

Nehemiah 8 (1-18) – This is How to Have Joy

The name Nehemiah in Hebrew means "the LORD comforts." This was after some of the Jews had returned to the land after the Babylonian captivity, but the land was in disarray and broken down. Nehemiah had been given an assignment by God to go back to Jerusalem and to rebuild the walls that had been destroyed. As we come from chapter 1 through chapter 7 the work has been accomplished. Through much opposition and trial, they amazingly finished the wall in just 52 days, with a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other.

Here in chapter eight we see something different, but very important, the rebuilding of the lives of those individuals. Even if we have walls of protection, if we don't have our lives being rebuilt it doesn't really matter much. We can have nice things, but there needs to be the rebuilding, renewing, refreshing of our spiritual lives as well.

This chapter is a paradigm setting passage, you can see where we get some of the traditions we adhere to. We see some of why we assemble together to hear the Word (vs.1-3), why a preacher stands in a pulpit (vs.4-5), why the congregation stands for the reading of God's Word (vs.5), why we raise hands (vs.6), why we shout amen (vs.6), why we bow our heads (vs.6), why we preach and teach (vs.7-8), why we eat together (vs.10).

The Joy of the Lord is Strength – The joy of the Lord comes from the Lord, and has the Lord as its object (Philippians 4:4). It surpasses all other joy. It is personal, powerful, and practical. The joy of the Lord is personal. You can have it. Think about it. God is your Father, Jesus is your Savior, and the Holy Spirit is your Comforter. You are adopted into the family of God if you have trusted Christ. Now I can say all sorts of inspiring things, and quote all these verses, but it has to be made real to you. It is in your personal relationship where you dive into the depths of God, and experience for yourself the joy of the Lord.

The joy of the Lord is powerful. There is no sweeter fellowship, and sometimes we find it as we sink deeper than depression, or bitterness, or sorrow. God is eternal and His joy is deeper than any temporal circumstance and we can find it no matter how far down we are. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. They will find joy, if they seek for the joy of the Lord. Finding it is what we are talking about today. True communion with God is no mere speculation or trite cliché or empty words for those of us who have known it. We have known the joy of the Lord even amidst affliction, persecution, and many trials. I love to tell the story for those who know it best, seem hungering and thirsting, to hear it like the rest.

The joy of the Lord is practical. Even when anything else is taken away, any other source of temporal joy, all seems hopeless, and yet you still have a little light of hope, let that light shine on your heart for it is faith. When all else fails your faith is still there. It is being tried, tested and yet it stays, it is something you can't shake. When it all seems worthless but your faith is still there, that is the Holy Spirit at the bottom of your heart giving you the faith to joy in the Lord no matter what. When you do joy in the Lord it is an unending, limitless source of strength. When nothing else seems to work and when all others things are taken away this one thing remains. It is great to realize that no matter how bad things get, the joy of the Lord will be our hope and strength to return to the Lord.

The joy of the Lord gives us strength to serve the Lord, to carry on, to stand against temptation, to suffer persecution, to deal with affliction, to lift up the fainthearted, strength to fight the good fight of faith. Psalm 16:11, 51:12, 105:3-4 / John 15:11-12 / Romans 14:17, 15:13 / 1 Peter 1:8 – What are you truly getting the most joy out of? Perhaps this is why you lack spiritual strength. Are you making the discovering of God's joy a part of your discipleship?

The Joy of the Lord is Sourced – The joy of the Lord comes as we understand and act on God’s Word, and as it acts on us. Vs.10 – we see how they are to act on what they have heard: celebrate, collaborate, consecrate, that is how they can jubilate, and they are able to do that because of vs.12 – they understand what God has said. They were looking for a way to obey, they found joy in obedience.

- Asked for and Attended to the Word of God
 - Respect – they Turned to God’s message
- Acclaimed the Word of God
 - Receive – they were Taught God’s message
- Admitted the Truth of the Word of God
 - Repent – they Trusted God’s message
- Acted on the Word of God
 - Rejoice / Restore – they Took God’s message, talked about it, obeyed

The Joy of the Lord is Spread – it is an intensely personal thing, but it can also be a corporate thing as believers work together to understand and act on God’s Word, to spread the Good News. They understood what God had said, which causes them to act in obedience (vs.13-18), the joy of the Lord increases as we follow God’s Word. As the joy of the Lord spreads into our soul we are to spread it into our world. Is your joy really of the Lord? If it is and someone else is looking for it they will catch it from you. The joy of the Lord is contagious. Has your joy spread, or is it dead?

Their weeping gave way to joy. The Word caused them to sorrow at their sin, but it also caused them to joy in God which would give them strength. The joy of the Lord happens as we understand God’s Word – we are forgiven, we are accepted, we are loved. This is what the Word does, it breaks you down but it builds you up. It exposes you, corrects you, and then encourages you as it equips you. It reminds you of your sin, reminds you of His love, and reminds you of the reason for joy. It gives you strength, powerful joy, by rejoicing in the Word of God read, proclaimed, taught, applied, understood, and acted upon.

Look at the text; it was good for them to enjoy the food, the fellowship, and all that. God isn’t asking us to forsake all our enjoyment of earthly things and needs and be a fasting monk all the time. But He does want us to find the true Fountain of all lasting joy, Himself, and we do that by understanding and acting on His Word. This is so very practical. You see, earthly pleasures and pictures are only shadows of something greater. All art, writing, and music, etc., are essentially attempts to reach out and capture something of the majesty that we seek after, a yearning for something beyond our normal experience. A Christian who understands this will be able to enjoy temporal things with a better sense of their place, and not as the “be all and end all” of existence. They won’t have to succumb to the need to be constantly entertained.

The devil wants to “destroy the joy” with circumstances, but we can have joy when the world cannot. This is what the world needs to see, that we trust in the goodness of our God and have joy despite circumstances (Psalm 30:5, 32:11, 126:6 / 2 Corinthians 6:10 / James 1:2).

The world also needs to see us as Christians blessing God and not blaming God “when the chips are down”, and it needs to see us turning to Him instead of turning to doubt and turning to temporary excitements when the going gets rough. This will point others to Christ, when we have true joy. Charles Spurgeon said holy gladness with holy boldness will make the whole world your pulpit. Acts 5:40-42 – when you think “I can’t take it anymore”, remember they can’t take it forevermore, which is the joy you will have for eternity. You just need to dip into the well once again. Better yet, dive right in, with all of your heart. That is how to have joy.