



## The God Whose Joy Is Our Strength Behold Our God! – Read the Bible for Life Series #42

Nehemiah 8-9

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August 19, 2012

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If you would, take a Bible and turn to Nehemiah 8.

When I was in seminary, someone loaned Holly and me a DVD series of a television show that was popular. It was about this man who was going out to fight against terrorist attacks and trying to stop them. I was taking a full load of classes and had a full-time job at the same time. I remember sitting on the couch at about 1:00 in the morning, looking at each other and saying, “What do you think? Just one more?” It was the kind of show that left you constantly hanging and wondering what was going to happen next. You would think, “If I just watch one more, surely at least some of this will have some kind of closure and I can go to sleep and then pick up the rest another day.” It wasn’t until the end of the season, though, that the threat would finally be neutralized, everyone would be safe and you could have a relieved feeling of satisfaction.

Even worse than that one was another show that someone talked us into watching about some people who were stranded on an island. It wasn’t the same kind of intensity or action; it was more this desire to figure out what was happening and understand the show. The problem with this one is you get to the end of the season and that doesn’t even resolve it. I know for me—it’s probably because I’m an intellectual viewer—I get all the way to the end of the series and I feel like I’ve invested all this time into the story but end up feeling basically “Lost” by the end of it.

I played along. I followed the carrot that was out in front of me, being led along by a stick. I kept thinking if I just watched one more or just made it to the end maybe I’d have a feeling of satisfaction—but I didn’t. I’m still recovering from that. As you can tell, it was a very unsatisfying experience for me. Sadly, this is how many people go through life—just thinking, “One more thing and then I will have joy and satisfaction.” Everyone in this world longs for joy. Everyone here longs for joy. For many—maybe for most or all of us at some point or another in our lives—joy just feels like an elusive dream. It feels like the closer we get to it, the further away it flees.

Maybe there are trials in your life and joy seems like an impossibility. Sleep-depriving, faith-shaking trials leave you lying awake at night saying things like, “God I do believe in You. I believe You are good and in control,” but even as you say those words they come out sounding very hollow because the circumstances you’re finding yourself in don’t make sense and joy seems so far away. Something happens and you think, “Maybe this is going to be the end,” or “Here’s the good news,” but as soon as you feel that way, something else happens and it flees.

Maybe it’s a different kind of pursuit of joy for you. It’s not because of problems, trials and difficulties; it’s because you’re following the story the world gives that joy is found in one more party, one more promotion, one more vacation or one more thing. When you experience that one more something and it’s over, you still feel depressed—or even worse, you just feel numb.

Maybe you’ve never heard the message of God. Maybe you’ve never been to a church service before and you had no idea God cared anything about your joy or that God wanted you to have joy. On the other hand, maybe you’ve been in churches and you’ve known this truth all your life. Either way, each of us needs to come to this passage and be renewed in our faith that the joy of the Lord *is* our strength. Each of us needs to put away the other things that we’re seeking joy in and hear from God’s Word as He talks to us about joy.

Before we go through this passage, I want you to drop down a little further into verse ten. By the time we get to Nehemiah 8:10, the people are rejoicing and celebrating. Nehemiah and Ezra are talking to the people and it says, *“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.’”* That is where we’re going to finish today as we talk about the joy of the Lord. I want us to work through this passage first and see how God’s people get there. How do they get to this place of celebration?

One more word of introduction before we get into this passage. As a church body, we’ve been going through God’s Word from beginning to end. We’re in a series called “Behold Our God” where we’ve been going chronologically through the Old Testament in a Bible-reading plan and then the messages have dipped into some key passages throughout the Old Testament. This is the last message in that series from the Old Testament; after this, Pastor David will teach through the New Testament in this same way.

## Historical Background

Though they're not at the end of our Old Testament as we open it, the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah are chronologically at the end of the Old Testament. At this time in the history of God's people, we're about 450-500 years before Christ in this scene. Ezra and Nehemiah are writing and talking to God's people after they have returned from being in captivity. They were exiled and taken away from their land. Now they have come back. Ezra—the priest—leads them to rebuild their temple and Nehemiah—the governor—leads them to rebuild the walls around the city. Now all of that is done. God's people are back in their city, the temple is rebuilt, the walls are rebuilt and now God is going to restore in His covenant people a joy and a delight in Himself.

Let's read Nehemiah 8:1-12. In this passage, they stood as they heard God's Word.

*<sup>1</sup> And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. <sup>2</sup> So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. <sup>3</sup> And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. <sup>4</sup> And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. <sup>5</sup> And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. <sup>6</sup> And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. <sup>7</sup> Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. <sup>8</sup> They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.*

*<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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." <sup>11</sup> So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." <sup>12</sup> And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that*

*were declared to them.*

I want to give you a sentence that I think summarizes what we're going to see in this passage. It's this—a hunger for God and a proper response to God leads to a joy in God. I want us to look at each of those three parts: a hunger for God, a proper response to God and a joy in God.

## **A Hunger for God's Word**

Verse one says, *“And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel.”* Bring the book! We need to hear from God. This wasn't Ezra saying, “Bring me the book so I can preach to you.” This is a story of the people who had gathered together saying, “Ezra, bring us the book. We need to hear a word from God this morning.”

Try not to read into this story a church culture like we have today where it's normal for us to come on a Sunday morning, listen to someone talk from God's Word, hear God's Word read and hear God's Word taught. God's people had been far from Him. God's people had been refusing to hear His Word, rebelling against Him and saying, “God, I do not want to hear You.” Look over in chapter nine where Ezra leads them in a prayer recounting a little bit of Israel's history. *“Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets...”* (Nehemiah 9:26). That's what their posture was toward God's Word. Then look at verses 29-30 and 34:

*And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules... Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear...*

*Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them.*

Now these people are gathered around Ezra and they say, “Bring us the book. We don't want to turn our backs on God's law anymore. We want to hear God's Word. We want to give Him our ears and listen to God's Word.” They're crying out for Ezra to bring them the book. God is putting within His people a hunger for Him and His Word—a desire to hear His Word.

Verses two-three say, *“So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both*

*men and women and all who could understand what they heard...*” There are already men and women gathered so *“all who could understand”* must mean children who also there in this assembly and are old enough to understand. It says, *“...on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it...from early morning until midday...”* Ezra stands up early in the morning and until the middle of the day, he is reading from God's Word *“in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand.”* Look what the end of verse three says, *“And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.”*

This wasn't just a spontaneous event. It says they built Ezra a platform so he could stand up on it for this purpose. Ezra is standing up there and they are looking forward to and preparing for this. God is working within them and warming up their hearts to His Word. They are coming and expecting to hear from God and hear His Word. It says that they stood there for hours listening to God's Word and their ears were attentive.

Sometimes we can stand for 12 verses, it feels long and we start daydreaming about something else by verse two. These people are hungry for God's Word and they want to hear it. Their ears are attentive to it. What is going on that is different in God's people now than it was at the time of Isaiah and his prophecy? We've been going through the Old Testament and we've seen prophet after prophet stand up and say, “Thus says the Lord.” We read how God even said, “You're going to go to these people and speak to them My words and they will not hear you.”

So what is different this time? Did Ezra figure out the best settings on his sound system with what sounded just right to the people? Maybe he learned that what you really need is a room that is about 71°F because then people will listen better. Maybe he went to homiletics school and seminary where they taught him that about every seven minutes you need some kind of relief—maybe something humorous. They told him to try to be funny but also serious at the same time, work all these things together and maybe even bring in some visual aids.

We don't see any of that here. We see people who wanted to hear God's Word and they stood and were attentive as Ezra read from the Book of the Law from morning until midday. God is working in His people, creating within them a hunger and thirst for His Word. As you attend church, realize this must be why we're here! Maybe you sometimes wonder why we start the service with a Scripture reading from the Psalms where we're reading it back and forth, then someone else comes up and reads another passage in the Bible and then before the sermon we have to read another long passage from the Bible. It's

because if not for God's Word, we have no purpose in being here. God's Word must be central to our worship services and to our lives. Together we cry out, "God, give us a hunger and a thirst for Your Word!"

Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...*" (Matthew 5:6). Psalm 42:1 says, "*As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.*" There is a longing and thirsting that is there. We cannot know God apart from His word. In Job 23:12, Job says, "*I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.*" This should describe us. It should be what motivates us. This should be our hunger. Our pursuit is to know God and to know Him through His Word.

God is showing us great kindness, mercy and grace because we can gather on Sunday mornings to hear God's Word. At some level, God has put within you some kind of a desire for His Word and that is by His grace. There are people all over this world who will never hear from this Book. By God's grace, you are in a place where you can hear God's Word. By God's grace, most of you probably have a copy of God's Word. God is doing a work within us to create in us a hunger for Him. We can only pray that will increase and that the people of New Covenant Bible Church will be marked by a hunger and thirst for the Word of God. A hunger for God and a proper response to God leads to a joy in God.

### **A Proper Response to God**

Let's move now to focus on how the people responded to God's Word. Look at verse six. It says, "*And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen,' lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.*" What you'll see modeled here in this passage is a people who are hearing God's Word. They're responding to it internally as their affections and emotions are being shaped by God's Word. They're saying, "Amen!" They're saying in their hearts, "Yes, that is right. I agree with that and affirm that. Ezra, what you're reading about my God is true. Yes and Amen!"

There's an internal response which leads them to an external response. In verse five it says "*the people stood.*" In verse six it says that as they were saying "Amen, Amen," they were "*lifting up their hands.*" In the same verse it says they bowed down "*with their faces to the ground.*" In verse nine it says "*the people wept.*" The Bible gives us examples like this throughout Scripture to model for us—and sometimes command us—to respond in worship with body and soul.

- Psalm 47:1 says, *“Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy!”* Psalm 95:6 says, *“Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!”* There are internal responses to God's Word that are leading them to respond with their bodies.
- Psalm 149:3 says, *“Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre!”*
- Psalm 22:23 says, *“...stand in awe of him [God].”*
- 1 Timothy 2:8 says, *“I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands...”*
- Revelation 4:10 tells of this worship scene in heaven where, *“The twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever...”*
- Psalm 150:4-6 says:  
*Praise him with tambourine and dance;  
praise him with strings and pipe!  
Praise him with sounding cymbals;  
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!  
Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!  
Praise the Lord!*
- Psalm 134:1-2 says, *“Come, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD, who stand by night in the house of the LORD! Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the LORD!”*

I think sometimes we don't realize how much the Bible encourages not only an internal response to His Word but a physical response as well. Sometimes we're afraid of what others would think. We think, “What if someone sees me as I am praising my God in an unreserved way with exuberant joy?”

It's good for us to focus on a reverent awe. It's good for us to focus on a humility that comes before a holy, righteous God. Sometimes that means we come in silence. Sometimes it means we stand before Him in awe. Sometimes it means that as we're moved to worship, we bow down with our faces to the ground. There are also so many times in Scripture where it's modeling for us, teaching us and commanding us to have an exuberant, passionate joy in our God.

This passage isn't promoting a thoughtless, shallow emotionalism. It's not emotions just for the sake of emotions. These people aren't just “happy and they know it” so they clap their hands. These are people who are hearing God's Word and responding to it. There is truth about God that is sinking deep into their hearts and they can't help but respond in

ways that are proper with affections that are fitting of this great God. They move through different kinds of responses. As they start, it says they're saying, "Amen and Amen," lifting their hands and affirming what is true. There's an excitement that is there and a longing for God and His Word. In the same verse it says as the Word of God is read, they are worshiping God in their hearts and they bow down with their faces to the ground.

Then in verse nine there's another response to God's Word. It says Nehemiah and Ezra taught the people, *"This day is holy...do not mourn or weep."* It says, *"For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law."* All of these are good responses as they're hearing God's law read. We don't know exactly where Ezra was in his reading at these different times of different responses. Maybe at this point he's coming to what we know as the Ten Commandments. He starts to read through them and says, *"You shall have no other gods before me,"* and like an arrow, God's Word pierces hearts as they remember and know and acknowledge how many other things they have lived for and worshiped and how many other things have become more important to them than God. They begin to think of that and are filled with a godly sorrow and weeping.

But Ezra continues on and he's already read through a few other commandments when he comes to, *"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain."* Then they think of how casually they've viewed God and used His name. Then he reads on and comes to, *"Honor your father and your mother."* Remember in this assembly, there are children who can understand. There would be teenagers who are there. They're hearing God's Word and thinking of ways they have not shown honor to their parents, ways they have not wanted to listen to their parents or ways they have used a tone of voice in talking to their parents that is not honoring. Maybe they're thinking of ways they talk about their parents to their friends that is not honoring.

It says that the people are weeping. *"You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."* Then he reads, *"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife."* Maybe as he's reading through these and he comes to adultery, someone is thinking, "I haven't done that but I've been close. I've been thinking and desiring that but at least I've obeyed this one." Then he comes to the line that says, "Don't even covet your neighbor's wife." Don't even desire something forbidden that God hasn't given you. He goes on and says, "Don't covet anything that is your neighbor's." As they listen to God's law, they are convicted. They are rebuked. It says that as they hear God's law, they are weeping.

As you've been reading through the Old Testament with us—or even just listening to the sermons throughout the Old Testament—you're seeing and hearing pictures of a holy God. As you hear about God's holiness and purity you can't help but acknowledge that we as people are sinful and falling far short of His expectations and laws. A proper response to this is to say, "Woe is me!" As Isaiah sees this vision of God in Isaiah 6:5, he says, "*Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips...*" These people are responding rightly to God's Word, saying:

It was my sin that held Him there  
Until it was accomplished  
His dying breath has brought me life  
I know that it is finished

(“How Deep the Father’s Love for Us” by Stuart Townend)

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

(“Were You There?” African-American spiritual song)

Yes, I was there! It was my sin that crucified my Lord. Last week, David Sunday preached an excellent message about godly sorrow and grief. However in this passage, Ezra and Nehemiah come to the people and say (8:9b-12):

*“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.” So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.” And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.*

## **A Joy in God**

How do God's people move so quickly from a godly grief, mourning, weeping and standing before a holy God and fully deserving His wrath to this great feast, party and celebration they are about to have as they find their joy in the Lord? I think the answer to that comes in chapter nine. Let's go there and scan through Ezra's public prayer again. He is recounting the history of God's people in this prayer. It is helpful to know the context of what's going on here with God's people. Why can they rejoice? Why can they be filled with great rejoicing? What do they have to rejoice about? This is also fitting for us as we finish

our series on the Old Testament because what Ezra does for us in this prayer is sweep through the history of God's people and His relationship with them from the beginning to where we find them here in Nehemiah 8.

**God is Creator** here at the beginning. Look at Nehemiah 9:6, *"You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it..."*

**God is creating and choosing a people for Himself.** In verse seven he says, *"You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham."* He's recounting that God has chosen Abraham for Himself and made this covenant promise with Abraham saying, "Through you, I will make you a great nation. Through you, Abraham, all the nations of the world will be blessed."

**God leads them out of Egypt by crossing the Red Sea.** If you remember the story, they follow Joseph down to Egypt to find food in the middle of the famine and then stay there after he dies. Generations later, they become slaves there in Egypt. Verses nine and ten say, *"And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh..."* Then look at the end of verse ten, *"And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day."*

**God gives them His law** in the wilderness. Verse 13 says, *"You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments."*

**God's people do not respond well to that law.** Verses 16-17 say, *"But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt."*

**God is gracious.** Look at the end of verse 17, *"But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them."* Verse 19 says, *"You in your great mercies did not forsake them..."*

**God blesses them with land but they rebel again.** Look at verse 22, *"And you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner."* Verse 26 says, *"Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets..."* Verse 27 says, *"Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried*

*out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies.”*

**God is slow to anger and merciful and gracious.** This picture is happening all the way through here as God is being gracious, merciful and slow to anger with His people. Even the wording it uses here— “you gave them saviors to save them”—is speaking physically. They’re being rescued from their enemies. However, it points forward to this greater reality that one day a Savior would come to save us from our enemy.

In verse 30 it says, *“Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets.”* So we’re through the history of the people of God now. We’re at the time where God is sending prophets to them. Verses 30-31 continue, *“Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.”* As God’s people are standing there and Ezra and Nehemiah are saying, “Do not mourn. Do not be grieved. This is a day of rejoicing; here is where God’s people can find their true joy.” Yes, they are sinful and deserving God’s wrath, but He did not make an end of them. He did not forsake them.

Charles H. Spurgeon said of this passage, “They felt the edge of the law of God like a sword opening up their hearts, tearing, cutting and killing; and well might they lament.” Spurgeon is saying they deserve to lament. He goes on to say, “Then was the time to let them feel the gospel’s balm and hear the gospel’s music.” There is good news. Ezra and Nehemiah are coming to a people who have been rescued not too long ago from captivity. They have been brought back to their land and delivered from the hand of their enemies. They have been set free and restored to fellowship with God. They were once far from God but they have been brought near to God. Therefore they are saying, “This is cause for great joy and rejoicing! Go, eat and drink lavishly. Celebrate what God has done because the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

About 400 years later, this God Who is still the God of salvation, Who is still faithful, merciful and slow to anger, Who rescued them and brought them from far away to near, does it again. He sends Jesus—a Savior—into the world to rescue people in bondage all over this world. We’re born slaves to sin and blind to the truth about God. We are born dead in our sins but God sent a Savior to rescue, deliver and free us from our captivity and free us from the bondage of our sin.

Do you realize how often we as a church sing about this? We sing about once being far off and now being brought near to God by the blood of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:13). We sing about being in chains and now being set free, about being prisoners who now have freedom in Christ (Galatians 5:1). We sing:

Once Your enemy, now seated at Your table  
Jesus, thank You

(“Jesus, Thank You” by Pat Sczebel)

My chains are gone  
I’ve been set free  
My God, my Savior has ransomed me  
And like a flood His mercy rains  
Unending love, Amazing grace

(“Amazing Grace—My Chains Are Gone” by Christ Tomlin)

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,  
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

(“And Can It Be That I Should Gain” by Charles Wesley)

By Faith the prophets saw a day  
When the longed-for Messiah would appear  
With the power to break the chains of sin and death  
And rise triumphant from the grave

(“By Faith” by Keith & Kristyn Getty)

Jesus is Lord—the tomb is gloriously empty!  
Not even death could crush the King of love!  
The price is paid, the chains are loosed, and we’re forgiven,  
And we can run into the arms of God.

(“Jesus Is Lord” by Stuart Townend)

He breaks the power of canceled sin,  
He sets the prisoner free;  
His blood can make the foulest clean,  
His blood avails for me.

(“O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” by Charles Wesley)

Just as I am, I would be lost  
But mercy and grace my freedom bought

And now to glory in Your cross  
Oh Lamb of God I come, I come

I come broken to be mended  
I come wounded to be healed  
I come desperate to be rescued  
I come empty to be filled  
I come guilty to be pardoned  
By the blood of Christ the Lamb  
And I'm welcomed with open arms  
Praise God, just as I am

(“Just As I Am” by Travis Cottrell)

Wonderful merciful Savior  
Precious Redeemer and Friend  
Who would have thought that a Lamb  
Could rescue the souls of men  
Oh You rescue the souls of men

(“Wonderful, Merciful Savior” by Selah)

We were once not a people. Through Jesus Christ, we have been made God's people. We were once in captivity. Through Jesus Christ, we've been set free. We were once in bondage. Now we have freedom in Christ. He has brought us near to Him by the blood of Jesus Christ and that is cause for great rejoicing.

One more thing here before we finish. There is a promise in this phrase for us to cling to today. A hunger for God's Word and responding to God's Word in a proper way leads us to a joy in God as we think of our salvation and what He has delivered us from. As we think of how wonderful our God is and our hearts are filled with joy, this passage says, *“The joy of the Lord is your strength.”*

There's a promise there that for God's people, joy in Him is strengthening. It gives strength in the middle of trial. Nowhere do we see in Scripture that following Jesus removes trials or difficulties or circumstances like I talked about at the beginning of this sermon. There is a promise here for us—that joy in God gives us strength in the middle of our trials. When we're lying there and nothing makes sense, we can find delight in God. We can find delight in the fact that He has rescued us in Jesus Christ even though we deserve His full wrath and eternity separated from Him and spent forever in hell. . If we find joy in that, it gives us strength to be not so easily shaken. The joy of the Lord gives us strength to fight the temptation to pursue joy in lesser things, in sin or things this world says will make us happy. When we are filled with delight in God, it gives us strength to fight temptation.

**A hunger for God and a proper response to God leads to a joy in God.** God's people, go your way and rejoice because this day is holy. The joy of the Lord *is* your strength. We want to find joy in God, find delight in Him and find that in God His joy is our strength.

Let's pray.

Oh Father, use Your Word that we've read. As we respond to it in different ways, God, lead us to joy in You. You've commanded us to delight ourselves in You. God, I pray that You would help us live in great rejoicing because You are the God of our salvation. May we find in You joy and may we find in that joy, our strength. We pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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