



# God's Joy, Your Strength

## *The Fruit of the Spirit, part 3*

July 5, 2020

Nehemiah 8:1-12

**“The joy of the Lord is your strength.”** It’s such a nice-sounding sentence, but what does it really mean? How does it really work? A closer look at Nehemiah 8 reveals to us *the gospel* of this verse. This is nothing less than “the gospel of the glory of the blessed God” (1 Timothy 1:11).

Jerusalem. 444 BC. The returning exiles have built the city wall but not much else. There is no temple. The houses of the city are in ruins; the farms in the country have been mortgaged to pay taxes and buy food. Children have been trafficked. Pagan marriages have been entered into for money and security. Nevertheless, Nehemiah calls the weak, sinful people together for a covenant renewal ceremony—and God rushes to his bride. That’s the gospel of Nehemiah 8. The people weep at the Word; they know they “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God;” their hearts are repentant. And through Ezra and Nehemiah God says, “Let’s party!”

God receives their repentance with omnipotent joy. Like a whole prodigal nation, he runs to welcome and restore them. “Put a robe on his back, a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet. Kill the fatted calf! For my people were lost, but now are found.” That joy in God becomes joy in us. He ravishes our hearts and propels us forward to *glorify God and enjoy him forever*.

How do we walk in this joy?

**Draw near to your happy God.** God is happy—always and forever—in himself. That’s good news. No one wants to be near a husband or father who is mean, drunk, and angry. They want one who is happy: happy in himself and happy in his family. And that’s our heavenly Father is! He is “the blessed God” and “in his presence is fullness of joy” (Ps. 16:11). Reimagine God according to this truth. Reframe your mental concept of who he is and what he’s like.

**Drink in the words of God.** A happy God speaks truthful, life-giving words. They’re not sappy and sentimental—sometimes they rebuke and correct (2 Tim. 3:16-17). But they always do so for our good, that we might share in his joy. That’s why Ezra’s audience drank in God’s word for *six hours straight*. It was healing to their bodies and water to their souls. It’s like Jesus said, “The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life.” The person who desires to live joyfully will be like George Mueller who said, “The first, great, and primary business to which I ought to attend every day is to have my soul happy in the Lord.” One can do that only by reading and meditating on God’s words.

**Direct up your heart to God.** Philippians 4:4 says, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!” This rejoicing is our “defiant *Nevertheless*” in the face of all anxiety, fear, anger and resentment. If we want to feel joyful, we simply must rejoice. We must express it. We don’t let our weak emotions lead us; we lead our weak emotions to the strength of joy in God. We don’t *act on* what we already feel; we *act toward* what we want to feel!

# Discussion Questions

1. Think about the situation of the people in Jerusalem in 444 B.C. In what ways are their circumstances similar to ours today?
2. If you were living in that time, and facing the difficulties they faced, how would you feel?
3. When the Bible was read—and you inevitably heard of all God’s perfections and all your failures—what would you expect Ezra, Nehemiah, and God to say? Would you expect them to say, “Party time! The joy of the Lord is your strength!”? Why or why not?
4. The sermon used examples like a crazy-in-love groom at a vow renewal ceremony, and the Prodigal Son story, to explain how “the joy of the Lord is your strength” actually works. Imagine someone asked you to explain it. What would you say? Retell it in your own words.
5. Thomas Aquinas said, “God is happiness by his essence. He is happy not by acquisition of or participation in something else, but by his essence.” Paul said he’s, “the blessed (happy) God.”
  - Do you see God like that? What’s your default idea about the emotional state of God?
  - If you truly saw God as happy, how would it change the way you relate to him?
6. If joy is the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), and if Jesus said, “the words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life” (John 6:63), then it seems there is a pretty tight connection between the Word, the Spirit, and a life of joy. What can you do to get in on that dynamic?
7. What keeps you from making reading and meditation on God’s word a source of joy? Why is it so hard to make this “the first, great, and primary business” to which we attend every day?
8. Ezra and Nehemiah said, “This day is holy to God. Don’t weep, rejoice!” John Orberg echoes that sentiment when he writes, “Joy in this world is always joy in spite of something else. So if we don’t rejoice today, we will not rejoice at all. If we wait until conditions are perfect, we will be waiting until we die. If we are to rejoice, it must be in this day.”
  - Do you agree?
  - How do we “rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil. 4:4) even when we don’t feel like it?
  - If you rejoice as a “defiant *Nevertheless*” to the anxiety, pain, or stress in your life, do you think it will help? How?
9. Share your final take-aways from this study and pray for each other. Pray that the joy of the Lord might actually be your strength.