

"The joy of the Lord is your strength" (NEH 8:10). At the time these words were proclaimed, the Israelites had just returned from captivity in Babylon. Under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people had rebuilt Jerusalem's ruined walls. And now they set their sights on reestablishing the temple and restoring the nation.

At this point, Nehemiah called a special meeting at the city's water gate, within Jerusalem's rebuilt walls. ***"And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate"*** (NEH 8:1). Some 42,360 Israelite men were on hand for this meeting. Standing alongside them were 7,300 servants, including 245 singers. Altogether, about 50,000 people were gathered.

First came the preaching of God's word. Scripture says the people were hungry to hear it: ***"They spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses ... Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding"*** (NEH 8:1-2).

These people didn't need to have God's word pushed on them. A consensus of hunger had developed among them. And they were fully prepared to submit to the authority of God's word. They wanted to be governed by it, to make their lives conform to its truth.

Amazingly, Ezra preached to this crowd for five or six hours - ***"from the morning until midday"*** (NEH 8:3). Yet no one even noticed the time. ***"The ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law"***

Maintaining the Joy of the Lord

(NEH 8:3). These people were totally captivated by God's word.

What an incredible scene! You simply wouldn't see such an occurrence in any American church today. Yet, I tell you, true revival can never take place without this kind of all-consuming hunger for God's word. Indeed, when God's people grow weary of hearing His word preached, a spiritual death begins - and the joy of the Lord departs.

You may have heard of the phrase "sermon tasters." This term is almost 200 years old, originating in London during the mid-1800s. At that time, the great preacher C.H. Spurgeon delivered sermons to 5,000 people every Sunday at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Across the city, Joseph Parker also preached anointed messages. And other fiery pastors preached throughout London, delivering deep, revelatory, prophetic words.

It became a popular sport among wealthy Londoners to hop in their carriages and race across the city from one church to another, sampling the preaching of these ministers. Each Monday in Parliament, exclusive meetings were held to discuss which preacher delivered the best sermon and who brought forth the deepest revelation.

These gadabouts were dubbed "sermon tasters." They always wanted to lay claim to some new spiritual truth or revelation. But

very few practiced what they heard.

At the water gate in Jerusalem, however, there was no eloquent preaching, no sensational sermon. Ezra preached straight from the scriptures, reading for hours on end. And as the people stood and listened to God's word, they grew excited.

At times Ezra was so overcome by what he read, he stopped to ***"bless the Lord, the great God"*** (NEH 8:6). The glory of the Lord came down powerfully, and everyone raised his hands in praise to God: ***"All the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands"*** (NEH 8:6). As certain passages were read, ***"they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground"*** (NEH 8:6). The people humbled themselves before God, in brokenness and repentance. Then, after a while, they stood up to experience more.

Please note - this meeting didn't include any exciting stories to stir up people's emotions. There was no manipulation from the pulpit, no dramatic testimony. There wasn't even any music as yet. These people simply had an ear to hear everything God said to them.

I believe the Lord desires to move among His people in the same way today. I see His Spirit stirring up churches wherever there's a hunger for His word.

Yet I've also been in churches where people constantly glance at

their watches, before the sermon has started. Then, when the pastor says his final "Amen," the people begin a mad race for the parking lot. There is no real joy in such a church. So, how can we expect desperate sinners to ever want a part in it?

The kind of revival we see in Nehemiah 8 requires a pastor who is as excited by the scriptures as Ezra was. Yet it also requires a people who are just as anxious to hear God's word and obey it. Even the most fiery preacher can't stir up a complacent congregation if they're not hungry to hear God's truth.

The Result of This Powerful Preaching Was a Wave of Brokenness Among the Hearers.

A half-day of preaching wasn't enough for the hungry Israelites. They wanted even more of God's word. So they formed groups, with seventeen elders besides Ezra leading them in Bible studies the rest of the day. "(They) *caused the people to understand the law ... so they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading*" (NEH 8:7-8).

As these people grasped God's law, they began to mourn over their sin. "*All the people wept when they heard the words of the law*" (NEH 8:9). Picture the scene: 50,000 people lay scattered on the ground, mourning their sin in unison. Like a hammer, God's word had broken their pride. And now their weeping echoed over the hills for miles.

I ask you - is this what revival is all about? Is it a word so piercing that people are driven to their knees, weeping and repenting before God?

I have experienced such holy gatherings myself. When I was a child, our family attended "camp meetings" at the Living Waters Camp Ground in Pennsylvania. Jesus' second coming was preached with such power and authority, everyone was convinced Christ would return within the hour. A holy fear fell, and people were driven to their faces. Some cried as if they were hanging over hell

by a thread - wailing, broken, sorrowing over sin.

Often, God's word was preached all day and into the night. Early the next morning, people could still be found lying prostrate in the prayer room, grieving over their sin. Some even had to be carried out.

It was on such a night that the Lord called me to preach, at the age of eight. I was in the Spirit for hours, broken and weeping, God's word coming alive in my heart. Christ's soon return burned within me as an imminent reality. I'll never forget that wonderful experience.

Yet, as glorious as all of these manifestations were - whether at Living Waters Camp Ground, or at Jerusalem's water gate centuries ago - none of these things can draw sinners into God's house.

Imagine an unsaved person who's trying to bear up under life's stresses. He has marital problems, he's hurting and confused, he's afraid his life has no meaning. Such a person is joyless, disgusted with life. And nothing he tries can satisfy his thirsting soul. He's convinced he can't make it through the day without medicating himself with alcohol.

If you took this man to a church service where people were lying about prostrate, mourning over sin, he wouldn't understand what was going on. In fact, chances are he would leave more depressed than when he came in.

We have to understand - the water-gate revival in Jerusalem wasn't for sinners. It was strictly for the backslidden children of God. Likewise, few unsaved people ever attended Living Waters camp meetings. In both cases, the Lord was trying to repair his children - to deliver them from corruption, baptize them with joy and make them strong.

God's testimony is never that His people are lying on their faces, crying rivers of tears. No, the testimony He wants to bring forth in His people is joy - genuine, lasting joy. "*The joy of the Lord is your strength*" (NEH 8:10). This joy - which results from biblical preaching and true repentance - brings true strength to God's

people and draws sinners into His house.

Most Christians never associate joy with repentance. But repentance is actually the mother of all joy in Jesus. Without it, there can be no joy. Yet any believer or congregation who walks in repentance will be flooded with the joy of the Lord.

What Is Missing in Multitudes of Churches Today Is the Thing Most Needed by The Lost: Genuine, Soul-Satisfying Joy.

I often hear Christians say, "We prayed down a revival in our church." But I say this cannot happen by prayer alone. There can't be any such awakening unless both the pastor and the people hunger diligently for God's word. And they must wholly commit their lives to being governed by the scriptures. We simply can't obtain heaven's joy until the pure Word has convicted us of sin - breaking down all pride, prejudices and false dignity.

When David disobeyed, he lost the joy of the Lord. And that joy could only be restored by true repentance. So he prayed, "*Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Purge me*" (PSA 51:2-3,7). David also prayed to regain what he'd lost: "*Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation*" (PSA 51:12).

I believe this explains the death pall that hangs over many churches today. In short, there is sin in the camp. And it's impossible to maintain the joy of the Lord if sin is present. How can the Holy Spirit pour out joy on a people who continue to indulge in adultery, addictions and materialism, living like the unsaved?

The Lord lifted His glory from Shiloh because the high priest, Eli, refused to deal with sin in God's house. Eli had become accustomed to the easy life - and if you're addicted to pleasure, you won't be motivated to expose sin. God finally wrote the word "Ichabod" above the door of the sanctuary - meaning, "The glory

has departed." Then He held up Shiloh as an example of what happens to a church when sin is ignored. God's glory - including all gladness and joy - dissipates, in individuals and in the corporate body.

**Where God's Word is Revered,
the Inevitable Result Is an
Outpouring of Genuine
"Jesus Joy."**

Ezra told the crowds, "You've been excited about God's word - hungering for it, loving it, allowing it to work in your heart. You've repented, wept and mourned - and God is pleased with you. But now it's time to rejoice. Take out your handkerchiefs, and wipe away your tears. This is a time for great joy and mirth."

The glory of the Lord fell on Israel, and the people spent the next seven days rejoicing: *"All the people went their way to eat, and to drink ... and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them"* (NEH 8:12).

The Hebrew word for mirth here means "glee, merriment, gladness, happiness." This kind of mirth isn't merely a good feeling - it's an inner joy, a deep exuberance. Its expression may look different in each of us, because such joy takes place deep inside us. But it's clear to everyone around us that our wellspring of joy comes from heaven.

Whenever Israel turned to sin and idolatry, the Lord removed their mirth: *"I will also cause all her mirth to cease"* (HOS 2:11). *"I will take from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, and this whole land shall be ... an astonishment"* (JER 25:10-11). *"All joy is darkened, the mirth of the land is gone"* (ISA 24:11).

At times, Israel put on a false joy to try to cover their sin. We see this happening as well in many churches today. We may witness singing, dancing, manifestations, loud praising - but those who love God's word can discern whether it's true or false joy.

You may recall Israel's shouts as they danced around the golden calf. When Joshua heard the

people, he said, *"There is a noise of war in the camp"* (EX 32:17). But Moses replied, *"It is not the voice of them that shout for mastery"* (EX 32:18). Moses was saying, "That's the shout of a people still in bondage. They haven't mastered their sin." Gold had become Israel's god, and it brought a shout to the people's lips. Yet it was a shout of false joy - a noise that signaled God's impending judgment.

I once preached in a large church full of this kind of noise. During the worship, the pastor and organist whipped the people into a frenzy. The congregation sang and clapped loudly for an entire hour. After a while, I felt physically sick. I prayed, "Lord, something's wrong here. This isn't the sound of a people who've mastered their sins."

A year later, the pastor and organist were exposed as homosexuals. Yet the people had never discerned this about their leaders, because they weren't grounded in God's word. Instead, they'd followed a noise that appeared to be joyful but that was leading them toward destruction.

When we started Times Square Church in 1987, we quickly realized we were pastoring in a modern-day Corinth. And we had to preach a strong message that would expose all sin.

Our services were attended by many Christians who worked in the entertainment industry - in theater, TV and film. These people shouted loud praises - but, in some cases, their noise wasn't the sound of mastery. Some had chosen to stay in careers that clearly dishonored the Lord, working in plays or shows that blasphemed God.

We wondered whether we could evangelize unsaved show people if our own congregants were still involved in wicked aspects of the business. Finally, we decided we couldn't allow a double standard. So we preached holy separation - and the Lord began to deal with the people. Many of them gave up lucrative careers in entertainment, and God blessed them marvelously. One former actor now pastors a church in

Jerusalem, preaching Christ on Mount Carmel.

Cross dressers also came to our services, dressed in drag. We never said anything to put them down, and over time the Holy Ghost dealt with them. Many were saved and began to change their appearance. Some even grew beards as a sign of repentance.

We had to face other significant problems among the people. Practicing gays wanted to sing in the choir. Bar-hopping musicians wanted to play in the orchestra. We had to preach the law to deal with sin, but we always tempered our messages with mercy.

We also had to deal with sin on our own staff. One musician was seen visiting X-rated theaters after our church meetings. And a member of our worship team - a white man - boasted, "Any black guy who tries to clean my windshield for money is going to get a fist sandwich." We released that man immediately.

We also had to deal with deceptions and delusions in our congregation. One married man told me he believed the Lord was going to take his wife from him. He said God had already revealed to him the woman in our church he was going to marry. I told this man bluntly that any such revelation he might have received wasn't from God.

We kept preaching holiness, week after week. And over time, our sermons scared many people away. Yet the Lord had kept a Godly remnant for Himself, a people who loved His word. In every service, these people sat like hungry little birds, their mouths wide open for food. Afterward, they took home sermon tapes to listen to over and over. We saw in them a spirit of repentance, an eagerness to obey, and a readiness to conform to God's word.

One wealthy couple called our offices and said, "Please send a truck tomorrow, along with some workers. We want to remove our liquor cabinet from our home, as well as our TVs."

As the people came under the power and government of God's

word, a joy broke forth. Soon our services were filled with more than tears of repentance. Suddenly, the sanctuary shook with shouts of victory, mirth, glee and gladness. There was great rejoicing - because we'd begun to understand the great truth of God's Word.

To Maintain the Joy of the Lord, God Called for an Even Deeper Work of the Spirit.

God had heard the Israelites' cry, and He'd shown mercy to them. He had turned their mourning into mirth, allowing them to shout and rejoice. And now He called them to gather for yet another meeting.

If Israel's joy was to be maintained - if it was not to be lost once again - God had to dig a little deeper. Certain areas of people's lives still weren't conformed to His word. Yet the Lord had allowed everyone to rejoice for a season, because He wanted them to know they were secure. Now, during this state of acceptance and joy, He asked them all to commit to a greater separation from the world.

God said to these joyful souls, "I am well pleased with you. You have revered My word - repenting of your sin, rejoicing in My mercy, and promising to obey Me. Now it's time for you to act on My love. I want you to separate yourselves wholly - to break away completely from the worldly influences that have crept into your hearts and homes."

You see, while the Israelites were in captivity, they'd become cozy with the heathen, slowly adopting their language and ways. Israelite men had married heathen wives, and Israelite women had purchased heathen husbands with dowries. The Israelites had also allowed unsanctified things to become a part of the worship in God's house.

Beloved, we can't go on to fullness in Christ if we don't increasingly separate ourselves from this world. If we're not becoming more heavenly minded, and less like the unsaved people surrounding us, we'll slowly lose all the joy of our repentance.

Israel didn't want to lose their great spirit of rejoicing. So they

assembled again, to obey God on this matter: *"The seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins"* (NEH 9:2). *"They ... entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law...and that (they) would not give (their) daughters unto the people of the land, nor take their daughters for (their) sons"* (NEH 10:29-30).

This Israelite remnant had also neglected to tithe. Now God demanded this of them as well. You may wonder, "Would God really withhold his joy and mirth from a church if the people weren't tithing?" I refer you to Malachi 3:8-10:

"Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse ... prove me ... if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

God was saying to Israel, "Don't continue to rob Me. If you'll conform to My command to tithe, I'll pour out a blessing you won't be able to contain." The people pledged *"that we should bring the first-fruits ... and our offerings ... and the tithes...unto the Levites, that the same Levites might have the tithes in all the cities of our tillage"* (NEH 10:37).

God's Promise to Pour Out A Blessing From Heaven Holds True for Us Today.

When we set our hearts to obey God's word - allowing His Spirit to expose and mortify all sin in our lives - the Lord Himself causes us to rejoice. *"God had made them rejoice with great joy"* (NEH 12:43). I believe this poured-out blessing includes abundant joy, even in the midst of our trials. The Lord opens heaven and baptizes us with "Jesus joy" - with shouting, rejoicing and singing - no matter what our circumstances.

Nehemiah reminded a rejoicing Israel of how God had provided for their forefathers in the wilderness.

The Lord had poured out manifold mercies on them. He'd taught them by His Spirit and led them by the cloud and the pillar of fire. He'd supernaturally provided them with manna and water. And, miraculously, He didn't allow their clothes or shoes ever to wear out (see Nehemiah 9:19-21).

How do these kinds of blessings sound to you? Manifold mercies, clear direction, God's Spirit teaching you, all your physical and material needs supplied - these all sound wonderful to me. And, indeed, all of these blessings hold true for us today. The Lord, in His great mercy, has promised to provide them all for His people.

Yet, we can still choose to live in a wilderness, as Israel did. Nehemiah pointed out that their forefathers had rebelled against the Lord, ignoring His law: *"Nevertheless they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their backs ... Yet many years didst thou forbear them ... yet they would not give ear"* (NEH 9:26,30).

Can you imagine the awful spiritual death these people brought upon themselves? Forty years of sabbaths without any joy or mirth. Forty years of funerals, without ever entering the promised land. These Israelites were rich with blessings, increased with goods, needing nothing - but they were lukewarm in spirit.

This is a picture of Jehovah Jireh - the God who faithfully provides for His people, even when they become hardened to His word. The Israelites had become bored with the things of God. They were just going through the motions. In His mercy, the Lord continued to direct their daily affairs and provide for them. But these people would never enter into His fullness. Is it any wonder their clothes and shoes never wore out? They simply weren't going anywhere.

This is also the sad state of many churches today. God may extend His mercy to a congregation - freeing them of debt, giving them direction for good works, supplying them with finances for new construction. Yet that church may remain in a spiritual wilderness, never going anywhere. They can

enjoy a measure of God's blessing - enough to keep from dying of thirst - but they remain weak, weary, ready to die. And it's all because their focus is still on the things of the world. They have no spirit, no life.

Simply put, only the joy of the Lord supplies us with true strength. We can talk all we want to about our ten- or twenty-year walk with Christ. We can show off our robe

of righteousness. But if we're not allowing the Holy Spirit to maintain the joy of the Lord in our hearts - if we aren't continually hungering for His word - then we're losing our fire. And we won't be ready for what comes upon the world in these last days.

How do we maintain the joy of the Lord? We do it the same way we obtained His joy in the beginning: First, we love, honor and hunger

excitedly for God's word. Second, we continually walk in repentance. And third, we separate ourselves from all worldly influences. This is how a Holy Ghost person or church maintains "Jesus joy" - rejoicing always, full of gladness and mirth.

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