

Sunday May 30th 2010. 10.30am

Building: Outreach: Belonging x22.

Building with Joy.

READ Nehemiah 8: 1 – 12.

Esp v10....The joy that the LORD gives you will make you strong.

Background: the Book of Nehemiah gives an account of the return of Nehemiah and some of the exiles from Babylon (Persia). (There had already been an earlier return as well & the Temple had been rebuilt: see Ezra). He comes to govern Judah and also to oversee the further rebuilding of the walls around Jerusalem.

In this chapter we also hear from the prophet and expert in the Law Ezra. Ezra stands in a wooden tower or pulpit so he can be heard and the people listen for 5/6 hours. (He is supported on his right and left by the Levites who helped develop Israel's worship). For a long time the people of God have lost touch with what is pleasing to God and what God requires of those who call themselves – the LORD's People. On hearing God's Law read and explained to them in ways they could understand they begin to cry. They are not living (socially) as God requires and there need to be changes.

But Nehemiah tells them not to cry - but to go home and have a feast. This is to be a holy day – a day when they set themselves aside/ make themselves available to God and his work. (Jesus the Bridegroom spoke about the times to feast and fast). They are to have a feast rather than a fast – and they are to share their food and wine with those who have nothing for their table (changes will begin with how the poor and weak are treated in their midst).

- They are not to be SAD but rather to say – *The JOY of the LORD is our strength.*

They have much work ahead of them and they need to celebrate God's goodness and renew their joy before they begin the serious and hard work ahead of them as they change the way they live in community. (Somehow I feel there are link points with what we in the UK and other places need to do – to go back to living as God requires and not in our greed) This work of reform and change will require great strength – moral and spiritual strength! (Many of us need to rediscover our Bibles and how to read and interpret them).

Has anyone here ever put diesel in their car engine rather than petrol or the other way around? I think it's impossible to do now because they've changed the shape of the nozzle at the pump – but if you do it will choke the engine. It will have to be flushed through and the correct fuel placed in the tank.

Nehemiah and indeed many OT and NT writers speak about the strengthening fuel/ resource of joy which comes from knowing the LORD God.

Nehemiah is using the word for joy that means to be jubilant, to rejoice – because you have succeeded. It is only used as a word also in Ezra 6:16 and 1 Chronicles 16:27. He is speaking of a spiritual joy – an inner resource of strength based on God and not simply based on circumstances!

The Greek NT word for joy also is based on rejoicing because of God. In Galatians 5:22 as Paul speaks about the fruit the Holy Spirit produces he speaks of joy based on our experience, our relationship with God. When he was in prison and on trial for his life he said – *Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice! Philippians 4: 4.* (There is a place for us to exercise and will and choice as to whether we rejoice or not).

God is the ground and the object of the Believer's joy. Also hearing the Law of the LORD is a source of joy according to the Scriptures: *Psalms 1 and 19 and 119.*

Building for God requires more than a “new year’s resolution” – it requires moral strength and endurance Building for God and with God requires regular and intimate time with God and also with celebrating with God’s people in feasting and worship!

Even if circumstances are adverse there is still ground for joy in God: *Though the fig tree does not blossom and there be no herd in the stall, though the produce of the olive fail and there be no fruit on the vine – yet will I rejoice in the Lord (x2) I will joy in the god of my Salvation – God the Lord is my strength. The prophet*

The work of God in others and their faith and obedience can bring great joy and encouragement to us:

Paul wrote to the Christians at Thessalonica about the joy they gave him and the other Believers.

READ *1 Thessalonians 3; 7 – 9.(p259)*

What’s more we can share the joy of those who are joyful and this strengthens us:

Romans 12: 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

Strangely it is we learn in life the experiences of sorrow which can enlarge our capacity to know joy. (*Romans 5: 3, 4*)

Jesus spoke about both happiness (deep happiness) and sorrow and even about leaping for joy. *READ Luke 6: 20 – 26 esp. 23*

Joy is often contrasted with weeping and sorrow. *His anger last only a moment, his goodness for a lifetime. Tears may flow in the night, but joy comes in the morning. Psalm 30: 5.*

If we find that joy is not present in our lives then we need to stop and to do some discovery thinking:

Joy can leave us because of a time of sorrow... the people stood before Ezra and wept because they realized that they were not living in ways that please God.

* There is a place for confession and change (repentance) at times. We have lost our joy because we have effectively turned our backs on God.

It may have been a slow turn away from God, a slow forgetting of his ways in which case perhaps we need to seek out help from others so that our relationship with God – who is the joy of our Salvation can be restored.

- Sometimes though we have lost touch with the joy of our salvation because we have been overwhelmed by circumstances at work, or home, or in the world. We may be tired or even sickly or bordering on depression and we need to make adjustments to see the joy restored. Perhaps there is the need to recognise again that *God is the giver of every good and perfect gift* – and effectively we need to be told to go home, to relax, to feast, to enjoy the fruits of the earth – in the company of others so that we may be renewed. This is not an excuse for debauchery or careless living but simply enjoying God's good gifts.

It's especially important for God's people to be able to do this. We rejoice in our Salvation (which is all in Jesus the Lord) and we do this in our songs and praises and also in our feasting and sharing in community.

We can rejoice in the changes we have seen in others as well as lamenting the sad and unjust things we see. Let it never be said that God's people do not know the time to weep and the time to rejoice.

Even in the times of deepest sorrow – God the LORD and joy in him brings us strength to live and build for his Kingdom. *Rejoice in the LORD always and again I say always rejoice in the LORD. Not sometimes but always.*

We need to spend time rejoicing (just because God is worthy) but also so that we may have strength to work and do what is pleasing to him.

Others need to see us rejoicing in God and his good gifts. (it confirms that we experience God as good and not a Master who gives us burdens we cannot bear. We are not religiously oppressed – *Jesus says, Come to me all you who are weary of carrying heavy loads and I will give you rest. My yoke is easy and my burden is light.*