

The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength

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[0 : 0 0] As Saturday, I guess, we began our second year of the task of raising our financial and prayer support so that we can go to the Philippines as missionaries with Word of Life and serve there at their Bible Institute.

And God has given us a great year, as we think back this past year, running the business full-time, trying to continue with the rest of life in ministry, as well as do support raising part-time.

And God has been faithful. He's been very encouraging. We are about 60% of our financial support that we need. We have to have 100% before they'll let us go. So the original goal was to try to be in the Philippines now, January of this year.

But that's not going to happen. So our new goal, our director said, shoot for June. That would put us there just prior to the beginning of their next school year. So that's our goal.

We appreciate your prayers for that. God has supplied all of our, what we call our initial startup funds. The funds, that means our, the cost of our travel over there, our visa cost.

[1 : 3 0] All the money it's going to take to set up a house so that we can live, down to civil wear and dishes. Getting a vehicle so we can travel with ministry. So all that has been raised due to faithful giving, like some of you in their church and many others.

And so now, since that has raised, we are able to begin drawing from a portion of our monthly support. So that's going to enable us to back off of our business, run the business part-time, put more efforts towards the support raising.

And Lord willing, that will produce the fruit of the other 40% we need before we can go. So again, appreciate your prayers on that. And just juggling that. Juggling life is tough anyway, right?

But some of you I know run businesses. And even if you say I'm running my business full-time, I know it probably seems a lot more than full-time. It's not, you just can't clock out in 40 hours.

So now that we're backing off the business, need wisdom on what that looks like, how to do that appropriately. We need wisdom in, you know, finding contacts, who to contact, trying to get reacquainted with people that we haven't seen or talked to in a long time.

[2 : 4 2] That, you know, God may move in their hearts to join our support team. As well as trying to juggle ministry as well. Our church is a little bit shorthanded ministry-wise.

I want to try to, both of us want to try to do more at our local church here in town to help them. And that's our role as members anyway. So appreciate your prayers and all of that.

And thank you for your prayers. Thank you for your giving and your encouragement. With that, we really look forward to, you know, God making us fruitful in a ministry overseas.

We have fears. We have hesitations. We have questions. You know, we've been to the Philippines once, but we've never been to that campus. We've met a few of our coworkers, but it's all new.

And so you can just imagine all the emotions and thoughts that can go along with that. We're thankful that God has taken our middle daughter, Abby, and her husband, who are also missionaries of Word of Life.

[3 : 45] They are now in Australia. They have a lot of support raising to do as well. But he is Australian, so they can go and try to finish raising their support there. They're safe.

And though we miss them, we're thankful that God has called them and he's going to use them there. As I think about being here today, I really am excited for the theme of your church for this new year in the Word of God.

As you mentioned it in your Bible reading plan, I think that's the same Bible reading plan I have used, my wife has used for several years. I'm not one of your pastors, just a friend and a brother in Christ.

But let me throw out just a thought for you that may be an encouragement to you. You know, life is busy. It's tough even as married couples to find enough time, even just to pray together, to read the scriptures together with families.

It makes it even more complicated. And the more kids you have, the more schedules there are, it can be really complicated. You know, in that Bible reading plan, there is, you read one chapter from the New Testament each day, if it's the same one I've been using.

[4 : 55] And years ago, my wife and I decided, you know, that's when we're going to read together. When we go to bed, we're going to read that one chapter together and then pray. Something like that may work for you, for your marriage, for your family.

You may just say, okay, you know, it's tough maybe to get into five chapters of the Old Testament or whatever it is each day together. But take some time to read the Word of God and just simply to pray through it like you've been doing here at church.

And I also, in light of that theme, I believe I know why God led me to the passage we're going to study today. Would you take your Bibles and turn to the book of Nehemiah? Nehemiah.

You can turn first to chapter 9. During the week of Thanksgiving, I did have the privilege of teaching a course for the Bible Institute in the Philippines.

Of course, I had to do that via Zoom. We couldn't get there. But so I taught on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. And I had never taught through those. As long as I had been in pastoral ministry, I'd never preached through or taught through those books.

[6 : 03] So it was great to study them and to learn for myself as well as to have the great privilege of teaching others. But how many of you have ever heard the biblical statement, the joy of the Lord is your strength?

Okay. How many of you know that from a song? The joy of the Lord. Okay. Yeah. How many of you knew that came from the book of Nehemiah? Okay.

Some of you. There's some sheepish hands, maybe. And I wonder if you know the context. That statement, the joy of the Lord is your strength, is true in so many ways.

Even some of you could have been preached from Habakkuk chapter 3, verse 19. But, you know, you could take probably a few months to study all the biblical truth that fits, that aligns with that statement, the joy of the Lord is your strength.

But I want to take some time to help you understand the specific context in which that statement was given in the book of Nehemiah.

[7 : 20] Because I think first it's going to surprise you. But with that surprise, I hope is going to come more of an impact and a lesson that you may not have expected or anticipated.

And again, what I'm going to teach probably is not new to you. But maybe you've never seen it in this context this morning. And you'll see, I believe, by the end of this that how well it aligns with your church's theme for this year, your focus on the Word of God.

Let me give you a quick view of the context in several ways. First, historically. The book of Nehemiah is one of six Old Testament books written during what's called the post-exilic period of Israel's history.

Meaning this is the time after Israel's exile by Assyria and Judah's exile in Babylon. So as Habakkuk, he was writing, Habakkuk was ministering and writing after Israel had already been carried into captivity by the Assyrian Empire.

Okay. He was writing, Judah was still around as a quasi-nation, those two tribes to the south. But their exile was coming.

[8 : 35] But it wasn't going to be by Assyria. It was going to be by the Chaldeans or the Babylonians. And Nebuchadnezzar. Okay. The book of Daniel. That was the time period that Habakkuk was writing.

That's not the period we're talking about. That's their exile into Assyria, then exile into Babylon. And then, eventually, according to God's promise, he would bring a remnant of those people back into the land of Jerusalem and Judah.

And he would reestablish them as his nation and people. So when they return from exile, that is the post-exilic period. And the six books that are of that period are Ezra, Esther, which her time period fits sort of right in between two chapters in the book of Ezra.

Then Nehemiah. And then the three prophets. The last three prophets of the Old Testament, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Those are the six post-exilic books of the Old Testament.

So how do you get to that period? Well, Solomon was the last king of the United Kingdom. Israel and Judah together. His foolish son, Rehoboam, took over.

[9 : 44] And if you remember Rehoboam, he split the kingdom in its foolishness because he basically said, Hey, you thought my father was tough on you? I'm going to be much tougher. And the ten tribes of the north said, Fine, we have nothing to do with you.

We're gone. We're out of here. Jeroboam then led Israel to the north. He set up false worship in the northern and southern portions of that kingdom. And they didn't have a single godly king amongst all those kings of the northern kingdom.

Judah was left. Rehoboam had the tribes of Judah and Benjamin to rule over. And they had some good kings in the southern kingdom, but very few.

And again, eventually God had enough of the idolatry, enough of the rejection of him and his word. Israel was carried off into captivity by Assyria. And then eventually also Judah by the Babylonians.

So if you think of time period, Israel goes into captivity about 721 B.C. The southern kingdom is carried off in three successive exiles.

[10 : 56] First in about 605 B.C., then 597. Finally, in 586, Nebuchadnezzar comes in, destroys the temple, destroys the city of Jerusalem, carries the last of the people that he wanted to carry off.

He carried him off into Babylon, leaving only some of the poorest of the people left in Judah. And then what they would do, just like Assyria had done before, is they would repopulate.

They'd bring other peoples into the land, foreigners into Israel, foreigners into Judah to take over the fields, the farms, and so forth.

So 586, finally Judah is wiped out, carried off into captivity. But then, according to the prophet Jeremiah, Israel-Judah would be in captivity about 70 years.

So, in 539 B.C., a new empire. Those of you who like history, this is empire after empire. Assyria, then Babylon, and then the next one is the Medo-Persian Empire.

[12 : 02] Cyrus is the first king of the Medo-Persian Empire. If you know the book of Daniel and that vision of the writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast, that is the night.

But, on that night, Cyrus comes in as the king of the new Medo-Persian Empire, wipes out Babylon, takes over Babylon.

Okay? 539 B.C. Cyrus has a different plan, though. He's going to let people go home. See, he's going to let people go back to their lands.

He wants them to go back and rebuild their temples, rebuild their homes, with the caveat that you're going to pay tribute to me, and I'm going to let you practice your religion because I want you to pray to your gods for my health and my success.

That is how God began to get Judah back into the land. And just as they were carried off in three waves, they're actually brought back in about three major waves.

[13 : 02] Two of them are described in the book of Ezra. Nehemiah, first with Zerubbabel, then with Ezra, and then the third one in the book of Nehemiah. So that's how they get back into land.

That's sort of the history of it. Now, spiritually, who are these people anymore? I want to read to you from Nehemiah chapter 9 first, even though the core of our message is in chapter 8.

In Nehemiah 9, we actually see what is like a revival, a spiritual revival taking place amongst the people.

And in the beginning of chapter 10, they are going to renew their covenant with God. The covenant that God gave to Israel through Moses thousands of years before then.

But these people had become a people who were separated from God, ignorant, ignorant of his covenant. And we'll see sort of the spiritual history recounted here in Nehemiah chapter 9.

[14 : 03] So if you follow along, I want to begin in the second part of verse 5. This is one of the longest, it could be perhaps the longest prayer recorded in the Bible. Even though it's really not, I don't think it's all that long, but this is a Levitical prayer.

It says, Stand up and bless the Lord your God forever and ever. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the Lord.

You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their hosts, the earth and everything on it, the seas and all that is in them. And you preserve them all. The host of heaven worships you. You are the Lord God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham.

You found his heart faithful before you and made a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites and the Girgashites to give it to his descendants. You have performed your words.

You are righteous. You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry by the Red Sea. You showed signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his servants and against all the people of his land.

[15 : 10] For you knew that they acted proudly against them. So you made a name for yourself as it is this day and you divided the sea before them so that they went through the midst of the sea and on dry land and their persecutors you threw into the deep as a stone into the mighty waters.

Moreover, you led them by day with a cloudy pillar and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the road which they should travel. You came down also in Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments.

You made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them precepts and statutes and laws by the hand of Moses, your servant. You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought them water out of the rock for their thirst and told them to go in to possess the land which you had sworn to give them.

But, very important word there. I want you to pay attention to how many times you see a reference to their rejection of God's word.

Okay? But they and our fathers acted proudly, hardened their necks, and did not heed your commandments. They refused to obey and they were not mindful of your wonders that you did among them.

[16 : 17] But they hardened their necks and in their rebellion they appointed a leader to return to their bondage. But you were a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them.

Even when they made a molded calf for themselves and said, This is your God that brought you up out of Egypt and worked great provocations, yet in your manifold mercies you did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud did not depart from them by day to lead them on the road, nor the pillar of fire by night to show them light and the way they should go.

You also gave your good spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness. They lacked nothing.

Their clothes did not wear out. Their feet did not swell. Moreover, you gave them kingdoms and nations and divided them into districts so that they took possession of the land of Sihon, the land of the king of Heshbon, and the land of Og, king of Bashan.

You also multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and brought them into the land which you had told their fathers to go in and possess. So the people went in and possessed the land. You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hands with their kings and the people of the land that they might do with them as they wished.

[17 : 29] And they took strong cities and a rich land and possessed houses full of all goods, cisterns already dug, vineyards, olive groves, and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and grew fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness.

Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you, cast your law behind their backs, and killed your prophets who testified against them to turn them to yourself.

And they worked great provocations. Therefore, you delivered them into the hand of their enemies who oppressed them. And in the time of their trouble, when they cried to you, you heard from heaven, and according to your abundant mercies, you gave them deliverers who saved them from the hand of their enemies.

But after they had rest, they again did evil before you. Therefore, you left them in the hand of their enemies so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they returned and cried out to you, you heard from heaven.

And many times you delivered them according to your mercies and testified against them that you might bring them back to your law. Yet they acted proudly and did not heed your commandments, but sinned against your judgments, which if man does them, he shall live by them.

[18 : 36] And they shrugged their shoulders, stiffened their necks, and would not hear. Yet for many years you had patience with them and testified against them by your spirit in your prophets. Yet they would not listen.

Therefore, you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great mercy, you did not utterly consume them nor forsake them, for you are a God gracious and merciful. Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and awesome God, who keeps covenant and mercy, do not let all the trouble seem small before you that has come upon us, our kings and our princes, our priests and our prophets, our fathers, and in all your people from the days of the kings of Assyria until this day.

However, you are just in all that has befallen us, for you have dealt faithfully, but we have done wickedly. Neither our kings nor our princes, our priests, nor our fathers have kept your law, nor heeded your commandments and your testimonies, which you have testified against them, for they have not served you in their kingdom or in the many good things that you gave them or in the large and rich land which you set before them, nor did they turn from their wicked works.

Here we are, servants or slaves today. And the land that you gave to our fathers to eat its fruit and its bounty, here we are, servants in it.

And it yields much increase to the kings you have set over us because of our sins. Also, they have dominion over our bodies and our cattle at their pleasure, and we are in great distress.

[20 : 14] Now, we'll stop there. See, that's their situation. They're saying that you brought us back into the land. But we recount all of this spiritual history of your relationship to us as this people called Israel, people of Abraham, the covenant you gave to Moses.

Our history has been literally riddled with disobedience and rejection of your law. And so as we think about the situation we're in today, we're back in our land, but we're not free.

We owe tribute to the emperor of the known world, of the ancient Near East, where we have to send off money and taxes. And you read more in Nehemiah, you'll find how economically oppressed they were.

But he said, we're not free. And we look at this and we say, we deserve every last bit of this judgment.

All the discipline that you gave to us and our nation over the years, we realize we deserve it because we have rejected your law. You have been just, God, in all that you've done, and really abundantly merciful and gracious.

[21 : 28] But they're also pleading with the Lord, saying, just look it on us with pity, with mercy. This prayer then leads them into renewing the covenant of obedience to the Mosaic law.

Now, how did they get to that point? I want us to go back to chapter 8. Before we read there, you know, I think, you know, I grew up going to church, and I so often assumed that Israel always made sure that the people knew about God's law.

But the more I studied the Old Testament, especially as I read Ezra and Nehemiah, and looked at, really, the history of Israel, I think, although they were known as a people of the book, for the most part, they were known as a people who rejected the book.

They had it. They had, they were the most privileged people in the earth because God had revealed himself to their prophets and put it in writing.

And said, this is who I am, and this is how you can have a relationship with me. And all the pictures that are in the temple and the sacrificial system, of course, we know they all point to Christ.

[22 : 51] That was given to them. But they rejected it. You know, every king of Israel was commanded, one of the first things they were supposed to do as a king is they were to write for themselves a copy of God's law.

I don't know how often that happened. We certainly aren't given the impression in the Old Testament that it happened very regularly. The Levites were commanded to teach the people every seven years.

They were supposed to read the law to the people during the Feast of Tabernacles, which actually happens in Nehemiah chapter 8. As we look through the history of Israel, apart from one reference in 2 Chronicles, we really don't know how often or ever if it happened in the nation of Israel.

In fact, Josiah was one of the last kings of the southern kingdom of Judah. Habakkuk was writing during Josiah's reign. Okay?

During Josiah's reign, he was one of the few righteous kings. And I think he was actually the last righteous king of the southern kingdom of Judah. This is what 2 Kings chapter 22 says.

[24 : 05] Now it happened when the king heard the words of the book of the law that he tore his clothes. Then the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, Ahicham the son of Shaphan, Achbor the son of Micaiah, Shaphan the scribe, and Esaiah a servant of the king, saying, Go, inquire of the Lord for me for the people and for all Judah concerning the words of this book that has been found.

For great is the wrath of the Lord that is aroused against us because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book to do according to all that is written concerning us.

It was found. They were trying to do some work in the temple. There was some rubble. There were some repairs that needed, and they came across a book.

At this point, they're not even referring to it as the law of Moses, but that's what it was. They were ignorant that they even had it in their possession. You think about that.

Here's the king of Israel or king of Judah. He was supposed to write a copy for himself. Had not done it. The book was just found. And when he reads it, he realizes, Oh my word.

[25 : 19] We are in bad shape. We, God is going to get us because we have not been obeying the words of this book.

So when you think about the people, Israel, Judah, carried off into captivity. He is one of the last kings of Judah. The people who go into captivity, apart from those that would have, you know, we don't know how far this revival took place, but if you read in 2 Kings chapter 23, you will see about all the reforms that King Josiah had to do, and you will probably be utterly shocked and amazed at the kinds of filth and idolatry that was taking place in the temple in Jerusalem.

They were so far away from God's truth. They were ignorant of it. These are the kinds of people that went off into exile into captivity.

These are also the kinds of people that end up coming back into the land of Judah. So when we get to Nehemiah chapter 8, we have to realize there's a people back in the land who though they have a name that we would equate with a spiritual heritage, they also have, they are characterized by ignorance of God's word.

It was available to them. They were ignorant. They had rejected it. So we're getting back, you think about, so what is God going to do? He's bringing those people back to the land.

[27 : 01] What is most important for God to reconstitute his people? As you read through Ezra and Nehemiah, they've got to reinstitute temple worship.

Okay? So that's the first way they come back, they start, they set up the altar. Then they finally, finally, finish rebuilding the temple.

Okay? And then Ezra comes back for some spiritual reforms. Nehemiah comes back to rebuild the walls and also spiritual reforms. And it's interesting, it's in Nehemiah's time that the law of God is finally brought before the people and taught in a very public way.

And that is Nehemiah chapter 8. So let's look there. We're going to pick it up at the very end of chapter 7. When the seventh month came, the children of Israel were in their cities.

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.

[28 : 04] 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. 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.

So Ezra the scribe stood on the platform of wood which they had made for the purpose and beside him at his right hand stood Mattathiah, Shemiah, Aniah, Uriah, Jehochiah, and Maseah and at his left hand Padaiah, Mishel, Mekijah, Hashem, Hashpadana, Zechariah, and Meshulam.

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. 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 worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

Also, Jeshua, Banna, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akub, Shabbathai, Hadijah, Maseah, Kalita, Azariah, Jehozabad, Hanan, Palaah, and the Levites helped the people to understand the law and the people stood in their place.

So they read distinctly from the book in the law of God and they gave the sense and helped them to understand the reading. 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.

[29 : 29] Do not mourn nor weep, for all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. 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 God.

Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, Be still, for the day is holy. Do not be grieved. 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.

I think about the context here. Why did I spend so much time helping you to understand the context? See, I want, I feel like in order for you to understand the statement, the joy of your, the joy of the Lord is your strength in this context, you need to understand where those people were spiritually.

despite the religious heritage. They were spiritually ignorant. They were not learned in God's word.

Perhaps, it is very probable that for most of the people who were there on that day when Ezra read the law, and he probably read, it could have been six or eight hours he was reading.

[30 : 47] This may have been the first time in their lives they ever heard it read. Now, not Ezra. He was a scribe even in the Medo-Persian Empire.

He studied God's word. God prepared him to come back to the land. That's why God commissioned him to come back to the land. Okay? But for most people, other than perhaps some things that their parents or grandparents may have remembered and may have taught them, they were probably for the most part very ignorant of God's law.

Remember, they didn't have it in their hands. Okay? You say, so what would it be like if you could put yourself in their situation?

How could we duplicate? How could we reproduce that kind of setting, that situation of personal, spiritual ignorance?

I think of the unreached peoples on this planet. over 17,000 people groups according to the Joshua Project.

[31 : 56] Almost 7,400 of those people groups are considered unreached with the gospel. The population in those unreached people groups, over 3.28 billion people.

think of those who don't have the Bible. Almost 7,400 languages in this world. World population, about 7.9 billion people.

Languages that have some scripture, 3,495 languages or just over 7 billion people have some scripture in their language.

717 languages have the complete Bible. Five and three quarter billion people. That leaves 1.29 billion people who do not have a complete Bible in their language.

This is 2022. Languages with no scripture, there are 828 languages have a work, a Bible translation work in progress right now.

[33 : 06] 67.6 million people. 1,892 languages still need translation work to begin. 145 million people.

Not ignorant of God's word because they've rejected it. Ignorant of God's word because they don't have it. It's estimated that only 6 to 15% of the worldwide population could be classified as evangelical Christian.

So as we begin this new year and you think of Israel, think of this passage, think of our mission in the world. Yes, it's local.

It's across the street. It's here in this town. And it's also around the world. How can you be involved in helping eliminate biblical ignorance on this planet?

There's a lot of ways you can do that. But how about for us? I think to a lesser degree, similar experiences can occur within our own country.

[34 : 18] A lot of people have never heard the gospel, never read the Bible, not because they don't have it available, maybe they thought it was important to them. It can happen in our churches when you learn part of God's word for the first time or you get to help someone else learn part of God's word for the first time.

It's going to have an effect on their lives. It can happen in our own times of Bible reading when it's that moment that God finally, you know, he just like puts a pen right there and says, Eric, pay attention to that.

Look at that today. And the more you read through God's word, you will see it is living and powerful and active. Hebrews 4, you're going to memorize that, right? It is alive and God continues to make it fresh.

So in light of this context of Israel's spiritual background, thinking about what was happening on this day in Nehemiah chapter 8 when he got up before the people and he read.

First, I want you to think about all the efforts they made to help people to understand. Everybody, they gathered, everybody together that they thought could understand. Okay? And then they went to a lot of efforts to make sure first people could hear.

[35 : 42] They built, they made it so acoustically they could hear. He was, Ezra was up on a high platform so that they could hear. And then there was a whole team of people who were going around through all the people and they were helping to explain the reading so that people could understand it.

And I think that, just by way of ministry application, okay, there is a time for Sunday school classes I think that are separated by age and levels of understanding so that you could focus in on that level of student to help them understand the word of God because that's what's most important.

We can make applications acoustically in our churches. The important thing is are we communicating God's word so that people can understand it? It can make translation choices for us.

It can be the way we present the truth in our classes and our small groups or whatever but that is what's most important. They went to a lot of effort to help people understand God's word and how did they respond.

Well, actually, I'm getting ahead of myself. I think of also the efforts that the listeners made. They stood for perhaps six hours or so that morning listening to the word of God being read and explained.

[37 : 05] Now, I'm not here to say our church services should be six hours or more, okay? I know I'm a long-winded preacher but they made an effort to listen.

They wanted to understand and it didn't just continue that day. If you read further in chapter 8, then the next day all the leaders, the fathers and so forth, the tribes, they gathered together to hear more about the word of God and then they had a whole feast week where every day the word of God was being read and explained to them and it's all of that reacquaintance then with the word of God that prepared these people to enter back into a covenant with God.

You think about this. They were not in covenant with God which meant they were spiritually lost. Okay? They were not in right relationship to God because they were not trusting in what he had revealed to them.

They were ignorant of it up until that point. These were spiritually lost people. When they were taught the word of God and they understood the impact it was supposed to make on their lives that brought them to position of humility and repentance and prepared them to enter into a covenant relationship with their God.

I want to focus in on getting into at this point the joy of the Lord is your strength. How did they respond? What was their first response?

[38 : 44] Okay? Look at verse 9. 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 or weep for all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.

They wept. Why? You know, we're not told exactly why they were weeping but that was how they responded to understanding God's word.

And so just some thoughts here. I think it's probable that they wept out of first sorrow for their former ignorance of God's law. And they thought, wow, this was available to us and I never knew it.

Probably also out of sorrow for the judgment their nation had and was experiencing because of their ignorance and rejection of God's law. looking at their situation in life and all that had come upon them, even their current situation, being oppressed in their own land, it was all because they had rejected God's law.

[40 : 04] And I think thirdly, it was out of sorrow that led to repentance and eventually would result in taking an oath to heed God's covenant.

I think all three of those are probably very likely reasons for their sorrow. So as you consider your life and even the spiritual condition of our nation and this world, when's the last time that God's word elicited sorrow from you?

When's the last time God used his word to bring you to that sorrow that leads to repentance? repentance? I wonder when's the last time you felt some sorrow for our nation?

Now, I would never say that we were truly a Christian nation, but we've had a heritage of biblical truth in this nation. And a lot of what we are experiencing today is because by and large our nation has rejected God's word, has rejected God's truth.

And how about our world? Do you sorrow over our world? Do you sorrow over the lost, those who don't have God's word? I think sorrow is often the most appropriate immediate response to God's word when it convicts us.

[41 : 32] And we realize that we have rejected, that we have not been faithful. But note here that the spiritual leaders on that day they didn't want the people to remain sorrowful.

Look there in verse 10. I mean, they said in verse 9, do not mourn your weep. This day is holy to the Lord your God. Verse 10, he said to them, go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions of 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. So the Levites quieted all the people saying, be still for the day is holy.

Do not be grieved. 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.

So they commanded them to rejoice. But why? Well, first they said the day was meant to be holy. That day, they were beginning a feast time. And this was a day of trying to bring this nation, trying to reconstitute this as a people of God.

[42 : 39] We're beginning today to get reacquainted with the word of God. This day is to be separated to honor him. And so, you know, sometimes because of our sinfulness, we can get really focused on our sin and on self-pity.

And these holy days when we're supposed to be worshiping God, we get focused on ourselves and our situations. And I think they were calling the people to say, no, stop focusing on yourselves.

It may be right, it is right to be repentant. But God has meant for this day to be a day of rejoicing, to be focused on him, to honor him.

The day was meant to be a celebration of God's goodness as seen in the provisions of his word. God gave his word to us. It was supposed to be a celebration of God's goodness with delicious food and drink.

The day was meant to be a time of sharing with those in need, those who didn't have any food to prepare for themselves. The joy of the Lord is your strength, meaning sorrow and self-pity.

[43 : 47] Even the sorrow that leads to repentance is not the source of spiritual strength and stamina. Now, understanding the curses associated with disobedience to God's law brings condemnation and sorrow, and that is right.

But understanding that God's law also shows us the path of true life and blessing, that's where our spiritual joy and strength comes from. It's right to know when we've done wrong, but that does not strengthen us to go forward to do right.

You see, that is just part of the step in that process of being rightly related to God. And I think of 1 John 1, He who says He has no sin makes God a liar and the truth is not in Him.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us of all of our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The joy of the Lord is your strength. In this context, as you were ignorant of God's word, you're finally made aware of it, you're moved to sorrow because now you perhaps realize all the ways you've done wrong, all the ways your life has gone wrong because you've rejected God's law.

[45 : 11] And you may be moaning in self-pity, even in repentance, but moving forward, that sorrow is not going to strengthen you for the rest of this day.

That sorrow is not going to strengthen you to help you go and live right. That sorrow needs to be turned to joy because you realize what God has just given you.

The gift of his word that had been available and to us so much more readily available, this gift. Though at times we've rejected it, God in his goodness, in his mercy, has reminded us of it.

He said, this shows you the path forward. This is how you can live rightly related to me. This is how you can live as my people and know me as your God.

That's reason for joy. And you notice, the same reason for their sorrow is the reason for their joy. Did you see that?

[46 : 23] Verse 12. rejoice greatly because they understood the words that were declared to them.

So don't remain sorrowful. The joy of the Lord is your strength.

You have God's word. now you can move forward not out of ignorance but out of true knowledge of God and the path forward.

And that knowledge tells us that we have a God who is great, who is awesome, who is mighty, who is abounding in mercy and all sufficient grace. We know about the gospel.

You see, there may be someone here today, there may be someone listening that you realize you have been rejecting God's word. You have been rejecting Christ. And that should bring you to sorrow, the sorrow that leads to repentance but also to faith, to realize that Christ is the one and only answer for the salvation of your soul and the gift of eternal life.

[47 : 44] For those of us who are believers, we know this. We have this joy readily available to us. When we think about that statement in this context, it's focused on the knowledge of God's word, really understanding God's word.

It can produce sorrow but should result in rejoicing greatly because we understand God's word. this has reinvigorated me.

My wife and I start this second year of support raising where I'm so looking forward to getting to the Philippines and having the privilege of teaching students God's word because I know the impact God's word continues to have on my life.

But for you as your church here, having this theme of God's word for this year, your joy, joy awaits. Joy awaits through understanding his word.

This world certainly can't offer us true joy. What a privilege we have in having God's word available. Jeremiah 9, verse 23, thus says the Lord, let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches, but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord exercising loving kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth, for in these I delight, says the Lord.

[49 : 21] Let's pray. Father in heaven, thank you for your word. What a gift and privilege we have, and Lord, you know, in our lives, probably if we were all honest, we would have to say that there have been many days in our lives that we've not given sufficient attention to you and your word, despite the privilege of having it in our language.

And Lord, I think of how I've been convicted at times when I've seen videos or read reports about people who finally receive a Bible in their language, and how they treasure it, and how they become avid readers, and students of it.

Lord, I thank you for that rebuke. I thank you for even the refreshment, the motivation, encouragement, as it drives me to remember the great gift we have in your word.

Not that we worship the Bible. We worship you. But you've given us your word so that we can know you. And so, Lord, help us to treasure your word.

Help us to be faithful students of it this year. Not just to learn, but to live it. And to love you.

[50 : 48] And to love one another. And to shine your light, the light of your truth, in this dark world. God, we pray that your kingdom would come.

God, I pray that you might use us to do your will as revealed in your word. Thank you for this time together. Thank you for all these people here.

God, I pray that you would bless and encourage them that each time they pick up your word this year, you would remind them of the great joy that's awaiting them.

The great joy they can have in knowing the privilege they have of having it in their language. And God, I pray that you would use them to share your truth with others. May your mission be accomplished this year.

Use us for your glory. In Jesus' name we pray.