

The Joy of the Lord • Neh. 8:9-12

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Where's The Joy?*

1. The Roman emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Empire after nearly 300 years of persecution
2. But after Constantine another emperor came to the throne who wanted to restore the worship of the old gods
3. His name was Julian; Julian wanted to turn back the clock and try once again to stamp out Christianity
4. His complaint was this - He said:
 - a. "Have you looked at these Christians closely? They are hollow-eyed, pale-cheeked, flat-breasted all.
 - b. "They brood their lives away, unpurged by ambition: the sun shines for them, but they do not see it: the earth offers them its fullness, but they desire it not; all their desire is to renounce and to suffer that they may come to die."
 - c. as Julian saw it, Christianity took the joy and vitality out of life.
5. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers."
6. Robert Louis Stevenson once entered in his diary, as if he was recording an extraordinary phenomenon, "I have been to Church today, and am not depressed."
7. These men have all hit on something tragic - believers are all too often identified as people who are sorrowful and depressed
 - a. they give the impression that being a Christian means just waiting to die
 - b. that this life is nothing more than a trail to be endured
 - c. that joy and faith are mutually exclusive
8. Yet if you were to put a bible in front of someone who had never in their lives met a Christian and had never, ever heard of the gospel before, and asked them to read it - they would tell you that a bible believing Christian would be a person of *uncountable* joy
 - a. why?
 - b. because that is the picture presented in scripture!
9. Garrison Keillor once said, "Some people think it's difficult to be a Christian and to laugh, but I think it's the other way around. God writes a lot of comedy, it's just that He has so many bad actors."

B. *Hebrew*

1. If you were to compare the Hebrew language to all others, you would discover that Hebrew has more words for "joy" and "rejoicing" than any other

2. In the Old Testament, 27 different words are used for some aspect of joy or joyful participation in religious worship.
 - a. in fact, worship in the OT is nearly always marked by a mixture of both awe and joy
 - b. while the worship of the other religions was marked by fear and ritual,
 - c. the worship of God was a joyous celebration.
3. The psalmist says, "You show me the path of life; in Your presence there is fullness of joy, at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore". (Psalm 16:11)

C. The Transition

1. What happened in the transition from OT to NT worship?
2. Did God change, or have the people of God lost something vital from their understanding of worship?
3. Let's see . . .

II. TEXT

A. V. 9

{9} And Nehemiah, who was the governor, 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 nor weep." For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law.

1. The book of Nehemiah has two parts:
 - a. chapters 1-6 tell the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem
 - b. while chapters 7-13 tell the story of the rebuilding the *people*
2. Now that the walls and gates of the city had been restored, Nehemiah knew he needed to insure they would be guarded
 - a. the sin and failure of the people had resulted in the city's destruction years before
 - b. he wanted to make sure it didn't happen again
 - c. so he set about to do a work of *spiritual* rebuilding
3. While stones and mortar had been the materials used to repair the walls; what was need to restore the people was the Word of God
4. So Nehemiah called a Bible conference, if you will, and he invited Ezra the priest and scribe to be the featured speaker
5. The people gathered in a large open square and Ezra brought out the Book of the Law, probably the book of Deuteronomy -
 - a. he read from morning till mid day
 - b. and as he did, he would pause to explain what he was reading
 - c. other teachers and many of the Levites assisted him in this
 - d. and finally, when the reading and teaching was done, the people responded with a deep sense of mourning and weeping
6. You see, as Ezra read and taught, they came to realize that all of the calamity that had come upon them and their forefathers was the result of their own national rebellion against God

- a. everything in recent history was an obvious fulfillment of all that God had warned them about
 - 1) the loss of their nation and the beloved city of Jerusalem -
 - 2) the destruction of their temple
 - 3) their exile to Babylon
 - 4) all these things had been foretold
- b. but now, even more recently, just as God had promised
 - 1) if they repented of their rebellion in the land of their exile
 - 2) and turned in love and loyalty to Him once again
 - 3) He would draw them out and bring them back -
 - 4) the waste places would be rebuilt
 - 5) and His light would once again shine out from Jerusalem
- 7. As they heard these words, they were overwhelmed with a sense of guilt and failure
- 8. But Nehemiah and Ezra were quick to tell the people *not* to weep and mourn
- 9. Why?
 - a. didn't they realize that getting people to weep was a sign of success in religious meetings?
 - b. isn't making people feel guilty and worthless something religious leaders aim at?
- 10. Not Nehemiah and Ezra!
- 11. They said that it was a holy day - a day set apart to the Lord - and weeping was an inappropriate response to what God was doing
- 12. You see - Ezra had not brought out the Law to lay guilt on the people
 - a. the day of guilt and judgment was past
 - b. the walls of Jerusalem had been destroyed 150 years before
 - c. now that they were rebuilt, and they were back in their homes, it was the sign that they lived in a day of forgiveness and renewal
 - d. the message they needed to understand was that God had forgiven them
 - e. they had to stop looking at their sin and guilt and look at the restored place they had been given - AND REJOICE!
 - f. it is as wrong to mourn when God has forgiven us as it is to rejoice when sin has overcome us.
- 13. In 1 John 1:9 we read these words, "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."
 - a. the word "confess" means to agree with
 - b. but confession is a two-sided coin
 - 1) on one hand, we agree with God about our sin - that it is wrong, evil, and deserving of His fierce wrath
 - 2) but on the other hand, as John says, God forgives us and cleanses us completely
 - 3) full-orbed confession means to not only agree that sin is wrong but that God has forgiven and removed our sin from us as far as the east is from the west
- 14. In Nehemiah, the time for agreeing with God that their sin was wrong had passed

15. Now they needed to actively agree with Him that it was forgiven and they were clean
16. A new day had dawned - a day of renewal - a fresh start

B. V. 10

{10} Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for *this day is holy* to our LORD. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

1. Nehemiah told the people to go home and party!
2. Their worship was not to be some kind of maudlin piety that walked around with head bowed, eyes closed, and hands folded
3. Look at the words: Nehemiah said, "This day is *holy* to our Lord."
 - a. because it was holy to God, many people think that what Nehemiah would have called for was a quiet kind of sedate worship
 - b. if the day was a special day, a holy day, they picture what God wanted was a church full of people sitting or kneeling quietly in long lines of pews, with a pipe organ playing somber and sonorous tones in the background while the choir sang Gregorian chants
4. But what Nehemiah called for was not that the people bow or kneel in the open square while they silently meditated on religious themes
5. It was a holy day, a special day -
 - a. and the best way for them to observe it was by going home and barbecuing a big slab of tri tip,
 - b. pulling out the best skins of wine they had
 - c. and making sure that everyone in their area had something to party with
6. They were to *celebrate* their forgiveness
7. Instead of being focused on their sin, they were to focus on the greatness of God's forgiveness
8. And as they did, they were to *rejoice* in it!

C. Vs. 11-12

{11} So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day *is holy*; do not be grieved."

{12} And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them.

1. The Levites repeated Nehemiah's message to the far reaches of the crowd
2. Soon, all the weeping ceased as they realized just how great God's forgiveness was
3. Then they all turned and went to their homes to worship by celebrating the new day God had given them as individuals and as a nation

D. The Joy Of The Lord

1. It's the last part of verse 10 I want to focus on today
2. Nehemiah said, "Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."
3. He had finished the great task God had given him - to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem
4. But Nehemiah didn't want the people to think that *material* walls were the

- answer to their problem
5. Walls of stone might repel a physical enemy, but they are not the source of the strength needed to live in peace -
 - a. because our real enemies aren't physical, they're spiritual
 - b. and it is only spiritual strength that can resist them
 6. Where does this spiritual strength come from?
 - a. it comes from the confidence of being in right relationship with God through the forgiveness he gives
 - b. it comes from knowing that Jesus has already defeated the devil and disarmed the principalities and powers arrayed against us
 7. Nehemiah says it this way: "The joy of the Lord is our strength."

E. Happiness Versus Joy

1. Notice that he didn't say, being *happy* in the Lord is our strength.
2. There is a vast difference between *joy* and *happiness*
3. Happiness depends on what *happens*
 - a. if things are going well, we're happy
 - b. happiness is conditional and varies from moment to moment
4. Sally was a 17 year old teenager
 - a. one Thursday evening her father came home from work and said,
 - b. "Sally, I need to talk to you. I bought you a car today."
 - c. suddenly Sally is very happy
 - d. then he said, "I bought you a mustard 1970 Ford Pinto."
 - e. now, Sally is sad
 - f. then her father said, "But as I was driving it off the used car lot, the transmission dropped out of it. So the owner, who felt real bad and was afraid I might sue gave me a totally restored red & white 1960 Corvette Stingray for the same price as the Pinto."
 - g. now, Sally is ecstatic
 - h. but her father wasn't finished, "I took it immediately to the insurance agent and got it insured for the full value of \$30,000. But while we were in his office, a run away truck crashed in to the Corvette and totaled it."
 - i. now Sally is weeping convulsively
 - j. "But wait, there's more," her father said, "The agent gave me a check, right there for \$30,000 and I went down to the Buick dealer and bought you a brand new Riviera. It's copper with leather upholstery."
 - k. now Sally is doing cartwheels across the floor
 - l. then her father says, "On the way home, I stopped at the card shop to get a card for you to put the key in it. But when I came out of the store, I discovered someone had stolen the car. Sorry honey!"
 - m. is Sally happy?
5. Happiness is determined by our circumstances and it can vary from moment to moment
6. Joy, on the other hand, is not determined by the circumstances of our lives
 - a. it has been determined once and for all in the circumstance of One

Man's life = Jesus

- b. and the circumstance is His death and resurrection
 - c. because Jesus died and rose again, and because He is coming again to claim us as His own,
 - d. you and I can have a deep and settle confidence that come what may, in the end, it's all going to be okay
 - e. "In the world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)
 - f. "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if *it were* not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, *there* you may be also. (John 14:1-3)
7. The Declaration of Independence says that man possesses certain inalienable rights, and that chief among them are life, liberty, and the *pursuit* of happiness
 8. The bible says that the inalienable possession of the child of God is something better than just a promise of being able to *pursue* happiness - we have joy
 9. Funny thing about happiness, it seems the more you pursue it, the more difficult it is to attain
 10. Happiness really only comes when we stop pursuing it and fix our attention on something worthy
 11. A big dog saw a little dog chasing its tail and asked, "What are you doing?"
 - a. the puppy said, "I have mastered philosophy; and I've learned that the best thing for a dog is happiness, and that happiness is my tail. Therefore I am chasing it; and when I catch it, I shall have happiness."
 - b. the older dog said, "I, too, have chased my tail to find happiness and it has occupied my time and attention for many years. However, I have noticed that when I chase after it, it keeps running away from me, but when I go about my business, it comes after me."
 -
 12. While the best the world can hope for is to be happy, the believer has something better and more lasting
 13. We have joy - we have the deep settle confidence that come what may, in the end and for all eternity, we win and will stand with Christ in victory
 14. This joy sees past the present with both it's highs and lows
 15. And it lights both the present and the future in bright colors

F. The Joyless Christian

1. As far as I can see, the joyless Christian is a contradiction in terms
2. According to the NT, joy is one of the distinguishing marks of the child of God
3. In Galatians 5, one of the fruits of the Spirit *is* Joy
4. Jesus told His followers to "Ask, and you shall receive, that your *joy* may be full."

5. In 1 John 1:4 we read . . .

These things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.

6. Paul repeated told his readers to "Rejoice in the Lord! Again I will say it - Rejoice!"

7. How sad it is when believers live joyless lives

8. A church is in a bad way when it banishes laughter from the sanctuary and leaves it to the cabaret, the nightclub and toastmasters.

9. CH Spurgeon was criticized by many of the ministers of his day because they felt he used too much humor in his preaching and was too joyful in his countenance in the pulpit

a. in his classic work *Lectures To My Students* he wrote these words . . .

"Sepulchral tones may fit a man to be an undertaker, but Lazarus is not called out of his grave by hollow moans." "I know brethren who from head to foot, in garb, tone, manner, necktie and boots are so utterly parsonic that no particle of manhood is visible.... Some men appear to have their clerical collar twisted round their souls, their manhood is throttled with that starched rag." "An individual who has no geniality about him had better be an undertaker, and bury the dead, for he will never succeed in influencing the living." "There are more flies caught with honey than with vinegar, and there will be more souls led to heaven by a man who wears heaven in his face than by one who bears death in his looks."

10. In contrast to the Christian who lacks joy is the one whose life is infused with it

11. He or she was come to the cross and gone away forgiven and new

12. Rather than having the countenance of an undertaker, they shine like a light house

13. A Hindu trader in India once asked a missionary, "What do you put on your face to make it shine?"

a. with surprise the missionary answered, "I don't put anything on it!"

b. the Hindu began to lose patience and said emphatically, "Yes, you do!"

c. "All of you who believe in Jesus seem to have it. I've seen it in the towns of Agra and Surat, and even in the city of Bombay."

d. the Christian understood, and his face glowed even more as he said, "Now I know what you mean, and I will tell you the secret. It's not something we put on from the outside but something that comes from within. It's the reflection of the light of God in our hearts."

III. CONCLUSION

A. His Joy Is Our Strength

1. Nehemiah told the people that the joy of the Lord was their strength

2. They were not to put their confidence in their new restored walls

3. Their strength came from trusting in God

4. What was true for them is true for us

5. The strength we need to live is not in the material or financial walls we build around ourselves
6. Our strength comes from the deep and settled inner confidence that comes from the Cross;
7. From knowing that if God loves us so much that He would go to such length as the Cross, will He withhold anything else?
8. No!

B. *Therefore, Rejoice!*

1. While joy is an emotion, and a deep one at that - it is something the Scriptures *command* from us
2. Phil 4:4 "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!"
3. We find the strength we need by turning our hearts and minds to the Lord and what He has done for us
4. Rejoicing begins with remembering God's all encompassing love