

August 30, 2020

Nehemiah 8:10b:

“For the Joy of the Lord Is Your Strength”

- I. The Circumstances.
- II. The Present.
- III. What About What's to Come?

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Nehemiah 8:10b

Dear Friends in Christ,

Just think of it. Starting with the early 20th century, the United States has traveled through World War I, the Roaring Twenties (which I consider to be the pre-cursor to the greater corruption of what I call The Roaring Sixties), the Depression Era, World War Two, the Korean War, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, a number of smaller conflicts, an assassination of a President, attempted assassinations of two Presidents, the Iraqi War, constant conflict with other countries, 9/11, Covid-19....and whatever is to come. A fellow by the name of James Armstrong wrote, "We have been offered in the church, all too often, a watered-down gospel in willy-nilly fashion, and so we go through the motions of being faithful while turning to a secular world for the stimulus and satisfaction we seek." Have you found satisfaction from the secular world? How close are we to the last moment?

I have stated how I recall listening to many voices from childhood to young adult years crying out how we we're going to make this world the wonderful place it should be; the "we", I guess, referring to humanity in general. How close are we? How close have we ever been? I'm sorry for being so terribly repetitive, but does anyone really understand human nature in its fallen condition??

The words from the Book of Nehemiah must become ours . . .

"FOR THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH"

I. The Circumstances.

You will recall that in 586 B.C. the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and carried off a great number of Israelites into captivity. The Persians defeated the Babylonians in 539 B.C., and under the Persian kings remnants of exiles were sent back to rebuild the Temple, the city and the walls. It would be hard times for the returning remnant. There were those from the immediate outside who opposed them and those within who caused trouble. It was the way of life for the church then. It's the way it is today. There is no "new normal," but there is Jesus' warning: "In the world you will have tribulation." (Jn. 16:33)

Our text is from the time when the Persian king Artaxerxes sent Nehemiah to help rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem; around 445 B.C. Preceding our text we're told:

"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. So Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly...And he read it...from early morning until midday.... (Neh. 8:1-3)

(Our text then says) "And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites...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." (Neh. 8:9)

They heard the Law. It brought them to tears. It's what the Law does. Shows us the inability to keep the Law as God commands. Convicts us of sin and condemns us. As James writes: "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point (let's say, one thought sin) has become accountable for all of it." (2:10) That is, has broken all of it. It isn't an issue of how we see sin. It's an issue of how God sees it. We weep! Or, at least, we should!

What the Book of Nehemiah reports along with the words of James not only condemn the arrogance of the self-righteous, but drives them to outrage! However, what is presented here points us in another direction . . .

II. The Present.

Verse 10 of Nehemiah 8:

"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. (vs. 10)

And so, the theme for our sermon: *the joy of the Lord is your strength*. The joy of the Lord! Not the pleasures of this world, which quickly pass away. Not the things we accumulate, which quickly pass away. Not people who are elected to high positions, or maintain worldly prominence, both of which quickly pass away. And certainly not celebrity. As Scriptures teach, "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him." (2 Chron. 16:9)

To be blameless before the Lord is to remember these words and apply them to our daily living: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (Ps. 41:16) This is what we offer to God: our massive and crippling load of sin and guilt; *a broken and contrite heart*. This is what He gives: "(Christ) was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed." (Is. 53:5) And so it is that Paul writes, "yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified." (Gal. 2:16)

I frequently recall, from a number of years ago, when my son presented me with a copy of a section of Martin Luther's writing from "Luther's Works." I have re-read it throughout the years, passed copies to others, and have read a particular excerpt of it here. I would like for you to hear it again. Luther wrote:

The main knowledge and true wisdom of Christians, then, is this: to regard as very serious and true these words of Paul, that Christ was given over to death, not for our righteousness or holiness but for our sins, which are real sins - great, many, in fact, infinite and invincible. Therefore you must not think of them as minor or that your own works can remove them. Nor must you despair on account of their gravity... But you must learn from Paul here to believe that Christ was given not for sham or counterfeit sins, nor yet for small sins, but for great and huge sins; not for one or two sins but for all sins; not for sins that have been overcome...but for invincible sins. (Jaroslav Pelikan, Editor, LUTHER'S WORKS, "Lectures On Galatians," Volume 26, Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis, p. 35)

III. What About What's to Come?

The words of Solomon come to mind: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance." (Eccl. 3:1,4) This moment in time is truly a mixed bag. On the one hand we see a world wrapping itself tighter and tighter in conflict, contradictions and upheaval. On the other hand, and of first importance, we have the Word of God in front of us which impresses upon us what this world is and what we have in Christ. It would appear that we are in "the short season." I would say we definitely are.

Through the years, the pastors have persisted to keep in front of us the reality of this world's worsening condition. It has always been an issue of confronting what our Lord Jesus taught; what we have repeated many times; what we cannot ignore: "And because lawlessness will be increased the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." (Matt. 12-14) This world's condition will not improve.

We would do ourselves a horrible disfavor - delude ourselves while running after this world - if we do not take Jesus' words to heart: "For then there will be great tribulation, such has not been from the beginning of the world, until now, no and never will be." (Matt. 24:21) The remnant church will be here at the final moment. The world wide suffering of Christians and the growing antagonism toward Biblical Christianity in our country are clear reminders! Jesus was very clear about this, and, at the same time lifts His people with these words:

"And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on earth distress of nations in perplexity of the roaring of the sea and the waves (that is, the clamor and upheaval as nations struggle with each other and as one group of humankind sees its wisdom and ways as superior to others), people fainting with fear and foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Lk. 21:25-28)

God has clearly addressed this world's on-going condition. The movement of human history underscores the reality. It makes no difference who you are, your age, what you have or don't have, what your hopes and dreams for tomorrow might be, this is what must be in the forefront of every child of God in Christ: The Cross, the Blood, the Empty Tomb, the promise of Eternal Life in Christ and His return! It was and is His joy to do all that for us! Consequently, *For The Joy Of The Lord Is Our Strength!*

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott