

Introduction

I'd like to begin with a question. What is the one condition in their nature that God and children enjoy in abundance but that most adults lack? The answer is "**joy.**" The most striking difference between God and children on the one hand and most adults on the other is the joy they have. That's problematic for those adults though and Nehemiah 8:9-12 teaches us why. It's because the joy of the Lord is our strength and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

Gloomy Christians

In 445 BC, Nehemiah and thousands of exiled Jews returned to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls. It was a massive undertaking and they celebrated its completion by having an assembly. During that assembly, the scribe Ezra read portions of the Law of Moses. But the people didn't rejoice like they were supposed to when he did. They were so convicted by it, according to verse 9, that they wept instead. But weeping was inappropriate to the occasion. So Nehemiah exhorted them not to and explained why in verse 10, "**the joy of the Lord is your strength.**"

God's people 2400 years ago desperately needed to hear that and you know what? So do we. A pastor tells a revealing story. A checkout clerk at a grocery store scanned his savings card and his name came up on the computer. She recognized him when it did as the pastor of his church. Whereupon she stopped, looked him in the eye, and said, "**We always know when your church lets out on Sunday – saddest, meanest group we deal with all week long.**" Whether that was true or not, that's how many secular people perceive Christians and for our purposes today, I focus on the first word she used, "**saddest.**"

Her comment reminds me of James Joyce's celebrated novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In it, Joyce explains his hero's decision not to become a priest. He was afraid that his face would become like the faces of the religious people he knew: "**A mirthless**

mask reflecting a sunken day sourfavored and devout, shot with pink tinges of suffocated anger.” Is that what we see when we look in the mirror, **“a mirthless mask reflecting a sunken day?”**

The truth is that’s exactly what many Christians see and here’s why. Look at a key word in verses 9, 10, and 11, **“holy.”** Holiness is one of the Bible’s dominant themes. It teaches that God is holy and that we should be too. The problem is that many Christians today connect holiness with gloominess. They’ve somehow gotten the idea that sanctified people are solemn people – that spiritual people are serious people. So they’ve shut celebration and joy out of their lives and are, as a result, stuffy, stodgy, and stiff.

Joyful Christians

But they, and we, shouldn’t be. Notice something in verses 9, 10, and 11. Nehemiah observed in each that **“this day is holy.”** He then revealed how the Jews should respond because it was. **“Do not mourn or weep”** (verse 9). **“Do not be grieved”** (verse 10). And **“Do not be grieved”** again (verse 11). Commentator Derek Kidner explains what that teaches us, **“Three times in this sort paragraph it is pointed out that holiness and gloominess go ill together.”** He’s absolutely right. Holiness and gloominess go ill together, which implies what human life proves. Truly holy people aren’t gloomy people.

What are they then? The word **“joy”** in verse 10 tells us. They’re joyful people. I wrote a note in my Bible beside verse 10. It says, **“Holiness and joy are comrades.”** So, holy people are joyful people.

There’s a reason they are. It’s because they’re like God and God is joyful. He is in fact the most joyful and exuberant being in the universe. The great G.K. Chesterton explained it this way: **“It may be that He (God) has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we are.”** That is such a penetrating insight. God truly does have the appetite of infancy. I wish you could see my grandson Zechariah’s response when he walks into

Chuck E. Cheese. It's sheer and unadulterated joy. His response is a crack in time and space that gives us just a glimpse into the sheer and unadulterated joy of God.

It also gives us a glimpse into our divine destiny as disciples or friends of Jesus. Joy is our divine destiny now in this life. In John 15:11, Jesus describes what He desires for us, **"that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full."** We can have a **"Jesus-joy,"** a fullness of joy now in this life. But joy is also our divine destiny forever in the life to come. As C.S. Lewis said it, **"Joy is the serious business of heaven."** I'd summarize it this way. God made us to be joyful now and forever.

Joy Is Our Strength

That clearly implies that joy isn't a luxury in our lives. It's a downright necessity. We desperately need to be joyful and the last line in verse 10 reveals why. It's because the joy of the Lord is our strength.

Remember the context of Nehemiah's admonition in verse 10. The Jewish people were mourning their sins. That helps us define more particularly the kind of strength to which he was referring. It was spiritual strength.

I'd explain it this way. The presence of joy is our spiritual strength. It's our first line of defense against sin. It makes sins look not good to us, which has the effect of weakening the power of temptation over us. In contrast, the absence of joy is our spiritual weakness. It makes sin look good to us, which has the effect of strengthening the power of temptation over us. The bottom line is the presence of joy strengthens us and the absence of joy weakens us in our efforts to do what is right.

Do you realize what that means? No one is more vulnerable to the attacks of Satan, our fallen nature, and our fallen culture than joyless Christians are. In contrast, no one is more invulnerable to them than joyful Christians are. Joyless Christians are Satan's dream. Joyful Christians are Satan's nightmare. Be Satan's nightmare! Be joyful!

That's our call and we answer it by apprenticing ourselves to Jesus. We make the decision to be with Him in order to learn and do all that He says. We then arrange our affairs around carrying out that decision.

When we do that, God, through the Holy Spirit, reproduces His joy in us. Joy isn't an emotion. It does have accompanying emotional tones like happiness and enthusiasm. But it isn't an emotion. It's a condition or state of being instead. The prepositional phrase "**of the Lord**" in verse 10 reveals that God Himself possesses this condition. And through the Holy Spirit, He slowly but surely reproduces that condition of His in us as we apprentice ourselves to Jesus. Being joyful, in other words, is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit.

But it isn't only His work. It's ours as well. We must partner with Him in it by doing two things, each of which I'm going to explain.

Look to the Goodness of This Life

First, we look to the goodness of this life.

That's what Nehemiah and the Jews did. In verses 9, 10, and 11, He told them that it was a holy day and in verse 10, what they should do because it was? "**Eat of the fat**" and "**drink of the sweet.**" You won't find that verse in any Jenny Craig literature. Eat rich food and drink sweet beverages. I don't know about you but I don't have any problem at all with a command like that. It's like being told to eat Hostess Chocolate Cupcakes and to drink chocolate milk. Nehemiah instructed the Jews, in other words, and us to look to the goodness of this life.

American poet Henry David Thoreau captured the gist of this in his acclaimed declaration: "**I wanted to live deliberately, I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, To put to rout all that was not life and not, when I had come to die, discover that I had not lived.**" That's powerful and true. We should live that way.

Now, there's an old axiom that teaches us how, "**Take time to smell the roses.**" Consider what it means to smell the roses. First, we bring the rose before our senses. We hold it as close to our nose and

eyes as we can – breathing in its fragrance and gazing at its colors, features, and form. Second, we bring the rose before our minds. We reflect on its fragrance and beauty and ponder what that tells us about the God who invented and made it. That’s how we smell the roses. What we do with them, we do with all the good things in life. We focus on them. We bring them as fully before our senses and minds as we can.

Take eating an apple for instance. I observe its shape and colors before taking the first bite. After taking the first bite, I notice its texture and smell. I then eat it slowly savoring the taste. I focus on the pleasure it gives and thank God at least several times for it. I don’t just eat an apple. I celebrate it.

But it isn’t just apples. It’s showers, sunsets, symphonies, spring rains, winter snowfalls, clever puns, creative metaphors, good jokes, breathtaking technologies, relationships, and countless other good things. Suck out the marrow of all those things. Experience them as if it were the last time you would. Look to the goodness of this life.

Look to the Goodness of the Life to Come

We partner with the Holy Spirit in creating joy by doing a second thing. Look to the goodness of the life to come.

We all know by experience that life in this fallen world can be hard. We can never know the destructive things that loom in our near or distant futures. All of us, in that sense, have the “**sword of Damocles**” hanging over our heads and sometimes it falls. So, how can we possibly be joyful in a life like that?

It’s by looking to the goodness of the life to come. I’m referring of course to our full and never-ending life with God after we die. This life on earth is simply a prelude to that one. So, we look to all the goodness that we’re going to experience in it.

Author John Ortberg calls what I’m talking about here “**eschatological thinking**.” Eschatology is about what we call final things. Eschatological thinking, therefore, means viewing everything in

light of our resurrection and the ultimate triumph of Jesus. Ortberg claims that joy flows from that kind of thinking and he's right.

I read about a bride who had the worst possible experience a bride could have. She vomited during the most dramatic part of the wedding ceremony, the processional, when everyone's eyes were on her. At the wedding reception afterward, though, she was as happy as she could be. When a tactless guest asked her how she could be, after what happened, she cheerfully replied, **"I still got the groom."**

That same thing is true of us if we're disciples or friends of Jesus. According to the book of Revelation, no matter what happens to us in this life, heaven's bride still gets the groom in the end. We get Jesus and an astonishing eternal life with Him and that's cause for joy.

Dallas Willard helps us get perspective on this in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*. He writes: **"What of victims of sexual abuse or of dreadful diseases, birth defects, war, and other terrible things? If we have suffered terribly, we must choose not to let that be our focus. We must, if we can, focus on God, God's world, and ourselves as included in it with a glorious destiny of our own. Gratitude then focuses forward on redemption, and on the future that is given to us in God's future, come what may."**

There's no doubt about it. Focusing forward to our full and eternal life to come generates hope and joy. And the more details we know about that life, the more joy it generates. So, learn in detail what our life to come is about and then routinely look to it.

Conclusion

That then is how we become joyful people. Apprentice ourselves to Jesus. Then look to the goodness of this life and the life to come. The joy doing so produces is our strength. But it's also something else and I close with this. Joy stems from our awareness of God's blessings. It isn't only our strength, therefore. It's our gratitude as well. Our joy thanks God! So, be a thankful people by being a joyful people.