

The Joy of the Lord is Our Strength

Trevor Froehlich ~ Athletes in Action

About 2 weeks ago, I was making my way across the U of A campus where I work, and I heard Jewish music being broadcast from loudspeakers out of a Truck with a kind of Hut built on the truck box. Curious, I approached the opened rear of the Hut, and saw two men. I said “Shalom”. A Rabbi welcomed me in and offered me a bag of Potato Chips. Upon questioning, the Rabbi explained that it was the Jewish feast of Sukkot which was the feast of booths - a week long celebration dedicated to celebrate Moses and the Jews wandering in the Desert in Sukkah “huts” for forty years, prior to the entry into the Promised Land. Faithful Jews would live in these temporary makeshift huts with branches as roofs above four walls. Sukkot is also known as “the time of our Joy”. And Joy pervades the festivities.

How many of you had a tree-house growing up? We all worked hard to get the home together. There wasn't much for furnishings. But great friendships were forged there.

This festival of booths provided opportunity for reflection upon wanderings in the dessert, upon temporary dwellings and upon the faithful God to deliver them into the Promised Land. It focuses on Joy. So it is fitting for me to tell you this introductory story, because it is the feast of Sukkot - that Nehemiah and the Jews were celebrating in today's reading in Nehemiah Chapter 8. The name of the festival “the Time of Our Joy” fits with today's message entitled **“The Joy of the Lord is our Strength.”**

I would like to make a few observations about how the Joy of the Lord is our strength in Nehemiah Chapter 8.

V 1-3 All the people gathered in one accord in the square before the water gate. They told Ezra to bring out the book of the Law of Moses which the Lord had commanded for Israel. So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak until noon as he faced the square in the water gate in the presence of men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the book of the law.

1. The Joy of the Lord is experienced first as God bring his people together in one accord.

This worship is the first time that they come together without the temple. Many Jews wondered if they could worship without the temple destroyed by the Babylonians... for the temple was the place where God dwelled.

It was by the Water Gate where they gathered in worship during the festival of Sukkot. The Water Gate was the place where the women passed by every day to go to the wells to draw water. The first act of worship behind the new walls of Jerusalem is not segregated as it was in the temple... into places for men and women, Jew and non-Jew, lame and non-lame, priest and high priest. Non-Jews could only go so far- then they had to stop. Then Jewish women could go a little farther, and then they had to stop. And then Jewish men could go a little bit farther and then they had to stop. Finally, there was the inner court – the holy of holies, which could be entered by the High priest only once a year on the Day of Atonement... Yom Kippur. **The Joy of the Lord was experienced as they worshipped together in unity... in one accord.**

I want to go back to the Sukkah booth for a moment. Four kinds of branches made up the roof of the Sukkah. Each branch represented different types of people in the community, whose intrinsic unity they celebrated at Sukkot. There are different kinds of people that attend church. There are many different kinds of people with whom we work. We don't always see eye to eye, do we? Everyone came together... without division... without segregation during "the time of our Joy" - Sukkot. They came together as one... in one accord. The result was JOY!

Yet, the enemy comes to divide; to magnify our differences.

The image of unity in worship here is a picture of what Jesus came to do in establishing the Kingdom of God. He came to unify gender, racial and social gaps. He did it through healing the weak and lame, through reaching into the Samaritan world, by speaking with the woman at the well and by dining with the poor and the outcast.

St. Paul's... are you living and worshipping in one accord? Does this give you joy? Does it strengthen you?

The Joy of the Lord is experienced as God brings his people together in one accord.

2. The next point is that the Joy of the Lord is experienced as the word of God is lifted high. (read v. 5-6)

“Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them. And as he opened it all of the people stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and said “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground.”

Notice that the book and the priest are elevated for all people to see. As Ezra opened it, all the people stood up. They honored the word of God. Ezra praised God.

Ezra read it aloud from daybreak until noon. The book of the Law of Moses kept their attention. I would like to give a snapshot of what they heard that morning, on a four hour sermon... (Pastor Michael told me to try for 15 minutes!)

They didn't just hear law lists and genealogies, but also stories of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Rachel, Leah, the exodus out of Egypt through the desert and the parting of the Red Sea. They heard about the people in the wilderness, wandering in the Desert. They heard about Moses on Mount Sinai; They heard about liberation from slavery. The covenants. They heard the ten commandments. They heard instructions to celebrate festivals unto God (including Sukkot)!

More than just rules, it was their past, stories of great human failure and stories of God's great redemption.

After hearing the Word of the Lord, in verse 6 it says that they bowed and worshipped the Lord, the great God with their faces to the ground. They humbled themselves. Lifting high God's word led to humility.

When they lifted high the Word of God. They heard a word with a double edge. On the one edge it judged... and cut, leading its hearers to humility, as they resonated with the common, human failure of their ancestors. Yet, on the other edge, the same word of God, when lifted high, healed and comforted, with the hope of God, his redemptive power and with the promise of his great faithfulness to restore. The joy of the Lord was experienced as the Word was lifted high. These were stories of God returning his people to the promised land. It was God's covenant with them. It was hope for their future, rooted in promise.

What happened when they didn't lift the Word of God high? Scripture ceased to speak to them due to absence or perhaps ritual. The Israelites could not respond to it. They ceased to worship. They cease to reverence God. They ceased to be convicted of sin, and they were in fact led into physical exile and Babylonian captivity. They re-entered slavery. We re-enter into slavery when we fail to lift high the word of God. We fail to be washed through the Word. in John 15... "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken."

The Joy of the Lord is experienced as the word of God is lifted high.

The people are then commanded to go and celebrate this week-long festival of Sukkot. They are challenged: "This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep", for all the people had been weeping as they listened to the word of the Law. They are told to celebrate this week, with choice foods and wine, giving to those who had nothing. This day is sacred to our Lord. Then they are told in verse 10: **Do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength. The joy of the Lord is your strength** I want to close by asking "What is the joy of the Lord? And how is it strength to the Jews? How is it strength to us?"

I believe the joy of the Lord is experienced as we bear the image of God. Genesis 1:26... Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. This Genesis account would have been read on the first day of the feast of Sukkot.

The joy of the Lord is seen as we bear the image of the invisible God. As we reflect His likeness and glory. The joy of the Lord is our strength. Think about how this would strengthen the nation of Israel, how it would strengthen the Church today, as we bear the image of God... personally... corporately. Marriages would be strong. Relationships would be strong. Work ethic would be strong. Weak would be strengthened. Poor would be fed. It would appear as God reigning in his Kingdom. People would be drawn to such a God and be saved. (As I looked at your bulletin, your website, I saw the work that God is doing through your church. I saw the Spirit of adoption. I saw great care for families who are in need. This summer a youth from your own congregation emailed me to discuss how he could help reach into the community of Grovener with the love of God. He thought maybe we could do so with a soccer game and with a youth event. This young man reflected the image of God, with his desire to see others come to know the Living God. I want to exhort you on in this kind of love for your community.

But we fail... don't we? we don't bear God's image well all the time. We are more apt to be like James and John from Mark 10 and say "Jesus, we want you to do whatever we ask you to do... put us on your left and right in your glory." Our failure is bad news.

But the good news, the gospel, is that **the Joy of the Lord is also experienced in his restoration when we fail.** The stories told during Sukkot are an intricate tapestry of God restoring his tarnished image that we bear, as he remakes us into new creations.

Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. Isaiah 1:18-20 God's restoration of his people is the Joy of the Lord.

We are cleansed, by God's generosity. We are cleansed by the waters of baptism. We are cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ, poured out for our forgiveness. "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come." 1 Corinthians 5:17.

The joy of the Lord is experienced at the festival of Sukkot. The joy of the Lord is experienced in our unity. It is seen as we lift high the word of God. It is seen as we bear his image and it is seen through his restoration when we

fail. As we are re-created into the image of God, day by day, it is the joy of the Lord. And indeed it is our strength.

Let's pray.

Lord, we are wanderers. We live in temporary dwellings. Help us to remember your great redemption. Help us to experience The Joy of the Lord in unity of worship... by elevation of your word... by bearing your image... and by restoration when we fail.