

Joy In The Lord Is Our Strength

'Go your way, eat as much food as you desire, drink the sweet (juice) and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be aggrieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength' (Nehemiah 8:10).

One of the nine fruits, or one form of evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit is joy (Galatians 5:22). In more than three hundred different places throughout the Bible we are told to express joy in the Lord or to rejoice in the Lord. It is a command, not an option. The Lord gives us joy (Ecclesiastes 2:26), but it is up to us to accept it and respond. People who fill their hearts with joy will not look at the circumstances surrounding them. 'He will not often reflect on the days of his life because God occupies him with the joy of his heart' (Ecclesiastes 5:20). To walk worthily of the Lord and to reveal His presence in our lives to the unsaved, we should openly show the joy of having a relationship with our Creator God through Jesus, and through our relationship with Him, we will have increase or abundant blessing in our lives. 'Be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding so you may walk worthily of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work, increasing in the knowledge of God, strengthened with all power according to the might of His glory, for all endurance and perseverance with joy, giving thanks to the Father Who made us fit to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light, Who delivered us out of the power of darkness and translated us into the Kingdom of the Son of His love in Whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins, Who is the image of the invisible God, the Firstborn of all creation' (Colossians 1:9 to 15).

Way back during the time of the children of Israel, when they were being given the instructions regarding the way the Lord wanted them to serve Him, they were told to keep the feasts the Lord chose for them. If they obeyed the Lord and served Him with joy, He would increase their blessings. 'You will keep a feast to the Lord your God for seven days in the place He will choose. God will bless you in all your increase and in all the work of your hands and you will be altogether joyful' (Deuteronomy 16:15). That was another way of showing the Israelites, they could have an abundant life if they obeyed the Lord as Jesus later said. "I am the Door. If anyone enters in (to fellowship with God) by Me, he will be saved and will go in and go out, and will find pasture (increase, joy, peace) ... I came so they (all believers) may have life, and may have it abundantly" (John 10:9 & 10).

What happens if we accept the peace and blessings but not the joy? We lose the increase and incur God's fury. 'Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and with gladness of heart when He gave you the abundance of all things (their increased blessings), you will serve your enemies whom the Lord will send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness and in want of all things. He will put a yoke of iron on your neck until He has destroyed you' (Deuteronomy 28:47 & 48). That is the result of not serving the Lord with joy and gladness and there are genuine believers who have incurred the anger of the Lord by not being joyful and glad of His blessings, and they actually lose the blessings they did have. Into that also comes thankfulness. No matter what our circumstances are, we must continue in the joy of our relationship with the Lord, we must be glad in Him and give thanks no matter how hard it is to praise the Lord in impossibly difficult situations. Only then will He deliver us out of the trouble. "Offer to God the sacrifice of thanksgiving. Pay your vows to the Most High. Call on Me in the day of trouble. I will deliver you and you will honour Me" (Psalm 50:14 & 15).

When the Israelites were glad and joyful, the Lord gave them victory over their enemies and they built their first temple, begun by King David and was completed during Solomon's reign. 'The same day (the temple was completed) the king made the middle of the court holy before the house of God, for there he offered the burnt offering, the meal offering and the fat of the peace offerings, because the bronze altar before the Lord was too small to receive the burnt offering, the meal offering and the fat of the peace offerings. Solomon held the feast at that time and all Israel with him, a great assembly, from the entrance of Hamath to the brook of Egypt before the Lord our God for fourteen days. On the eighth day Solomon sent the people away. They blessed the king and went to their tents joyful and glad of heart for all the goodness the Lord God had shown to David His servant and to Israel His people' (1 Kings 8:64 to 66). When the Israelites disobeyed the Lord, the temple was destroyed by fire (2 Kings 25:9).

When the foundation for the second temple was laid the people wept for joy. 'When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of God, the priests, Levites and the sons of Asaph clothed in their raiment, with trumpets and with cymbals praised the Lord after the order of King David of Israel. They sang to one another in praising and giving thanks to God saying, "For He is good. His loving kindness endures forever toward Israel." All the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord because the foundation of the house of God was laid. Many of the priests, Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, when the foundation of this temple was laid before their eyes, they wept with a loud

voice and many shouted aloud for joy so the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout and the noise was heard afar off' (Ezra 3:10 to 13). At the completion of the temple, there was great joy again. 'They offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced for God had made them rejoice with great joy, the women and the children rejoiced so the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off' (Nehemiah 12:43).

People who lack joy seem to be people who whinge and whine about their lot in life. They seem to be permanent 'mourners' who grieve for no apparent reason except their lives are not as they would like them to be. That does not include people who are genuinely mourning the loss of a loved one. Grief is a natural process after a serious loss but when it lasts for years, there is a problem that must be dealt with. We must accept the loss, get up and move on. When Moses died, the Israelites were allowed a month to get over his death then the Lord said, "Moses is dead, now arise and go ..." (Joshua 1:2). The general spirit of heaviness, sadness, gloom, negative feelings and negative speech is caused by an evil spirit that invades the person's thoughts and they speak it out because that is how they are feeling deep inside their soul. The Lord gave us a solution for that feeling of incessant mourning. He has given us a loving embrace (a garland) for the down feelings (ashes). He gave us a Spirit (oil) of joy for the feelings of mourning and praise to wrap around ourselves like a garment for feelings of depression. Accepting His embrace, His joy and praising God will help us become righteous spiritual 'trees' that bear good spiritual fruit so He will be glorified. 'God gave to them a garland for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness so they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord so He may be glorified' (Isaiah 61:3). When righteous people go through terrible situations and trials, often the last thing we want to do is smile and praise the Lord, but He asks us to give Him a sacrifice of praise during these times and to keep serving Him. 'Through Jesus, let us offer up a sacrifice of praise to God continually. The fruit of our lips proclaim allegiance to His name. Do not forget to be doing good and sharing the Gospel, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased' (Hebrews 13:15 & 16). No matter what the situation, there is always something we can praise the Lord for. We should all have the attitude Habakkuk had. He praised the Lord with music and let his joy in the Lord be his strength, even though his circumstances were dire due to a severe drought. 'Though the fig tree does not blossom and give fruit, nor fruit be on the vines, the olive fails, the fields yield no food, the sheep are cut off from the fold and there is no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! The Lord is my strength. He makes my (spiritual) feet climb like deer up to (spiritually) high places like a music director on my stringed instruments' (Habakkuk 3:17 & 19).

These are hard lessons to learn. We cannot argue with God about these things. We are just clay. God is the Potter. He owns us and He has the right to do whatever He wants with us, in all righteousness, no matter how terrible it is. Our suffering does not trouble God. Quite the opposite. When Job cried out to God about his intense suffering, God did not show any sympathy. God is purifying us and making us fit for the Kingdom of God (Colossians 1:12). No matter what happens, we need to rejoice in our salvation while God is in the process of removing the 'dross' which is sometimes terribly painful. 'Why does He still find fault? For who withstands His will? O beloved, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed ask Him who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?" The Potter has a right over the clay, from the same lump to make one part a vessel for honour and another for dishonour' (Romans 9:19 to 21). 'Beloved, do not be astonished at the fiery trial that has come on you, to test you as though a strange thing happened to you. You are partakers of Jesus' sufferings. Rejoice so at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exceeding joy' (1 Peter 4:12 & 13). We must have joy regardless of our situation and we must not become bitter, because bitterness defiles others. There is always a purpose and a reason behind the suffering. The Lord sends us difficulties to make us more like Him (1 John 3:2). 'My child, do not take lightly the chastening of the Lord nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him, for whom the Lord loves He chastens. He scourges every child whom He receives. It is for discipline you endure affliction. God deals with you as with children ... Should we not be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? ... He disciplines us for our profit so we may be partakers of His holiness. All chastening seems for the present not to be joyous but grievous, yet afterward it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been disciplined. Make straight paths for your feet so what is lame may not be dislocated but rather be healed ... Look carefully lest there be anyone who falls short of the grace of God, lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you and defile many' (Hebrews 12:5 to 15).

The chastisement could be for disobedience. Moses was the most meek and humble man on earth at that time but he almost died because of his disobedience. He had not circumcised his son according to the command of the Lord. It was Moses' wife Zipporah who did the agonising deed on her son and she was not happy about it. 'On the way (from Midian to Egypt) at a lodging place, the Lord met Moses and wanted to kill him. Zipporah took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at Moses' feet saying, "Surely you are a husband of blood to me." So God let Moses alone, then Zipporah said again, "You are a husband of blood," because of the circumcision' (Exodus 4:24 to 26). Before Moses could begin his tough ministry, he had to be completely obedient to every word of God.

Jonah was terribly chastised for disobeying God's direct command, was tossed overboard and swallowed by a fish especially created and prepared for that occasion. At first Jonah complained bitterly and told the Lord how much he was suffering but it was not until Jonah gave thanks to God, He was delivered from the stomach of the fish. 'Jonah said, "Throw me into the sea then the sea will be calm for you for I know because of me this great storm is on you." ... So they threw Jonah into the sea and the sea ceased its raging ... God prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah and he was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights' (Jonah 1:12, 15 & 17). 'Then Jonah prayed to the Lord out of the fish's belly. He said, "I called because of my affliction to God. He answered me. Out of the belly of hell I cried. You heard my voice. You threw me into the depths, in the heart of the seas. The flood was all around me. All Your waves and Your billows passed over me. I have been banished from Your sight yet I will look again toward Your holy temple. The waters surrounded me, even to my soul. The deep was around me. The seaweeds were wrapped around my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains. The earth barred me in (for what seemed) forever yet You have brought up my life from the pit, Lord my God. When my soul fainted within me, I remembered my God. My prayer came in to You, into Your holy temple. Those who regard lying vanities (lies of the devil) forsake their own mercy. I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving. I will pay that which I have vowed. Salvation belongs to the Lord." The Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited out Jonah on the dry land' (Jonah 2:1 to 10).

After a great miracle happened in Nineveh when the whole, huge city repented and turned to God, Jonah complained again and threw what can only be described as a major temper tantrum and the Lord struck him again because of his behaviour. Jonah was furious because of the Lord's love and concern towards the spiritually lost Gentile city, especially the innocent children and animals. The three days in the fish would have taken its toll on Jonah's health. The stomach acids would have burned his skin badly so when he was exposed to the heat of the sun, it must have been terrible. 'The repentance of the city displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry. He prayed to God and said, "Please Lord, was this not what I said when I was still in my own country? Therefore I hurried to flee to Tarshish for I knew You are a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger, abundant in loving kindness and you relent of doing harm. Therefore Lord I beg you, take my life from me for it is better for me to die than to live." The Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Then Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. He made himself a booth and sat under it in the shade until he might see what would become of the city. God prepared a vine and made it grow up over Jonah so it might be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the vine, but God prepared a worm at dawn the next day and it chewed on the vine so it withered. When the sun arose, God prepared a sultry east wind and the sun beat on Jonah's head so that he fainted. He requested he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the vine?" He said, "I am right to be angry, even to death." God said, "You have been concerned for the vine for which you have not laboured neither made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. Should I the Lord, not be concerned for Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand (babies and young children) and also much livestock?" (Jonah 4:1 to 11). It was Jonah's initial disobedience that brought about the terrible circumstances he found himself in, and as a result he suffered from the effects of the fish's stomach acids for some time.

Job was chastised for being self-righteous and for whinging against God, which was a rebellious attitude. Job of all people had good reason to complain but after a while, even Job realised his complaining and lack of joy was rebelliousness and God would not consider him innocent in that regard. In spite of all Job's complaining, God did not remove the heavy hand of oppression off Job until he submitted to God's judgement of him and after encountering the awesomeness of the Creator God, Job was quiet then he was healed and restored. 'I will not keep silent. I will speak in the anguish of my spirit. I will complain in the bitterness of my soul' (Job 7:11). 'I am afraid of all my sorrows and I know You will not hold me innocent' (Job 9:28). 'My soul is weary of my life. I will give free course to my complaint. I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will tell God, "Do not condemn me. Show me why You contend with me. Is it good to You that You should oppress me, that You should despise the work of Your hands?"' (Job 10:1 to 3). 'Is my complaint to man? Why should I not be impatient? Look at me and be astonished. Lay your hand on your mouth. When I remember, I am troubled. Horror takes hold of my flesh' (Job 21:4 to 6). 'Even today my complaint is rebellious. His hand of oppression is heavy in spite of my groaning. Oh that I knew where I might find Him! ... I would set my cause before Him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know the words He would answer me and understand what He would tell me. Would He contend with me in the greatness of His power? No, but He would listen to me. There the upright might reason with Him so I should be delivered forever from my Judge ... but I cannot catch a glimpse of Him. He knows the way I take. When He has tried me I will come forth like pure gold. My foot has held fast to His steps. I have kept His way and not turned aside. I have not gone back from the commandment of His lips. I have treasured up the words of His mouth more than my necessary food. He stands alone and who can oppose Him? What His soul desires, that is what he does. He performs what is appointed for me. Many such things are with Him, therefore I am terrified

at His presence. When I consider, I am afraid of Him. God has made my heart faint. The Almighty has terrified me' (Job 23:1 to 16).

All this happened because Job was self-righteous and seemed to reject joy. The Lord wanted to reveal that to Job and make him realise his righteousness was a result of God's righteousness, and Job could not be a righteous man without the Lord. There was perhaps a bit of pride there too. "Though I am righteous, my own mouth will condemn me. Though I am blameless, it will prove me perverse. I am blameless and I despise my life" (Job 9:20 & 21). 'Job's three friends ceased to answer Job because he was righteous in his own eyes' (Job 32:1). 'I am clean, without disobedience. I am innocent, neither is there iniquity in me. Behold, God finds occasions against me. He counts me as His enemy. He puts my feet in the stocks. He marks all my paths ... God is greater than man so why do you strive against Him because He does not give account of any of His matters? ... Man prays to God and He is kind to him. He sees God's face with joy. He restores to man his righteousness' (Job 33:9 to 13 & 26). 'Job said, "I am righteous. God has taken away my right ... My wound is incurable though I am without disobedience ... Job adds rebellion to his sin. He claps his hands among us and multiplies his words against God"' (Job 34:5, 6 & 37). Elihu said to Job, "Do you say, 'My righteousness is more than God's?'" (Job 35:1 & 2).

Right after Elihu finished rebuking Job for his self-righteousness, lack of joy and lack of respect for God, the Lord Himself began speaking to Job with the same theme until Job submitted to God and repented (Job chapters 38 & 39). 'Job said to the Lord, "Behold, I am of small account. What will I answer You? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once and I will not answer. Yes twice but I will proceed no further." The Lord spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, "Now brace yourself like a man. I will question you and you will answer Me. Will you even annul My judgment? Will you condemn Me so you may be justified?"' (Job 40:3 to 8). The Lord continued to reveal His creative power to Job (Job chapters 40 & 41). After this, Job repented again. 'Job answered the Lord, "I know You can do all things and no purpose of Yours can be restrained ... I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know ... I had heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my (spiritual) eye sees You. I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes"' (Job 42:1 to 6). After Job had prayed for his so-called friends who were more like persecutors, he was comforted by his family, friends and was fully restored double what he had before (Job 42:10 & 11).

When the Lord allows awful trials, we need to seek Him to find out why He has allowed the ordeal to happen. The reason could be because there is something deep in us He wants to root out and the only way He can do that is by chastising us severely. Usually, we do not know why the chastisement is so harsh and extreme. We can be completely unaware there is sin lurking deep in our soul but the Lord knows it is there and He will do whatever it takes to get that dark area of our lives washed clean. We are all sinners saved by His grace and if we want to enter heaven as a sinless and pure believer, we will have to undergo chastisement and during the discipline, we must keep our attitude to God right and use the fruit of joy to strengthen us in the Lord. Believers who go through terrible persecution in countries where Christianity is illegal, all seem to have deep joy in their hearts. The joy comes from knowing our destiny and it is the joy that keeps us going. We are saved. We are spiritually safe with the Lord. We will inherit eternal life and we will forever live in the Kingdom of God. If we can keep our eyes focussed on eternity, the matters of earth diminish greatly and over time, cease to be important. It does not matter if we are persecuted because we will be blessed in heaven (Matthew 5:10 to 12). Only by many afflictions can we enter the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). Since Jesus suffered, so we too will suffer. 'Though Jesus was God's Son, He yet learned obedience by the things He suffered' (Hebrews 5:7 to 9). If Jesus learned obedience through suffering, how much more do we need to learn obedience through suffering?

We have the promise of forgiveness when we realise there is sin and repent, but if we try to pretend there is no sin, we are only deceiving ourselves. We cannot hide sin from God. 'I acknowledged my sin to You. I did not hide my iniquity. I will confess my transgressions to God and You forgave the iniquity of my sin ... Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous! Shout for joy all you who are upright in heart!' (Psalm 32:5 & 11). Sometimes the Lord needs to help us overcome the things He is dealing with. Confessing the sin, repenting and keeping our joy alive, will turn our mourning into joy. 'The young woman will rejoice in the dance and the young men and the old together, for I will turn their mourning into joy, will comfort them and make them rejoice from their sorrow' (Jeremiah 31:13). 'If we walk in the Light as God is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin ... If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:7 to 9). Joy is what keeps us going. Joy in the Lord is our strength. 'Let all those who take refuge in You rejoice. Let them always shout for joy because You defend them. Let those who love Your name be joyful in You' (Psalm 5:11).

Amen and God bless you.

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