves of your herds and lambs of your flock. ... You will be blessed more than any other people.... The LORD will keep you free from every disease.” If they kept the Law, there was a promise of relationship, family, prosperity and peace. Furthermore, God’s hope was that these blessed Israelites would bring God’s blessings to the whole world. “Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west, and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.” (Genesis 28:13) In short, God wanted to bless them with everything so that they could bless the whole world.

These promises sounded great. At the same time, God warned the Israelites that they would lose everything if they turned from him. For example, Ezra might have read Deuteronomy 29:25-28. “It is because this people abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their ancestors, the covenant he made with them when he brought them out of Egypt. They went off and worshiped other gods and bowed down to them, gods they did not know, gods he had not given them. Therefore, the LORD’s anger burned against this land, so that he brought on it all the curses written in this book. In furious anger and in great wrath the LORD uprooted them from their land and thrust them into another land, as it is now.”

As the Israelites listen to verses like that, they weep because that’s what happened to them. They were where they were because they abandoned God. They lost everything, including their relationship with God, not because of aggressive foreign

powers, but because of their own sin and wickedness against God. They have no one to blame but themselves. They weep and mourn in repentance, regret and sorrow over their broken relationship with God.

Then, in an odd twist, the people are told not to mourn or weep. Let's read verse 10 together. "Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.'"

Why did Nehemiah tell them not to grieve? How could there be joy when it looked like God had given up on them? Because God offers restoration. For example, Deuteronomy 30:2-3, 5b say, "... and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you.... He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors." The people lost everything like their temple, their nation, their dignity, etc. but God also offered a way back to him. That offer of restoration gives them hope, even in their grief. Nehemiah encourages his people to see and accept this hope through their tears. Perhaps Ezra points to the rebuilt temple and the rebuilt walls as evidence that God still loves them and has hope for them. Maybe he even quotes Jeremiah 29:11, written specifically for them. "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" This hope from the LORD is the reason the people can have new joy and strength.

The Levites further calm the people. Then the assembly is over and people disperse. Verse 12 says, "Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them." They go away to celebrate. They eat and drink. They also serve others who do not have the means to celebrate. Their sins brought national and personal calamity. But they understand that God still loves them. God still has a hope, a plan and a future for them. God still wants to have a covenant relationship with them. These things give them great joy. So the second main point today: God's word brings repentance and the joy of the LORD to our hearts.

Let's read verse 10 together again. "Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.'" Thanksgiving is near. As we go and enjoy choice Turkey and sweet apple cider, let's bless those who have nothing prepared or have nowhere to go. Times of thanksgiving are intended to bless other people. We celebrate the blessings of life. But even more, we celebrate and are thankful because we also understand that God is ever loving and faithful in his relationship with

us through our Lord Jesus. For the last few months, I've been embroiled in what feels like an unending tailspin of trouble at work. Workload, never-ending fires to put out, challenges with a boss who is completely different from me and staff burnout have brought on a lot of self-doubt, negativity, frustration, sleeplessness and stress. Work has again become such a "thing" that even when very good blessings outside of work have come during this time, sometimes I feel numb. Only God encouraging me through his word has helped day by day. Joy and strength have come from the Psalms for expressing my heart and yet turn me to the Lord or verses like Lamentations 3:22,23, "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." or Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" I may not have human strength but the joy of the LORD is my strength. No matter what we've done or what we are going through or where we've been, God has a hope, plan and a future for us too. This is all available to us through Jesus Christ. In the midst of trials, we can have a joy in the Lord Jesus that the world cannot take away. That joy gives us strength to pass through our hardships with victory. That joy gives us strength to honor and bring glory to the Lord. So this Thanksgiving, celebrate and be thankful, "for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

4. God's word is put into practice. (13-18)

The next day, the leaders of all the families, the priests and Levites again gather around Ezra to give their attention to the words of the Law. They rediscover that God commanded his people to keep the Festival of Tabernacles that same month. The festival requires the Israelites to gather branches from leafy trees and make temporary shelters. They live in these shelters for seven days. The festival commemorates how their ancestors had lived in temporary shelters for forty years in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt. It was a time to remember and be thankful for God's provision, promises and love for them. It was a fitting celebration in light of the wall being rebuilt.

The heads of the families realize that the time for the festival was fast approaching. They spread the word to all the surrounding towns and in Jerusalem. They tell people to go into the hill country and bring back branches from all kinds of trees to make shelters. They go out and gather branches. They make these shelters on their roofs, in their yards, in the temple courts, and in the open square in Jerusalem. Everyone who had returned from exile to Babylon and Persia participates. They all live in these temporary shelters for a week.

When these Israelites hear what God requires of them, they immediately put it into practice. And that's our third main point this morning: Understanding and receiving God's word results in obedience to God's word. This is not easy for the Israelites. Many of them had already paused their lives for two months to rebuild the

wall under great stress. They could not attend to their fields or their businesses. The festival would have required another commitment of at least several weeks. But the joy they knew they'd receive from carrying out God's word far outweighed the personal cost. We see an amazing result. Verse 17b says, "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." When you decide to obey God's word, God will give you great joy.

Ezra's daily public Bible reading during the festival adds to their joy. It reinforces what they had already heard. Their sin was great but God's love for them was greater. They had tossed away their relationship with God but God wanted to renew it again. God's grace is truly greater than all of our sins.

We are at the end of this chapter, but this is not actually the end of the story. This chapter marks a high point in Nehemiah. Its kind of downhill from here. Nehemiah ends with a list of examples of corruption and sinfulness amongst the people. Furthermore, the end of Nehemiah is the end of recorded Old Testament history. After our passage today, why end Nehemiah and Old Testament history with a big dud? The reality is that Nehemiah feels incomplete because it is incomplete. Nehemiah could restore a city wall but he could not really restore the people. True restoration of the people would not happen for another 450 years at the coming our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. God's people failed to keep the old covenant in the Law. So Jesus would establish a new covenant in his blood through his death and resurrection. Not only the Israelites but everyone who believes in Jesus enters into a covenant relationship with God. Our sins are wiped away and forgiven. We have eternal life. We can have assurance of God's good plan, a living hope and a secure future through Jesus Christ. We are given the Holy Spirit who transforms hearts and minds. Jesus will never leave us nor forsake us. The joy Jesus gives us from having a relationship with him is our strength. And for this, we can be truly thankful this Thanksgiving season.

In conclusion let's remember three things. 1) Make listening to God's word a priority, especially in a time of thanksgiving and celebration. 2) God's word brings repentance and the joy of the LORD to our hearts. 3) Understanding and receiving God's word results in obedience to God's word. As you celebrate Thanksgiving, may the joy of the LORD be renewed in you. May the joy of the LORD be your strength and enable you to face and overcome your circumstances and challenges with victory.