

KINGS NORTON BAPTIST CHURCH

Sunday 3rd January 2021 10 am

Motto text sermon - *The Joy of the Lord is your strength*

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." Nehemiah 8:10

Welcome to all

Opening Scripture

Hymn MP 498 O God our help in ages past

Scripture Psalm 1

Prayer

Covenant reading

Notices Bible reading plan,

Prayer and Lord's prayer

Communion time

Reading Nehemiah 8:1-12 (page 492)

Matthew 6:25-34

Hymn MP 590 Seek ye first the kingdom of God

Sermon "the joy of the LORD is your strength"

Hymn Joy is a fruit that will not grow (on bulletin)

Closing Prayer: **Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.**" (Eph 3:16-21) check add

Jude 1:24 **To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—**

Close _____

Welcome and pray

■ It's a hot summers day (imagine that if you can), I'm there in my shorts, its sports day and along with hundreds of others we are preparing for our races, the sports fields are crowded. My main race is coming up, there's pressure and I'm nervous. I look around at the sea of faces and I feel worse, what if I have a bad start, or stumble, or come last and finish with no-one to congratulate me at the end. And where is my family they should be here by now, I can't see them anywhere? We line up, at the gun we are off and then as I head down the track I spot my father there in the crowd with his eyes on me – instantly everything changes and my heart is lifted and seeing his presence gives me a deep Joy - whether I win or not.

■ Perhaps in hearing this your mind has gone to the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games and Derek Redmond. His Achilles tendon snapped during the 400 metres race. He pulled up in agony when suddenly his watching father jumped over the barrier, came to the rescue, put his arms around him and helped him to the finish line.

This new year, like the one just gone, will have some surprises, and some trials, be assured of that. Whether you are a follower of Christ or not - none of us know what is coming. How will you face it? How will you finish? ... And where will you find your strength?

You could rely on the uncertainties of your character, or your family if they care enough., or your friends if they care enough. Will you thrive through the trials? Or more likely settle on survival?

Hold up **the joy of the LORD is your strength.**" x2 Nehemiah 8:10

Let us focus on the word Joy x2. How different it is for a follower of Christ. We can go through the worst with Joy. How? Because 'He is with me.' x2 Not as a stoic might, or as a Pollyanna optimist might (a character in a children's novel always saw the +ve) or just surviving - as a fatalist might No a Christian can be joyful in everything, yes everything for Joy is not happiness, or peace and quiet, but a deep sense of His presence with me.

These words we have just read were spoken to people who had just been through a traumatic time. It was a reminder to them in whom their strength lay. My prayer is that for each of us this will be our true experience in 2021.

It is a well-known verse – but what does it mean?

1st the background

How does it fit into Scripture? It is found in Nehemiah, so it is part of the writings concerning God's people after their time of exile in Babylon. God's people had failed to remain faithful to the Lord until the time came when he had had enough.

- Just like a child who refuses to listen and learn, the time for harsher discipline comes. "No more comforts, not more treats and the good things of home - until you change your attitude!"

So there they were sent away from their homeland to see what it was like to live far from home and with godless people. Yet God loved them as a father loves his child and at last the time came for them to come down stairs and rejoin the family. So these writings are essentially restorative. And here God is being brought back into the centre with the setting up of the altar for sacrifice and worship. The temple is being rebuilt, and the walls are being rebuilt.

Part I – they hear and understand God's word and his law.

It was in the seventh month, the time of three Jewish festivals that the people were called together. There they all are, the water Gate (not that one) square is filled with people, men and women, young and old ready to listen. The book of the law is brought out and Ezra, who is raised up on a platform, starts to read, when he does so, the people stand. (Synagogue CofE practice)

It was on that day that the altar was set up, and they began to offer their burnt-offerings, their sacrifices, their worship. They came humbly and thankfully. Their return from captivity with the favour of God fresh in their minds. They had seen their God faithfully fulfilling his earlier promise, a reminder that their God is slow to anger but full of compassion and grace.

In Ezra 3 we have the gathering of God's people for the restoration of worship. So here in our passage in Nehemiah 8 we have something similar, (in fact the start of both chapters is almost identical) Here is Ezra who reads out the books of the law, the books of Moses, the first five books of our bible. The foundations are being relaid.

Men, women and children were there (See Neh 12:43).

Heads of families should bring their families with them to the public worship of God. Children have souls to save, and therefore must come to

learn the word of God so they can gain the knowledge of the Lord and find grace. Jesus warns us: "**Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them**". Bringing children to church is not for them to play, they spend enough time doing that – but so they can hear the word of God. Doesn't God speak to children? Don't hold them back. Our little ones, as they have understanding, are to be trained in Godliness.

One recurring word x4 in the chapter is that people should understand v2,3

The word of God, is for all people not just some, but for everyone to hear and understand.

So in the first instance '**understanding**' would mean language. Aramaic had become the norm since living in Babylon. Hence the need for Translation.

Ne 8:8 "**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.**"

Secondly the word of God is not to be confined to the minister or clergy but to be brought before the congregation. Ezra and those with him were to make it understandable.

- ✚ Reading God's word is good, listening to God's word is good. But when the preacher is explaining it – it brings the reading and the preaching together, and thus makes the reading more intelligible - and the preaching the more convincing.

So there are two things you can see here: They understand what was being said – and we should do all we can to help this. But this was combined with a heart ready to receive, to take it in, they had spiritual understanding.

We can see this because it produced in them a stirring, a conviction. **For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.**" Ne 8:9

- ✚ The word of God, His living word did something, it affected them.

Do you weep? Does the presenting of God's holy Law move you to tears? That is the right response. It shuts our mouths and opens the eyes with tears. Why doesn't God's word affect many today?

Is it because I do not spend hours on this as they did there? – and as the revival preachers in Britain in the past used to?

It was laid out to them so clearly they had no-where to hide. God word's reveals a God who is above all holy and that sin is utterly sinful, it is

dreadful in His sight, misusing his name, setting up idols in the heart, disrespect for parents, dishonesty, jealousy, pampering the body, gluttony, an indifferent, dismissive attitude to God's pronouncements, a view that because I'm not seeing his judgments then the things of God don't matter that much. One day, perhaps very soon, it will come. You will slip and fall. People are leaving this world at a rate of 4 a second. One day it will be you and then immediately those without Christ will be put in a dungeon. You will see the Holy God who made you and gave you life and you will be summoned before him for you to give your account.

For these people then - those years of discipline had produced the desired effect – a change - it had humbled them. God's word had penetrated, now they were listening!

Their gathering that day was not ceremonial but moral. Do you come to church so you can go through the motions and come out the same, unmoved, maybe feeling better about yourself? Then don't come. We are here to worship God Almighty, to bring Him praise, to seek Him, to hear from Him and to draw grace towards my reform.

Those weeping are ready. They do not need the law any more. They have come to the door of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus said "I am the door". And who can enter?

The poor, the poor in spirit, the empty, those who weep over their state before God and their failure, - that makes a person mourn and grieve. If that is happening to you it will make you meek. The fight will go, the pride will go, you – your ego - will go, now you can be filled with Him. The reason you don't receive Christ is because there is too much of you in the way.

Christ's declared "**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled**" that is His invitation - and His promise to you.

Because of what Christ has done on the cross there is a way. Many have stopped up their ears, but if you have ears to hear then for you there is a way

There's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin;

There's a door that is open and you may go in:

At Calvary's cross is where you begin,

When you come as a sinner to Jesus. E.H. Swinstead

"Come to me" Jesus says. Have you come as a sinner to Jesus?

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✚ **The foot of the cross is empty, anyone who comes - does not stay there - but goes away changed and made new.**

These people had done that in their hearts. How do we know that? Because Nehemiah says: "**Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord.**"

This day is sacred to our Lord. God was reminding them that he is a covenant keeping God. We fail and fail – but God never does.

Those who follow Christ are now under a covenant - the covenant in His blood. If you are in that then you are secure, Christ will never fail you.

Motto text **Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.** Ne 8:10

As we have considered understanding the law - now let us think that...

Part II – they understand God's Grace

Look at v9-11 see the immediate context of the verse **Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.** **Do not grieve** All the leaders said:

9 "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep."

Nehemiah said: **10 This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, why?**

Then the centre line/theme - **for the joy of the LORD is your strength."**

The Levites calmed all the people, saying, **11 "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."**

So placed in the centre for all to see – in the midst of that grief – know that **"the joy of the LORD is your strength."**

In other words I say to you who are Christian this morning - if you belong to Christ, - then God is your Father, and you his child will know his discipline – we undergo it for it is good for me - for it confirms that I belong to him. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us in ch.12 ... **If you are not disciplined, then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. We have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! ... God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.** Hebrews 12:8ff

A good child will believe in his father's love even when his father is angry. We believe in the sun when it is under a cloud, and shall we not believe in God when he hides himself? When the door of mercy is shut, then is the time for knocking. When the blessing appears to be lost, then is the season

3b

for seeking; and when favours seem to be denied, then is the hour for bold asking. When we have had many denials we should be the more earnest in prayer, that the hindrance may be removed.

So boldly come to the King of kings, from whom no sincere petitioner was ever dismissed unheard. Come, my soul, get yourself to his chamber and seek the King's face, for you and I are in great need.

For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favour lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning. Psalm 30:5

✚ Grace brings me to know God, and therefore to know Joy

That is to understand grace.

Finally, Joy is found in Knowing Christ, and delighting in Him

The word Joy occurs 238 times in our Bibles (NIV) and simply put Joy is found in God, Joy is found in what he does, Joy is found in the assembly of God's people who went up into his presence with Joy. **I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you with the harp,** (the instrument of praise) **O God, my God.** Ps 43:4

Christ brings me to share in God's love and his joy.

- Picture the scene, mum and dad at home have a hug. Immediately the little boy or girl squeezes into the middle. Why? Yes it is 90% awkwardness - but they are instinctively drawn to the love and security - and find rest in the middle of it.

Jesus brings me into the middle, he says "**As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. "yes Joy is the byproduct of obedience." I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.**" Joh 15:9-11

- Children are rounded, confident, secure, responsible when they know they are loved at home, - so too should a Christian be.

Yes there is Joy with God **You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.** Ac 2:28 (nearly the Motto)

So to be in Christ is - whatever the current circumstances – to know the God of Joy. That is how Paul and Silas, while fastened in irons late at night in the dungeon part of the prison at Philippi, could sing hymn of praise to God.

Christ brings Joy because he makes me able to know God, **You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,** Ps 30:11

We must take ourselves in hand, remind ourselves of what the cross has bought for me, count our blessings, draw in to God, dwell with him. Ps 33 says: **Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him.** Ps 33:1, 3 and so on... May there me Joy when we meet together.

So why was there Joy here at that time?

Ne 8:12 **They... celebrated with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.** Why was their Joy great?

The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. The feast of 'Tabernacles' was a reminder of their time in the wilderness, not of their failings, but of God's presence with them and His faithfulness to provide for them - **he was their God and they were his people.**

When Christ entered this word it says He 'tabernacled' with us. (John 1:14)

And now Christ lives in his people, he is present and **Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.** 2Co 4:16

New system being developed charging cars as they go along the road

That is how it is with Christians: the Holy Spirit constantly affirms Christ's presence in me and gives me that ongoing strengthening.

How different with those who do not know Christ who remain: insecure, uncertain, fearful, doubtful, etc. Not so the Christian, we are strong in him, in his love in his Joy and in his good purposes.

- A third-century man anticipating death penned these last words to a friend: "It's a bad world, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people are the Christians-- and I am one of them." Today In The Word, June, 1988, p. 18.

Joy is the wonderful gift of Christ to His people. God uses circumstances for your good – because he loves his children.

- Deitrich Bonhoffer was a German Christian living during the dark and difficult days of the Nazi Regime. Towards the close of the war he was murdered by them. His troubles thrust him onto the Lord he loved, he said of Christ: "I want to live these days with you"

The Joy of the Lord is your strength Joy is not a feeling, it is a recognition of our adoption as His children.

✚ Christians we know who we, - and what we have in Christ.

Joy is the fruit of the Spirit, Therefore Joy is expected - and commanded -

Be joyful always; **Be joyful always** ^{1Th 5:16}

At the 1968 Olympics athlete John Stephen Akhwari was injured during the marathon. With his leg bloodied and bandaged, he grimaced with each hobbling step around the track. He was so far behind that the crowds were leaving the stadium when he finally crossed the finishing line. A reporter asked him "Why did you continue the race after you were so badly injured?" He replied, "My country did not send me 7,000 miles to start the race. They sent me 7,000 miles to finish it."

That was a painful experience for him. Was he gazing down at his ankle? No, he was looking ahead, determined to do all he could to finish.

That is what Christ did and so should each of His people.

What will you be achieving for Christ this year? Let us fix our eyes on Christ, and on the prize that is there for all who finish.

So "Do not grieve, x2 **for the joy of the LORD is your strength.**" ^{Ne 8:10}

END

Closing hymn

Neh 9:10

Joy is a fruit that will not grow
In nature's barren soil;
All we can boast, till CHRIST we know,
Is vanity and toil.

But where the LORD has planted grace;
And made his glories known;
There fruits of heavenly joy and peace
Are found, and there alone.

A bleeding Saviour seen by faith,
A sense of pard'ning love;
A hope that triumphs over death,
Give joys like those above.

To take a glimpse within the veil,
To know that God is mine;
Are springs of joy that never fail,
Unspeakably divine!

These are the joys which satisfy,
And sanctify the mind;
Which make the spirit mount on high,
And leave the world behind.

No more, believers, mourn your lot,
But if you are the LORD'S;
Resign to them that know him not,
Such joys as earth affords.

John Newton