

# Joy: Lookin' For it in all the Wrong Places?

(preached 11/14/21)

Please turn to *Nehemiah 8*.

“LOOKIN’ FOR LOVE...” In 1980 a singer named Johnny Lee released a song that rose to the top of the charts called “Lookin’ For Love in All the Wrong Places.” The lyrics show a man going to single’s bars, hooking up, and not finding love. He ends up alone and feeling like he failed until “the right one” finally comes, knocking on the door to his heart. He lets her in, realizes she’s “the right one” and now he’s fulfilled—he doesn’t need to look for love no more.

**DO WE DO THE SAME WITH JOY—LOOK FOR IT IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES.  
MAYBE ITS KNOCKING ON THE DOOR TO OUR HEARTS RIGHT NOW?**

CHRISTIANS LACKING JOY? I’ve been hearing reports from other Christians and about other Christians that they lack joy. Despite going to Church, knowing the Bible, and being born-again I’ve witnessed a pervasive depression and sense of hopelessness. A brother from another church said that people in his congregation no longer went forward to worship anymore because they had nothing to rejoice over.

DARK DAYS. Indeed, these are dark days. Wars, pandemics, ethnic cleansing, starvation, and poverty are everywhere in the world. In our country alone prices for everything have inflated to the highest point in 30 years and show no signs of slowing much less stopping. Corruption and lawlessness in Washington DC are the worst I’ve ever witnessed, inspiring sharp divisiveness between common people like you and I. Covid doesn’t seem like its ever going to go away and some of our country’s supplies are sitting on massive ships out in the ocean.

**People have looked at all of this and more, and decided there isn’t much to be happy about.**

*“Lookin’ for joy in all the wrong places, lookin’ for joy in too many faces, searching around, lookin’ for traces, of what I’m dreamin’ of.”*

**Where is joy?** Where do we search to find it? If we had it once, where were we getting it from and how do we get it back?

NEHEMIAH. Now we’re at today’s reading of *Nehemiah 8:1*. The wall of Jerusalem is done at last and everyone is gathered together....

### **Nehemiah 8:1-8 (NKJV)**

<sup>1</sup> Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that *was* in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel.

<sup>2</sup> So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who *could* hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month.

<sup>3</sup> Then he read from it in the open square that *was* in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people *were attentive* to the Book of the Law.

<sup>4</sup> So Ezra the scribe stood on a platform of wood which they had made for the purpose; and beside him, at his right hand, stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Urijah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah; and at his left hand Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbadana, Zechariah, *and* Meshullam.

<sup>5</sup> And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he *was standing* above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up.

<sup>6</sup> And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. Then all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with *their* faces to the ground.

<sup>7</sup> Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law; and the people *stood* in their place.

<sup>8</sup> So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped *them* to understand the reading.

READ THE LAW. The order here isn't perfectly chronological, so let me lay it out for you. They've all gathered for a massive church service and Ezra brings out the Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible, A.K.A. "The Book of the Law." His intention is to do exactly as God commanded in said book and what gets done in Jewish synagogues to this day: to read God's commandments out loud.

GOOD MOOD! Everyone's in a good mood! They are full of joy and therefore rejoicing! Look at **verse 6**: the people shout "Amen! Amen" and lift up their hands like the good Pentecostals they were (a joke!). They're so caught up in joyful worship they fall down on the bare dirt ground, prostrating themselves in abject worship of God.

### **QUESTION FOR YOU: WHAT'S THE SOURCE OF THEIR JOY?**

COME TO CHURCH.... Let's be honest: sometimes we come to church and our experience is amazing, just as if we were caught up to Heaven. Other times everything is like a big dud. Why? Some days when worship starts its like we're in the throne room of God and other days we're caught up in our own thoughts and can barely pay attention. Why?

LET'S START LOOKIN' For Nehemiah and the people this is a "caught up to Heaven" moment for them so let's start lookin' for joy and find out if we're lookin' in the right or wrong places.

CIRCUMSTANCES. Let's go to their circumstances: the long, difficult, expensive, and dangerous project of building the wall is finally over. Despite enemies on all sides, not only was the wall funded but supplies were obtained and the work was complete. They now have a Temple and a protective wall/gates around their beloved city of Jerusalem. The King of Persia has set them free to return en masse to their homeland and resume worship of the One True God the way the Lord commanded—in the Temple.

GOOD CIRCUMSTANCES? Would it be fair to say their circumstances have put the Jewish people in a position to be happy instead of sad? Full of hope instead of despair? Feel courageous vs. afraid? Yes indeed and that's the way they're feeling in this church service! Things are going swimmingly!!!

READING THE LAW.... But wait...what was Pastor Ezra doing? Reading God's commandments. ***What happens when God's commandments are read out loud? Does it tend to inspire joy?***

"Thou shalt not steal" tends to remind us of the last time we stole

"Honor thy father and mother" highlights the last time we mistreated our parents.

"Thou shalt not bear false witness" brings up the last time we lied.

"Thou shalt not covet" shows us how we envy our family member who makes more \$ than us and can afford better things.

INFLAMES FLESH. What's more is the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans goes on to say that the reading of the Law inflames our fleshly desires to want to eat the FF even more!

**So does the reading of the Law tend to inspire joy?** Let's see what happens when Pastor Ezra does it and remember: when he starts his reading, ***the people are in a great mood even to point of falling on their faces!***

**Nehemiah 8:9-12 (NKJV)**

<sup>9</sup> And Nehemiah, who *was* the governor, 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 nor weep." **For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law.**

<sup>10</sup> Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for *this day is* holy to our LORD. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

<sup>11</sup> So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day *is* holy; do not be grieved."

<sup>12</sup> And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them.

**Verse 9:** what happened? The people go from rejoicing and worshipping to a state a mourning & weeping...and these are not tears of joy but those of sorrow (verse 10).

SOURCE OF SORROW? For verses 1-8 we asked what was the source of their joy, now we ask what is the source of their sorrow? We've already answered the question: ***the reading of the Law and the effects it tends to have upon a person which is 1) the conviction of sin and 2) enflaming the passions of the flesh.***

**Verse 9 last part:** "ALL the people wept when they heard the words of the Law."

**Verse 10:** Pastor Ezra and his Levite Priests swoop in for the rescuing truth, the one you and I need desperately right now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: **"do not sorrow, the joy of the Lord is your strength."**

DON'T DESPISE. And there is our answer and let's not despise it. What do I mean by that? We come to another Christian for counsel and they might respond with one of several cliches such as: "trust in Jesus," "rely on God," or "look to God." They might even go a bit deeper and say something like "even though you aren't feeling loved right now, the Lord loves you."

MIND VS. HEART. Are there times when we're disappointed by these answers, saying something like "I get that in my mind but not in my heart."

WE DON'T BELIEVE. If we don't get it in our hearts we don't believe it. Romans 10: its with the heart one believes and not the mind. If we don't believe something, that's our moment to separate what we really do believe from the truth of God, then embrace the truth of God and reject what we formerly believed.

***If we're looking for joy outside of God, we're lookin' for joy in all the wrong places. Lookin' for joy in too many faces, searching around, lookin' for traces, of what we're dreamin' of.***

JOY "PERMITTED" IN CIRUMSTANCES? Does this mean we shouldn't or can't find joy in external circumstances? Let me navigate through this carefully and be sure to listen to everything I say.

BLESSINGS. If something good happens like a promotion at work, a holiday, the completion of something, etc. there's nothing wrong with rejoicing. Thanksgiving is coming and Christmas soon to follow—I find both days and the seasons before them to be good times. Yet it ends the day after, vacation time is over, it's time to go back to work and/or the daily routine of life. ***In other words, its temporary just like everything else in this world.***

CAN GO WRONG. What's more is that things can go wrong even on those days, yes? Maybe we get into a fight with family, something breaks down, the weather is horrible, etc. Despite it being Christmas Day we aren't speaking to each other, the power is out, and we get the car stuck in the snow trying to get over to grandma's to open presents.

TEMPORARY. We can find joy in good and blessed circumstances of this world, but they will 1) always be temporary and 2) can be corrupted, reversed, or taken away—they're not secure.

**Finding strength to actively rejoice (which is a verb) requires a stable, powerful, and permanent Source that never runs out, cannot be corrupted, and won't change....**

**Back to Nehemiah:** at first the people were in a good mood because the building project was done, enemies had been defeated, and the king released them from captivity. Then only moments later, in the same church service, they were in a bad mood when the Law was read.

XANAX. IDK about you, but that sounds neurotic and unstable to me! If I lived life that way I would need Xanax. Perhaps the reason people suffer with depression & anxiety so much nowadays has to do with lookin' for joy in external circumstances which come and go and are unstable, tossing us about like a ship caught in a storm at sea.

**The joy of external blessing is not our strength.**

The joy of winning the game is not our strength.

The joy of achievement and accomplishment is not our strength.

The joy of our political candidate winning office is not our strength.

- Are we waiting for some sovereign act of God or some other greater source (work, government, etc.) into our circumstances to bring joy?
- Are we waiting for our “luck” to change and for something to just “work out”?

**The Joy of the Lord is our strength and brings us out of sorrow.  
We must partner with God to live this way.**

Let's read the last 3 verses again:

<sup>10</sup> Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for *this day is holy* to our LORD. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

<sup>11</sup> So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day *is* holy; do not be grieved."

<sup>12</sup> And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them.

Verse 12: the people got their joy back but this time it was different. ***It was no longer based on the accomplishment of finishing the wall and being able to return to their homeland. Now their Source was God Himself.***

WORDING. Please notice the wording of this famous quotation: it's the Lord's Joy that is our strength. When our favorite sports team wins the championship, that joy comes from the victory. When we're promoted at work and given a raise, our celebration is based on said promo. When we finish a project or degree, our joy is found in the accomplishment.

**God is not only eternal but He's enduring.**

- No circumstance changes Him.
- What we do or don't do doesn't change Him.
- What we say or don't say doesn't change Him.
- All the wars, starvation, disease, wickedness, death, and injustice in the world doesn't change Him.

**IT CHANGES US AND STEALS OUR JOY...BUT NONE OF THOSE THINGS STEAL FROM GOD.**

**God produces His own joy and its just like Him: eternal, enduring, pure, and stable. It's His joy, found only in Him, that is our strength.**

LEVITES. The Levites send the people away in rejoicing and let's read what happens next:

**Nehemiah 8:13-17 (NKJV)**

<sup>13</sup> Now on the second day the heads of the fathers' *houses* of all the people, with the priests and Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, in order to understand the words of the Law.

<sup>14</sup> And they found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the

children of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month,  
<sup>15</sup> and that they should announce and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the mountain, and bring olive branches, branches of oil trees, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of leafy trees, to make booths, as *it is written*."

<sup>16</sup> Then the people went out and brought *them* and made themselves booths, each one on the roof of his house, or in their courtyards or the courts of the house of God, and in the open square of the Water Gate and in the open square of the Gate of Ephraim.

<sup>17</sup> So the whole assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day the children of Israel had not done so. And there was very great gladness.

FEAST OF BOOTHS. This is what's called the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths...these "booths" were tents and here is amazing significance of this event. This Feast is best celebrated with a Temple and they finally had one, as Solomon's Temple had been destroyed 70 years before. In the Feast of Booths, people erect tents and live in them for several days and the idea is to pitch the tent as close to the Temple as possible.

GET CLOSE TO GOD. Why? Because that's where God lived back then and non-Priests can't go in. So the next best thing to get close to God is to pitch your tent right next to the Temple. Ever been camping and it gets real cold? Where is the best place to be? Right next to the fire. The first ring of people get the most warmth.

LIVING WITH HIM. The Feast of Booths is all about getting closer to God and enjoying all His fruits...including Joy. It denotes LIVING WITH God.

**Verse 17:** when the people pitched their tents near the Temple, there was great gladness.

***If we could just pitch our tents close to whatever Temple God is using to live in now....*** Wouldn't it be great if there were a temple—not "spiritually speaking" either! A physical, hands-on Temple where God lived that we could go near to and hang out?!

### **1 Corinthians 3:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

### **1 Corinthians 6:19 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?

WE ARE TEMPLE. You and I are the Temple of God and superior to one Solomon and Ezra built. God the Holy Spirit has already descended from Heaven to live inside these temples and is here right now.

UNBELIEF. Yet the unbelief in our hearts leads us to search for Joy in all the wrong places and faces. The world isn't getting better or more Godly. Corruption and lawlessness isn't lessening in Washington DC. Our favorite sports team may or may not win. Our preferred political candidate might not win his or her next election.

GOD IS.... Yet God is eternal, immutable, unchangeable, and produces a joy that strengthens us even in a dark and terrible world.

**In John 15** Jesus says that when we live in Him and He in us, only then will our joy be full. Listen to what He reveals in chapter 16:

**John 16:16-24 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> “A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.”

<sup>17</sup> So some of his disciples said to one another, “What is this that he says to us, ‘A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’; and, ‘because I am going to the Father’?”

<sup>18</sup> So they were saying, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We do not know what he is talking about.”

<sup>19</sup> Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, “Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, ‘A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me’?”

<sup>20</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.

<sup>21</sup> When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.

<sup>22</sup> So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

<sup>23</sup> In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.

<sup>24</sup> Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

HOLY SPIRIT LIVES IN THEM. The disciples are sad because Jesus is leaving...yet their sorrow turns to joy when He sends the Holy Spirit to live inside of them. They are the new Temple of God, housing God's Spirit. Look at verse 22: “no one will take your joy from you” because now it's that of the HS.

Nehemiah ends like this:

**Nehemiah 12:43 (NKJV)**

<sup>43</sup> Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice



with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off.

Read the wording carefully: GOD MADE THEM rejoice. They weren't merely looking to the wall's completion or their release from captivity, they attached their hearts to God Who poured in His supernatural fruit of joy that was so exuberant it was "heard from afar off."