

The Joy of the Lord

Today's message is on joy.

Someone has aptly said that

"Joy is proof to the world that God can fully satisfy the human heart."

Paul wrote this summary statement in his letter to the Philippians,

"Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice" (Phil. 4:4).

To rejoice is to be glad. The root word in the Hebrew means, "to brighten up, to make glad, to be merry."

In Psalm 37:4 the word, delight is used,

"Delight yourself in the Lord;

and He will give you the desires of your heart." Ps. 37:4

Andrew Murray wrote,

"Joy is not luxury or a mere accessory in the Christian life. It is the sign that we are really living in God's wonderful love, and that love satisfies us."

God's word says this about rejoicing:

Rejoice always, in every circumstance, rejoice in hope,

rejoice in salvation, rejoice in sufferings, rejoice in the Lord.

In how many believers would the quality of joy characterize their lives?

Why does joy seem at times to be so elusive?

The illusive nature of Happiness

Since happiness is dependent on circumstances or happenings, people try to manipulate their circumstances so they can be happy.

In the 'Declaration of Independence' we are told that certain rights are endowed by our Creator - life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness -

[Thomas Jefferson had originally written '*possessions*' in place of '*happiness*'].

In certain ways it is this pursuit of happiness that is the problem.

Because happiness depends on happenings,

what happens when happenings for our happiness don't happen?

My daughter, Stephanie, was in a play called Oklahoma, in high school.

It was a musical, in which they sang a song that went,

"O what a beautiful morning, O what a beautiful day,
I've got a wonderful feeling, Everything's going my way...".

As long as things happen our way, we can be happy. But if circumstances don't go our way, then the feeling goes away, along with our happiness.

Malcolm Muggeridge wrote,

“I can say that I never knew what joy was like until I gave up pursuing happiness, or cared to live until I chose to die. For these two discoveries I am beholden to Jesus.”

Jesus' message in His Sermon on the Mount, began with the beatitudes, in which He used the Greek word for happiness, translated blessed:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness... blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”
(Matt. 5:3, 4, 10-12).

Blessed – macarios – was a word meaning ‘to be happy’. But the happiness Jesus spoke of was not dependent on circumstances; on the contrary it was in spite of them. Being poor, or mourning, or being humbled by pain, aren't the keys that unlock happiness in today's culture.

The Scripture emphasizes joy, a personal happiness greater than circumstance.

Today we'll take a closer look at the post Exilic writings of Nehemiah as we consider the topic of 'Joy.'

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. Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God. And all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!” while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azriah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. Then 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 were weeping when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, “Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to

him who has nothing prepared for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.” All the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them. (Neh. 8:5-12)

The Great Strength of Joy

The people of Israel under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra had completed rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem in 52 days; and this was the day of celebration. The gates and walls of Jerusalem had been destroyed 140 years earlier by the Babylonians when they conquered the people of Israel. The people had been carried them off into exile and now that they were allowed to return the city was still in the same condition, leaving them subject to attack and plunder by vicious neighbors. In this place surrounded by enemies the city’s walls were now completed, providing the potential for safety, security, and hope for future prosperity as a nation.

It had been a long process with many setbacks. They had to build with a sword in one hand and a tool in the other. They endured years of disappointment, threats of violence, political injunctions that stopped all progress, and many discouraging words. Being surrounded by violent enemies, under Nehemiah’s and Ezra’s leadership the children of Israel finally succeeded.

The great spiritual lesson of this book speaks loud and clear:

“There is no winning without working and warring. There is no opportunity without opposition. There is no “open door” set before us without there being many adversaries to obstruct our entering it. Whenever the saints say, let us arise and build,” the enemy says, “Let us arise and oppose,” There is no triumph without trouble. There is no victory without vigilance. There is a cross in the way to every crown that is worth wearing.”¹

In chapter eight we see that Ezra the priest reads the word of God to God’s people and then he teaches it to them so that there is a good understanding. Here we see a balance between the public proclamation of the Word in the large assembly and the personal application in the smaller groups. [not a bad pattern]

Next we see a response of conviction and grief. They mourned for their sins, “for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20). The law can’t save us; it

¹ J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), p. 230.

can only convince us that we need to be saved and then point us to Jesus Christ the Savior.

The Jewish calendar shows the Day of Atonement followed by the Feast of Tabernacles, an entire week of celebration. – conviction, cleansing, celebration.

- Understanding of the Scriptures and celebration.
- Acknowledgment of their past sins as well as God’s mercy.
- Renewed commitment to follow the Lord and keep His Law.

Under the law’s conviction they worship and weep; but with much left to rebuild, Nehemiah and Ezra’s counsel was

“Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength!” v 10

It is as wrong to mourn when God has forgiven us as it is to rejoice when sin has conquered us. The sinner has no reason for rejoicing and the forgiven child of God has no reason for mourning. We know what it means to experience God’s power that transforms sorrow into joy.

“Joy-Stealers”

What keeps us from rejoicing?

1. Mental Negativity – cynicism

Plato said, “Thinking is the talking of the soul with itself.”

Because we are surrounded by negativity we must focus on the positive.

- As a man thinks in his heart so he is. (Pr. 23:7)
- Set your mind on the things above,

not on the things that are on earth. (Col. 3:2)

George Sweeting writes,

“When my gasoline tank registers empty, I know it is full – that is, it is full of air. But the automobile was not built to run on air. To displace the air, I must fill it with gasoline. God’s cure for evil thinking is to fill our minds with that which is good.”

- Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. (Phil. 4:8)

God’s method of enacting changes in our character is through our minds. At salvation we are born again. At that time our spirit is made alive as we are

indwelt by the Holy Spirit. In the interval our soul (our mind, will, emotions) needs to become more like Christ. As we renew our minds with the Scripture and submit our will to Christ, it will result in positive responses from our emotions. Ultimately our behaviors will be brought under the control of Christ.

Paul writes,

“... be transformed by the renewing of your mind,
 so that you may prove in practice what the will of God is,
 that which is good and acceptable and perfect”
 (Rom. 12:2b).

What you put into your mind is what you think about, and ultimately, what you become. Putting the Word of God in our minds will produce worship.

2. Worry

“Worry is fear looking for a cause.”

Worry is rooted in a false view of material things – a temporal value system.

Concern over the things that only last for time instead of eternity.

{This is much like temporary happiness that results from happenings.}

Jesus connected the dots between seeking after earthly riches and worry when He said, “For this reason [It is impossible to serve God and Mammon] ...I say to you ‘Do not worry...’” Matt. 6:24-25)

Worry is being overly concerned and fearful of not having earthly wealth.

The solution to worry is found in Jesus’ words,

“But seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness,
 and all these things will be added to you.” (verse 33)

A mother giving birth is in pain until the baby is born.

Her pain is not replaced by joy it is transformed into joy.

Difficult circumstances are pregnant with joy,

and by faith we must give that joy time to be born.

3. Lack of Prayer

The solution to worry is prayer.

Paul wrote,

“Don’t worry about anything, but pray about everything.” (Phil 4:6)

The solution to great difficulties is prayer.

James writes,

“But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” (Jm. 1:5)

Abraham Lincoln wrote,

“I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me seemed insufficient for the day.”

Philipp Melanchthon said,

“Trouble and perplexity drive us to prayer, and prayer driveth away trouble and perplexity.”

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed about His going to the cross.

“Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done. Now an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him. And being in agony, He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground” (Luke 22:42-44).

It’s like going for a swim in an icy pond. As difficult as it would be you wouldn’t give it a second thought if your small child had just fallen through through the ice. It seems that Jesus’ prayer time infused Him with strength to face the will of God.

The writer to the Hebrews wrote this of Jesus,

“...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” (Heb. 12:2-3)

Prayer isn’t twisting God’s arm to get my way; it is making my soul happy in the Lord, so that I am willing to submit to His will. Prayer may not change the circumstances, but it will give us the strength of a rejoicing heart.

Blessed is the man who finds out which way God is moving
and then gets going in the same direction.

A confederate soldier was the source of this prayer:

Asked God for strength, that I might achieve;
I was made weak, that I may learn humbly to obey.
I asked God for health, that I may do greater things;
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.
I asked for riches, that I may be happy;
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing I asked for but everything I hoped for.
I am, among all men, most richly blessed.

Closing Prayer

Father, this morning I submit my will to You. I commit to You my struggle for peace, my fears of the future, my desire for fulfillment, my need for security. I surrender to Your will, no matter what the cost, I lay it down at Your feet...
I dedicate my life to You as my Lord. Instead of complaining I give thanks and ask You to open my eyes to all the blessings that I normally overlook. Instead of feeling sorry for myself, I purpose to give You a sacrifice of praise. In the place of selfish pursuits, I ask for guidance step by step into the center of Your will. By Your strength I will walk through the challenges I face, rejoicing in every step, for You are with me to the end. Amen.