

Communion

The joy of the Lord

(edited transcript)

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The Jewish leader Nehemiah exhorted the people who had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon:

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

Nehemiah's exhortation, recorded in the Scriptures, is not a metaphor, an ideal, or a motivation to generate in ourselves joyful feelings about Jesus and then as a result, feel stronger in ourselves. It is a true statement of the Lord's own joy that He gives to us. And when *His* joy is ours, He strengthens us. His joy in us becomes our strength.

This is echoed by the apostle Paul's declaration:

"...when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10)

What Paul meant by this was that in his weakness, he was strong with a strength that was being supplied to him by Christ Himself. As we are being weakened in our flesh by the Holy Spirit who, in the mercy of God, sets Himself to frustrate the relentlessly self-justifying efforts of our flesh, we can receive and know the joy of the Lord that He gives to us, and be strengthened.

If you've been feeling frustrated over things that are happening and stopping you from being a 'good Christian', thank the Holy Spirit because it is He who is frustrating you so that you can learn not to trust in yourself!

Paul knew that the purpose of the sentence of death in himself was that he would learn not to trust in himself (2 Corinthians 1:9). In learning to trust instead in God who raises the dead, he knew joy. *Exceeding* joy! This is the joy of the Lord that we too can know.

It is important to understand that the joy of the Lord is not some overt outbreak of happiness that belies the fact that we are suffering. Neither is it a mindless optimism that overtakes us for a time until the sadness of our suffering reasserts itself. The joy of the Lord is the joy and the capacity of God Himself.

Jesus, for the joy that was set before Him, endured the things He suffered (Hebrews 12:2). Think of that! Jesus *saw* the joy that was set before Him, the joy that He was obtaining for *us*, and for this reason, He endured the cross.

How are *you* enduring whatever difficulty you are currently going through? We can only truly endure by His strength, the strength that He supplies, and for the joy that is set before us, the joy that He gives us. *This* joy is the joy of the Lord that is our strength.

God is building His Church

The Book of Nehemiah records the return of the Jewish captives from exile. Coming back to Jerusalem, they had to rebuild, starting with

the structure - the walls, gates and doors - of the beautiful city that had once been their habitation. In a sense, they had to rediscover who they were.

We have a city from God (Hebrews 11:10), and we are all living stones in that city (1 Peter 2:4-6). God does not require us to build His city's walls with hewn stone, for He is fitting *us* together, and teaching us how to be fit together, as living stones who are part of His city. Let me ask you, how are you going with His building process? Can you see that everything God is doing in your life is because you are a specific and unique person whom He has made to fit into a specific and unique place in His city? He has given you only one name and only one life, and *this* is it, unfolding right now. He wants you to live the life *He* has given you, and He will supply strength for you to live that life and no other.

Part of what we are coming to understand is that we've got to be shaped and fitted with the right gear. The gospel we have held has been faulty - full of good intentions but to one degree or another, carnal. We thought we could overpower the devil; overcome our own slothfulness. We thought we could deal with our own and other people's sin. We believed we could emerge victorious from the conflicts we entered into in our self-righteous zeal. This kind of faulty thinking underlies the futile responses we see to the tumult around us and in some cases, *in us*: 'If you're a Christian, get up and fight against the world'; 'The world's out of control - withdraw and barricade yourself away from it'. These kinds of responses, motivated and empowered by the flesh, are carnal. All we can do in the face of such strife is to learn, as Israel did when they returned and began rebuilding, surrounded by powerful enemies bent on stopping them, that God is sovereign and He is building His city (Nehemiah

6:4). We stand in *His* strength and keep walking with Him.

The song of the Lord

Nehemiah records that for the dedication of the rebuilding of the city wall, the leaders of the priests gathered the Levites and the singers together to sing and minister joyfully in song (Nehemiah 12:27-28). This song was the song of the Lord.

"Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites from all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem so that they might celebrate the dedication with gladness, with hymns of thanksgiving and with songs to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps and lyre. So, the sons of the singers were assembled..." (Nehemiah 12:27-29)

Singing enthusiastically in the house of God is not necessarily singing the song of the Lord. It might just be that you like to sing. The song of the Lord is the song He gives us and doesn't rely on our natural inclinations - whether we like opening our mouth or not; whether we sing out confidently or we don't. The song of the Lord comes out of the testimony we have obtained in Him, out of His life that He has given us. It is of His own that we give back to Him (1 Chronicles 29:14), offering joyful thanksgiving that is according to the order that He has ordained and not according to what or how we would like to sing in church.

The song of the Lord is sent forth as a weapon against our enemies. The singers among the returning exiles were part of the guarding of Jerusalem against the enemies that were all around. At that time in history, God's people had just celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, confessed their sin, and repented of the waywardness that had led them astray (Nehemiah 8 - 9). In their repentance, they gained perspective on the last seventy years of their

captivity and on their troubles after returning. They were experiencing severe opposition from the peoples around them who were against them, opposing their faith and their work, and undermining their confidence with predictions of failure and threats of trouble from the governing authorities (Nehemiah 4 - 6). So hostile and hard against them were their opponents that the rebuilders had to be deployed in two teams - one team to stand armed guard while the other team worked on the building. Even those working on the building were armed, with those carting building materials holding a weapon in one hand and those building the wall having a sword at their side (Nehemiah 4:16-18). It was a struggle for them the whole way through the rebuilding and restoration process, and God was engineering it all.

God was engineering it! If you will be faithful to what God is doing in your life today, He is faithful. He is faithful to what He has given you, not to your idea of what He should do. We all have those self-sourced ideas, and sometimes we try to impose them on the process in which God has placed us. But trying to impose our own ideas on God's ways only makes us sad and anxious, afraid that God isn't working things out for our good anymore or that He doesn't really like us anymore. We come up with all kinds of silly explanations for our trouble when the missing piece is not in God's hand at all but in ours.

When we turn to Him, and stand in the grace God has given and 'get with His program', the Holy Spirit stops resisting and frustrating us and strengthens us instead.

Rejoice with great joy

It took the Israelites some time before they could sing the song of the Lord. There was a lot that needed cleaning up first.

"The priests and the Levites purified themselves; they also purified the people, the gates and the wall." (Nehemiah 12:30)

When they had been sanctified and purified, then the song of the Lord could begin. Nehemiah recorded:

"Then I had the leaders of Judah come up on top of the wall, and I appointed two great choirs to give thanks. The first proceeding to the right on top of the wall...The second choir proceeded to the left...on top of the wall..." (Nehemiah 12:31, 38)

Nehemiah appointed two large, thanksgiving choirs. Why? To give thanks! One choir went streaming out to the right, the other to the left.

"Then the two choirs took their stand in the house of God. So did I, and half of the officials with me; and the priests..." (Nehemiah 12:40-41)

They stood, and that's the first thing we need to do - stand in the grace that God has given.

"And the singers sang, with Jezrahiah their leader, and on that day, they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy. Even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar." (Nehemiah 12:42-43)

There they all were, singing their thanks, not to any formula but just as their leaders led, and commensurate with the work God was doing among them. On that day there was a great outpouring of sacrifice and offering. Something had begun to happen in the people's hearts, in their thankfulness to the Lord, and they went on to fill up the storehouse in the city of God. As the life of God multiplied among them, their singing, thanksgiving, tithes, and offerings multiplied. They rejoiced with great joy, singing the song of their testimony in the song of the Lord.

"...and on that day, they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy..." (Nehemiah 12:43)

God wants *you* to have a testimony! He wants to cause your life to abound with thanksgiving to Him as you bear witness to the testimony of God in your life and as others bear witness to the testimony of God's life that is in you.

If that has not been happening in you, and you know it hasn't, don't be troubled. You are hearing His voice today, and God is going to give you faith to participate in His song if you will hear His voice today.

As you come to the Communion table this week, come to participate with Christ, because the cup of blessing which we bless is a participation in Him (1 Corinthians 10:16).

Our participation in Christ's offering

When Paul exhorts us to judge ourselves rightly when we come to the Communion table, he is calling us to our participation in what the Lord is doing (1 Corinthians 11:31). The Communion is not a 'drink, eat and hope for the best' kind of meal - it is a participation with God who is looking at us and calling us to look at ourselves with Him; to look at what He is saying to us. We are to hear Him, to receive from Him, and offer to Him in communion and participation with Christ.

The people's joyful celebration in Nehemiah's day was a rejoicing out of their recovery and restoration by God, and it touched every family.

"...and on that day, they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar." (Nehemiah 12:43)

Can you imagine that *great* sound of rejoicing by all the people in the city of God - a sound that was so great it was heard from far away as the sound of joy? Think of the effect on their enemies, all the people who'd opposed them, telling them they'd never do it, when they stood on the walls, joyfully singing the song of the Lord who *had* done it!

You may have looked at your life, and others may have looked at your life, and said, 'It can't be repaired'. But God is not saying that to you! Today, *our* repentance is to turn to Him, confessing that we have said what He never said; acknowledging that we have agreed with His enemies who said He could not repair. We need to turn from our opposition and believe *Him*. Just because the Lord has been frustrating us and we feel as if we're in a pit, we are not victims of our circumstances. If you keep positioning yourself as a victim, you will not be able to participate with Christ. You will not be a participant, and His grace will not be there for you to stand in. We must each join the work of God, and our joining must in the first instance be by ourselves with Him.

If you are in a furnace of affliction, it is the Lord who has ignited it. That furnace is His fire, and that is why it will not destroy you. He is not destroying you - He is putting you under pressure because He is working in you and refining you. Can you receive this today? God will bring you out of the furnace in His time.

Paul exhorts us to redeem the time (Ephesians 5:16). Isn't it extraordinary that even time, temporary by nature and not part of God's everlasting Kingdom, needs to be redeemed? The years that have been lost, that we have written off, can be redeemed by the Lord (Joel 2:25). If you feel that your time has been lost, the Lord is encouraging you today that He can redeem that lost time, and you can redeem it with Him. If something is redeemed, it's bought

back. That means that God does not measure you by the years or times you think you've lost. It is very important that we hear that! God is not writing *anyone* off because of the passage of time. Time is not part of the everlasting Kingdom although He created time, and we live under it. It is part of what God has given as our 'school master' in this age that we're in, an age that is measured by time that will, at the end of time, come to an end and be no more. For now, God is redeeming us *in* time, and can redeem the time we have lost.

There is no circumstance you can bring to the Lord today that disqualifies you or anyone else from singing; no reason by which you can convince Him that you cannot sing or join His song today. If you need to repent, repent! Turn again to the Lord and rejoice! As we allow the Lord to sing His song in our midst with exceeding great joy, and we join His song, it will be heard afar off. The song *must* go forth, just as the word of the Lord surely goes forth from Zion, the city of God (Isaiah 2:3). It will go forth and do that which God has sent it to do (Isaiah 55:11).

Thank the Lord for his song! What a gift and a blessing the song of the Lord and the ministry of His Spirit is among us! What a joy that He rejoices over us with singing (Zephaniah 3:16). If you're not yet able to rejoice from the testimony of His life in you, can you rejoice with thanksgiving because you've heard the Lord today? He has given you His word - you have only to believe Him and participate in faith.

The week ahead

As the Lord has been speaking to you today with words of knowledge, calling for a particular turning to Him and giving you grace to receive and participate with Him in His word to you, receive His word! No one need feel they have missed the opportunity the Lord has

offered to them today to turn again to Him, to hear what they had not heard, to see what they had not seen, and to understand what had never entered their mind (Isaiah 52:15).

Can we let this be part of our fellowship in our families and homes this week? Can we speak to one another, and bear witness to what the Lord spoke to us as we participated in His song and in His body and blood at the Communion?

Let's turn and keep turning to the Lord, letting His gaze rest upon us and speak to us. Most of us at one time or another have tried hard not to notice that someone wanted to get our attention. Ignoring people who want our attention can be a way of showing our displeasure. When we do that to God, who is looking at us and seeking our attention, we are registering the fact that we are not happy with the way He is running things. If you are doing that, stop it! Turn to the Lord and look at Him again. That is your repentance. We have to confess that we *have* been like that; we *have* withdrawn ourselves from His process; we *have* been living by our own assessments of His ways, by our own complexities and anxieties, and these have kept us from Him.

When we turn to the Lord, all those entanglements and complexities unravel and fall away from our minds, and we can see clearly (2 Corinthians 3:16). Turning to the Lord, we can see the solution - the cross of Christ. His cross makes sense of our suffering. We won't be able to explain everything, but we will no longer need to, for we will know the Lord's fellowship and His grace to stand and endure. In this fellowship, through the whole matter, God will speak to us and we will *know* the joy of the Lord is our strength.