

Midweek Message

“And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

(Nehemiah 8:9-10 ESV)

Joy is something all believers have because it's an aspect of the Holy Spirit's fruit in our lives. There are numerous Scriptures that speak to us of joy and how we should always be rejoicing regardless of our circumstances. This joy of which the Scriptures speak isn't some giddy feeling of emotional happiness but is a deep-down sense of contentment in knowing that God is always working all things for our good and His glory. You see, it's really about our relationship to the Lord and how His joy fills us and flows out from us as we keep our focus on Him.

When Ezra tells Israel the “joy of the Lord is your strength” he does this in light of God's ancient people having returned to Jerusalem after their exile. They had been severely chastised because of their rebellion against the Lord and now that time of discipline was over, so God brought them home. However, as Ezra begins to read from the Book of the Law (Scriptures), they soon realize how unfaithful they had been, and they begin to weep over their sinfulness. It's then that Ezra tells them to rejoice and celebrate for the “joy of the Lord is your strength.” In other words, God Himself has forgiven and restored you so you should rejoice in His love, mercy, and grace toward you.

Have you ever wondered about the “joy of the Lord?” It's an interesting thought, isn't it? For us to realize that God, not only gives us joy through the fruit of the Holy Spirit, but that He Himself is joyful isn't something that I've actually heard preached or even taught much in the church. Perhaps I've just missed it or maybe I haven't focused on it, but I wonder if any of us have really taken the time to grasp this truth and some of its application to our own lives, especially as we move through our current crisis. The prophet Zephaniah makes a wonderful statement regarding the joy and rejoicing of God toward His people. In chapter 3 and verse 17 he writes:

*“The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.”*

Now, I want you to think about that for a moment. This ancient prophecy was given to Israel and to the Israel of God, His Church, as a promise that looks forward to the future when God would redeem His people and restore them to fellowship with Himself which we know comes through Jesus. So, what do we learn from it? Well, we learn God is in the midst of His people just as He's always been in our midst. Not even this pandemic can close off the avenue through which we commune with God and He with us. Everything must fit His purpose for our salvation and that certainly includes times like we're facing now for He is “a mighty one who will save.” God always has a purpose in what He's doing, a good purpose as I've said often, and as His people we must never forget the very nature and character of God as He is always moving in this world for His glory and the good of His people. His desire is to save His people and restore them to a loving relationship with Himself.

Another wonderful truth is that God is glad to rejoice over His people. Did you hear that? God rejoices over His people! When God looks at us, we who are followers of and believers in Jesus, He's

filled with gladness and actually delights in us. In Psalm 147 and verse 11 the writer tells us: *“But the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.”* I’m afraid that all too often Christians have this belief that God is there to take away every aspect of our happiness. We can have a picture in our mind that God is some kind of killjoy who waits around for us to mess up and then wham. It’s certainly true that God disciplines us and often does so using very difficult times, such as we’re facing now, but He does so for our good. God isn’t trying to take the fun out of life but is at work in us, transforming us, so that we can truly enjoy the best of life that God offers to us.

You see, when Zephaniah tells us that God “will quiet us in His love,” he’s reminding us that everything God does is out of His great love for us. Think about the cross for a moment and how that’s the greatest expression of love we could ever experience. In his letter to the Romans, chapter 5 and beginning in verse 6:

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

We’ve seen the efforts of our first responders working diligently to save people from the effects of this virus and some of them have even died in the process. However, the contrast presented in that passage is about how we’re aren’t the good people for whom Jesus died. We’re the enemies of God, rebellious sinners who deserve His justice. And this is our God who has loved us so much that He sent Jesus to redeem us and make us His friends. You see, the quieting of God’s love comes to us when we remember how great His love is toward us and we then realize that if God would love us so much then we can trust that everything we face flows out of that love for us.

However, what really amazes me is that last phrase that Zephaniah writes when he tells us that our God “will exult over you with loud singing.” I don’t know about you, but I simply cannot imagine what it will be like to hear God sing. And it’s not just any singing but it’s “loud singing.” You see, this expression is meant to impress upon us just how great is God’s joy in us. In Hebrews, chapter 12 and beginning in verse 1 we’re told:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Have you ever thought about the joy that was set before Jesus? There are two sides of it; one is in glorifying His Heavenly Father and the other aspect is we who’ve been redeemed. We are the joy that is set before our Savior; a people who now belong fully to Him and who’ll live and reign with Him forever and ever. You see, we have every reason to rejoice even in these difficult times and when we choose to rejoice it’s the joy of the Lord that fills us and strengthens us. This joy of God will be all we need to help us overcome those moments of despair for we know that our God is always there for us.

Pastor Mark