11-8-26

The Joy of the Lord is My Strength

Nehemiah 8: 1 - 12

There are some Christian phrases that, for the life of me, I have a difficult time understanding. It's not that I don't believe they're true; it's just that I'm not sure how they work. I'm not sure how they are to operate in my life.

In my opinion, they just seem a bit vague or mysterious which is not too surprising since my mind is always trying to catch up to Paul's exhortation, *"Be transformed by the renewing of your mind."*

Let me give you an example of what I mean:

In the Book of Psalm, the authors often call the people of God to glorify Him. *"**Glorify** the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together. Because your love is better than life, my lips will **glorify** you. I will **glorify** your name forever."*

How do we glorify God?

Obviously, there seems to be an element of verbally expressing our adoration to God through song or verse and there's also the aspect of corporate activity, *"**let us** exalt his name together"* but certainly this can't be the entire scope of the act of glorifying.

Can we not also glorify God through the works of our hands or by striving to be a faithful servant?

In other words, the call to glorify God is not relegated to people who can play a musical instrument or carry a tune. It's about a mindset and heart attitude that desires to honor God with one's life.

How this actually manifests itself in our lives though, will be as varied as the people who engage in it.

I'm sure we can all think of other interesting Biblical phrases or concepts that are difficult for us to flesh out and practice in our daily lives like when Paul writes, *"Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."*

Fortunately, Paul gives us some guidelines by listing the fruit of the Spirit. But labeling them and living them out are two different things.

"The joy of the Lord is your strength" is another one of these concepts that I've struggled to understand. Again, it's not that I in anyway disagree with the idea. It's that I'm not sure I understand how to utilize it or incorporate it into my daily life.

And this is a problem, because if the joy of the Lord truly is our strength, then shouldn't we want to know how to tap into this joy so we can be as strong as possible?

Couldn't we all use a little more strength in our lives especially when it comes to navigating and surviving the unpleasant trials of life that will certainly come our way?

But what kind of strength are we talking about here?

Is it referring to strength of character?

Being morally strong?

Spiritually strong, like having a spiritual backbone in the midst of opposition or temptation?

What does this strength look like?

Can we put our finger on it, or is it too nebulous to capture?

What's surprising to me in all this is that I pretty much agree with the statement, *"the joy of the Lord is our strength"* but I've never really considered the context from which it came.

Up until just a couple of years ago – and I can't believe I'm even admitting this - I didn't even know the statement was found in the book of Nehemiah!

For all I knew, it was someplace in the psalms or perhaps in Philippians where the topic of joy is a major theme.

So the phrase, *"the joy of the Lord is our strength"* must have entered my mind subconsciously sort of like lyrics of a song do when we hear them over and over again.

Take for example our national anthem. For me, recalling the lyrics of our national anthem while at the same time hearing the tune is a doable exercise for me. Without the music? Not so much.

This just goes to show that some of the things we pick up as Christians aren't necessarily from the Bible at all, which can be a very serious problem especially when we assimilate ideas that are completely contrary to scripture.

For example, there are some well-known and popular preachers out there that teach that God promises us worldly wealth and affluence, but in fact He doesn't.

God does promise us that he'll take care of all our physical needs – what we'll eat and clothes to wear - if we follow him – *"seek first his*

kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

He also promises persecution and hardship in this life. John 15: 19 -20: *"I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you"* and *"If they persecuted me, they will persecute you."* Also 16:33: *"In this life you will have trouble."*

This is why it's so important to heed the Apostle John's warning in 1 John 4:1:*"Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God because many false prophets have gone out into the world ...*

This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ as come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the anti-christ, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world."

So let's take a look at the context in which Nehemiah uttered his now famous proclamation*: "Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."*

First, let us remind ourselves that there are specific days in the Jewish calendar set aside each year for the confession of sins for an entire nation – a time when the nation of Israel would assemble - men, women and children, to fast, weep, and mourn over the failed moral condition of the nation, to confess the corporate sins of God's people, and to beg God for mercy and grace because the covenant between God and his people had been broken.

Chapter 8 of Nehemiah records one of these times.

The book of Ezra also documents a similar if not the same event in chapter 10 saying, *"While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites – men, women and children – gathered around him. They too wept bitterly."*

It also says this about Ezra in chapter 10: *"While he was there, he ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles."*

So, according to Biblical scholars, this demonstration of national lament most likely marked the beginning of the high and holy days of Israel that includes the Feast of the Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles, all of which are described in some detail in Leviticus chapter 23.

The point in all this is to say that when Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites finally get around to instructing the Israelites ***to cease*** their mourning and grieving, it wasn't because their sins were not to be taken seriously – the sins of Israel were taken very seriously - Instead it was their way of proclaiming Good News to the people.

In a very practical way, they were proclaiming the fact that God had heard their prayers. And because of His faithfulness and love, forgiveness and payment for their sins was right around the corner.

This reminds me of what Isaiah wrote in chapter 49: *"In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of my salvation I will help you";* and as he continues, see if you can hear the prophecy of Christ in the next verse:

*"I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people … to say to the captives, 'Come out' and to say to those in darkness, **'Be free!'"***

Recall Christ's raising of Lazarus: *"So they took away the stone, then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they might believe that you sent me. Lazarus, **Come out! Take off the grave clothes and let him go."***

If Jesus Christ could do all this for Lazarus even before he vanquished sin and death on the cross, imagine what He can do for us now that he's resurrected and personally conquered death. *"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."*

This is why we can stop grieving.

This is why we no longer have to remain in our mournful state.

This is why when Nehemiah says, *"Do not grieve"* we can whole-heartedly obey.

When things go south in our lives, we're no longer obligated to go with them.

This is why we can have hope even in the in the midst of total darkness: God has not and will not forget us.

For the Israelites and for us, salvation is right around the corner:

"You will not abandon me to the grave. You will not let your holy one see decay" as David put it in Psalm 16.

The joy of the Lord truly is our strength when we realize that provision has been made for our sin and we no longer have to live in spiritual darkness.

Now I hope we can all see where all this is going – and I'm by no means an expert in understanding Jewish religious practices – But I know enough to tell you that in very broad strokes, the Israelites set aside very specific days every year to personally and collectively mourn and repent of their sins.

And after a good week of sitting in the proverbial ash heap, reflecting upon the truth that God's judgment was but a whisper away, the Israelites reenact – even to this very day - their rescue at the hands of God – their rescue from Egypt.

But even more importantly, they reenact their rescue from sin and the subsequent restoration of their relationship with God as symbolized through the priest's offering of an unblemished lamb on the altar of God.

And after this takes place, the party begins.

This is why Nehemiah writes, *"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."*

Don't miss this point:

When God reveals to us who He is and what He's done for us, we must celebrate!

Anything less is an insult to God.

So going back to the phrase, *"the joy of the lord is your strength"*.

Is it about having the strength to do the right thing when every fiber in your body is telling you to do the opposite? Perhaps.

Is it about having the moral backbone to stand up for something you know is right in the midst opposition and persecution? I hope so.

Is it about finding hope and purpose in the midst of tragedy and confusion? You bet.

But maybe it's even more than this.

Maybe this strength is about having the courage, the willingness, and the wisdom to celebrate God in all his uniqueness, his mysteriousness, and his unsurpassing love for us.

"Go into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees and from myrtles, palms and shade trees to make booths"

Notice the variety, the different textures, and the different types of trees the Israelites are to gather. Is it a coincidence?

Noah, build an ark.

Abram, leave your country and go to the land I'll show you.

Esther, become queen and rescue your people.

Joseph, check on your brothers.

Moses, throw down you staff and watch it become a snake.

Rahab, hide the spies.

Ruth, glean in the fields that belong to Boaz.

The ways God calls us to serve and obey him are as varied as leaves on different trees.

But we dare not hesitate to obey, because the joy of the Lord is our strength.

I close by reading Revelation 22: 1 – 5:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

In other words, our future joy will be immeasurably great. So, we can begin rejoicing even now.

"for the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

"From the days of Joshua Son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

Do not grieve. Do not mourn. For the joy of the Lord is your strength.

Now we can better understand the words that have been given unto us. Amen.