

NOTES FROM TIM GAMSTON'S SERMON- Sunday 26th May 2024 am

TITLE: "The joy of the Lord is your strength"

TEXT: NEHEMIAH 8 v 1-13

Scripture references from the ESV

Nehemiah 8:1-12 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. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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 worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷ Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites,^[a] helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly,^[b] and they gave the meaning, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go on 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." ¹¹ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." ¹² And all the people went on 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.

George Muller died at the age of 92. He was well known for the building of orphanages, caring for over 10,000 orphans. Aged 70, he began a 17 year period of missionary travel, preaching in 42 countries to around 3 million people, and travelling over 200,000 miles before the invention of the aeroplane. On his return, he continued

to preach and to work for the Scripture Knowledge Institution, leading the weekly prayer meeting the night before his death. He was known as a man of prayer, never asking for money but praying that the Lord would provide for all the needs.

How did he keep going, despite this heavy workload?

Where did his strength to serve the Lord and those around him come from? In his own words:

it pleased the Lord to teach me a truth I saw more clearly than ever; that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not, how much I might serve the Lord, how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man might be nourished.

He read scripture on his knees every morning and did not rise from prayer until he had seen with the eyes of his heart the glory of God and had savoured, tasted and delighted in that glory. (Adapted from his journals.)

George Muller lived out the truth we read in Nehemiah 8:10, and his life sets us an example:

the joy of the LORD is your strength

Our challenges are different to those faced by George Muller, but we still need to learn this truth. We may be facing:

- Grief over ongoing, besetting sin
- Physical, emotional and mental pain and suffering
- The challenge of living with broken relationships
- Financial pressures because of the rise in the cost of living
- The daily demands from family, work and education

It is easy to feel overwhelmed and crushed. Like George Muller, we need to ask the question:

- How do we keep going?

Not only that, but how do we keep going in a way that brings glory to God and enables us to serve others before we serve ourselves? Along with George Muller, we need to learn that: *the first great and primary business to which [you] ought to attend*

every day is, to have [your] soul happy in the Lord. Being happy in the Lord is primarily about:

Being joyful in Jesus as our Saviour from sin

Our joy in Jesus as Saviour from sin becomes a refuge

into which we can run for strength to bring glory to God and to serve others.

The context of this passage is Israel's return from exile in Babylon, by which God had chastened them following their sin against him. They had worshipped and served false gods, but when they repented God led them out of exile and back to the land of Israel. Under Nehemiah's leadership, they had rebuilt Jerusalem and the walls of the city, and now a new generation of God's people were back living in the land God had promised them. After they had rebuilt the walls, one of the first things they wanted was to hear the word of God being read (v1).

- The people were hungry to hear what God had to say and when the book was opened, they responded with an outpouring of worship (vv5-6).
- The scriptures were read for up to 6 hours (v3)
- There were men on hand to help the people understand what was being read (v7).

Hearing and understanding the word produced both weeping and rejoicing (vv9,12).

- The people wept as they grieved over their sin (v11 (above), Ch 9 – please read in your Bible). As the law of God was being read, the people saw how much they had failed to measure up to God's standards and they grieved.

Nehemiah spoke to them as they grieved (vv9-10).

- As the people understood what was meant, their grief was turned to joy (v12)

What is going on and what does this mean for us? Consider two possessions we have as God's people:

1. **Our joy in the Lord.** The Bible shows us that God is a joyful God. Examples from scripture are:

- **I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.** (Jeremiah 32:41). These are God's words to disobedient Israel, and we see that

showing grace to wayward people brings joy to God's heart

- **These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.** (John 15:11). These are words from Jesus, the Son of God, showing he has his own joy.

Jesus wants to put his joy in us so that our joy may be full

God is an infinitely joyful being. If that was not so, then Heaven would not be a joyful place! Yet in Psalm 16:11, David tells us: **in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures for evermore.**

God is infinitely joyful in himself

When Nehemiah speaks about the joy of the Lord, he could mean the joy that God has in himself, but it is **our** joy in the Lord that is the more likely explanation. Of the three references to people stopping their weeping, two are commands (**vv9,10**) and one is their response (**v12**).

- Do not weep but rejoice with feasting (**v9**)
- Do not weep because joy is your strength (**v10**)
- They stopped weeping and they rejoiced (**v12**)

The joy of **v10** is parallel to the rejoicing and feasting in **v10** and **v12**.

The joy is our joy in our God

2. **Our refuge in the Lord.** The Hebrew word that is translated as strength actually means (and is more usually translated as) refuge, fortress, stronghold or protection. Literally it says: **delight in the Lord is a strong refuge.**

The people were grieving over their sin, crushed with guilt because they knew they had fallen short of the holy standard of God's own glory, and judgement must surely come because God is a holy God. Nehemiah told them to stop grieving, **not** because sin does not matter, but because there is a refuge.

- The refuge is the joy they have in the Lord who provides atonement for their sin
- Ten days after this event, the people would be celebrating the Day of Atonement, when, through sacrifice, the record of the sins of the nation would be wiped clean and they would be assured of God's forgiveness and acceptance. Nehemiah was calling the people to

**Rejoice in the God of their salvation because
God had not left them condemned in their sin**

Israel's failure was not the end of the story for them, and, by rejoicing in the Lord, they were taking hold of the one who is their refuge from sin and wrath - the one who is a refuge of God's mercy.

Grief over sin is right. We should feel sorrow for our sin - sorrow that:

- We have committed high treason against God who created us and gives us life
- We have turned our back on a God who loves us enough to give us his law
- We have treated with contempt the commands of God which are given for our good

Grief over sin will not, in itself, lead us to the stronghold of God's mercy.

It is joy in God our Saviour that will lead us there.

Nehemiah called the day **holy to the Lord**. The day is intended to bring glory to the Lord, and nothing glorifies God more than when we turn from grieving over our sin and turn to rejoicing in God for his grace. God is glorified as his salvation is put on display for all peoples to rejoice in.

When we are able to rejoice in our salvation from sin because we know that Christ is our Saviour

then that same joy in Jesus as Saviour will sustain us in every trial.

When we face pain, grief or find ourselves under pressure, facing demands, temptations and challenges, the joy of the Lord will be our refuge.

- When you know that the sin which excludes you from relationship with God, has been atoned for, and you are rejoicing in that, so that you can run to that refuge, why would you fear anything else?
- When the greatest problem in your life has been resolved by God, why would you doubt that he will help you in every other area of your life?

We run to our refuge by rejoicing in the Lord

How do we find joy in the Lord and run to our refuge, and thus live out our mission statement to be a people who are:

Delighting in God, to the glory of God and the good of all people

There are three things needed:

a) We need to examine our heart. When we feel overwhelmed and joyless, then we need to ask ourselves:

- What lie am I believing, or what idol am I treasuring that is robbing me of my joy in the Lord?

We need to set aside the many distractions around us and take time, before God, to call out our wrong beliefs and false idols. It might be the wrong belief:

- That God will not forgive you for a besetting sin because you keep falling into it.
- That your current suffering means that God doesn't care about you

Alternatively, your current trial might be God's way to reveal to you that:

- You love comfort and ease more than you love him
- You are more concerned for your reputation before others than you are for his glory
- You want your own way in life more than you want to see the Lord obeyed

Examining your heart might involve sitting with a trusted friend and letting them ask searching questions, or using a notebook and pen to write down what is going on in your life. You might need to ask God, who alone knows the depths of your heart, to search you and then work through how his Spirit convicts you.

b) We need to meditate on scripture. Ask questions about what God is saying to you in his word.

- How does his word correct your wrong beliefs and lead you to treasure him above all false idols?
- What promises can you call on to help you in this?

c) We need to pray in faith. Take what God has said and pray it deep down into your heart until joy in the Lord begins to rise. Wrestle with God in prayer, confessing your lack of faith and calling on him to keep his promises, so that you can know the joy that only he can give.

We need to rise above superficial Christian living if we are to experience the refuge of God's mercy and find strength for everyday living.

We need to dig deep - examining our hearts, meditating on scripture and praying in faith.

George Muller worked to have his heart happy in the Lord at the start of the day. *The first thing I did, after having asked in a few words the Lord's blessing upon His precious Word, was to begin to meditate on the Word of God, searching, as it were, into every verse to get blessing out of it...The result I have found to be almost invariably this: that after a very few minutes my soul has been led to confession, thanksgiving, intercession, or supplication; so that though I did not, as it were, give myself to prayer but to meditation, yet it turned almost immediately more or less into prayer. When thus I have been for a while making confession, intercession, or supplication, or have given thanks, I go on to the next words or verse, turning all, as I go on, into prayer for myself or others, as the Word may lead to it; but still continually keeping before me that food for my own soul is the object of my meditation. The result of this is ...that by breakfast time, with rare exceptions, I am in a peaceful if not happy state of heart.*

Having his heart happy in the Lord meant that he was able to sacrificially serve others, and deal with running the orphanages, preaching three times a week and leading the church and other institutions.

As a church, we would be so blessed to know this kind of joy:

**Deep serious joy that grieves over sin, yet is that same joy which leads us to the refuge
that is Christ**

**Deep serious joy that feels the weight of pain in the world, yet is that same joy in the
Lord which sustains us
and enables us to meet the needs of that pain.**

The joy of the Lord is your strength