

THE JOY OF THE LORD

In today's lesson, entitled "*The Joy of the Lord*" I invite you to open your Bibles to **Nehemiah 8:9-12**. It's on page **762** in the Pew Bibles. While you're turning there, a little background. **70** years earlier, the inhabitants of Judah were *forced to walk* to ancient Persia, now southern Iraq or northern Iran. The Bible tells us **5-10,000** people were taken into exile, while several thousand others were left behind. War and a terrible plague nearly decimated the entire population of Judah, but the group in exile grew to **100-150,000**. When the time came, all of these were offered the chance to return home - but only a fraction actually took advantage of the offer. Though King Cyrus even financed their trip home, **2/3** of them refused to go.

Those who stayed behind missed being a part of God's story_ and the blessings that accompanied the roles they could have played. You see, the invitation to return to God is exactly that: an invitation. God will never force anyone to come home. He often goes to great lengths to paint us a picture of what's waiting for us. He sometimes will go to extreme measures to make sure we get a personally engraved invitation, even sending messengers to work mighty miracles or to speak clearly to us in the midst of the mundane. But God will never drag anyone kicking and screaming, forcing them to "*come home.*"

Those of God's people who did return to their homeland rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and settled into their restored houses. All the while, there was adversity and difficulty with nearly every step. Hurdles, hardships, and heartache were the words of the day_ every day, until the work was finally finished. Then, when they were about to settle into their new environment, Nehemiah gathered them together *to hear a reading* of the Word of the Lord.

I have had people tell me after one of my sermons that they should've been warned to bring a box of Kleenex because something I said brought them to tears. We read here that the whole congregation wept aloud when Ezra presented this lesson. Why? Wasn't it a "*feel good*" sermon? Evidently what they heard deeply convicted them. They realized that the things that they had suffered were because of their ancestors' purposeful rebellion and defiant rejection of God and His counsel. They also now understood that God had given ample warnings that such choices would carry severe consequences. So, now_ as that cold reality became clear, they wept bitterly over their shame and guilt - shedding sincere tears of grief and deep sorrow.

Picking up now in **verse 9** we read: "**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. 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."** **The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."** **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."**

The leaders of the assembly commanded the people to stop crying. Why? "**The day was sacred.**" Must've been Sunday_ or a High Sabbath. I really don't know what day of the week it was...or whether or not it was even close to a holy holiday. What made it sacred was that it was a **Day the Lord had especially made** for reconciliation. A day to rejoice and be glad!

Despite their sins, God had kindly redeemed them. The Lord of Heaven still loved them and wanted them to *"be happy."* But not by living their lives apart from Him and the plans that He had for them. He wanted them to find strength in **"the joy of the Lord."** Yet, what does that mean? The tendency is to think that we're talking about a supernatural joy that God imparts to believers. After all, joy is a fruit of the Spirit. But, this is long before the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost to indwell and empower God's people. The reasoning for rejoicing here is of a different stripe. This **"joy of the Lord"** is literally **"the Lord's joy."** It carries the concept of rejoicing with the LORD. When we come to grips with the fact that God is *"happy to have us home"* - that He is overjoyed and welcomes us with open arms, even though we have strayed - we see His joy and are strengthened in our spirits. The image of a father running to embrace his prodigal son comes to mind. Jesus tells the story in **Luke 15** to illustrate the joy of our heavenly Father when one who has wandered from home returns. **Vs.20.** says He ran to embrace his son, and if you recall, the father in the story literally throws a party to celebrate the event.

Like the son in this story, we may approach our heavenly Father with sadness, even fear that He will turn us away. We've been rebellious at times, too_ squandering the blessings God has freely given. Selfishly choosing our way while rejecting His. Yet, if we'll turn to Him, and will dare to look up long enough to see His face, we'll see that He is smiling from ear to ear and that His eyes twinkle with joy. And if we'll listen carefully, we can hear Him say with great glee, *"Welcome home!"*

I think the parable of the talents that Jesus shares in **Matthew 25:14-30** is also quite relevant. To those servants who are found faithful with what He entrusts to them, He says this: **"Come and share your master's happiness!"** Did you catch that? **"Share your master's happiness."** Rejoice with Him. Find joy in the knowledge that He is happy. This is huge... Instead of expecting God to infuse you with joy in your personal pursuits, concentrate on doing what will bring Him joy.

As a father, I experience joy when I'm with my kids. I will admit it makes me smile when they do special things for me, things that they know please me. It can be little things. Like when my girls make sure I have sugar-free iced tea when I visit_ or when they buy me gifts that they are convinced that I will like. For my birthday this year, both of them prepared special cards expressing their love and appreciation and telling me that they missed me. I made sure they knew how much it pleased me, because I know that when I am pleased, they are pleased. But, what pleases me most is just knowing that they want to please me. Did you know that's true of God, too? **Ephesians 1:5** says that **"God's unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into His own family by bringing us to Himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave Him great pleasure."** God is greatly pleased, delighted, and deeply satisfied when His children come close.

I made a point of spending personal time with each of my grandkids over my vacation. I took Wyatt out for a meal and a movie and to GameStop_ and we watched some TV together. I took Abbey and Shelby out to Starbucks for their favorite Frappuccinos. Just us_ talking, joking, laughing. To be honest, I just wanted to rejoice with them. The heavenly Father wants to do that with us too_ even letting us choose some of our favorite things at times, and enabling us to enjoy them with Him. He invites_ we accept, and experience joy knowing that it gives Him joy.

Of course, our best example of this concept of finding joy in giving our Father joy is Jesus, and He said this in **John 15:10-11:** **"If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in His love."**

Then He says... "**I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.**" Clearly, if we want to be strengthened by the joy of the Lord, we need to understand that the path we must take is one of obedience. Why? Because disobedience always distances us from the Father and nothing grieves Him more than for us to be far away from His loving arms.

We introduced a new song by **REND COLLECTIVE** last week, and we invite you to stand and sing it now with us. And if you've been seeking "*happiness*" apart from the Lord, listen closely_ and let us be His singing telegram as He invites you to ***come close and share in His happiness.*** Find strength in the joy of the Lord.