

The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength

Nehemiah 8:9-10

Introduction

It is quite likely that the church in America is headed for more and more trouble in the coming days. In such times (and really at all times), where does strength come from to stand, to wield the gospel against the principalities and powers (Eph. 6:10-14), against the high and vain things that exalt themselves against the knowledge of God (2 Cor. 10:4-6)? Where does strength come from to endure the trials that may come? Where does strength come from to endure the trials you already are encountering, large or small? Scripture tells us that the joy of the Lord is our strength (Neh. 8:10).

Response to the Word

After the Jews were returned from their captivity in Babylon, God raised up Ezra and Nehemiah to lead the people in what became a great reformation. After Nehemiah's work to rebuild the wall was complete (Neh. 6:15), the people gathered together to hear the Word of God (8:1-6). When Ezra read the Word and it was explained to the people, they mourned and wept (8:7-9). The people, worshipping the Lord and hearing His Word delivered to them, are convicted. Nehemiah then encouraged the people, calling them away from their sorrow because the joy of the Lord is their strength (Neh. 8:9-10).

Why would God's Word cause great sorrow? The Word is a mirror (James 1:23), a light (2 Pet. 1:19), and a sharp sword (Heb. 4:12). It exposes us and flays us open. God knows our very deepest thoughts and desires (Ps. 139:1-4, Prov. 15:11), and He uses His Word read and preached and explained to show us where we fall short of Him, where we sin against Him, where we still need to be conformed to the image of His Son. Nehemiah quickly leads the people away from the sorrow that comes from the knowledge of their sin and lack of conformity to the Lord's ways. In repentance, we ought not to remain in sorrow.

Repentance begins with this, but if we stay there, there is no hope. There is only despair, which in turn is unbelief and thus more sin to be ashamed of. Rather, in true repentance, we see and acknowledge our sin and then turn away from ourselves and to the Lord. Why? Because we have no strength in ourselves. Forgiveness is only found in Him, as is our joy.

Reformation of God's House

Ezra and Nehemiah witness a great reformation take place among the people of God (Ezra 9-10, Neh. 13), and this is what we desire to see in our time. Jesus commissioned His church to disciple the nations because they have been given and will be brought under His Lordship (Ps. 2:8, Matt. 28:18-20, Rev. 21:24). If we are Jesus' hands and feet carrying out His takeover of the world, we must realize that reformation begins in the house of God, in the churches, in the families, and in the individual hearts gathered here. We long, as the hymn says, to see God's churches full, and this begins with us weekly coming to the Lord and being reformed and renewed by His Word and sacraments. Having been brought into Christ's army, your part in the gospel conquest of the world begins with you being right with God and with your brother. Do you long to see people coming to Jesus? Then first, you come to Jesus. Do you long to see our nation repentant? Then first, you confess your sins. Acknowledge them to the Lord. Give no provision for your sin, give no ground to it (Rom. 13:14).

It is in doing this that we find our strength. This is because we realize that we cannot comprehend the width and length and depth and height of the love and grace of God (Eph. 3:18-19). His joy in forgiving us is our joy. When we are honest about our sin, our wickedness, we see how undeserving we are. How could God forgive me for this? But this is precisely the point of the gospel. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). And so, when we confess our sins, knowing that we are forgiven, the response is go, “eat the fat, drink the sweet,” and share it with others. Go and celebrate and feast together because the joy of the Lord is your strength. You are forgiven, so throw a party.

Cultivating the Reformation

We need this joyful strength in dealing with our daily trials, temptations, struggles, relationships, etc. We also need it to face the growing onslaught of unbelief and hatred of life and hatred of the Lord. We need the joy of the Lord as we put on the armor of God and stand strong against the devil, the principalities and powers, and the unbelieving strongholds. The joy of the Lord is something God gives in His grace, not something we gin up or earn or grow on our own. At the same time, God has given us means by which we embrace and cultivate this joy in Him. Looking at what we see in Nehemiah and elsewhere, we can identify four things to practice alongside of our prayers for reformation.

Because we are forgiven, we also grow joyfully strong by gathering with the assembly of saints and worshipping on the Lord’s Day (cf. Ps. 98, 100, 149). We rejoice in the day that He has made (Ps. 118:22-24, cf. Matt. 21:42). Second, like Nehemiah exhorted, we eat the fat and drink the sweet, celebrating the rest and joy we have in Christ by outwardly resting and feasting, knowing that we are as undeserving of it as the prodigal son (Luke 15). Third, we share this rest and celebration with others, being given to hospitality (cf. Rom. 12:13, 1 Pet. 4:9). Lastly, as we saw in Nehemiah, embracing the joy of the Lord begins with coming to His Word. So, in addition to hearing the Word read and preached on the Lord’s Day, we must be readers of the Word ourselves, desiring it like a baby desires milk (1 Pet. 2:1-3). While the Word does expose us and can be painful, if we are forgiven, it is also sweet, brightens the eyes, and rejoices the heart (Ps. 19).

Conclusion

Forgiven people, people free from guilt and shame, people free from the dominion of sin, people walking in the light are able by the grace of God to stand steadfast in the face of anything the Lord ordains to come to pass. You can say with Paul that you can be content in all things and endure all things because it is Christ who strengthens you (Phil. 4:11-13). You can rejoice under trial (James 1:2) and under slander and persecution (Matt. 5:11-12). But there is one more important reason for this, and it is actually the foundation of all that has come before. It is not just that we are strong because we have joy in the Lord. Our strength actually begins with His joy in us (Zeph. 3:17). Zephaniah was prophesying (at least in part) of the return of the Jews from Babylon. He speaks of the joy that the Lord has over His people, and the joy that He declares over them in His love as He delivers them. The joy of the Lord is your strength because He loves you and has forgiven you and called you His own. You don’t deserve His joy over you, and that’s the point. Your strength is all because of His grace.