

**The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength**  
**Nehemiah 8:1-18**  
**February 16, 2014**

- Small Groups – sign up with yellow card.

**Introduction – Perpetually Hammered**

Last week, I introduced you to Charles Finney, the evangelist whose ministry marks the beginning of modern revivalism in the early part of the nineteenth century. I thought you might like to see his picture:



Scary, huh? How'd you like to have him for your preacher? He had a lot of people weeping and wailing in his meetings. Little wonder.

Some preachers are downright scary. They hammer away on their people week after week. I knew a few pastors like that. At first it was exciting. Here was a preacher with real passion and fire! He meant what he said. But after weeks and months and years of being told how awful the world was and how bad we were and how we needed to get right with the Lord... Well, it got tough to listen to. It is true. These are difficult times. We need to be serious about our faith. I find that the passion of the Lord burns deep and hot in me and I'm eager to have us in line with God's purpose. I'm also the melancholy artsy type. I love songs in a minor key. They're so expressive of the angst of living. And I have found, rightly, I believe, that it is often suffering that brings meaning and growth to one's life. We'll, it's easy to see that my default in preaching could easily become a bitter cocktail of angst and passion. It's kind of like the old folksong, "If I had a hammer..."

Where's the joy in that? Didn't Paul say, "Rejoice in the Lord always?" (Philippians 4:4)

God is the inventor of fun. He is the giver of joy. In today's passage, we see a wonderful corrective turn of emotion in the people of God. The walls of Jerusalem have been finished. Enemies have been stymied. Everyone has gone back to their homes after working non-stop for 52 days. For nearly two months they have watched God work. Now that the wall is finished, they've convened together to consider God's next move in his enterprise.

### **The Word**

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema... And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, ... the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

### **The People's Grief**

Chapters 8-10 in Nehemiah are the high point of the book. The walls have been built – the structure has been restored. It's time now to restore the soul of the nation. Curiously, Nehemiah, the namesake of the book, steps back and brings Ezra the scholar/scribe to the front. I don't want to belabor the point, but Nehemiah demonstrates the best kind of leadership here. He is humble enough to delegate a leadership task to another who is more qualified than he was to perform. And he doesn't come back into the forefront of the book until the final chapter. That is an example of godly leadership worth emulating.

Chapters 8-10 address the inner life of the nation. It is a national revival. And notice where it starts. It begins with the Word of God. Any lasting change in the people of God always begins with His Word. The Scriptures themselves say, “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12) The Word of God gives life. Christians talk about having a “quiet time” where we pray and align our lives with God. But it can’t be just quiet meditation or contemplation. Our solitude with God is best served on the springboard of God’s Word. That’s why so much time is given in our worship tradition for the sermon. And we expect our sermons to be biblically-based and more often than not, straight out of the biblical story – like today. The honoring of God’s Word is why this lectern or pulpit is elevated and in the center of the platform rather than to the side.

Notice how the Jews honored the Word of God. And if you are able, I’d like you to join the description in the Bible and act it out with me.

- When Ezra opened the scroll, they stood.
- Then Ezra blessed God in prayer and the people lifted their hands and said, “Amen, Amen!”
- And then they bowed low with their faces to the ground and worshipped... (be seated)

Did you notice anything? The Scriptures say to love God with all your heart, soul, and strength. That includes your body. Is there a disconnect here? This is how we worship. (Demonstrate...) This is how the people of God in the Book of Nehemiah engaged with God. (Demonstrate...) Don’t you think we might be missing something when we insist on staying reserved and not engaging our bodies in worship? I think we are. I hope we can grow in that.

The honor that we show to the Word of God must be more than tokenism. The Word must be in our prayers, in our songs, and in our daily lives. We’re fortunate here in America. When I prepare for a sermon, I typically consult three to five different translations. I’ve got a whole series of Bibles on my shelf right in reach. And if that’s not enough, I’ve got access to [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com), a website that offers me any translation I might want along with search engines. But later this year, I will visit Kenya and Uganda where even some pastors don’t have their own Bible. You’ll have an opportunity to help them by giving money to purchase Bibles in Swahili for them. Can you imagine? What would it be like if we didn’t have our own Bibles? Our desire for the Word of God would be multiplied many times over. And that’s how it was for the people in Jerusalem in our passage.

The next part of the story tells us that Ezra read for six hours. Most likely, he read from the Book of Deuteronomy, the last of the books in the Law which is Moses’ last words to the nation before they went into the Promised Land. Many of them had never heard the Hebrew language.

They and the generation before had grown up in Persia. So Ezra had the Levites, Temple servants, translate and explain the Word to the people – a great example of what biblical exposition is.

The last time that the nation had stood together to hear the Word of God was 177 years earlier under the reforms of Josiah, the Judean king (II Chronicles 34). Most were hearing the Word for the first time. And if Ezra was reading from Deuteronomy, they clearly understood how far they had wandered from God and why their nation had to be disciplined through the pain of exile.

They broke down and wept.

I suspect we would, too. It is a very moving moment in the story of Jerusalem. The prodigal nation had come home.

### **God's Correction**

Leviticus 23:24 declares, "Say to the Israelites: 'On the first day of the seventh month you are to have a day of Sabbath rest, a sacred assembly commemorated with trumpet blasts.'" (NIV) That was this day: *The Feast of Trumpets*. And the people were weeping and mourning their sin! Ezra and Nehemiah and the Levites redirected the people's attitude to celebration.

Sometimes we need that. We are broken people and we know it. Sometimes the sense of guilt can become so pervasive that we do not allow ourselves to have any joy in our faith. But friends, that's a perversion of our faith. God is a forgiving God. He's no "grumpy old man" sitting up in the clouds scowling down at us. Charles Finney's picture is not a good representation of how God feels about us.

One of the places where we really struggle with this is at the Lord's Table. Seriously. It is such a somber event. We're so sorry for what we've done to Jesus and we sit and meditate on our sin. Jesus never intended for his meal to his funeral service. It is a celebration of our deliverance from sin and death. The Lord's Table, if anything, should always be a joyous time. And the joy we experience at the Table should spill out and over into the rest of our lives. That's why many churches observe Communion every week. We are a forgiven people! We are a delivered people!

That calls for celebration! That calls for joy! Let us never forget the words of Nehemiah, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." (8:10)

### **Psalm 118**

I love the psalms, more and more each day, actually. I try to read and sing at least one every day. It was the song book of the Hebrews and it was an integral part of the fabric of their lives.

Imagine yourself as one of the Jews in Jerusalem. You've just finished this incredible job of building the wall. You've heard the Word of God and your heart has been touched. Now, you're celebrating. I think Psalm 118 captures it perfectly:

Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;

***for his steadfast love endures forever!***

Let Israel say,

***"His steadfast love endures forever."***

Let the house of Aaron say,

***"His steadfast love endures forever."***

Let those who fear the Lord say,

***"His steadfast love endures forever."***

Out of my distress I called on the Lord;

the Lord answered me and set me free.

The Lord is on my side; I will not fear.

What can man do to me?

The Lord is on my side as my helper;

I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.

It is better to take refuge in the Lord

than to trust in man.

It is better to take refuge in the Lord

than to trust in princes.

All nations surrounded me;

in the name of the Lord I cut them off!

They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;

in the name of the Lord I cut them off!

They surrounded me like bees;

they went out like a fire among thorns;

in the name of the Lord I cut them off!

I was pushed hard, so that I was falling,

but the Lord helped me.

The Lord is my strength and my song;

he has become my salvation.

Glad songs of salvation

are in the tents of the righteous:

"The right hand of the Lord does valiantly,

the right hand of the Lord exalts,

the right hand of the Lord does valiantly!"

I shall not die, but I shall live,

and recount the deeds of the Lord.

The Lord has disciplined me severely,

but he has not given me over to death.

Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
 that I may enter through them  
 and give thanks to the Lord.  
 This is the gate of the Lord;  
 the righteous shall enter through it.  
 I thank you that you have answered me  
 and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected  
 has become the cornerstone.  
 This is the Lord's doing;  
 it is marvelous in our eyes.  
 This is the day that the Lord has made;  
 let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Save us, we pray, O Lord!  
 O Lord, we pray, give us success!  
 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!  
 We bless you from the house of the Lord.  
 The Lord is God,  
 and he has made his light to shine upon us.  
 Bind the festal sacrifice with cords,  
 up to the horns of the altar!  
 You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;  
 you are my God; I will extol you.  
 Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
*for his steadfast love endures forever!*

### **Not Just Words - Action**

On the second day the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law. And they found it written in the Law that the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, "Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written." So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God.

Now I don't know if the parents enjoyed this, but as a kid I would have loved it! I used to gather sticks and branches with my friends out in the desert to make a fort. What a blast it would have been to live in it for a whole week! The parents...well, maybe not so much.

We read in Leviticus 23:34 that the people of Israel were to make booths to live in for a whole week beginning on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. God commanded the festival so that the people would always remember their 40-year journey through the wilderness before entering into the Promised Land. The Jews hadn't done it since the days of Joshua. And now, in the wave of a spiritual revival, they not only heard the Word of God, they did it! God's Word always demands a response. May that same wave of revival wash over us. The book of James directs us, "Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only." (James 1:22) Is that true in your life? That's why we have Sunday School. That's why we are starting small groups. That's why, frankly, we have the church. We need each other to be encouraged to put the Word in practice. God's Word, not just heard, but practiced – that is what will change our lives. And then First Baptist Aberdeen will indeed be the people and place where God's name dwells.

### **The Source of Our Joy – Being Aligned With God's Purpose**

So rejoice! Let the party commence. Our joy is not manufactured by up-tempo music and a positive and happy message. True joy comes when we are in alignment with God's purpose in our personal and corporate lives. And church, I believe we are where God wants us to be. Oh, to be sure, there is a lot of work to be done in our lives. And I'm not just talking sheetrock and paint. We've got issues. Every church does. But God is working. People are talking...

I received a call just this week from a member who wants to get out into the community and begin serving. Blessed me and made my day. We're in conversations with a school about how we can partner with them to help needy families. I know of at least one person who has begun mentoring a child in the last month and two more who are pursuing it. There are more than twenty men who are serious about actually prayerfully discerning God's will rather than just making decisions in leading this church. God is working. He is bringing us to Himself and we are pursuing Him. It's time to listen to His voice because He is speaking. It's time to keep our hearts open to be ready to obey. It's time to share in the joy of the Lord because of the work that He is doing in us.