

The Joy of the Lord - That is Strength

Read

Nehemiah 8:1-12

8 Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that *was* in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded Israel. 2 So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who *could* hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. 3 Then he read from it in the open square that *was* in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people *were attentive* to the Book of the Law.

4 So Ezra the scribe stood on a platform of wood which they had made for the purpose; and beside him, at his right hand, stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Urijah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah; and at his left hand Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbadana, Zechariah, *and* Meshullam. 5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was *standing* above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6 And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God.

Then all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with *their* faces to the ground.

7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law; and the people *stood* in their place. 8 So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped *them* to understand the reading.

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.

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."

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.

The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Ne 8:1–12.

Welcome to God's Word For You, a ministry of Sharon R P. Church in South East, Iowa. We want to thank you for listening today, and we pray that you'll be blessed by both hearing God's word as well as having it applied to your life and your heart.

Nehemiah chapter eight and we're going to be just looking this morning at verses, well it's technically 7:73b through 8:12 but chapter eight, one through twelve. Hear now God's holy and perfect word.

73 When the seventh month came, the children of Israel went to their cities. 1 Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded Israel. 2 So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. 3 Then he read from it in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. 4 So Ezra the scribe stood on a platform of wood which they had made for the purpose; and beside him, at his right hand, stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Urijah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah; and on his left hand Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam. 5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6 And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. Then all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. 7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law; and the people stood in their place. 8 So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading. 9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to 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. 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." 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.

Thus ends this portion of reading of God's word. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God endures forever.

Well there is a man who was raised in the church one time and, and as he was as he was raised in the church, the Bible was something foreign to it. He heard people read it to him, he even picked up the Bible a few times himself, and he tried to read it and he just didn't understand it. It was just something foreign to him. And then as that boy grew up, he became a man, and when he became a man, he became a Christian. He was saved, and he picked up his book after becoming a Christian, and he understood God's word. And he said, whoa, wow, it's about time someone finally edited this so we could understand it. Well, the Bible wasn't edited, it's that his heart was

edited. It's that he was given something in his spirit now where he could understand God's word. And this is what Nehemiah or this is what Ezra does here in Nehemiah chapter eight. In Nehemiah chapter eight. Ezra and the Scribes and the Priests, they show people the joy of the Lord in the Scriptures. And so that's what we're going to look at today is how do you find joy in the Lord in His word?

So we start with Ezra and what does Ezra do? Well Ezra has an affinity with the book. Ezra is a scribe. Ezra is one who would take one copy of the book and painstakingly letter by letter copying the book. Later these scribes, were called Masoretes and the Masoretes had an intricate system of how they would actually transcribe God's word to make sure that there were no errors in it. And so, as someone would write out lines, someone else would come back later and they would just count the letters. And if they got to line number seven, they knew that there should be 75 letters. And if they got there and there was 73, it all had to be scraped away and started again. It was meticulously cared for. God preserved His word. And this is what, what Ezra's entire calling in life was, was to care for God's word. And so what does he say in Nehemiah chapter eight, verse one. "All the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe bring out the book". Bring out the book.

Why did you come to church this morning? Why did you come to church this morning? I hope it was because you wanted me to bring out the book. If a pastor's coming before you and he's just giving you a good inspirational talk and never brings out the book, he has failed his ministry. Bring out the book has been God's people's cry for generations and generations and generations. Bring out the book, bring out the book. And so that's what Ezra does; he brings out the book, the Book of the Law of Moses. And it's not a book like we have it, they had parts, or they had parchment scrolls. I'll be showing some pictures of those in the afternoon time, but these are painstakingly made scrolls. They're expensive to make, and he would have brought out this large scroll, and Nehemiah starts reading from the book. Verse two, "So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly." Verse three, "Then he read from it in the open square". Nehemiah doesn't just bring, or Ezra doesn't just bring out the book as an ornament, as something that's, that's pretty, that's kept to the side as a sign, but God's people, you are entitled to God's word. It is your book. It is God's word to you. And that's what Ezra does, he opens the scroll and he begins to read from God's very own word. He reads it aloud. Verse three. Verse four, what does he do? He doesn't stand in some obscure place, but Ezra the scribe stood on a platform of wood, which they had made for the purpose. Ezra doesn't just sit in the midst of people. Everyone needs to see that he's actually reading from the book. And so books are expensive, not everyone has one. We live in a great age. Bibles are really cheap. And so we have, we have Bibles in every single pew, and when I mess up reading, some of you are able to tell me you didn't do so good reading this day. Because each of you have your own book. At this time, there was only one book, and so he's got it. He's got the scroll. He opens it up on the platform so everyone can see, and he's high enough up so everyone can hear him. Have you ever wondered why churches have stages and pulpits? It's Nehemiah chapter eight. It's not so that the pastor can feel big and important, it's so that way you can hear what he's saying and can respond to God's word, so you could be attentive to it. Nehemiah goes up on the platform in verse five. "Ezra opened the book in the sight of the people, for he was standing above the people when he opened it, and all the people stood up". It's still a tradition in some churches to take this literally that they, the people

of God at that time stood up to show honor to God and to His word. And there are still some churches in our country that when people will, when the pastor will get up or the elders will get up to read the book, the people will stand up to show honor that this is God's word. The people stand up to honor this book and the God who gave it to them. And as Ezra begins to read the book, verse six, "And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God". As Ezra begins to read the book, he cannot help himself but to thank the great God who gave this book. Second Timothy chapter three, verse 16 is clear that this book is breathed out by God; and it's perfect; it's inspired by Him, and it's, and it's effective. And how do the people respond while Ezra reads the book then all the people answered, Amen, Amen. Ezra was a man of the book. God's word does that. It is through God's word, that people are saved.

I was amazed one time I was reading a story from Charles Spurgeon, that great Baptist preacher of the 1800s, and a pastor came to Charles Spurgeon, and he said, my preaching hasn't been very effective lately. And Spurgeon asked him one question, he said, every time you get up to preach from the book, do you expect people to be saved? The guy goes, no, I don't expect people to be saved every single time I read from the book. He said never get up and preach again. Because that's what the book does. That's what Psalm 19 says that the word of God does. The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword. Book of Hebrews, the word converts sinners. Psalm 19. It is God's word. You want to know the most effective way of evangelism, lace God's word into your conversation with people. Lace your conversation in God's word. How were you saved? Yes, you might have been drawn into the church by people you love. You might have been drawn into the community because you liked the singing. But you are saved by the preached word of God; by hearing His word and having it applied to your heart. This is what God's word does. This is what the people desire. Let's look at what the assembly does. Chapter eight, verse one, "the assembly of the people gathered as one in the square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe, bring out the book". The people of God tell the scribe, tell the pastor of the time, you bring out the book. It is the people of God who have a thirst for the book. But this was not just a few people in the community. Verse two, "so Ezra the priest brought the book before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding." Everyone who could understand. Now there is a place, this is a somewhat controversial statement, that's okay, there's a place for little, little kids to have a nursery. But if you've ever wondered why we want children in worship, why we want children to hear God's word read and sung and preached it's because we want them to have faith. We want them to thrive. Children, we want you in worship. We want you to sit underneath God's word. It has a long term effect and a good effect. This is a whole congregation, all the families together men, women, children; all of them together, to hear God's word. And what did they do? Verse three, "Before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law". The people of God were attentive to the book. It is the word that is the center of worship. It is the word by which we know who God is. It is the word who shows us who we are. It is the word that the Holy Spirit applies to your heart. It is God who will make you understand. Will you incline your ear even this morning to God's word? Will you listen attentively? Now this isn't easy. I promise you I will preach boring sermons. I won't do it on purpose, but it will be boring. There will be sermons that just aren't to your taste. There will be sections of scripture that are difficult for you to understand, but the call of God's people is that they are attentive. They incline their ear to God's word. Is that what you do? When you come into worship, do you expect to strain your ears and to focus your mind that

you might sit under the feet of Christ and see Him as truly portrayed as crucified? Do you come to worship ready to think? The mark of paganism is superstition and non-understanding. The mark of Christianity is Spirit-wrought understanding of His word. Are you listening to His word? Are you attentive to the book?

But there are people in the assembly who are right there next to Ezra on the platform. Look with me at verses four – I'm not going to read all those names again, but the first part, Ezra the scribe stood on a platform of wood which they had made for the purpose; and beside him, at his right hand were a number of men and on his left hand were another number of men, 13 men, total rulers, influential men in the congregation who came and sat next to the pastor as he was reading God's word. Again, this is a tradition that still carries over into some of our American churches today. In some churches you'll see the pulpit in the middle and behind the pastor will be two or more seats where the ruling elders sit.

But I want to challenge you a little bit. How long did Ezra read to that assembly with those elders next to him? From daybreak till midday. So, okay, that's great, we really, we normally only read maybe one chapter or half of a chapter. Imagine standing for five to six hours as the elders took turns reading God's Word. You must, you need to really want to be there. I mean to be able to do that, you must really, really want to be there. The elders are there and the people see and stand and are there next to him in verse five, and what is the people's response as they are reading God's word? Now this is dangerous to say in a Presbyterian church, but just a few weeks ago, someone said, I really wanted to say amen during the sermon, but I think it be weird. Well as Nehemiah chapter eight shows us, it's not weird. How do the people respond? How do the people respond in verse six, Amen, Amen. And again we might think it's mushy, gushy evangelical land where people might lift up their hands, but that is what the people do in Nehemiah chapter eight. It is not because they want attention; but it's because they are involuntarily... So if in worship you involuntarily lift your hands and someone rebukes you say go read the Bible. If you, if we are reading God's word together and you are hearing the word preached and you involuntarily go amen, nobody's going to wag their head at you. If you bow down your head and because the weight of God's word and His Spirit is pressing down upon you that you cannot stand to even look up anymore, thank the Lord, because that is what His word does. "Amen. Amen!" while lifting their hands, "and they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground". God's word has an effect on our souls, but the effect has a different, has a different hit sometimes.

See as they're reading the Levites realize that there's, there's a problem. People can hear the words and they can understand the sentences, but they're not grasping the concepts. Have you ever done that before? Have you ever picked up your Bible in the morning and you've been reading your Bible and, and you get to that down to the end of the sentence or the end of the paragraph in you're like, I know I just read that but I have no clue what I just read. I know those words went into my brain, but they went right back out the second they got in there. Well the Levites recognized that. And in verse nine, what does it say, or verse seven, the end of verse seven, and the Levites helped the people to understand the Law and the people stood in their place. The people, the Levites read this law and in verse eight, so they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense of it, and helped them to understand the reading. The word here is parashah. It's dividing up, rightly dividing God's word. And that's

exactly what Paul tells Timothy, the pastor of the church to do, is to rightly divide God's word. The synagogue service in later Judaism came as a model of Nehemiah chapter eight. A lot of scholars believe that's the case, because a lot of these elements are still in synagogue worship and they translate over into our New Testament worship. What we find the scriptures telling the New Testament church to do. Pastors are to give a sense of the law; they're to read it out there to divide it rightly, and to say this is what it means; here is what we're doing; here is what God commands. But as the people understood the law, they had a response. That's understandable. Look with me at verse nine, "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 or weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law". The people weep. The people hear God's word, and they understand it at one sense, they weep. Why would people weep at God's law? Why would people weep when they heard that, that they were sinners? Why would people weep when God tells them not to commit adultery? Not to steal, not to murder, not to covet. Why would people weep when they've heard to worship the Lord only and to serve Him alone? Why would people weep when they hear about how they're supposed to take care of their neighbors and loved ones? Why would people weep when they heard about all the do's and the don'ts of the commands of God? Because it's pointing a finger right at them. The law comes. God designed the law to show us the guilt of our sin; to show us that we are unrighteous before a holy and perfect God. The law points to our souls and its first use is to convict us of sin; to show us that we do not deserve to be called God's people because He's made a covenant, and every single day we break that covenant in things we say and in things we do and even things we think. The people weep.

You know that feeling at times, haven't you, when you've wept because of your sin? When you've heard the word expounded and it's pressed upon your soul until, until tears came out of your eyes. You've heard it before, haven't you? When someone has told you your sin crucified our Lord. You know the weight of that guilt and how heavy and burdensome it is upon people's souls; the people weep. Nehemiah and Ezra understand that there is a greater story of redemption that is being accomplished, and that's what they tell them. Look with me again at verse nine "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 or weep." Why? Verse eleven, "The Levites quieted all the people saying, be still for the day is holy; do not be grieved". Verse ten, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet that's the sweetest of wine and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to the Lord our God." Do not sorrow. Why? Why are they telling the people not to sorrow? Why are they telling the people not to be pushed down by the law? Why are they telling the people that there is a greater sense to the message of God than just condemnation? The last few words of verse ten "for the joy of the Lord is your strength".

Brothers and sisters rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice. When you feel the weight of sin, when you feel the pressure of the guilt upon your soul, flee to the Lord who is your refuge and your strength for He carried your sin. Come to Him all you are a weak, weary and heavy laden and He will give you rest for your soul. His burden is light; go to him. There is joy in Christ. The law is meant to point us to Christ. The law is not meant to show us just our sin or just give us an immeasurable goal to reach, but it's to show us that we have a righteous God who will give you righteousness. He will be your strength. What are you trusting in today? What is

your joy in today? Is your joy in your own strength, or is it in the Lord? Is your joy in your ability to think you're able to keep His law, or is your joy that He gives you His righteousness? That is what the book teaches, that a holy God is redeeming people for a holy eternity. Brothers and sisters rejoice in the Lord, for the joy is in His strength.

And 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. They left. They left the Water Gate and they went home. And they went home with the joy of the Lord, the fruit of the spirit of joy. That when they came and they told Ezra to read that book, the Holy Spirit accompanied that book; and they went away glad. They went away fulfilled that they might eat the choicest of meats with joy, that they might eat the sweet, or drink the sweetest of wines with joy that they could share with their poorest of neighbors with joy. Because the joy of the Lord is their strength. How did they build that wall in 52 days? Because they had joy in the Lord. How will you live your life battling your sin? Because the joy is in the strength of the Lord. Go to Him. When you go down to fellowship meal later and you eat the choicest of meats and you drink those sugary drinks and you get to go home in a few minutes or in a few hours and you get to go. This is a holy day to rejoice in the Lord. This is a day for you to remember the great deeds that He has done for you. Let's leave here with joy in the Lord's strength, the great God of our souls. Let's pray.

Oh Lord, we thank You. Lord, we thank You for ministering to our hearts and for giving us a joy that is enduring. Lord, we thank You for Jesus Christ. And we thank You, Lord, for being our strength and our hope. Lord, we thank You for Your word and for ministering to us for feeding us as Your sheep. God, we pray that You would overflow our hearts with joy in who You are and what You have done. In Jesus name, Amen.

Thank you for listening to God's Word For You, a ministry of Sharon R.P. Church in Morning Sun, Iowa. We pray that you would be blessed as you grow in your love for God, your love for His word, as well as your love for His people. Until next week, God bless you.