

11 — Nehemiah 8-9 — The Joy of the LORD is my Fortified City

BY PASTOR JASON SNIDER

I. Introduction

- A. What do you perceive to be that one thing that you think would cause you to abandon the Lord? Is it physical suffering or something else? It seems some of the most dangerous are the accumulation of good things—even good gifts from the Lord. I think these two chapters will prove that.
- B. In what sense do you know or feel physically safe?
 - 1. When the 9/11 Terrorist attack happened, the church was full of people for about 6 months. The comforts of security returned and they left.
 - 2. Is your sense of safety coming from the locks on your doors and your security cameras?
 - 3. Is it in Metro PD?
 - 4. Or how you expect this election to go?
 - 5. Maybe you have a conceal carry permit or trained in self-defense.
 - 6. It could be that you feel safe due to the amount of money you have.
- C. In what sense do you know or feel safe from diseases like cancer?
 - 1. Advancements in early detection?
 - 2. Great doctors?
 - 3. Improved medicines?
- D. And in what sense do you know and feel spiritually safe?
 - 1. In light of our text today, in what do you find joy?
 - 2. Is it the good gifts God has given you or in God himself?
- E. What does this all mean in light of where we are in the story of Ezra-Nehemiah?

II. Main Point

- A. Because I believe the main point is this: the joy of the Lord is my protection

III. Outline

- A. Why not Strength?
- B. What is joy in the LORD?
- C. How does joy in the LORD protect me?

IV. Exposition

- A. We need to deal with the issue of protection or fortified city versus strength first.
 - 1. So, why do I think we should see this as protection instead of strength like almost all the modern English translations?
 - a) The simple answer is—that's not what the word means. Strength is only implied in the word. There are Hebrew words for strength and this isn't it.
 - b) Now, before I lose you by changing that word, let me point out that strength isn't a bad translation. You need strength to be protected. However, I think protection is better.
 - 2. Definitions of words matter. So let's define this Hebrew word—ma'oz.
 - a) The first entry in my Hebrew Lexicon is: 1. mountain stronghold, place of refuge
 - (1) It doesn't have a second level entry but it does give a few more options to think about—fortress as in a fortified city (like they are standing in) or refuge or sanctuary.
 - 3. Now let me give you a few references where this word is used like this.
 - a) (Isaiah 30:2) who set out to go down to Egypt,
without asking for my direction, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt!
 - (1) This one is really helpful because it joins this idea of "taking refuge" for the purpose of "protection."
 - (2) Sadly, the Lord is pointing out to his people how they sought protection in Pharaoh instead of God.
 - b) (Isaiah 27:5) Or let them lay hold of my protection,
let them make peace with me,
let them make peace with me."

- (1) The Lord is telling his people that if they will make peace with him, they will lay hold of his protection.
- c) Others includes lots of Psalms as I'm sure you could guess.
 - (1) (Psalm 27:1) The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
 - (a) Notice in this verse my salvation is parallel to the stronghold of my life.
 - (b) The psalmist asks an important question: of whom shall I be afraid?
 - (c) If God is my stronghold, then I need not be afraid.
 - i) Isn't that what I'm supposed to conclude?
 - (d) Here are other references in the Psalms for you to look up later.
 - i) Ps. 28:8; 31:3; 37:39; 62:9
 - ii) One that I want to read is very helpful and interesting to which I alluded to in the introduction—(Psalm 52:7) See the man who would not make God his refuge, but trusted in the abundance of his riches and sought refuge in his own destruction!"
 - (1) Instead of trusting in the LORD as his refuge, some men trusted in their riches.
 - (2) They did not see that God was their riches so they did not trust him because he was less valuable to them.
 - d) There are many other references and none of them use strength for this word.
 - e) Therefore I conclude that stronghold or refuge or protection are the better options.
- B. Before we explore how we are to understand this, let's now consider what the joy of the Lord means.
 - 1. Before I define this there are at least two options to consider.
 - a) The two options I'm going to discuss are—is my protection in my joy in the LORD or is my protection in God's joy in himself.
 - (1) Is this God's joy? Is God happy? Did he create the world seeking something to be happy about? Was he somehow lacking fulfillment?
 - (a) Some think that God is continually angry.
 - i) While it cannot be denied that God hates evil and there are always evil things to be angry about, this does not define who God is.
 - (1) This is a complex topic that needs lots of work and teaching. I hope to do more later.
 - (2) For the sake of time, I want to summarize what we need to hear right now.
 - ii) First—the being of God—"God's beatitude is simple. Nothing "makes" God happy. God does not "have" happiness. "God is happiness by his essence." He is happy because he is who he is (Exodus 3:14). God's beatitude is eternal. "The glory of the blessed God" (1 Timothy 1:11) is the glory of "the King of the ages" (1 Timothy 1:17), the glory of one who lacks beginning and end. God's beatitude is immutable. Nothing can increase God's happiness, and nothing can take it away (Job 22:2–3; 35:6–7; 41:11; Acts 17:25; Romans 11:35; James 1:17). God's beatitude is impassible. Because God is perfect, he rests content in himself as his own final end. He desires no further completion, no further fulfillment from anything outside of himself. God lacks all desire, reposing in himself in infinitely realized delight. God's impassible happiness is fully actualized happiness. For this reason, God's will toward anything outside of himself is not an expression of desire but of pure benevolence. God wills and affirms the existence of creatures, without grudging, without envy (James 1:5)."
 - iii) "Consequently, while divine beatitude is the supreme form of beatitude, it is not the exclusive form of beatitude. God's blessedness is a communicative attribute — that is, an attribute that he shares with [his] creatures. As the supreme good, God is also the supreme source of creaturely goods: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). And each creaturely good carries with it a distinct form of happiness for creatures capable of happiness."

- (1) (Scott Swain—article on *That Your Joy May Be Full: A THEOLOGY OF HAPPINESS*)
 - (2) You are thinking—but we do things that grieve the Holy Spirit and things that do not please God.
 - (a) That is true but that does not change who God IS. Both can be true. He has always been and forever will be happy.
 - iv) I hope that helps you conclude that God is a joyful God.
 - v) In brief, I would say—if God were not a happy God we would have no possibility of happiness ourselves. We were created in the image of the happy God’.
 - (b) I raise this issue to say, I don’t think Nehemiah 8:10 is referring to God’s joy but our joy in him.
 - i) But our joy in him exists only because God is the joyful God.
 - ii) So, Nehemiah 8:10 is telling us that our protection is in our joy in God.
2. So, let’s define joy.
- a) Here are several ways the Bible describes joy:
 - (1) Obviously, joy in the Lord,
 - (2) Delight in the fear of the Lord.
 - (3) Pleasures in the presence of the Lord.
 - (4) Gladness in the Lord.
 - (5) Exultation in the Lord.
 - (6) Desire for the Lord.
 - (7) Contentment in the Lord.
 - (8) Treasuring the words of the Lord.
 - (9) Being satisfied in the love of the Lord.
 - b) The only other place this word for joy is used is in 1 Chronicles 16:27 where it ascribes it to God himself.
 - (1) (1 Chronicles 16:27) Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his place.
 - (2) His joy is to be our joy. It is central to the mission of God.
 - (a) (Isaiah 35:10) And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.
 - (b) How might the book of Revelation end? Would it claim something like this joy? Does this happiness await us?
 - i) (Revelation 22:14) Blessed [happy] are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.
- C. There’s so much more to talk about on this but let’s spend the rest of our time seeing this in Nehemiah. How can you be protected by having joy in the Lord?
1. Let’s see the big picture in our story
 - a) In light of where we have been so far in Ezra-Nehemiah, I would ask—how have they been protected thus far?
 - (1) God has provided, protected, and led his people—the remnant—back to the Promised Land to rebuild the temple and the wall.
 - (a) All good gifts from God.
 - (b) There is no other answer for how this happened other than the Lord.
 - b) I suggested in the weekly email that you take a few minutes to read the book of Lamentations. As you might have noticed, that is what it felt like for the people of God living in exile.
 - (1) Was that a good gift of the Lord? Will they trust him while in exile?
 - (2) The most notable and often quoted verses from Lamentation are in chapter 3 verses 22 and 23—The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
 - (a) That’s really something new. They had not been saying such things while they sat securely in the promised land.

- (b) The exile—fear, loss, need—brought this about.
- (3) I had you read Lamentations so that you would know just how unsafe they felt in a foreign land but also where they sought protection in the Lord's steadfast love. He had sent them into exile but he had not forsaken them.
 - (a) Indeed, that question is how the book ends—Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old—unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us.
 - (b) The Hebrew Bible was arranged differently than our English Bible. They arranged it to help you read it rightly because the next three books answer that question—Esther, Daniel, and Ezra-Nehemiah.
 - i) In other words, God is saying, I have not forsaken you forever and I will restore and renew you.
- c) In Ezra-Nehemiah, God has restored them to the land and is reforming their lives. But will it last?
 - (1) These things are the goodness of God. They were signs of his faithfulness and love for his people.
 - (a) But here's the problem their fathers had and they will as well—DO NOT TAKE THE GOOD GIFTS AND SIGNS OF GOD TO BE YOUR PROTECTION. God is; not the gifts.
 - i) Once they feel safe again in the good gifts of God, they will shift their joy from God to the gifts.
 - ii) For now, they seem to be trusting the Lord because they really had no other options.
 - (1) When they returned, they had no wall, gates, army or king. All they had was God.
 - (2) Chapter 8 explains that the people of God were eager to hear God's law.
 - (3) Indeed, they told Ezra to read it to them.
 - (4) They built a platform much like this one so that they could all hear.
 - (5) They spend from dawn to noon listening to the Law.
 - (6) The Levites who have obviously been taught by Ezra over the past 13 years help the people understand God's word.
 - (a) They see to it that it is clear and they give them the sense of it.
 - (7) There is a obvious point made by Nehemiah that God's people sat under the word for the purpose of understanding it.
 - (8) One sign that you are finding joy in the Lord is your eagerness to hear the word of the Lord—not for it to end.
 - (2) There in verse 9 we see Nehemiah speaking on behalf of Ezra and the Levites when he says, "This day is holy to the LORD your God, do not mourn or weep."
 - (a) They wept because of what they heard in the words of the Law.
 - i) No doubt they heard things that their fathers had done as we hear in chapter 9.
 - ii) They felt convicted and unsafe for doing the same things.
 - iii) They could be weeping because they saw clearly that they had sought joy in the good gifts of God instead of God.
 - iv) The exile had cured that for now.
 - (b) But as they gather on this first day of the seventh month—one of the highest and holiest months of their calendar year—they are commanded not to weep.
 - i) Weeping and lamenting is very normal for those who hear the Law and see their failures.
 - (1) Even back in Ezra 10:1 says they wept over their sin.
 - ii) But why stop them?
 - (1) Nehemiah says three times—V.9—This day is holy to the LORD your God, do not mourn or weep. V. 10—for this day is holy to our LORD. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your protection. V. 11—Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.
 - (2) How are we to understand this?

- (a) Those three times make it clear that the reason behind this was that the day was holy.
 - (b) It seems that because of the exile and hearing the law, they understood that their joy in the Lord was their protection.
 - (c) This day was to be a day of rejoicing.
 - (d) The thing they do—eating together and sending meals to others is exactly what they did in the book of Esther when their enemies were defeated.
 - (e) It makes sense that they should not be weeping when it was obvious—even in spite of their failures—had restored them to the land and saved them from their enemies.
 - (f) Indeed, God had not forsaken them!
 - d) But a danger lurks in the shadows. Where are they gathered to hear the Law?
 - (1) “Before” the Water Gate.
 - (2) Obviously they are within the fortified city.
 - (3) So as they have proclaimed the word BEFORE this newly rebuild wall and gates, they are essentially told—it’s not this wall and its gates that will protect you or save you.
 - (a) Sure, God may use them for their protection but they are not to be trusted for salvation.
 - (b) There are enemies that are far more dangerous than those outside those walls.
 - (c) God is to be trusted—wall or no wall.
 - (d) Cancer or no cancer.
 - (4) Your protection is in the joy of the LORD.
 - (a) They hear and understand the words declared to them which turns their grief into rejoicing.
 - (b) What did they understand?
 - i) They heard that their refuge is God.
 - ii) He is their salvation.
- 2. However, as we end, we need to see the danger and the pattern that we all face.
 - a) As chapter 9 unpacks, Israel failed to keep God’s covenant. This retelling of their history is tragic.
 - (1) They admit in chapter 9 verse 33—You [God] have been righteous in all that has come up us, for you dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.
 - (a) In other words, the exile was exactly right for their unfaithfulness and good for us.
 - (b) It exposed where our joy was and the exile made us long for the LORD.
 - (2) This is the pattern of God and God’s people. Let’s see the clear contrasts.
 - (a) V. 6—You are the LORD, you alone.
 - (b) You have made heaven, the earth and all that is in it.
 - (c) v. 7 you chose Abram brought him out.
 - (d) v. 8 you have kept your promises, for you are righteous.
 - (e) You saw the afflictions in Egypt. You performed signs and wonders.
 - (f) You made a name for yourself. You divided the sea.
 - (g) You cast their pursuers into the depths.
 - (h) You led them by day and night.
 - (i) You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke. You gave them right rules.
 - (j) You gave them bread from heaven.
 - (k) You gave them water from the Rock.
 - (l) v. 16—But they acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey.
 - (m) They refused to obey and were not mindful of your wonders.
 - (n) v. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them.
 - i) Even when they made themselves a golden calf and had committed blasphemy, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness.
 - (o) You gave them your good Spirit to instruct them.

- (p) 40 years you sustained them. They lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.
- (q) v. 22—you gave them kingdoms and allotted to them the land.
- (r) You multiplied their children.
- (s) You brought them into the land.
- (t) You subdued their enemies in the land.
 - i) They captured fortified cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards and fruit trees in abundance.
 - ii) So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness.
 - iii) V. 26—Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their backs.
 - iv) And killed the prophets who had warned them in order to turn them back to you.
- (u) Therefore, you gave them into the hand of their enemies who made them suffer.
- (v) You abandoned them. v. 31 —Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.
- b) So, they have a big problem. Do you see it?
 - (1) They are standing in the rebuilt, fortified city of Jerusalem.
 - (2) They have done things that were literally impossible without God.
 - (3) Their enemies haven't laid a finger on them.
 - (4) Many foreign, pagan kings have commissioned this work and given them money to do it.
 - (5) To summarize it—they are sitting in an ocean of God's good gifts.
 - (a) And here's the danger—they are going to end finding their joy in them instead of God.
 - (b) They are going to seek happiness outside of God just like Adam and Eve did and every human being has done on this planet.
 - (c) Do not confuse the gifts of God with God himself.
- 3. So what do they need, because right now they know this?
 - a) They need God! They need to find their joy in the LORD not a fortified city!!!
 - b) They need something to fix this problem because eventually, like 9/11, they will feel secure in the good gifts of God instead of God himself.
 - c) How can this be fixed? The problem is within their own hearts.
 - d) Their greatest enemy is sin—a heart that seeks happiness outside of God and his word.
 - (1) The answer is perfect atonement so that God's Spirit can come inside of us and remove our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh—the new covenant.
 - (2) So that our hearts will set our hope and joy in the Lord as our Protector and Savior.
 - (3) The answer is Jesus.
 - (4) The answer is the cross and the resurrection.
 - (5) It is what they needed and it is what need.
 - (6) Through repentance and faith we can be forgiven and declared righteous.
 - (7) And now, we are eternally protected in Jesus—the Son in whom God is well-pleased.
 - (a) And if we are in him, we are sons in who are well-pleasing to God.
 - (b) The joy of the Lord is your? What? Salvation