

# “The Root of Joy”

An Advent sermon preached at Hillcrest Reformed on December 13, 2009

Text: Nehemiah 8:1-12

Proposition: **The root of our rejoicing is God’s grace.**

Outline:

Intro: Being commanded to JOY, when we don’t feel like it. How can I really have joy, deep abiding Joy?

I. Background Ezra/Nehemiah: Seeking Joy in the Restoration; still there was a deeper longing . . .

II. 8:1-9 – Hungry for the Word of God (The Bible brought them condemnation, or did it?)

III. 8:10-12 Finding Joy in God’s grace!

IV. The root of our rejoicing is God’s grace – from an OT festival to our Christian holiday!!

Conclusion: Gary Haugen and the International Justice Mission

Intro: Each week while I was growing up, my mother would make her weekly run to the grocery store after work. Sometime between 5:30-6PM each week, we would hear the door from the open and my mother yelling to my siblings and me, “Would you guys like to help bring in the groceries?” Each time, I would “patiently” listen to her words while I was sitting on my rear watching television. Then with as much smug adolescent sarcasm I could muster, I would reply, “No thank you, I would not like help bringing in the groceries.”

To which my wise mother would say, let me try again, “You guys WOULD like to bring in the groceries for me, wouldn’t you?” To which I would sheepishly reply, “Of course, mother.”

Have you ever been asked to do something you did not want to do? Maybe like me you responded in such a way to indicate just how little you wanted to perform said task. Or maybe you did it outwardly, while inwardly you were kicking and screaming. It’s not easy to perform tasks that we are not excited about . . . But what do we do when the God of the universe commands us to something that goes against how we feel at the moment. In particular, I am thinking about the dozens and dozens of times, God commands us to be joyful or to rejoice in all circumstances. For example: <sup>NIV</sup> **Psalm 95:1** Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. <sup>2</sup> Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.

How can God expect me to rejoice all the time? Aren’t there reasons (or excuses) I can use to not obey this particular command?

In a recent Christianity Today article, the author quotes German Theologian Karl Barth:

*"It is astonishing, how many references there are in the Old and New Testaments to delight, joy, bliss, exultation, merry-making, and rejoicing, and how emphatically these are demanded from the Book of Psalms to the Epistle to the Philippians." [the Christianity Today writer continues]*

*Indeed, from "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth!" (Ps. 100:1) to "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4)—and dozens of places before and after and in between—we are urged to lead joy-filled lives. When believers do a little self-reflection, not many of us point to joylessness as the thing that needs attention. Mostly we flagellate [condemn] ourselves for our undisciplined discipleship. We issue calls to repent of our consumerism, sign ecumenical concords to heal our divisions, and issue manifestos to care for the poor and the planet. No one has yet issued a joint ecumenical statement on the need for Christians to be more joyful. Yet it's right there in the Bible, over and over: "I say it again: Rejoice!" [end quote]*

As far as I have discovered, I have not found any escape clause to these commands. We are called to joy, regular, daily, persistent rejoicing no matter our trials.

Now, just maybe Christmas time could be different. Maybe this is a time where JOY comes a bit more easily. We give and receive presents, we spend time with our families, and we often get a few days off of work. But I suspect that every person here has seen Christmas fail to deliver on abiding joy. The presents are unwrapped, the family leaves, and we're left at home wishing there was something more to this "most wonderful time of the year." It's as if we experience a Christmas hangover. And to be fair, for others, Christmas is the most painful time of the year. Christmas becomes a sad reminder that their families are separated by great distances or that loved ones are no longer alive to share in the season. So too, Christmas can be a time that highlights financial difficulties.

*Transition: So where do we turn? Is there any hope of finding an abiding joy. A joy that leads to a kind of rejoicing that just cannot stop. A joy that's rooted in something so deep and so unfading that even the blackest moments of today and the blackest times in our future can still be times when the singing just simply does not stop.*

*Well, I think we have hope, and I find it in 12 verses in the Old Testament book Nehemiah. So, if you would turn with me to Nehemiah chapter 8, I'd like to see just how God might instruct us today to FIND THE TRUE ROOT OF JOY.*

I. Background: Let me give a little background on the passage we will be studying today. The book of Nehemiah records events related to Israel in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Here are a few important dates and events that set the stage for our passage:

In 605 and 597 there were attacks on Jerusalem and Judah by the Babylonian empire. Many Jews were killed and many deported at this time to Babylon (this was when Daniel, Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego were taken). Then in 586BC, Jerusalem was attacked and destroyed by the Babylonian empire. An entire civilization was nearly wiped off the planet. It was here in 586, the Jewish temple, the one Solomon built, was destroyed, the most sacred place for God's people.

The city laid in ruins for several decades. But then in 539 BC (about 50 yrs later), the Babylonian empire was destroyed by the Persian Empire, and a year later in 538BC, the Persian Ruler, Cyrus allowed some Jews to return under the leadership of Zerubbabel to rebuild the Jewish temple. You can read in Ezra ch. 3 just how bitter-sweet the rebuilding of the temple was for the Jews.

Some celebrated the return and rebuilding, while the older people wept as they realized that this rebuilt temple paled in comparison to the beauty of Solomon's temple.

80 years after Zerubbabel came, the Persians allowed a second return, this time led by the priest Ezra in 458BC. Often people will call Zerubbabel, the builder of the temple, and Ezra the restorer of worship. But the restoration of the faith was no easy task. Decades of captivity and decades of Jerusalem in shambles left the spiritual lives of those in Judah in a pretty sad condition. Ezra was faithful to his task and many people repented.

Most likely, the year of our text is 445BC (13 years after Ezra). This time, Nehemiah has returned to Judah to rebuild the walls. (remember: Zerubbabel, builder of the temple; Ezra, restorer of worship; and now Nehemiah, builder of the walls). What it means by walls is that Jerusalem, like most ancient cities, was an enclosed city of fortified walls. But these walls had been torn down by the Babylonians. So for over 100 years, the city laid desolate and any would-be attacker could have easily attacked the city. Nehemiah's task was to rebuild these protective walls in order for the city to become protected by foreign enemies once again. The first 6 chapters of the book of Nehemiah record in detail just how each of these walls were rebuilt. They had opposition in the process, but in just a few months, Jerusalem had become a fortress upon a hill once again.

*Transition: This leads us to chapter 8. The work is completed and now it seems fitting to have a religious service in honor of the accomplishment. Maybe this will give them reason to rejoice. Maybe now after decades of struggle and abuse, joy can come once again to the people of God.*

*So, they call Ezra, the priest who has been leading them for 13 years to come and read Scripture to them. Let's go to the text.*

<sup>NIV</sup> **Nehemiah 8:1** all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. <sup>2</sup> So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. <sup>3</sup> He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. <sup>4</sup> Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam. <sup>5</sup> Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. <sup>6</sup> Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. <sup>7</sup> The Levites-- Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah-- instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. <sup>8</sup> They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. <sup>9</sup> Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD

your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

- I. 8:1-9 – Hungry for the Word of God (and yet, the Bible brought them condemnation, or did it?) There is ONE KEY THING I want to highlight in the first 9 verses:

It is this: THESE PEOPLE WERE HUNGRY FOR THE WORD OF GOD!

In verse 1, all the people gather at the Water Gate. This is a gate on the eastern side of the city of Jerusalem. It is not close very close to the temple, and in ch. 3, you can read that it is one of the gates with a tower nearby. Near this gate there was an open square large enough for the small population of returned Jews to congregate.

Secondly, the day is the first day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month, which according to Lev. 23 is called the Feast of Trumpets. Lev. 23 details a number of special feasts God has for His people. On this day is the Feast of Trumpets, and then later in the 7<sup>th</sup> month, they will celebrate the day of atonement and the festival of booths.

Note, that Ezra's duty is to bring a reading from the Scriptures. These Jews have learned throughout their time in exile that God's Word and their adherence to it is even more significant to the Temple itself.

In vv. 2-3, we read that nearly the entire population (probably only excepting infants and the physically infirm) have come to hear. The reading lasts somewhere between 5-6 hours.

Verse 4 makes a passing reference to a wooden platform in which Ezra stood as well as over a dozen Levites. Some might fly by this and think, that's nice a platform. But what should get our attention is that these people were preparing for this event. This is not some thrown together reading; these people have intentionally come together to hear God's Word. To the point that they even made a platform.

Then in vv. 5-8, catch how reverently they desire to hear and understand God's Word.

v. 5 – people stood when the Word was read

v. 6 – the people bow before the Word, say Amen ("let it be so") – they are ready to hear

vv. 7-8 – look at how painstakingly the proper understanding of the Word of God was

Let me read a quote to you from the editor of Christianity Today, Mark Galli, on his insights into listening and hungering for the Word of God:

*Whenever the Bible is read, a hush should come over us. We should be inching toward the edge of our seats, leaning forward, turning our best ear toward the speaker, fearful we'll miss a single word—the deeds and words and character of Almighty and Merciful God are being revealed! In a world of suffering and pain, of doubt and despair, of questions about the meaning and purpose of existence, we are about to hear of God's glory, forgiveness, mercy and love, of his intention for the world, of his promise to make it all good in the end, of the way to join his people, of the means to abide with him forever! And there we sit, tapping our feet, mentally telling the preacher to get on with it.*

*But if we take the trouble to listen, really listen, to that Word, we'll discover something else marvelous: that the One being revealed is as patient with us as we are impatient with his Word, and as enamored with us as we are bored with him. Ah yes, even more enamored.*

Why were the Jews so focused on the Word of God? Why were they so hungry?

Thought: It appears that the Exile was a helpful reminder of how ugly their syncretism was . . . they really wanted to be right with God and to worship Him alone! Judgment and the Lord's discipline had done just what it was supposed to do; bring the people of God back to God! The pain of losing loved ones, the pain of losing their homeland, the pain of losing their history and their culture, made them fully aware that they needed to follow God. God, YHWH, had told them time and time again that sin would be punished . . . and it had happened and they never wanted it to happen again.

Now let me ask a different question, Why are we not so hungry for the Word of God?

Why do we have a take-it-or-leave-it attitude about the Bible? Here's my thought, we have it too good. Life is easy. Or maybe it's not easy, but we drown out the evil in this world through differing forms of medications and distractions. Whether it be TV, the internet, movies, alcohol, sex, pornography, books, or fancy vacations. We coddle ourselves and convince ourselves that God can be secondary, or that God can even be completely ignored.

Let me tell you, I pray that it does not take a destruction of the world as we know it to make us hungry for God's word. I pray that God doesn't use something like a divorce or a death to wake us up to the ugliness of our sin. O that we would hunger for God's Word.

But, note what happens in verse 9. The change that God's word effects on the congregation of 5<sup>th</sup> century listeners.

<sup>9</sup> Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

Can you picture it? Thousands have gathered to hear God's Word. They have reverently listened, and now the mob is balling their eyes out. Their hearts are aching. Old fears have probably been resurfaced. And why? Well, remember Ezra is reading from the Law of Moses. He is reading the 10 Commandments, he is reading about the devotion God expects for His people, he is reading about the very same expectations God had given to the Jews before the Babylonians had come and annihilate their city. The Jews have just rebuilt the city, and they hear God's Word condemn them of breaking the very same commands as before. They are guilty!! Guilty! Guilty! And they are scared to death!!

Once again, I ask now in regards to us: Does the Bible ever scare you? Do you ever trip over the verses, like in Gal. 5:19-21 that read: "Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness,<sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, Gal 5<sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

The Bible has this awful tendency of knocking all of our confidence to pieces. It did it to the Jews in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. and it ought to do the same thing to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century AD. Even those who love the Bible and hunger to know its truths, stand naked and defiled according to God's holy standards. There's nothing we can do. We are only left to weep and cry out, and to long for someone to save us, to bring us life out of our sin-stained deaths. But that's why vv. 10-12 becomes so important. For it is in these final verses where we taste the JOY, we taste hope.

## II. 8:10-12 Finding Joy in God's grace!

<sup>10</sup> Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." <sup>11</sup> The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve." <sup>12</sup> Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

Remember, v. 9 the people are commanded to stop weeping, and now in vv. 10-12, the people are commanded to go party. Eat choice food (which in the original Hebrew reads go eat the fat), that is, eat the best food you've got. Second, drink sweet drinks, probably referring to the best wine. Then, it commands them to make sure every person can share in this rich feast. No person should be neglected: whether they are poor, sick, or disenfranchisement. The call for rejoicing is for every person.

But, the heart of all this is explained in these words: This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." This day: That is the Feast of Trumpets. This day is a sacred day to the Lord. A day that we are called to feast. But Why, why can we feast and have joy. FOR THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH.

A couple of things needs to get explained about this verse:

First, the New International Version (NIV) translates the Hebrew word מְעוֹז (ma'oz) "strength". This is a poor translation for a word that every other time the NIV properly translates as refuge, fortress or stronghold. <sup>NIV</sup> **Psalm 28:8** The LORD is the strength ('oz) of his people, a fortress (ma'oz) of salvation for his anointed one. <sup>NIV</sup> **Psalm 37:39** The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD; he is their stronghold (ma'oz) in time of trouble. So this is the first point. We need to translate this: The joy of the Lord is our REFUGE/FORTRESS!

Second, the term "joy of the Lord" is a construction in the Hebrew that could either mean, the joy we have toward the Lord (objective genitive) or the Joy the Lord has for us (subjective genitive)! And in this context how could Israel's joy be their refuge? The people are crying, weeping, and in totally despair. They don't have joy. Their joy is not the refuge. So it means that the joy of the Lord is *God's joy toward us*. Our refuge, our fortress in the midst of our doubts and fears is that God rejoices over us. He delights in us.

So, what did this mean to the original audience in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC? God's joy for us, THIS (note pronoun adds emphasis!) is your refuge. It's all about covenant! God had chosen long ago

a special people for Himself. These people were called the Jews, Israel. He called them his treasured possession. They were his special people. He chose to delight in them, to rejoice in them. So, on this day when the Law was read, Ezra and Nehemiah wanted to remind people of God's covenant faithfulness with Israel. *Their security was not in their rebuilt temple. Their security was not in the restoration of sacrifices. Their security was not in the rebuilt walls of Nehemiah. The real fortress for Israel, their stronghold against death and sin was God!* His choice to make Him his people, that was their refuge. And how could they put their faith in this God? How could they act out that they trusted in God's provision? Answer: they needed to participate in the Feasts of God's people. This was a sacred day, the Feast of Trumpets. And God's covenant people needed to participate in God's covenant celebrations! Their joy could be rooted in God's joy.

In other words, the root of their rejoicing was God's grace! He had chosen them, despite their sin, and despite their idolatry. Check out the final words of v. 12: <sup>NIV</sup> **Nehemiah 8:12** Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

Yes, it was appropriate for them to mourn over the state of their souls at first. They were law breakers, they had broken their covenant with God . . . BUT God had not abandoned his promises to them. And when they understood that, they left in great joy. Their city was still in shambles, many of their kinsmen were still spread out across the Middle East far from the land of Israel . . . and yet, they had found the root of JOY, God's abundant grace. So what about us? How does this story, 500 years before Jesus even walked the earth, help us find JOY in Christmas 2009! How can we plumb the depths of God's joy for us and then respond with unceasing joy in our lives as well.

### III. The root of our rejoicing is God's grace – from an OT festival to our Christian holiday!!

Like, the Israelites of Nehemiah 8, I think we need to go through an important cycle for us to get our hands around true joy.

And I think the process looks something like this:

1. Hear God's Word: We need to be just as expectant this day as the Jews were centuries ago. We need to lean in and hear the truth of God's Word. His call for holiness, his commands for perfection.
2. Weep/Wail over Our Sin: And then we must weep that we fall very short of God's holy standards. We lie, steal, cheat, lust, and covet . . . and to top them all off we get prideful and think that we don't need God every second of every day.
3. Understand God's grace: But then we remember that Jesus Christ came to earth. In many ways, Christmas and Easter have supplanted all the Jewish feasts of before. For on these two Christian feasts, we remember that God sent his divine Son to earth as a man. And this Son lived and died so that we do not have to! God loved us, while we were yet sinners. God's grace and delight in us began even before we ever turned to Him in faith. O, but we can choose to believe today for the 100<sup>th</sup> time and the 1<sup>st</sup> time.

4. Embrace it: Which leads me to step 4, we have to embrace God's grace. And this grace is manifested only in a Person, Jesus Christ. We are not saved b/c we believe God loves all people. We are not saved because we go to Church. We embrace Jesus, we say, I will Follow Him no matter what. My ways are death, His ways our life. And this is the precipice of JOY; when we take him into our lives, we only have one thing left to do!!
5. Celebrate it: We celebrate God's grace in our lives. The root of our rejoicing is God's grace. So if we have the root, we can expect that our lives will be able to bloom with real, abundant, sustained joy.

The joy of the Lord is our stronghold, our strength, our fortress!

O evil will try to steal our joy. The devil would like nothing other than make you depressed and despondent. But God's grace frees us from this. If God is for us, who can be against us? Think of Jesus as recorded in Hebrews 12, that Jesus for the JOY set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame! Did you get that? Jesus withstood suffering because He knew there was JOY on the other side. So too, with us, suffering, pain, and hurt can all be washed up in a deep abiding JOY!

Which leads me to my final story:

Gary Haugen is the leader of an organization called the International Justice Mission (or IJM) for short. The IJM goes around the world combating sexual trafficking, childhood slavery, police brutality, unjust imprisonments, and a myriad of other human evils. What's fascinating about their ministry is that a fundamental plank of their organization is JOY. They know that without JOY, there is no possible way they could day in and day out combat the ugly things of this world. They laugh often in staff meetings, they celebrate regularly, and worship their Savior constantly. They will not forget that JOY comes from God. He rejoices over us, and we too can now rejoice over Him.

The end of the Christianity Today article I mentioned earlier reads like this:

*But is it not truer to say that we will not make progress on the human catastrophe until we first rediscover joy? The gospel [of Jesus Christ] remains a scandal, indeed, because it announces joy right when everything is falling apart, just when today's experts offer "sober assessments of the current situation," and in their euphoric moments can only say they remain "cautiously optimistic." There is a time to ponder the sobering reality of evil, to write the occasional dirge. But G. K. Chesterton knew well the greater truth—which is why the Bible harped on it so. A person is fully human, he says, "when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial. Melancholy should be an innocent interlude, a tender and fugitive frame of mind; praise should be the permanent pulsation of the soul. Pessimism is at best an emotional half-holiday; joy is the uproarious labor by which all things live." (CT – Online – December 7, 2009)*

God's commands for our joy are not optional. And yet, we must continually go to the fountain of God's grace if we will be joyful people. So, As you prepare for the celebration of our Lord's first coming and as you await our Lord's victorious second coming, remember THE ROOT OF REJOICING IS GOD'S GRACE!