

## The Joy of the Lord is My Strength [Slide 1]

Preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his book, Spiritual Depression, writes the following: Read card. What a shame that is because those who have the Lord in their life also have his joy if they care to live in it.

Today I want to talk about the joy of the Lord, but before I do, I want to review with you what we have covered the last three weeks. We learned that joy, in contrast to happiness, does not depend on the circumstances surrounding me but rather true joy comes from a right relationship with God and being passionate about Jesus and the Gospel. I gain joy by trusting in God's goodness and sovereignty and believing that to live is Christ and to die is gain. As we will learn today, joy has its source in God, nevertheless I play a role in experiencing joy by choosing what I will think and what I will value. I will find joy if I view myself honestly, forget the past, and pursue knowing Christ and becoming like Christ. I can have joy by choosing to be content in all circumstances.

Today we want to learn what it means that the joy of the Lord is my strength. I invite you to turn to Nehemiah chapter 8 in your Bible. The easiest way to find Nehemiah is to pick the halfway point in the Old Testament which should turn out to be in the book of Psalms. Move backward from the book of Psalms through Job and Esther and you will arrive at Nehemiah. We will focus on Nehemiah 8, verses 9-12 but before I read those verses I want to set the context of what is going on.

Nehemiah returned to Israel from Babylon to help build a wall around defenseless Jerusalem. The wall was completed in record time despite opposition from other people who lived in the land. Nehemiah knew that much of his success was due to God's blessing so he called the people together to celebrate the completion of the wall and asked Ezra the priest and some others to read from the book of the Law, probably referring to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. So Ezra and some Levites read from the Law and taught what it meant as they read.

Nehemiah probably intended to honor God and show appreciation to God for all that he had done by publicly reading God's word. However, the people reacted in a way that Nehemiah probably did not anticipate. Let's read verses 9-12. Read.

Nehemiah wanted the people to celebrate the completion of the wall. He wanted them to take delight in God's word and rejoice in the knowledge that they were God's people.

However, the people actually listened closely to God's word, the reading of all those commandments, and they became convicted of their sins. They began to grieve and mourn how disobedient to God they had been.

That is not what Ezra, Nehemiah and the Levites wanted at that moment. They wanted the day to be holy to the Lord, dedicated to praising God and delighting in God for all his goodness to his people rather than focusing on the people's failures to follow the law. Repentance and mourning over sin have their appropriate place, but this situation was much like when Jesus told his disciples not to fast while he was with them, because when the bridegroom was present, it wasn't appropriate to mourn, even over something as worthwhile as one's sin. That's what is going on here. It's not that mourning sin is an inappropriate response to God's word. It is entirely appropriate. It was that at that point the focus needed to be on God's greatness not the

people's sinfulness. The moment needed to be about God rather than dealing with man's need for confession and forgiveness.

So Nehemiah urged the people to go eat, drink and be merry. Do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength. As a result of his exhortation, in verse 12 the people did celebrate a great festival because of the words which had been known to them.

The joy of the Lord is your strength. That phrase can mean one of two things. It can mean that the joy which comes from or originates from the Lord can be a source of strength to you. Or it can mean that the act of rejoicing in the Lord can strengthen you. I think both statements are true, but I think the point that Nehemiah is making is that rejoicing in God will strengthen you because in this passage he is exhorting the people to do that very thing, to rejoice in God and in his provision of the wall and the Word. The act of praising and rejoicing in God gives us strength.

[Slide 2] I invite you to turn over in your Bible to Psalm 63 where we see an example of the results of rejoicing in God. David finds his pleasure and satisfaction in God. Let's begin with verses 1-8. As I read them see how many different ways David describes his delight in God. Read verses 1-8.

In verse 1 David seeks for God earnestly. He yearns to know God. His soul thirsts for God. Here is a man who enjoys God and wants to go deeper in his relationship with God. He finds satisfaction and happiness with God. In verses 2-3 David refers to God's power, glory and lovingkindness as things that attract him to God, and so in verse 4 David says that he will bless God as long as David lives. He will lift his hands up in honor to God.

Verse 5. David finds satisfaction in praising God with joyful lips. In verses 6-7 David says that when he reflects on what God has done in his life, he remembers the different ways that God has helped him and in God's presence, in the shadow of his covering wings, David sings for joy. As a result of David's remembering and praising God, David exhibits great fortitude and strength in the presence of his enemies. Those who seek David's life in verses 9-10 will not succeed. They will in turn be defeated themselves.

David had a lot of enemies trying to kill him throughout his life including Philistines, giants, Saul and his soldiers, warriors from nations outside of Israel, Absalom and his followers. So much opposition might have broken a lesser man, but David withstood all the plots and attempts on his life and this psalm shows us how. David gained his strength and fortitude through his practice of delighting in God and reflecting on who God is and what God had done in the past to help him. There was a connection between praise and strength.

Sometimes we are so down and defeated that we can't even start with rejoicing in the Lord. We have to start with just the Lord. Joni Eareckson Tada, who is paralyzed in her arms and legs, describes her day. Read Joni quote. Sometimes joy is hard won. It is won when I recognize God's sufficiency, his care and kindness, and I delight in that enough to ask for help.

[Slide 3] In Psalm 51 the psalmist links our joy to our forgiveness. In Psalm 51:7-9 David writes: Read. David asks God to purify him and make him clean from his sin so that David will hear God with joy and gladness again. In verse 12 David asks God to restore unto David the joy of God's salvation and sustain David with a willing spirit. Thus strengthened by joy, David vows to teach transgressors God's ways. What a relief and a shot of adrenaline it is to be forgiven and restored.

John Piper shares the following comment about the joy of forgiven sin in his book *Desiring God*. Read p 129 Flower book. The dance of the forgiven is the joyous celebration of being set

free from the penalty of sin and the threat of God's judgment. How can you but dance your way into Heaven?

[Slide 4] John Piper has done some incredible work on the topic of joy and rejoicing in God and I would like to share with you some of his insights on this topic. I strongly recommend his book, Desiring God.

One of Piper's key thoughts is that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. What he means is that when we pursue God or serve God because we enjoy him and are passionate about him, that is what most glorifies God. God doesn't want us to worship or do anything out of duty, but out of joy.

He provides the following analogy. It is your wife's birthday. You buy her a present and you hand it to her with these words. "Honey, it is my duty as your faithful husband to provide you with a birthday present on your birthday. Here it is." How do you think she will receive that present? "God, I am supposed to worship you together with the saints as one of my responsibilities, so here I am on Sunday morning, attending the worship service as you instructed."

Instead, you say, "Honey, you have been so good to me and the kids, taking great care of us. You really are a wonderful wife and mother, so patient with us lunkheads, far exceeding the average mother and wife. Here is a small token representing the great affection I have for you."

God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. Piper goes on to say that all praise should be the spontaneous overflow of our delight in God. In fact our delight in God is incomplete until it is fully expressed.

He provides an example of a sports team and I will use our own Houston Astros World Series victory as an example. Could you fully enjoy and delight in that great victory without expressing it? Could you fully enjoy that achievement without praising it? Greatest team in all of baseball-- Woo hoo! Can you believe how many homers Springer hit in the series! Wasn't Altuve the greatest! All-star! Can you rejoice without a little smack talk about how the Astros are going to come back next year and repeat over all those lesser teams? The pleasure and joy is not complete until you express it.

What God wants is for us to so enjoy him and be so delighted in him so much so that part of our full experience of that joy is to declare his goodness and his worth. That is what I do with anything else in which I really delight. I talk about it. If a young man or woman never bragged on their fiancée to other people, I might wonder they should marry each other. If people aren't attracted to our God, maybe it's because we haven't been bragging about him.

[Slide 5] What can we delight in God or what can we brag about God? Every single material thing we have, came from God. All our food, our cars, our beds, our homes, our appliances, our clothes, everything came from God. He may not have personally made them but he gave people the intelligence and ability to make them and to us the skills and abilities to earn the money to purchase them. He gave us favor with interviewers to gain our jobs, provided us with the aptitudes to perform our jobs, and plopped us in a country where these things are available. Do you enjoy the things you have, like the convenience of a microwave to warm something up quickly, a phone to connect you at all times? Can we delight in God that he is so generous to give us these things?

Do you like your health? Are you glad you can walk and move about, taste good food, see pretty sights, and relax in a hot shower? Isn't God kind to give us life and good health to enjoy that life?

What about your family and friends? Isn't it cool that God has given you brothers and sisters all over this world, people who will accept you simply because you claim the name of Jesus?

We have a purpose that is eternal, of great value, and fulfilling. You and I are not accidents, part of some great, impersonal, cosmic casino, a random roll of the dice. We were formed with the utmost care in our mother's womb, fashioned and formed by the greatest artist ever to create. Each of us is a masterpiece, an original work of art that will never be duplicated. Can I get an amen for that?

We don't have a two-bit God, some weakling deity who once was a weak man like ourselves. No, we worship the eternal, all powerful, infinite and unchanging God of the Bible who sovereignly decides the fate of nations and empires, whose will cannot be thwarted and whose power cannot be resisted. This God is holy just and righteous. He will correct every wrong and establish every right. There is no shadow of evil in him, but only the pure light of righteousness and holiness surrounds him.

We have a loving and merciful Father who is always faithful to keep his promises and protect his children. He has allotted us an inheritance in Heaven that is undefiled, non-perishing, uncorrupted and unfading. He will not leave us or forsake us. Here he is the all-powerful, all-knowing ruler of time and space and yet he pays attention to each of us and has loved us enough to call us son and daughter and to reserve a space for us in Heaven forever. Can you be happy about that? Can you delight in such a God?

He has forgiven you, cleansed you, adopted you, sealed you, transferred you to his Kingdom and transformed you to his truth. He has regenerated you, justified you, sanctified you and he waits to glorify you. He teaches you, guides you, comforts, and exhorts you. He keeps forgiving you and washing you clean when you soil yourself. He goes looking for you when you lose yourself. He kindly speaks the truth to you when you deceive yourself. He blesses you when you deny yourself and elevates you when you humble yourself. Can you brag a little on him?

No alternative god can match him; no human king or demonic power can overrule him. No sinner can resist him and no age can outlast him. No wise man can fathom him and no rich man can outspend him. No philosophy can replace him and no scientific advance can disprove him. No soldier can outfight him and no movie star can outshine him. That's our God.

David says in Psalm 37:4, Read. David lived that truth. He knew it to be truth. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. He will strengthen you, establish you and empower you. David also said in Psalm 16:11 "Read." Fellowship with God will bring fullness of joy. Enjoying God will lead to an inner strength of character. The joy of the Lord is your strength.

I close with one final quote from John Piper's book, "Let the Nations Be Glad." He writes, "Read Piper quote from p. 37. May you delight in your Savior and King as we remember his birth. Close in prayer.