

Joy - part 2

Nehemiah 8:1-12 (NIV)

1 all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

2 So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.

3 He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

4 Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

5 Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up.

6 Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

7 The Levites--Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah--instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.

8 They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "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.

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

11 The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."

12 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.

You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand. (Psalms 16:11)

The Lord put it on my heart at the beginning of the year that before I headed off on long service leave I was to preach on Joy. It seems God wants to unlock more joy in people's lives, more joy in the life of our church – sounds wonderful. The only trouble is that when it came to the preparation for this week, I really didn't feel like it. I would really have preferred a topic like, being grumpy with God, seven biblical justifications why grumpy is godly. It's a bit of a struggle to consider joy when you're feeling grumpy, grumpy makes the whole world feel blaah and you think things and you say things that you normally wouldn't think or say. Like I spent ages telling off the dominos delivery guy for delivering a pizza without any toppings and I had such a grump going that it took him ages to point out that I'd opened the box up-side down.

However, what I've discovered this week is that the word of God is good for you even when you don't feel like reading it. I also discovered that for a book with a reputation for being grumpy, the bible has an awful lot to say about joy.

I discovered that in the bible...

- Love is mentioned 563 times
- Judging is mentioned 153 times
- Being grumpy (sad) is only mentioned 10 times
- Joy is mentioned 222 times

Then I began to think about all those worship songs that are so full of joy and when artists keep returning again and again to the subject of Joy you know they are on to something.

There are a lot of Christian songs about Joy

(The most joyous of all the protestants were the Congregationalists as exemplified by this joyous of all hymns by Isaac Watts)

Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns;
 Let us our songs employ;
 While fields and streams, rocks, hills and plains
 Repeat the sounding joy
 Repeat the sounding joy
 Repeat, repeat the sounding joy

(While not as boisterous as Joy to the world this next hymn, also by a Congregationalist, Brian Wren, has a lovely sense of joy)

I come with joy to meet my Lord,
 forgiven, loved and free,
 in awe and wonder to recall

his life laid down for me,

(Music must be one of the best ways that we can express joy and one piece of music probably expresses it better than any, the final movement of Beethoven's 9th symphony, known popularly as the "Ode to Joy" and used as the tune for several joyous hymns, this first one is regularly sung at Christmas concerts but the author of the lyrics is a bit of a mystery)

*Come sing a song of joy for peace shall come my brother
Sing, sing a song of joy for men shall love each other*

(Now the most popular hymn version of this tune was written by the Presbyterian minister Henry Van Dyke, the Presbyterians were not always known for their joy, but there you go, God's joy pops up everywhere – I love the version of this made popular by the Sister Act Movie starring Whoopee Goldberg)

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee,
God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flow'rs before Thee,
Op'ning to the sun above.

Melt the clouds of sin and sadness;
Drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the light of day

(Then there are a number of anonymous joyous songs that became huge hits in the 60's and 70's)

Joy is the flag flown high from the castle of my heart,
from the castle of my heart,
From the castle of my heart.

Joy is the flag flown high from the castle of my heart
Where the King is in residence there.

Fly it high in the sky,
Let the whole world know,
Let the whole world know,
Let the whole world know.
Fly it high in the sky
Let the whole world know
That the king is in residence there

(George Willis Cook)

I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart, (where!?)

Down in my heart, (where?), down in my heart,
I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart, (where!?)
down in my heart to stay.

(This was never really a worship song - but it always made me feel joyous written by the band - *Three dog night*- best version - *Creedence Clearwater Revival*)

Singing Joy to the world
To all the boys and girls
Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea
Joy to you and me

The bible is clear and repetitive about this, No matter how we feel, no matter what our circumstance, there is a gift of Joy that is our heritage. The writers of the Old Testament and the prophets knew that joy was never far away when you lost yourself in worship.

Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his tabernacle will I sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the LORD. (Psalms 27:6)

Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you. (Isaiah 12:6)

Paul prayed for all believers to be filled with Joy

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

Peter understood that Joy is an inseparable consequence of a personal relationship with Jesus

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, (1 Peter 1:8)

But what I would like to zero in on today is a really interesting claim by the great builder of Jerusalem, Nehemiah who said that:

...the joy of the LORD is your strength (Nehemiah 8:10)

So what does Nehemiah mean? You see Nehemiah is not just speaking hope words - you know hope words, I hope to lose a kilo this week, I hope free to air TV has a great future, I hope politicians won't embarrass us this week - hope words. The Joy Nehemiah is speaking about are tested words, words tested in the crucible of very difficult living such that this statement is not just a hope but a reality that has been lived out ...*the joy of the LORD IS your strength*



Nehemiah lived in a difficult time in Jewish history when his people had lost everything. Seventy years ago their mothers and fathers were defeated in battle by the Babylonians. As they left the city in chains they looked back over their shoulders at the smouldering ruin that had been their life and the pile of rubble that had once had been their hope. And then they arrived in Babylon, virtually slaves. How could God free them from the Egyptians only to make them slaves again at the hands of the Babylonians? I think that the Israelites would probably describe this as the lowest point in their history.

¹ *By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.*

² *There on the poplars we hung our harps,*

³ *for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*

⁴ *How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? (Psalms 137:1-4)*

Which was the question that the people were asking, how can we have faith in the God of Israel when we are not in Israel anymore? Anyone who has ever felt this terrible discouragement or been at such a low point in their life, whether it's through internal demons, addictions or impossibly stressful circumstances, know that this is not a time when you generally experience joy. If someone like the apostle James were to suggest to us that we should be joyful in the face of really difficult circumstances, we'd probably want to punch them in the face – but that is exactly what the apostle James suggests.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. (James 1:2-3)

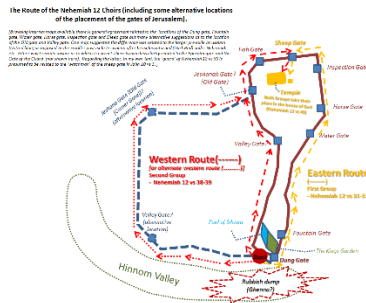
There have been times when I have wanted to punch James in the face for this passage, because it's counterintuitive, it doesn't make sense, it's offensive, but strangely there is also something powerfully true here. Neither Nehemiah nor James were arm chair philosophers espousing self-help mantras to trick our minds into being happier. These are guys who have both had difficult lives but have discovered that the joy of the Lord is their strength. That when they lost everything they discovered how potent faith in God can be, even bringing joy into a life that has lost everything.



So what has Nehemiah experienced that makes him confident that the joy of the Lord was their strength? Nehemiah was a Jewish slave of the king of Persia, his service was royal cupbearer, so that the King always had wine to drink. It's an important role – I don't know why my wife won't accept this very important job – Anyway, Nehemiah, after much agonising in prayer over the plight of his people, took a big risk, and asked his master, the king of Persia, to not only let him return to his homeland, but to give him the supplies and building materials that he would require to re-build Jerusalem. You see slaves that make requests that displease their masters get executed but through the grace of God the King of Persia said yes.

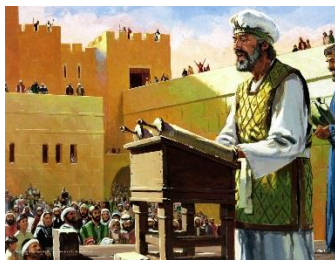


So it was that on the first month of the year Nehemiah began rebuilding the walls of the city with a whole lot of opposition from surrounding tribes (including the Samaritans which was the cause of the enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans that Jesus commented on.) So much so, that they had to work with a hammer in one hand and a spear in the other. But it only took them 52 days after which the people returned to their homes. Seven months since they returned, Nehemiah called all the people together again to assemble in the square in the front of the water gate.



(The seventh month is an important month of feasting on the Hebrew calendar. On this day they celebrated the Feast of Trumpets (today called *Rosh Hashanah*, Head of the year), which was followed by the Day of Atonement on the tenth and the Feast of Tabernacles from the 15th to the 22nd of the same month.)

As the people assembled, Ezra the priest solemnly walked through their ranks carrying a great scroll.



A hush fell over the people as Ezra walked up onto a platform to read. That scroll was their faith, it was their rock. They had lost home and at times hope, but God's word was always with them. For seventy years in captivity they had gathered on the Sabbath, unwrapping the scrolls and reading the stories of God's guidance and deliverance. Now Ezra read the word of God inside the walls of rebuilt Jerusalem, the word of God's deliverance in God's delivered city.

As you can imagine the people were really stirred up and emotional at this time and were not quite sure how to respond, because three times in a row Nehemiah and the leaders had to convince the people that this was not a time for mourning but a time for joy (Nehemiah 8:9-11). You see the people had been grieving for seventy years, dealing with what they had lost and it's just not easy to move from grieving to Joy. Over time a spirit of grieving will settle on people, it will become the new normal and it is a difficult thing to let go. This gathering, this listening to the word, this time of openness, was a time that God was using as an instrument to release the people from their spirit of mourning. It is something God knows that we need to do and God is the one who can help us do it.

The prophet Isaiah had declared to the exiles who grieved that God would:

...provide for those who grieve in Zion-- to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair... (Isaiah 61:3)

This is what God does. So it was that on that day, the festival of trumpets, Israel's mourning turned to great Joy (Nehemiah 8:12). As Solomon notes; there is *a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance*, (Ecclesiastes 3:4)

¹ *When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed.*

² *Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."*

³ *The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.*

⁴ *Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev.*

⁵ *Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.*

⁶ *He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him. (Psalms 126:1-6)*

Our fine brother James Evangelidis remarked to me this week that what releases joy is simply remembering what God has done for us. That while we were still far from God, while we didn't deserve any good thing from God, God came to us, became one of us, allowed our whole world of evil and violence to spill his blood and break his body, all because he loves us and wants to spend eternity with us. In his death and resurrection we have become the sons and daughters of the living God, we belong to him and he gives us an identity and a destiny. Pity those who do not belong, who do not have an identity who do not have a destiny. Remember what God has done for you and rejoice no matter your circumstance or the way you feel. *The Joy of the Lord is our strength.*



John Piper tells of an afternoon that he spent with Josef Tson, a Romanian pastor who suffered under the Communists (*A Godward Life, Book Two* [Multnomah Press], pp. 358-360). One topic they discussed was having joy in the midst of suffering. Tson told about one day when the Communists came to his house and confiscated almost all of his books. The soldiers needed proof that they were getting his books from him, so they made him sit at a table and write in each book that they found it in his house, while they took pictures of him doing this. At one point in this process, Tson

took down a book whose title was, *“Joy Unspeakable and Full of Glory,”* with the subtitle, *“Is This Your Experience NOW?”* I tell you it is *not* a joyful thing for a pastor to lose his books!

But as he read the title, Tson asked himself that question and at that moment was flooded with great joy in the Holy Spirit. He lost his anger and fear and asked his wife to get the soldiers some coffee. Later that week he had to preach. His congregation knew that he had been stripped of his books and had been harassed daily by the officials so that he had no time to prepare a sermon. He spoke that day on Nehemiah 8:10, *“The joy of the Lord is your strength.”* One man in the church was so overwhelmed with the sheer force of Tson’s joy in the midst of suffering that he could not hear anything after the text. He was broken in his own heart and deeply changed.

There is a reason we are so easily and continuously anxious about our undesirable circumstances. Clearly, our hearts struggle to believe that we have a sovereign and attentive God who truly cares for us (1 Peter 5:7)! We forget that he is a constant shield around us (Psalm 3:3), that he orders our steps (Proverbs 20:24), and that all of our days were written in his book before we were even born (Psalm 139:16). We are so prone to feel like we are at the mercy of our circumstances rather than under the never-ending mercy of a God who is eagerly working all things for our greatest good (Romans 8:28) and very desiring to turn our mourning into JOY.