

## NEHEMIAH 8:1-10 THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH

How many passwords do you need to remember?

One writer says the average person, just at work, has between six and twelve passwords to remember. Somehow this writer found a man who keeps 130 online accounts at his work, and he needs a user name and password for each account! And that's just at work!

What is the function of a password? It is your way of saying, "I am the person I say I am. I am me. This is really me."

Who are you? Who am I? Who are we, gathered together today?

Maybe you don't know, and you don't care.

At least, that's what you say. But I think you do care. I believe that within the human heart, there is a longing for understanding, a great passion for knowing who we are, and what we are doing here. Yet I also believe we can only start to answer that question, when we see how we relate to God.

As we read through the Old Testament, we meet a people who once knew who they were before God. They were God's chosen people. They were the nation of Israel - beloved by God, not because they were good, but because he was good to them.

But now they must be wondering. Maybe you are wondering. Sometimes I wonder.

Nehemiah gives us an answer. He announces, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." In those few words, we learn much of who we are, and how we are to live, before God.

Through faith in the Lord and his Son Jesus, we have the joy of the Lord. With that joy, we live in the strength of the Lord, in this world.

Let's enter these words by asking and answering two questions.

First, WHERE IS THE JOY? How do we receive the joy of the Lord? It's a good question, because as you read this story, you read not of some glorious journey of joy, but of THE JOURNEY OF WEEPING.

For God's people, there has been the weeping of leaving.

God said, "I am giving you this land where you can serve me." But the kingdom has split, and both parts have become weak, which means they are great targets for invasion by other nations.

The northern kingdom of Israel has been invaded, and her people carried off into the land of Assyria.

The southern kingdom of Israel has been invaded, and her people carried off into the land of Babylon.

This weeping of leaving is captured in Psalm 137:

"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'"

They remembered the land, and they wept. Their enemies mocked them, by demanding songs of joy. But they could only weep.

The weeping of leaving. Also, the weeping of returning.

Several generations came and went. Some settled in the new lands, and did not want to return. But God planned a return, and some came to rebuild the temple.

Then more generations, and Ezra returned to bring the law of Moses back to the people.

Then a few more years, and Nehemiah returned to rebuild the wall that protected Jerusalem from outsiders.

But was this a truly glorious return? Hardly. If you read the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, you read of harassment by these outsiders. Then even when the work was declared to be done, the new temple and wall hardly held the glory of the structures built in the days of David and Solomon.

The weeping of leaving, and of returning. The weeping of hearing.

In the words we read, Ezra, Nehemiah and the people gather for the reading of the book of the law. This is probably the "five books" known as "the Pentateuch" - known to us as the first five books of the Bible.

The people stand, probably as a sign of respect for God's Word. They hear the law and worship. But then we read, "For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law."

Why are they weeping? We don't know for sure.

\* Maybe because they cannot understand it all! The law is in Hebrew. The people have grown up with Aramaic. Maybe they need translators!

\* Or, maybe because they can understand it all too well. Whether or not they need translators, they eventually get the drift of it all. Maybe as they listen, they realize what God's truth means for their lives. Maybe it all feels a bit overwhelming.

We don't know for sure, but we know this: these people need joy, so that Nehemiah directs their hearts to joy.

He leads them on THE JOURNEY TO JOY.

"Do not grieve," he says, "for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

How can he say that? The answer is not obvious. He does not openly tell them why they have the joy of the Lord.

Maybe that's because the very nature of what they are doing, should be a source of joy. Think about it. What is happening here? God is allowing his people to hear what they must hear, to know and serve him.

God has not left his people alone and adrift. He is faithful to his promise to guide them and provide for them.

They have taken a journey of weeping, not for hours or weeks or years, but for generations! Is God gone? Has he abandoned us?

No. Nehemiah himself has seen this, as he has seen God guiding him and providing for him as he rebuilds the wall. Now he declares to the people that the journey of weeping need not be the only path they walk, for they have a God who still loves them, who still reveals himself to them, who still will guide them and provide for them. That is a journey to joy.

Who am I? Who are you? We find the joyful answer in this: God is here, and he is not silent.

He has revealed himself in his written Word, held and read by Ezra.

He has also now revealed himself in his living Word, named Jesus the Christ - the One hoped for by Ezra and the faithful of Israel.

How we seek joy! As Americans, we seek it in:

\* What we have: in our homes, in our bank accounts, or anywhere else.

\* What we do: in our achievements, in our amusements, in however we define what is worthwhile.

\* Whom we love: in relationships with certain friends, or certain members of the opposite sex, or anyone we think will give us joy.

\* What we feel: from a great experience, from a great high, from a great passion, or from anything that will give us that rush.

But we are made for God. We are made in his image, and only as his glory shines upon us, do we have true joy.

Nehemiah's words remind us of this. Joy is of the Lord. Joy is in the Lord. In his amazing grace, we know him as he speaks in his Word, and we know him as he shows us Jesus.

Do you know that? Or maybe, have you forgotten that? Where are you seeking joy? In any or all of the places I have described? Elsewhere?

Where is the joy? In the Lord. If we know him, we know who we are.

But these words drive deeper into our lives. What about the second part of that sentence? **WHAT IS THIS STRENGTH?**

"The joy of the Lord is your strength." We do not often put those words together. How might the joy of the Lord, lead to the strength of the Lord?

Here are two answers, rooted in the story of God's people in the Old Testament, and captured in the words of the New Testament.

First, **JOY BRINGS STRENGTH FOR THE WEARY AND BURDENED.**

If joy is from God, and if God shows us this joy in his Son Jesus, then Jesus' words must reveal this joy.

They do, in Matthew 11. Jesus has just finished another sermon to the self-righteous. Now he turns to his Father in heaven, and praises him.

"I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, this was for your good pleasure."

"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

That's what I have just described. God is not silent. God has revealed himself to people. Now listen to more of Jesus' words.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

"For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Jesus is talking to weary and burdened people. Why are they this way? Because of the people he has just lectured: the self-righteous lawgivers of the day. They demanded that others do this, and do that, and keep doing and doing and doing, to please God. They left people weary and burdened.

So Jesus encourages these weary and burdened people by reminding them that God has revealed his truth and his Savior to them. They need not bear these burdens. They can rejoice in him, and rest in him. We might even say they can find their strength in him.

The story is told of a day when the evangelist Dwight Moody was holding one of his meetings in Scotland. A little, dirty, ragged boy wanted to get in, but the door was closed because the room was full.

A carriage pulled up, and an old gentleman stepped out. He saw the boy standing and crying and said,

“What’s wrong?”

The boy said, “I want to hear Mr. Moody, but it’s full up and nobody will let me in.”

The old man said, “Come with me.” He marched in, took the boy to the front row, and sat him down.

As you have probably guessed by now, the old man was Moody himself.

The point of the story? “The only way we will get to heaven is if Jesus himself takes us by the hand. We are not good enough. We are too dirty.”

Jesus says to the weary and burdened, “Let me take you by the hand, and bring you into the joy of the Lord, which is your strength.”

Are you weary and burdened by your attempts to get God to love you, by doing whatever you think he wants you to do? We think if we can undo enough wrong things, or do enough right things, then that will be enough.

It is never enough, and it is wearisome. Salvation is a free gift, given by Jesus, who died to secure the forgiveness of those who trust in him, and who takes sinners by the hand, and leads them to God.

Maybe you know that, but are still you weary and burdened by your efforts to serve God, as you do what you think he wants you to do? As servants of Jesus, our lives can become merely weary and burdensome.

Are you resting in Jesus - in the joy of who he is?

The joy of the Lord. It brings strength for the weary and burdened, as we rest in Jesus for salvation forever, and for strength today.

As well, JOY BRINGS STRENGTH FOR THE SORROWFUL AND STRUGGLING.

In the book of Philippians, Paul urges his readers to rejoice in the Lord.

But for him, as for us, it is easier said than done. Paul is in prison. His physical and spiritual needs are great. Yet few churches are helping him.

In the midst of this, he writes, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

How can he continue on, with all the sorrow and struggle in his life? He will do this, with the strength of the Lord, fueled by the joy of the Lord.

For Paul, this joy grows from the same roots as the joy of Nehemiah. God has revealed the good news of Jesus to him. Because of this, he has great joy. Through this great joy, he has great strength to do what God urges him to do with his life.

Do you see the connection? The joy of the Lord fuels the heart of the believer, so that he or she may love and serve the Lord, even in seasons of sorrow and struggle.

One sorrowful and struggling believer said it this way: “God has given me sorrow with a tea-spoon but comfort and joy with a ladle.”

What a perspective! The huge ladle of the joy of the Lord, that makes the very real sorrow and struggle of this world, seem to fill only a teaspoon.

Are you there? Am I there? How do we get there?

Put it all together:

\* God reveals. In the Word written (the Bible), and in the Word lived (Jesus), God shows himself and his glory to us.

\* We receive. We receive the joy of knowing the Lord, and the strength to serve the Lord.

So the way we “get there”, is as God fills our “ladles” with himself. We gain joy and grow strong, as we are filled with him who is fullness itself.

I call this “Practicing the Presence” of the Lord. It is the practice of entering the presence of the Lord each day, and even several times a day, with the confidence that as I dwell in his presence, he will fill me with joy. With that joy, I will have the strength to carry on in a world that can be weary and burdensome, and filled with sorrow and struggle.

Here is how this has started to take shape in my life.

\* I begin the morning with song, God’s Word, and prayer.

\* I start my work day, in his presence, with prayer.

\* Sometime around mid-day, I shut off everything and everyone else, and I either read the words of a Christian writer, or sing, then pray briefly.

\* As I prepare to re-enter with my family in the evening, I ponder a few words from a Christian writer, or sing again to the Lord, and pray again.

\* As I end my day, I dwell upon a Psalm and pray a bit more, so that I might end as I began: in the presence of the Lord.

How might you practice the presence of the Lord? How might you allow him to bring his revealed Word and Son to you, all through the day, so that you might receive the joy and the strength that he provides? How will your Lord, fill your ladle, with joy and strength?

It’s not about rigid rules. It’s about a real relationship, with the Lord who gives joy and strength, through Jesus.

Who are you? Who am I? Who are we?

We are men and women and children to whom God has revealed himself, in a Word written down, and in a Word who lived, died and rose again.

From this, we are filled with joy and strength.