

# "The Joy of Repentance"

## *Nehemiah 8:1-12*

A few years ago we did a sermon series called 'One Verse Sermons', where we looked at popular verses that we often use but preached on their meaning within the context where they are found. Sometimes we found that we misapplied these verses. One that stood out was Phil. 4:13, when Paul said

*"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

Many people have wrongly applied this verse to mean you can do almost anything – even things you're not gifted to do – because Jesus will help you do it. Jesus can help you do many things when you trust Him but not everything and especially not random things we're not gifted to do.

Some translations take away the first word, "f**OR**, I can do all things through Christ..." referring to what Paul just spoke about in v.12 when he said about the Philippians who were concerned for his needs:

*<sup>12</sup> I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.*

So Paul meant that he could handle any situation – rich or poor – because Jesus meets His needs and he has trusted him for His life.

Last week when we were in Honduras we attended a Bible study on Saturday night. The passage we discussed was Neh. 8-9. We were discussing the connection in Ch. 8 with repentance and joy, in particular, the phrase 'The joy of the Lord is your strength' in v.10. Another familiar verse, maybe one we've memorized or put on our refrigerator or a notecard in our Bible. Maybe we even wrote it on a greeting card to encourage someone. But again, that's not the whole verse.

*<sup>10</sup> 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 people were hearing God's Word being read by Ezra and explained to them by the Levites and were convicted of their sin and were grieving over their disobedience. Nehemiah however encourages them and tells them to stop grieving and instead to rejoice with their fellow believers in God because God's joy is their strength. What does that phrase mean? It sounds wonderful. I've memorized it, used it but do we fully understand what it means?

My prayer this morning is that we will understand what this means in the context of repentance and that some, who 1) need to repent of sin will find the joy that repentance brings or 2) that some who have an unhealthy fear of God and beat them-selves up over and over again about their sin would find freedom in repentance and experience God's joy as only He can give it. [pray]

What is repentance? Repentance is when after agreeing with God that we have sinned, we now turn away from our sin of disobedience and rebellion and turn to God in obedience. Sin always disrupts our relationship with God. Nehemiah wanted the people to know that repenting pleases God and knowing He is pleased and will receive us when we turn back to Him is in itself the stronghold/strength that God provides us to be restored to Him and experience His joy. God's joy is

the settled peace we have when we obey God. But repentance rarely just happens in a moment. It usually happens when we finally see that God has been working in us for awhile. And that's why the people of God have come as one to hear from God as Ezra teaches the commands of God. The joy of repentance starts

## **When We See the Gracious Hand of God** **(Ch. 1-7)**

... has been working in our lives. And this is what has been happening from Ch. 1-7. The book of Nehemiah begins with Nehemiah's brother Hanani return from Jerusalem and issuing a report that since the exiles returned to Israel about 90 years ago, the wall of the city still lies in ruins and the gates are not there because they were burned. Nehemiah cries out to God asking for Israel's forgiveness and ends it praying this:

*<sup>8</sup> "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, <sup>9</sup> but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'*

*<sup>10</sup> "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.*

*<sup>11</sup> O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."*

Nehemiah believes God's promises. He reminds us that it was by God's strength and mighty hand that redeemed them in the past and prays for success when he's going to ask King Artaxerxes to allow him to go back and fix the walls. Nehemiah believed that the same mighty hand that delivered Israel in the past can still deliver Israel in the future. So when King Artaxerxes granted Nehemiah his request, Nehemiah said in 2:8

*And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.*

And when he arrives in Jerusalem and rallies the leaders to gather the people to help rebuild the walls he said this in 2:17

*"You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." <sup>18</sup> I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me.*

*They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.*

Already we begin to see a pattern. When people see God's gracious hand at work [He graciously waited for them to obey Him and rebuild] in their lives, we see how God is working around us, graciously waiting for us to obey Him. This was the message God had been speaking for a few years now because when we read Ezra – who led a team back from Persia 13 years earlier, listen to what he wrote:

*Ezra 7:1 After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah, ... the son of Aaron the chief priest— <sup>6</sup> this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him. <sup>7</sup> Some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. <sup>8</sup> Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in*

*the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. <sup>9</sup> He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him. <sup>10</sup> For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel*

Artaxerxes let Ezra go back earlier and gave him a letter in case he encountered opposition and Ezra responds in 7:27-29

*<sup>27</sup> Praise be to the Lord, the God of our fathers, who has put it into the king's heart to bring honor to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem in this way <sup>28</sup> and who has extended his good favor to me before the king and his advisers and all the king's powerful officials. Because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.*

And when the wall is finally completed we read this in Neh. 6

*<sup>15</sup> So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. <sup>16</sup> When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.*

Nehemiah and Ezra continually credited God with answers to prayer, God's sovereign moving of Artaxerxes, safety in their travels, success in thwarting enemies attempts to stop the work and to the obedience of God's people to obey. All this prepares us for Neh. 8.

*"When the 7<sup>th</sup> month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, 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."*

Who told Ezra to read from God's Word? They, "all the people" When we, the people of God, have our eyes opened to God's gracious hand in our life, what does that do for us?

## **We are More Receptive to the Word of God** **(8:1-8)**

Here we see a healthy community of faith gathering to hear from God's Word. At least eight times we read "All the people" have come together to do what? To hear the Word of the Lord. They ask Ezra to come. Something we don't realize here is that the people

### ***Did not ignore or make excuses to respond (vv.1-3, 5-6)***

Back in 6:15-16 we read,

*So the wall was completed on the 25<sup>th</sup> of Ellul, in 52 days.*

Ellul is the 6<sup>th</sup> month of the Hebrew calendar; roughly mid-August to mid-September. According to 8:2 they all came together only one week later on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month. The work on the wall just finished a week ago, now they come back to Jerusalem already. Why? Because the real work had only started. In Ch. 7 we read an unexciting list of Levites gatekeepers, temple servants and singers. Why? To renew the sacrificial and worship services at the temple. Without the walls of the city completed the temple was at risk of being destroyed again. People did not feel safe to travel

about because many half Jews and foreigners had taken over since the exile. The people of God did not have control over their situation.

The 1<sup>st</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month is a special day on the Jewish calendar, Rosh Hashanah or the Jewish New Year, also known as the Feast of Trumpets. The purpose of Rosh Hashanah was 2-fold: 1) to celebrate a new year, remembering past blessings and anticipating new ones; and 2) to spiritually prepare for Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement, Israel's national day of repentance.

Rosh Hashanah begins with trumpet blasts by the Levites calling the people to gather together, and that's what probably happened here even though the trumpets aren't mentioned, but an Israelite reader is aware of what's going. This will also explain why they will begin mourning and grieving a few verses later.

The main thing here is that they are not coming together because of obligation but out of desire. They assembled "*As one man*", unified in purpose. The people ask for Ezra to come and read from "*the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.*" So Ezra comes. The people are gathered, all those who could understand. "*And the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.*" Why? Because they knew God was working in their life and they wanted to worship God and hear from God. How many times did Jesus say, "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear*"? Meaning hear to obey.

As the people gather, Ezra stands on a platform already built for the occasion and is surrounded by 13 other scribes or priests who help him in reading plus there are Levites who go through the crowds "*making it clear and giving the meaning so that people could understand what was read*" (v.9). As obvious as this sounds when people come together to hear God's Word

### ***Spiritual leaders are ready to help us grow (vv.5, 7-8)***

Why did God take the time to mention the leaders' names? I think he wanted to honour these unknown leaders who worked with Ezra to make sure people could understand what God's Word said.

It wasn't just Ezra and Nehemiah. There were many others prepared to help teach the word of God. Praise the Lord we have several people who can teach the Word of God here. We have Sunday school teachers and Bible study leaders to help young and old to understand the word of God. When you come to a Bible study or Sunday school or the service, we assume that teachers and pastors have prepared to teach God's truth. But don't just assume that. Pray for the preparation of our teachers and for the Word of God to be clearly taught so as to be understood. We all need your prayers. Do not assume it's just going to happen. There is spiritual warfare going on to distract us from studying and derail us from living it out because if we don't live it ourselves we have no power to teach the Word.

When we see God's gracious hand in our lives, we open ourselves to be more receptive to His Word and

## **We Understand and Respond to God's Word** **(8:9-13)**

As Nehemiah, Ezra, the priests and Levites helped the people hear God's Word, the people understood and responded to it. How?

### ***They understood God is holy and they had sinned (v.9)***

Nehemiah steps in at this point and announces to the people that, “This *day is sacred* [holy] to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep . . . do not be grieved . . . do not grieve.” Why? Because the people were sensitive to God’s presence when they listened to God speak through His Word, they were convicted of their sins and wept in repentance. And yet, Nehemiah says ‘*This day is sacred... but do not weep.*’ Conviction of sin does produce sorrow and tears but it’s also a good thing because God is strong and patient and forgives our sins.

### ***Rejoice that God wants to forgive us (vv.10-11)***

*“Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared . . . Do not grieve, [for] the joy of the LORD is your strength.”*

Repenting of our sin is something to rejoice in because we’ve just obeyed God and God wants to forgive us and restore us to Himself. Listen to these familiar verses in 1 John 1

<sup>5</sup> *This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.*

<sup>7</sup> *But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*

<sup>9</sup> *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

**2:1** *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. <sup>2</sup> He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*

But I think if we’re honest we often wrongly think God is brooding and waiting to ‘zap’ us when we sin. And only reluctantly forgives us. There’s joy in repentance. It’s our stronghold. We can depend on God forgiving us. That’s why we can rejoice in God’s gracious hand in our life and continual desire to draw close to us and renew our relationship with Him.

When we understand God’s Word we need to respond. We repent when it’s necessary and rejoice in forgiveness because that’s God’s stronghold for us, His willingness to forgive.

### ***Now we’re ready to serve each other (v. 12)***

Nehemiah reminds them this was a holy day – a holiday where first of all don’t work. That’s worth rejoicing in! Second, get together with friends and family and share a meal with them. ‘Choice food and sweet drinks’. The food you eat on special occasions. Pull out a roast, a turkey, or a ham. Make a nice dessert. Use your good China and serve someone else by letting them enjoy this time with you.

*“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” (v.12)*

Do you understand that God is very patient with us even when we put off repenting of known sins? He wants us to obey His Word. That when we’re convinced of sin we just felt the Holy Spirit work in our life. That’s worth rejoicing in. We will be forgiven if we ask. And we need to repent, turn back to God and draw near to Him again because He will draw near to us (another stronghold we can trust in, James 4:8).

If we're in Christ we're secure in Him. That's our stronghold we can rejoice in. The joy of the Lord is our strength. God's joy in us when we're forgiven, God's joy in us when we repent and act on His Word. God's joy is in all of us as a community when we see each other get serious with God about our sins.

I don't know why God led me to speak on this today. I didn't have time to work on 1 Corinthians this week so God led me to share from Nehemiah which His Spirit prompted in me last Saturday night in Honduras when we attended a Bible study of maybe 40 people in a very non-descript 'church' in a language I don't speak but the pastor interpreted one lady's comments for us. Even when the power went out on us in just a couple of blocks and people pulled out their cell phones and we kept going.

But, I have faith in God believing His hand has been graciously working in your life and brought you here today because there is something the Spirit of God wanted to speak to you about. May God show you that the repentance you need results in joy because God's joy and love are our stronghold and it won't give way.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please  
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