

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
November 26, 2015 | Thanksgiving Day Worship
James Madsen | The Joy of the Lord is My Strength | Nehemiah 8:10

Good morning, everyone. Happy Thanksgiving! Can you imagine a better way to start the day than to be here together? I was holding on to this illusion that summer would last forever. I think today we have a bit of reality in that, but it feels like the fall just flew by, didn't it? Maybe it was in part because the weather was so nice, or maybe it was just the pace of life.

When the fall ministry season starts up here at CPC, I have to say that things get a little bit busy. And in the midst of that busyness, I found myself feeling crushed at times by the weight of expectations. I need to put in more hours at work. I need my boss to approve of what I do. I need to spend quality time with my kids. I need to lose weight; my doctor says I need to lose 20 pounds. You guys got some weight I can borrow to lose? So, I have to exercise. I need to clean the house. I need to take care of the yard. The dog wants me to throw the ball. There are diapers to be changed, dishwashers to be emptied, and laundry to be put away. The list just goes on and on, and I started to feel crushed by the reality that there was not enough of me to go around and I didn't feel competent enough to measure up to those expectations. Does anyone else ever feel this way? Just me and the people at home making the turkey? Is that how that is? Whether these expectations were real or just ones that I put on myself, the reality was that I felt joy seeping out of me. I found myself muttering "The Joy of the Lord is my strength. The Joy of the Lord is my strength" because I know full well that my identity is not in what my boss thinks about me, or how clean my house is, or the number on the scale. My joy is not found in those things, but the provision of Jesus Christ.

Whenever I get the chance to speak, I always like to talk about what God is teaching me. So today when I got the chance to talk, I knew I wanted to speak on "The Joy of the Lord is my strength", but I have to make a little confession: I forgot where that phrase is in the Bible. I was thinking "The Joy of the Lord is my strength" was in Psalms . . . so I was a little surprised to find it in Nehemiah. And when I read the verse, I actually laughed out loud because I thought, this the perfect Thanksgiving verse. Let's look at this.

Nehemiah 8:10 Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who having nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

Doesn't that sound like the perfect Thanksgiving verse? Let me give you a little context for this verse . . . The Israelites have returned to Jerusalem after 70 years of exile in Babylon. They return to find the walls of the city are crumbling and the city is in

shambles. Life is literally falling apart around them. In the midst of this, Ezra brings out the book of the Law...the first five books of our Bible. All the people gathered together and Ezra begins to read from the beginning of Genesis all the way through the end to Deuteronomy. It takes half the day. And the people respond . . . first in awe of the faithfulness of God and then in grieving and sadness at their own unfaithfulness to God. They feel crushed by the demands of the Law of God.

And in this context, Nehemiah reminds them that their hope is not in their circumstances or in their ability to get their act together, but their hope is in God who is faithful to His promises, a God whose mercies are new every morning and whose faithfulness never comes to an end. Your joy is found in this God also and His provision for you. And this joy will be your strength whatever your circumstances. My guess is that for many of you, there is something crushing you or at least sucking joy out of your life. I wanted to remind us what the source of our joy is.

I was really hoping I could share with you 40 reasons why Jesus should be your joy, and I asked Heather for 15 hours today to talk; she said I had 15 minutes. So let me tell you about four times when you should remember that Jesus is the source of your joy.

First of all, when you've messed up, remember Jesus is your Redeemer. The truth is that you came up short yesterday, that you will fail in some way today, and that you will sin again tomorrow. You're probably hoping I would give you some good news, right? You will let people down. You will not even be able to live up to your own expectations. And if you spent half a day reading God's Word, you would feel the crush of the weight of the Law like those Israelites did as well. The purpose of the Law is to remind us how much we need a Saviour. The more time I spend in the Bible, the more aware I am of sin in the dark parts of my heart and my need to be rescued. The more I read the Bible the more I am reminded that Jesus came to earth to die on the cross for the forgiveness of my sins. There is no sin that His blood cannot erase. Maybe you think your sin is too big, but Jesus loves you, He knows you are a sinner, in fact that is the very reason why He came to die. You are more loved than you will ever know by someone who died to know YOU. Romans 5:8 paraphrase.

When we become aware of the sin in our heart, our response should always be repentance. Repentance means turning to Jesus. Rejoicing in His provision. True repentance will always lead to joy. That is how you know you are repenting correctly, because your heart will experience joy.

You remember the story Jesus told of the prodigal son? Say yes. Thank you. What did the Father do when his lost son came back to him? He threw a thanksgiving feast, didn't he? What does Peter tell us?

Acts 3:19 "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord"

My wife and I have been going through a mentoring program called Sonship. And our mentor is a wise sage from Philadelphia. I was lamenting during one of our sessions that whenever my wife points out one of my many sins, I often become very hard on myself. I beat myself up. Our mentor, Richard, reminded me that when someone points out my sin, really it's an opportunity to rejoice. I'm sure you've never thought of it that way, have you? We should repent and say, "Thank you Jesus that You died for this sin! The debt is paid for; we are washed white as snow by the blood of the Lamb."

Secondly, when you feel that you are not good enough, remember that Jesus is Your Righteousness.

The most natural thing for us in the flesh is to try to find our identity in our performance and in our relationships. Our culture says that we are defined by our successes and failures. We strive to find something that we are good at so that we can tell ourselves that we are acceptable. We starve ourselves so the number on the scale goes down to the point where we can look at ourselves in the mirror. We are crushed when our mother-in-law criticizes our parenting, our house, or our cooking. How easily then we assume that God's opinion of us is based on our successes and failures.

But God's grace changes our identity problem. Justin Holcomb in the Mockingbird Devotional reminds us that

"You are not your real or perceived set of identifiers. You are not your career. You are not the car you drive. You are not children's behavior at Target. You are not your divorce. You're not your parents' divorce. You are not your addiction or disorder. You are not your gossip, your adultery, your anger. You are not your bank account and you're not your grade point average. Isaiah tells us that our righteousness is as filthy rags, but it is Jesus' robe of righteousness draped over us that God sees. We need a God before whom we can put aside the disguise—trusting that when He sees us He won't turn away or smite us in anger. Because of Christ's imputed righteousness, we can stop the vicious habits of identity maintenance, and we can step down onto the firm ground of acceptance."

Jesus says you are not defined by your success and failures. You are defined by who you are in Christ. The truth is that Jesus not only pays the penalty for our sin that we deserve, He also gives to us His perfect record so that we stand before the Father just as if we had always obeyed. That is why Paul calls us Saints who are holy and blameless. Christ's righteousness is ours! Is there an identity more secure than that!? Is there a greater reason to give joy? That God sees you as holy and blameless? Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness.

So the next time your mother-in-law criticizes you, I dare you to smile at her and say, "Thank you so much for pointing out my shortcomings. It is a great reminder that Jesus died just for that thing, and even more, He gives to me His perfect righteousness so that I stand before God holy and blameless." And even if you don't have the guts to say it to her, say it to yourself. You are not defined by what other people think of you and you

are not defined even by what you think of yourself . . . you are defined by whose you are. You are in Christ. Rejoice! Throw a party. Serve a big meal. Give thanks!

Third, when you are ready to give up, remember that Jesus' love is relentless. There are times in life when we can feel so overwhelmed: By a broken relationship, the loss of a loved one, or by the weight of the darkness. We can feel so alone.

Brother and sisters, remember that Jesus is always with you. He is pursuing you. He loves you with a deep, deep love. It can be so hard to feel that love in the midst of the darkness. I was recently recounting a story of the aftermath of my divorce 15 years ago and it reminded me of that dark period when I was so alone and I had given up. But God had not given up. One night when my son, Connor, was almost 2-years-old, and he woke up in the middle of the night crying "Daddy, daddy, where are you?" I got up and picked him up and started to rock him back to sleep, and as I was rocking him, the tears began to flow down my face and I was cried out to my heavenly Father, "Daddy, where are You?" God had seemed so silent for so long. But in that moment, I felt His presence. And as clear as day, God spoke into that darkness and said, "I am here with you. I have always been here. Don't you know how much I love you? I love you so much." God's message, "I love you" is the cord that keeps us from falling into oblivion at times. In truth, I was not clinging to God's love as much as God's love was clinging to me. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Nothing.

Finally, when you are overwhelmed, Jesus gives us rest. In Matthew, Jesus says to us,

Matthew 11:28-30 (MSG version) "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with Me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take real rest. Walk with Me and work with Me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with Me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

Sounds wonderful, doesn't it? Jesus makes it sound so easy. But the truth is, we resist this rest.

Isaiah 30:15 has been coming to mind all fall:

Isaiah 30:15 This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says:
"In repentance and rest is your salvation,
in quietness and trust is your strength,
but you would have none of it."

We are seeking to find life and meaning and joy in so many things apart from Jesus. And in turn, those things put us in bondage and suck the joy of life out of us. Jesus is offering us the abundant life and we resist it. My favorite verse from Jonah is "those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace of God." We miss out on God's grace because we are clinging to the very things that are making us miserable. But Jesus offers us rest, and we are clinging to our striving. Striving for good grades, striving for perfection,

striving for that promotion at work, striving for perfect children, striving for the approval of our mother-in-law. Repentance means letting go of trying to find life from those things and turning to Jesus.

Last Sunday, we were introduced to our new vision statement. Boldly extending the invitation that Jesus makes to us, to everyone. And this morning, we are reminded what Jesus is inviting us to . . . a relationship where He is our Redeemer, our righteousness, the one who loves us relentlessly, and the one who offers us rest. What is our response to this invitation? The call for all of us is to daily receive what Jesus is offering. Faith is opening our hands to receive the promises of God found in Jesus. Jesus is always the hero of our story. What we need in life is more Jesus. Our hearts can overflow with JOY because, by grace, we have been given everything we need, in Christ. Therefore, rejoice in the Lord. The joy of the Lord is our strength. Have a feast today. Give thanks for who you are in Christ. Amen?

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.