

“The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength”

Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10

January 26, 2025

I have never preached on Nehemiah before. Perhaps I have avoided it because of my own baggage that lingers from my time attending a Pentecostal church. It was there that I heard Nehemiah 8 sermonized too many times as a surefire blueprint for revival. Really, that is NOT the entire picture of what Ezra/Nehemiah is about. Today we take a deep dive into their world around 450 BC and find out...

Consider that in the world and time of Nehemiah that they are located in a community in severe conflict, dispute and fragmentation. Not so different from today, is it?

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell about Jewish returnees from exile in Babylon, led by Nehemiah and Ezra and others who attempt to rebuild Jerusalem and restore Judah as a worshipping community. However, the future of the people is in serious doubt.

Enemies attack from outside, but even more disruptively internal disagreements threaten to undermine the community's future. The people form factions arguing about who is in and who is out, who should govern, how the temple can be rebuilt, how Jerusalem can be reestablished in safety and peace.

In the Hebrew Scripture the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are combined as one book not two. In the book of Ezra we learn that the Jews have been in exile for about a hundred years. They have settled down in Babylon, built their families and have taken wives. However, some of these wives were non-Jewish, and Ezra the High Priest decrees that they and their children be sent back to Babylon as the Jewish remnant repopulates Jerusalem and rebuilds the Temple. He deports them en masse. Sound familiar?

Ezra does not get a word from the LORD to do this. He does this on his own for the sake of racial purity. This was an awful predicament and the cause for much resentment and conflict. This action of the High Priest Ezra is the quintessential act of exclusivism that is representative of an endless sequence of exclusions that have marked both Judaism and Christianity. In their anxious attempts to maintain purity, both Judaism and Christianity, in

various ways, have undertaken to to maintain the status quo of current power arrangements.

Despite this, the broken walls are now repaired and now is the time for broken people in Nehemiah 8 to experience the touch of the hand of the LORD, through the reading and hearing of the word.

Here in Nehemiah 8 Ezra brings God's book, the Book of Moses to the people (which is our first five books of our Bible). They have gathered as "one" (men, women, and children), all gathered to actively listen to God's word being read aloud. Somehow enough time and diplomacy have occurred from the return, about a dozen years, that now they are of one mind and desire. A large pulpit has been built in the Water Gate Square for this.

It takes Ezra a long time to read, translate, and explain from the Hebrew to common Aramaic which most now people spoke. Most people in fact could not read. And, this is not your average 20 minute sermon but transpired over many hours perhaps 5-6 hours!

Worship and a 'royal reception' are given to "welcome" the LORD God's presence back to Jerusalem again as the Words of God are read aloud. All ages weep as their hearts are melted in response, producing the fruit of worship, joy, and the confession of sins.

In Nehemiah 8:8 we read of the word of God being explained using 'oral translation, as the law was written in Hebrew and the people in exile had adopted Aramaic as the language of daily life'. that initial reaction comes the realization of the law as the revelation of God to the people for their benefit, not their condemnation. They are told to celebrate: "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine... and do not be grieved" (v. 10). "

So, what do we learn from Ezra and Nehemiah here—**FOUR LESSONS...**
First, worship is something that all of the people of God do together.

"All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate"
The place is significant; the square in front of the Water Gate was a place where everyone could be present, even those who were ritually unclean."

We learn that true worship of the LORD transforms lives. After Ezra completes his reading, all of the people weep (v. 9). Why? We are unsure. Perhaps they are overcome with regret for the loss of the Torah during the exile. Perhaps they have been reminded of how far short their actions have fallen from God's expectations of them. Or perhaps their tears are tears of joy, for the recovery of the Torah and for a sense of God's abiding presence and providential care.

Second, the people know that they have entered the presence of the living God.

The people do not ask Ezra to speak about God. They ask him to read the Word of God. When Ezra opens the Torah, he prays, and the people prostrate themselves with their faces to the ground in response to God's living presence.

God is not just the object of our worship; God is also the subject our worship, the living, Holy One whom we encounter in our worship. Does our worship here convey that? To worship means to assign worth to something or someone.

Evelyn Underhill in her classic "Worship" has written that:

As the genuine religious impulse becomes dominant [in a person's life], adoration more and more takes charge. 'I come to seek God because I need Him', may be an adequate formula for prayer. 'I come to adore His splendor, and fling myself and all that I have at His feet', is the only possible formula for worship.

Third, the worship led by Ezra centers on the Word.

Worship in Nehemiah 8 is simple and straightforward: Ezra steps up on a wooden platform made for the occasion and reads directly from the Torah. Then, certain named Levites present with Ezra interpret the Scriptures, either by translating the Hebrew into the Aramaic language more commonly spoken by the people or by explaining the sense of the Torah to the people, passage by passage.

In Christian worship Jesus is the Word Incarnate. He is the Living Word. He is the Gift. We are the Gift Receivers and the Gift Givers to the entire Community of God.

This practice of Ezra translating the Hebrew into the Aramaic language that is spoken by the people means that the Word of God needs an able and faithful interpreter. Scripture was written in a language and region and culture foreign to ours. The same is true for today...

After Ezra completes his reading, all of the people are moved to weep. Why? Perhaps they are overcome with regret for the loss of the Torah during the exile. Perhaps they have been reminded of how far short their actions have fallen from God's expectations of them. Or perhaps their tears are tears of joy, for the recovery of the Torah and for a sense of God's abiding presence and providential care.

While Ezra was reading the Law to the people it produced sorrow because their lives and behavior were not in alignment with the Law. But instead of being rebuked and condemned, Nehemiah and Ezra instructed them to celebrate because of "the joy of the Lord." The children of Israel were never known for their perfect behavior. They were known for being the people of God. They were His. He loved them. His people had been separated from Him in exile for years and were finally reunited to Him. God had His beloved people back — why would He not have joy?

We too are God's people, should we too not have joy as well?

Fourth and finally, the "joy of the Lord" mentioned in Nehemiah 8:10 is all about the deep and lasting joy that comes from knowing God and being in relationship with Him and all of God's community.

When the Israelites heard the Law and realized their sins, they were heartbroken, but Nehemiah reminded them to celebrate instead. Why? Because God's joy in His people—His love, grace, and delight in restoring them—was their strength. It is the same today...

This isn't about fleeting happiness; it's a steady, unshakable joy rooted in God's faithfulness and goodness. It's the kind of joy that lifts us when we're weak and reminds us that no matter what we face, we belong to a God who is for us. God is not there to rub our faces in our past mistakes and sins.

This type of contentment also refers to the joy that comes from knowing and trusting God. This isn't a fleeting happiness based on circumstances but a deep, abiding sense of peace and contentment rooted in God's character and promises. The Israelites were reminded that their joy didn't come from their performance or perfection but from their covenant relationship with God.

When Ezra and Nehemiah declare that the joy of the Lord is our strength to the people gathered at the Water Gate in Jerusalem they are not talking about pleasure, happiness or personal fulfillment. The joy of the Lord is our strength is an "our" or "we" religion not a "me" religion. It is a commitment and a relationship not a personal self fulfillment trip. It's not Jesus and me.

How can we, with God's help, unpack the Bible in everyday language so that we all might understand and apply it to our lives? How can we diligently study it and not allow it to be dictated to us by those who would hijacked it and changed it for their own agendas?

How can we use our various gifts, talents of people to work together to help to build the Community of God? Each of us has a role to play, using creative gifts and talents in places of opportunity under God to usher in the Kingdom of God in a fresh way. The broken walls have been built, is it now time to go to the broken people that they might in word and action experience the healing and forgiveness of God? This is the Mission. This is our Mission. Amen.

Reverend Dr. James D. Hegedus
First Presbyterian Church of Mason, Michigan
January 26, 2025

