

# The Incredible Strength of Knowing God's Joy

by Carter Conlon

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*The sermon emphasizes the transformative power of knowing God's joy, especially in the context of repentance and grace.*

**Duration:** 1:00:42

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 28:1-2, Deuteronomy 28:15, Nehemiah 8:8-12

**Topics:** "Joy"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the importance of understanding the Word of God. He emphasizes that the people in the Bible who had returned from captivity in Babylon were finally beginning to comprehend the warnings and prophecies in the Word of God. The preacher draws a parallel to the church today, stating that when the Bible is preached, the Holy Spirit opens our understanding to truth. He then focuses on a verse from the book of Nehemiah, where the people are told to rejoice and find strength in the joy of the Lord, even in the midst of their weeping and repentance.

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## Transcript

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I'm going to take a verse of scripture and show you another side of it. Perhaps that you've not seen before. Certainly I didn't, not in the way that the Lord has shown it to me.

And my feet may not have been set to dancing over this, but certainly my spirit was. And I thank God for that. If you'll go with me in the Old Testament to Nehemiah chapter 8. And we're going to start there.

We're going to be going through a lot of scripture today. But we'll start with Nehemiah chapter 8. And we'll start with prayer. Father, I thank you, God, that you have sown this deep in my heart.

You've given me this word. And Lord, I see something in the scriptures that heightens my appreciation for all that you are and all that you've done for us. I'm asking for the grace to be able to convey it clearly and simply to those that are gathered in this house today and to those that will hear this word in the future on tape.

God, I thank you for the anointing of the Holy Spirit. I thank you that I'm never called to stand in my own strength. I thank you, God, for the quickening of my heart and mind and spirit.

And I thank you, Lord, that your kingdom will advance in our hearts and minds with great power today. Father, we ask you now to overthrow every hindrance, every power of evil, everything that would come against God's people hearing this word today. We bind it in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We declare this to be holy ground. And, Father, we thank you that your word will be heard in the inner man of those that you have gathered today to hear. And we thank you in Jesus' mighty name.

The incredible strength of knowing God's joy. In Nehemiah chapter 8, And all the people, verse 1, gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate. And they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had commanded to Israel.

And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation, both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women and those that could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law.

Now go down to verse 8. So they read in the book of the law of God distinctly and gave the sense and caused them to understand the reading. Now, keep in mind, this is speaking about a people who had gone into captivity and had returned over sequences of time in three distinct stages, had returned from the captivity that they had gone into because of their disobedience to the word of God in Babylon. And now for the first time in the ears of many, they are beginning to understand the word of God.

They may have never understood it before. They are finally aware that the warnings in the word of God are real. The things that God had previously very clearly foretold them had come to pass.

Generations had gone into captivity because of a neglect of the word of God. And now they are beginning to understand God is opening His word. And that's exactly the way it is in the church of Jesus Christ.

When you are in a place where the Bible is being preached, the Holy Spirit will open your understanding to truth. And you will undoubtedly become aware of your shortcomings in the sight of God. Verse 9 says, And Ezra the priest, the scribe, and the Levites taught the people and said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the Lord your God.

Mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. And then he said to them, Go your way, and eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared.

For this day is holy unto our Lord, and neither be you sorry, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy, and neither be ye grieved. And all the people went their way to eat and to drink and to send portions and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them.

Now as I said earlier, these are people returning from captivity. And the Bible says in verse 9 that when they heard the words of the law, many of them began to weep. They began to weep probably because they became aware of the great loss which had come to their families and their society because of their disregard of God's word.

Really this is always a precursor to what we have come to know throughout history as revival. When God comes and begins to touch a society again or touch a particular church or church age again, there is an awareness of failing. There were probably people there that all of a sudden saw, especially if Deuteronomy 28 would have been read.

Obviously it was. The chapter that speaks about where God says, This is how I will bless you. I'll bless the fruit of your body.

I'll bless the fruit of your field. I'll bless your coming in. I'll bless your going out.

I'll fight against your enemies. And all these blessings, He said, if you will diligently hearken to all that I speak to you. And then the other side of that chapter is, And all these curses will come upon you.

You'll be cursed in the field if you disregard my word. And your fruit of your body will be cursed. And your coming in and your going out.

You'll be overpowered by your enemies. And all these specific curses would come on a people. And most of the people beginning to weep would be aware.

Oh God, look what we've lost. Look what kind of a heritage I could have had. Look at what my life could have been.

Look at how my children could have been blessed. It would have been so awesome to have a history of a father and a grandfather and a great grandfather that lived for God. We could have had fields and lands.

And we could have understood the worship in the temple as we're understanding it now. We could have lived in the blessing of God. But because of our ignorance and our disregard, rather, for the word of God, we went into the very captivities that God warned us about, but we wouldn't listen to.

We went into those captivities. And you would see a weeping as there's an understanding begun to come into people's lives. And that's the way it is for many.

Even today, come into the house of the Lord and the word of God is opened. And the joy of pleasant memories is forever lost. And there's a sense of loss.

Oh God, what it could have been like. What my life could have amounted to. If I had obeyed you, especially for the backslider, it's worse than for anyone else.

The unsaved person sees hope and joy before him. But you have to understand, these are scriptures being read to people who knew God. They had the testimony of God's blessing and power and deliverance, but through their neglect had gone into captivity that God had warned about.

They would be aware that the fault was not God's, but their own. All of the captivity, all of the misery, the stages of poverty that came upon Israel, the stages of captivity as various kings began to come in and overthrow parts of the kingdom until the northern and southern kingdoms were virtually swallowed up by

their enemies, being led away on forced marches by the Assyrians. You think of the northern kingdom and how they must have suffered.

The marches were brutal and designed to dispirit, as it is the people. By the time they were dispersed into various areas throughout the kingdom that was dominated by Assyria, by the time they got into those parts of that kingdom, the ones who survived would be so dispirited there would be almost no hope left in them for the rest of their lives and nothing to pass on, obviously, to their children. And sitting there and beginning to weep and saying, God, it wasn't your fault, it was ours.

I think of what's going to happen to the church of Jesus Christ in America the day that great calamity comes to this part of the world. If it should come, if everything collapses around us and all of society begins to be as the Bible says it will. It's not going to happen just to America, it's going to come to the whole world.

The Bible says that men's hearts are going to fail them for the fear of those things that are coming on the earth. The powers of heaven are going to be shaken. And I can see the people of America coming into the churches looking for hope and hopefully there'll be men and women there who can open this word and cause them to understand what is happening.

And in that initial understanding there will be a weeping and a sorrow. There will be a remorse in the heart. Oh God, what have we done? What have we done to a nation that was founded on the principles of the word of God? What have we done that in the name of freedom we've allowed filth and immorality to permeate the minds of our children? What have we done in our neglect of you that we have so misrepresented you in our generation that children even who are looking for God will give it the one or twice try and then turn away and live a life of self-seeking just like many of God's people tragically have done and so fail to represent Him in our generation.

But I see a people that are getting up and they say, Oh God, we're so sorry for what we've done. We're so sorry for how we've represented you. We're so sorry for shaming your name.

And this would have been the cause of the weeping in Nehemiah's day. This deep inner sorrow. Lord, we have so dishonored your name.

The way we lived, how casually we treated holy things. How we just came into the temple and bought the cheapest lamb we could find. Sacrificed it for the pacifying of our conscience.

But we're unaware of the sacrifice that was being paid. We're unaware of the provision that was ready every day. The mercy that was at our disposal.

We took it for granted. We began to live carelessly, not aware that our enemies were amassing on all sides of our borders. And one day we were going to be overpowered.

But it wasn't your fault, oh God. It was ours. And I can see people beginning to get up, but getting up with sorrow.

Just like in the New Testament, the Bible talks about in Luke 15, about a son who walked away from his father and spent his years as it is, his inheritance with foolish living. It says in the King James, riotous living. But the actual word for that means self-consumption.

He lived a life of self-consumption. And he spent all this inheritance that could have been his on himself. But finally he came to himself because he began to be hungry.

And beloved, there is no freedom in self-seeking. There's no life there. There's no knowledge of God there.

There's no joy there. Everything is as superficial, even in the self-pursuit that goes on in the name of Christ in the Christian church. These pursuits are just as superficial as those in the world.

They all end in an empty valley. There's no hope. There's no joy.

There's no life. There's only sorrow there. And this young man begins to realize that, God, Father, I've lost something.

I remember that back in your house that even the servants had enough to eat, and I'm perishing with hunger. He said, I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I've sinned against heaven and before you, and I'm no more worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants.

And I feel that that's what probably was in many of the people's hearts when they began to weep. They said, oh, God, we are no more worthy to be called after your name. Look what we have done.

You took us out of Egypt, out of bondage. We are the children of Abraham. It was through us that the world was supposed to be blessed.

And look at the disgrace we made of your name. Oh, God, we see it now. Tragedy that we had to go for 70 years into captivity, and much of the northern kingdom has been lost and amalgamated into the then secular world.

But Lord, in your grace, you're calling us back, but we're not worthy. We're not worthy to be called your sons and daughters any longer. And so they began to weep, and they began to cry.

And then a very, you would think, you know, today, this would be a very good thing to happen. This would be sort of the natural progression of preaching the gospel to a formerly backslidden people. And to say, well, I've heard pastors say, oh, what a wonderful service we had.

We had 500 or 50 people, whatever it was, weeping at the altar for an hour. Well, they may be weeping at the altar, but that may not necessarily be a wonderful service. Because if that weeping doesn't lead us to something, then something is gravely missing in the gospel that we are preaching.

Now, in verse 10, a seemingly strange statement is made under these circumstances. He said unto them, go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to them for whom nothing is prepared. For this day is holy unto our Lord, and neither be sorry, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

Now, you're talking to a weeping people. And saying to the weeping people, the joy of the Lord is your strength. Now, folks, if I preached this message today and exposed all of our failings, and half of this church came to the altar, and you all began to weep, and I let you cry it out for 20 minutes, and then said, now go home and rejoice.

The joy of the Lord is your strength. You'd look at me like, what is he talking about? The joy of the Lord is my strength. Well, unfortunately, pastor, I don't have a lot of joy in me at the moment.

I've seen my failings. I'm aware of my loss. I am gripped by the thoughts of what could have been.

I'm ashamed at how I've disgraced the name of Jesus Christ, but then you tell me the joy of the Lord is my strength. Now, tell me how. How is the joy of the Lord my strength? Give me the sense of this and help me to understand it.

It goes on to say, the Levites then stilled the people saying, hold your peace, the day is holy and neither be ye grieved. Now, they said more than this. Obviously, the Bible is not, I don't feel, is fully inclusive in everything that was said.

This is just a historical account. And the people went their way to eat and to drink and to send portions and to make great mirth. So, the people left this place of weeping and they went home to make great celebration, to be greatly happy as it is, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Now, here's where everything changes. It's not that they had understood the words of the law, but they had understood those words initially. But this verse of Scripture tells us they now understood the words that had been declared to them, that this is not a day to be sorrowful, this is a day to be joyful, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

The prodigal son, again in Luke 15, we're going to go back there. We're going to be traveling a little bit from story to story. He was returning home and this boy who was returning home had a brother.

And this brother was without doubt a hard worker in his father's field. There's a lot that happened from the moment the boy got up and he ended up in his father's house again. But probably in the evening time, at the end of a hard working day, his older brother came and the Scripture says he came out of the field.

He was a working brother. Now, I want to show you something about the working brother in the house of God. Go to the book of Revelation with me, if you will, please.

Last book in the New Testament for those that are new to the Lord. Revelation chapter 2. I want to show you the working brother in the house of God. And that there are working brothers.

This is a brother who's never left his father's house. He's worked hard as he sees it. He's obeyed the law.

He's done what he thinks is right. But something is missing in his life. Unto the angel, Revelation 2, of the church of Ephesus, write, These things saith he that holds the seven stars in his right hand, and who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.

I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil. You've tried them which say they're apostles and are not, and you've found them liars. And you're born, and you have patience, and for my name's sake you've labored, and have not fainted.

Now here's a working church. This is a working brother as it is. Working, laboring, has the fruit as it is of patience for the work that he's involved in.

He's a studyer of the word of God and can't bear them that are evil. He says you've tried those that say they're apostles and are not, and have found them to be liars. And you've carried on working.

You've carried on with patience. And even for my name's sake you've done it. And you've not fainted.

But he said I've got somewhat against you because you've left your first love. Incredible. You've left your first love.

You see, the prodigal son came home. The older brother was angry. And the father said to this hard-working brother, Son, you fail to understand something.

He came home and he was angry because this other brother came and was not as diligent as he had been. This other brother, as he saw it, had wasted all of his goods. He was not faithful.

But the son, this hard-working brother had lost something. And the father said to him, Son, you've lost an understanding that neither you nor your brother are here because you deserve to be. You're only here because of something I determined to do in my heart long before you were even born.

Now, beloved, it's important for us to understand this or we'll never understand the joy of the Lord. We don't deserve to be in the house of God. We never deserve to be here.

And we will never deserve it. The salvation we have cannot be earned and it cannot be deserved by human effort. The salvation we enjoy today was something that was in the heart of God long before this world was even created and long before you were even born.

God had decreed that he would have a son and his son would come to this earth. And his son would become a man. His son would die on a cross.

And his son would rise again from the dead on the third day. And his son would be the head of a redeemed people known as the Church of Jesus Christ. God said this would be a bride for my son.

Hallelujah. It was not in your heart. It was in God's heart.

You didn't find Jesus Christ. He's never been lost. He revealed himself to you.

By his grace, he came to you. As he said to Israel, when you were laying on the road in your filthy condition, I came to you and I cleansed you. Hallelujah.

We don't find Christ. By his grace, he reveals himself to us. By his grace, he shows us his salvation.

By his grace, we come into his house. By his grace, we stand. By his grace, we grow.

By his grace, we work. By his grace, we understand the things that God speaks to us in his word. It's not by any works that we have done.

It's according to his mercy that he has saved us. We must be cautious never to shift our trust. It happens in the church of Jesus Christ.

The older brother is a long time in the house and is working long. And because of his long and faithful work in the house of God, he recreates a standard of righteousness. And he becomes his own sacrifice.

And he becomes critical and judgmental of the new ones that come into the house of God. He becomes critical of those that have backslidden and turned away from God. He becomes hard and angry and judgmental.

He doesn't want them to come in freely. He doesn't want them to freely receive the grace of his father that he has always lived under. He was angry with his father.

And he said, Father, I've worked and labored all these years, but I've never experienced any joy. I've never known the joy that's going on in your house now. And the father said, Son, everything I've had has always been yours.

You see, this older son was just looking in the wrong direction. He was looking to his own righteousness. He was looking to his own labors.

He was trying to bring something of himself to the table, as it were. And he thought that everyone else had to come in that way. I thank God with all my heart that the prodigal son didn't meet the older brother on the road home.

The older brother would have said, Look at the mess you're in. Look at the disgrace you've made to the father's name. Look at your hair.

Look at your hands. Look at your clothes. There's a lot of older brothers in the church of Jesus Christ today.

The poor, struggling sons and daughters of God. Many even who have been raised in Christian homes but have fallen away. Looking for God to come into the church and meet the older brother instead of the father.

The older brother looks at them at the altar, weeping their way through to God and says, Look at your hair. Look at your earrings. Look at your hat.

Look at your clothes. Look at the disgrace you've made to the name of God. Come, take up your burden like I have.

Come and work hard like I have in the house of God. And you too will be accepted to the father. You've left your first love.

You've left your first love. The father says, Son, I loved you long before you were born. I loved you.

You see, that's the first love. You've left the understanding that it's not by works of righteousness. It's according to the mercy of God that you even exist.

That you even live. That you even breathe. That you've been in my house.

You've been in my field. It's only by mercy. You've not earned it.

You don't deserve it. You've left your first love. You've forgotten that I loved you first.

Oh, Son, neither you nor your brother are here because you deserve it. I determined to do it in my heart long, long before you were born. Isaiah chapter 44.

If you'll go there with me, I want to show you something. Isaiah chapter 44. Here's a passage of scripture that's written over 150 years before the first return of the children of Israel from captivity.

And somewhere between 200 and 300 years before they stood before Nehemiah and Ezra. In Nehemiah chapter 8. Isaiah 44. 24.

It says, Thus saith the Lord thy Redeemer. And he that formed thee from the womb. I am the Lord that maketh all things.

That stretches forth the heavens alone. That spreadeth abroad the earth by myself. That frustrates the tokens of the liars and makes diviners mad.

That turns wise men backwards and makes their knowledge foolish. That confirms the word of his servant and performs the counsel of his messengers. That says to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be inhabited.

And to the cities of Judah, you shall be built. And I will raise up the decayed places thereof. Now, Isaiah is prophesying this before Israel has even gone into captivity.

Before the Babylonians have even come and overrun the nation. Isaiah is prophesying about them being rebuilt. That says to the deep, be dry.

And I will dry up the rivers. Verse 28 says, That says of Cyrus, he is my shepherd. And shall perform all my pleasure.

Even saying to Jerusalem, thou shalt be built. And to the temple thy foundation shall be laid. Isaiah says, God is going to give life to a king who is not even born yet.

He is going to be the king of the Medo-Persian empire that will come in and conquer Babylon. And his name is going to be Cyrus. Now, God names him before his mother and father are even born.

He names a king and he says, this king that I am going to call Cyrus is going to release you. And I declare to you that Jerusalem shall be built. Yes, you will backslide.

And yes, you will go into captivity. But I'm going to take you out of captivity. For I didn't create you to leave you overpowered by your enemies.

I created you for my glory. And God says, I'm not going to let you go. I'm not going to give you over to the power of the enemy.

Yes, your sin may cause you to weep for a season. But joy is coming back to you again in the morning. He says, I'm going to raise up a king and his name will be Cyrus.

He will issue a decree and he will allow my people to go back. Because God says, I am God. There is no other besides me.

I frustrate all the plans of man. It is me who has the plan for all of eternity. And I say, Jerusalem shall be built and it shall be built.

Hallelujah. The church of Ephesus. Christ would say to this church, The failure to understand these things can cause you to lose your candlestick.

He said to Ephesus, remember from where you have fallen. And repent and come back and do the first works. Or else I will come and take your candlestick away from you.

And really in this context, I see the candlestick as simply the ability of that church to represent Jesus Christ. God says, I'm going to be bringing home some sons and daughters. I'm going to be bringing some people who have been far, far, far, far away from me.

They are far away in appearance. They are far away in understanding. But if you don't understand that you stand by grace, you will misrepresent me to them.

When I bring them in, I think of the 200 or so young people who were at this altar on Friday night. Giving their lives to Jesus Christ for the very first time. Many never, never having heard there was a God.

No understanding. Knowing no language but profanity. Knowing no cultural interaction but violence and loneliness.

And I see them at the altar and folks, they've got a long way to go. And if we don't understand that it's all by grace. If we fail to understand that we too stand by grace.

We too are still, if God judges according to our iniquities, we couldn't stand. We stand in this house by grace. And if we lose touch with that, we will misrepresent God to all of these young ones coming into His house.

We'll begin to be the older brother. We will be so far from the heart of the Father that we will misrepresent Him. In other words, we will have lost our candlestick.

Luke 15 says he was angry. Go with me to Luke please. Chapter 15, verse 28.

It says that he was angry and would not go in. And his father came out and treated him. And he said, verse 29, he was joyless.

He said to his father, these many years I've served you. You see there was a great celebration going on in the house. And this older brother couldn't enter in.

He said, look, I've served you all these years. And I've had such a joyless life. And folks, there's people like that, even in Times Square Church, can honestly say, I've been here 15 years and I've got no joy.

And if I've got no joy, nobody else is having any joy either. I've found what holiness is all about. Holiness is serving.

Holiness is working. Holiness is judging. Holiness is discerning.

That's what holiness is all about. And I haven't experienced any joy, and I don't want anybody else to experience it either. He was joyless.

I've worked all these years. And Father, I've never had a joyful time. I've never had anything to make merry with my friends.

But as soon as this son comes, which is devoured, you're living with harlots, you've killed for him the fatted calf. You've given him the fat. In other words, you've given him that which was prepared for a celebration time.

The fatted calf was raised just for that purpose. It was raised to be slaughtered in a time of great celebration. And he says, you've given him the fatted calf.

You've not given me anything. For all my labor and all my work, I've never experienced any joy. And now look at this.

This harlot son, this harlot brother of mine, comes back in the house. He's made such a mess of your name and our family, and you have received him and killed the fatted calf for him. And all this joy is going on.

How come there's been no joy in what I'm doing? How come you've never had a party in the house for me? And all my work and all my labor. Oh boy, this hits pretty close to home with some. And he said, son, all that I have is yours.

And you are always with me. You see, son, there's something in me that you've lost. Or maybe you've never known it.

I speak now to the church of Ephesus. You've lost something of me. Or maybe you've never had it from the beginning.

But it is in me, and you can have it too. And that's what the father was saying to the older son. You can have this.

It was meat that we should be merry and be glad. For this thy brother was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found. And the word for meat in the Greek New Testament means it was unavoidable.

It was necessary by the sheer nature of things that exist the way they do. I mean, it's an incredible thing. God said, it had to be.

It had to be because there's something here, son, that you don't understand. There had to be joy. I think as I preach this that the Bible says there's joy in heaven over one sinner that repents.

There's something that people and created beings in heaven have the knowledge of that sometimes the church on this earth fails to understand. You know, I've been in places where they say, well, how was the service? Oh, the worship was awesome. And they'll go on forever about the worship.

How was they? There was a testimony. Oh, it was incredible. And some brother 20, 30 years ago got delivered from drugs.

It was just incredible. And what happened at the end? Oh, a hundred or so people were saved and everybody on. Doesn't even go there.

Just moves away. There's no rejoicing. And the father is saying, listen, it was unavoidable because there's something in me that cannot that there's something in me that is manifested.

God said every time a sinner comes home and those who know me and those who are mine and those who are working with me and those who have not lost their first love are become partakers of a joy that I begin to experience that nobody else in the world knows anything about. It's my work. It's unavoidable.

It's my nature. It's what I do. God said, he's equal.

Thirty six. Thirty six is I, the Lord, build the ruined places. I plant that that was desolate and I, the Lord, have spoken it and I will do it.

And God says, this is what I do. I, I came to. To not have a bunch of working sons, I came to gather that which was cast away.

I came to bring home that which nobody else wanted. I came to call the lame, the main, the leopard, the poor, the heartless, the blind, the addicted. I came to call them home to me.

And I didn't ask them to clean up their act before they came. I asked them just to come as they are. Incredible.

And you see, my job is to. Now, this is the Lord speaking. I'm speaking as the father to his son, to his older son.

My job is to build them up. They've been ruined by sin, but I've come to restore them and build them. My job is to plant them and to cause them to grow and to give them a name of praise in the earth that all the world may glorify me.

This is my work. There's no other work. Folks, there are people all over the church world looking for joy.

Everywhere, but getting involved in the true work of God. Which is seeing the lost saved. Seeing that which was ruined, restored.

Seeing that which had no growth, planted. There's no joy outside of doing what God is doing. People are running the world looking for joy.

Looking everywhere but where it really is found. It's found in a life that's abandoned to the work of God. In Nehemiah's day, the people were given the power to rebuild out of the ruins as long as they believed and followed the word of God.

They came back out of captivity in three separate stages. All of them, in one fashion or another, beginning to rebuild what was lost. In Nehemiah's day, they were the last group to come back to rebuild the wall round about Jerusalem.

The opponents looked at them and said, will they revive the stones out of the heap of rubbish which are burned? Will they do it? But just as in years before, when another group would come back, the prophet Zechariah had arisen up. And God gave him a vision of candlesticks and bowls and pipes, feeding them with this endless supply of oil that never runs out. And Zechariah was able to say to those who were being discouraged because the work seemed so great and their own strength seemed so insignificant.

And because of it, they were losing heart. And God spoke through Zechariah to the people in a sense and said, don't give up the work. This work is not of man, this work is of God.

It's not by might, Zechariah was able to say. It's not by power. I've seen something.

This kingdom is built by the Spirit of God. This thing that God is doing is not by your strength. It's not by your ingenuity.

It's not by your self-will. It's not by the amount of things you do for God. This is something that God is doing for you.

He is building something in you. And He says, given you an endless supply, it will never run dry. And He said, who are you, O great mountain? Who are you, O opposition that stands in the way of the work of God? Before Zerubbabel, you will become a plain.

And He said, the building or the headstone, in other words, is going to be finished. The building is going to be finished. And a headstone is going to be put on it.

And grace, grace is going to be shouted to it. God says to you today, don't be dismayed. The work I've started in your life, it's going to be finished.

And there is a headstone, a capstone, going to be put on that work. And when it's laid there, you're going to shout, grace, grace, almighty grace to it. You're going to know that you've stood by grace.

You're going to know it's the power of God that has transformed your life. You're going to have a testimony of love and joy for your generation. You'll know it's not been by works.

It's not been by the amount of things that you and I are able to do. It's by the almighty grace of God that we stand. Hallelujah.

Luke 15 again. The prodigal son gets up and begins to come home. And as he gets up, he's got his excuses.

Verse 18, he says, I'll arise and go to my father and say, father, I've sinned against heaven and before thee. And I'm no more worthy to be called thy son. Make me as one of thy hired servants.

And he arose, came to his father, but when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him. And had compassion and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. Now, the father has run to his son.

He has greeted this son coming home. You see, the older brother knew nothing about this. That's why he had no joy.

He had lost the heart of his father. That was his first love. He lost it.

He lost it in all of his works in the house of God. It meant nothing to him to see a sinner come home. His heart didn't rejoice like the heart of his father rejoiced.

He's out working in the field. The father is standing on the porch. And the father is waiting for this boy to come home.

And he sees this boy even before the boy sees him. You see, that's what it's always been about. God saw us before we saw him.

And he ran to him. I remember years ago, as a police officer, all of a sudden, this hunger for God coming into my heart. Not even knowing where it came from.

I remember going and sitting in churches when I would be working and saying, God, I know you're up there somewhere. I know you can speak to me. I know you can talk to me.

He was a long way off, but his father saw him coming. And he didn't sit on his throne and waiting for us to get through the gauntlet of the older brothers. He left the house and ran down the road.

You've got to understand that about God. He ran to you. It was not our effort.

It was not anything we've done. He came to us in our sin. And he fell on his neck and kissed him.

He received him unconditionally. And as they're heading back to the father's house, the son keeps on speaking. He says, Father, I've sinned against heaven and in thy sight.

And I'm no more worthy to be called thy son. And I love this. I love this passage of Scripture because Jesus Christ is speaking about the heart of his father.

And the father doesn't even respond to all the weeping, all the sorrow, all the head hanging. I'm no longer worthy. You think of the people now, again, where we started in Nehemiah's day.

The book is open. They see they're failing. They see where they've lost hope and heart and the mess they've made, even of God's name.

And they're heading back home. And their heads are bowed. And they're beginning to weep.

And, oh, we deserve to be beaten. We deserve to be punished. I'm no longer worthy to be called a son.

Just make me as one of your hired servants, just like my brother is. And here the father says, oh, bring out the best robe. It's incredible.

It's an incredible thing because the father speaks and the son now, all he can do is receive it by faith. You and I have no choice. We have nothing to bring to him.

We have no good works. We have no legacy of faithfulness. If he judged us for our thoughts of the week, we'd all be damned and doomed.

We have nothing to bring to God. He says, bring out the best robe. Incredible.

Now, when he speaks it, we have a choice. We can receive it or reject it. Oh, I'm not worthy.

Oh, I'm not worthy. But the father has commanded it. And the son has dumbfounded it.

His servants come and put the best robe in the house on him. And without any discussion necessary, the best robe in the kingdom of God is the blood of Jesus Christ. The covering for our sin.

And as they travel on closer to the house, he says, I'll put a ring on his hand. Now, we know that that ring is a ring of authority. God said, I'm not bringing you into my house as a slave.

I'm bringing you in as a son. I'm bringing you in as a daughter. And I'm giving you authority.

You've got the seal of my house on that ring. And whatsoever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven. Whatsoever you loose on earth shall be loose on heaven.

I give you power to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy. And nothing shall by any means hurt you. Behold, all things you ask in prayer believing you shall receive.

Up to this point you've asked for nothing. Now ask that your joy might be full. And he said, and put shoes on his feet.

Incredible. Now, the son knows that he doesn't deserve a single thing that his father is giving him. He doesn't deserve it.

I know, I'm more aware in my life now than I've ever been that I don't deserve anything that I have. I don't deserve to be here. I don't deserve to be preaching to you today.

I don't deserve anything. I've not done anything to deserve it. Everything I have has come from his hand.

And it's only come because he's spoken it and I've received it in faith. If I looked at myself, I'd hang my head and weep. I'd be always aware of my own frailty and always aware of my own failing.

Unaware of what it is that God wants to do in my life. Unaware of what it is that he is building. Now, verse 24, it says, Verse 23, it says, Bring hither the fatted calf and kill it, let us eat and be merry.

For this my son was dead and is alive again. But he was lost and is found and they began to be merry. God, it must have been an incredible thing for this son to come home.

He's still dumbfounded. He's still awestruck. He's wearing the best robe in the house.

He's wearing the finest robe in the house. He's been received as if he's a king and a ruler. In spite of his failure.

He's been received in entirety. He's now got authority. He can now give commands.

He wouldn't at this point, perhaps, because he's unaware of the authority that's been given him. But he can. He has shoes on his feet.

The father is saying, You're going to now represent me. You've got something of me in you now, son. And you're going to be able to represent me all over my kingdom.

But he sees something that I personally believe gives him incredible strength. He walks in the house. And he watches his father begin to dance.

And he stands there. Amazed. As the father and all of his household begin to rejoice.

Over his being received, his salvation. The whole house begins to rejoice. I can see the old father just beginning to dance.

Because his son has come home. Beginning to rejoice before God. And I can hear the music begin to be played.

And the hands are clapping. And the dishes are out. And the fatted calf is killed.

And there's the smell of wonderful food in the house. Incredible. The best choice fruit of the vine is there.

Everything that's in his kingdom is in that house. All for this one son that's come home. And the father begins to dance.

And I begin to understand, looking at this, that it's the joy of the Lord that's my strength. I said it's the joy of the Lord that's my strength. Not my joy.

It's God's joy. It's the joy of the Lord. It's the delight of God to save me.

The delight of God to change me. The delight of God to clothe me. The delight of God to walk with me.

The delight of God to declare my name before all of heaven. The delight of God. The joy that's in the heart of God over one sinner that repents is my strength.

It's not something that I have to muster up. It's something I become aware of. That God is rejoicing over me with joy.

And the knowledge of that joy becomes the source of my strength. Hallelujah. Back in Nehemiah again, they told the people, they said, This day is holy to the Lord your God.

Mourn not nor weep for all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, Go your way and eat the fat and drink the sweet and send portions for them for whom nothing is prepared. For the day is holy unto our Lord.

Neither be you sorry for the joy of the Lord is your strength. You see, they made them understand, the Bible says these words, that it's, You can eat the fat that's presented before you. In other words, the fatted calf has been killed for you.

Feel free to eat it. Remember, Jesus said, Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you. Drink the sweet.

Eat the sacrifice of Christ for your sin. Eat it. Eat the strength that God says I give you through the living word that I've entrusted into your hands.

Drink the sweetness of your God. Drink it daily. Say, God, I am your delight.

You are confessing my name before the throne. Even though I've made a mess, you are confessing my name. I have an honest heart.

I've come home. And I now know that you are rejoicing over me with joy, with great joy. Your whole house is astir.

As a matter of fact, you are preparing a place for me in heaven right now. You commissioned a crew the day I came to the altar. You commissioned a crew to start building a mansion with my name on the door.

Hallelujah. And there is joy. The builders are not grumbling.

There's no complaining in the streets of heaven. They are building a mansion. They are talking about the person that's going to live there.

They are speaking about the wondrousness of God. Hallelujah. There are participants in the joy of the Lord over one sinner that's come to Christ.

Isaiah said it this way in Isaiah 55. And I'm going to close with just two scriptures. He said, Ho, everyone that thirsts, come to the waters.

And he that has no money, come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money, verse 2, for that which is not bread, and you labor for that which satisfies not? Hearken diligently to me and eat that which is good.

And let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear and come unto me. Here and your soul shall live.

And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David. God said, Come. You don't have to bring anything in your hand.

Stop working for that which doesn't satisfy. Let your soul delight in that which I've given to you and provided for you. Begin to understand.

Incline your ear. Come to me and you will live. And I will make a covenant of mercy with you.

I will be merciful to your iniquities. Your sins and iniquities I will remember no more. I will cover you.

Though your sins be as red as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Let us reason together, says the Lord. Come and stop laboring for that which doesn't satisfy.

And one last scripture, Zephaniah. It's four little books back from the Gospel of Matthew in the Old Testament. Zephaniah chapter 3. Do you see it? The joy of the Lord is my strength.

It's the Lord's joy over me that strengthens me. It's the knowledge that he is delighted in me. It's the knowledge that he yearns to cover me.

Empower me and change me and build me. It's the knowledge that I have come to him with an honest heart and I'm not playing games with God. Yes, I've failed, but I'm home.

And this is where the people were in Nehemiah's day. Greatly failed, God, but they were home. They had responded to the call to come back and they had built as best as they could out of the rubble.

They saw the reason for their failure and their captivity and they wept for the loss. But they made them understand the words of the book and said this is not a day of mourning. This is a day of rejoicing.

It is the Lord's joy to bring you home. And the joy of the Lord is becoming your strength. Zephaniah 3.13. The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity nor speak lies.

Neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth. For they shall feed and lie down and none shall make them afraid. Sing, O daughter of Zion.

Shout, O Israel. Be glad and rejoice with all thy heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. For the Lord has taken away thy judgments.

He has cast out thine enemy. The king of Israel, even the Lord, is in the midst of thee. Thou shalt not see evil any more.

In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, fear thou not, and to Zion, let not thine hands be slack. The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty. He will save.

He will rejoice over thee with joy. He will rest in His love. He will joy over thee with singing.

Now, this is God. He said, I'm going to bring you home. And I'm going to fight against your enemies.

And I'm going to cast down all that has afflicted you. And I'm going to rejoice over you with great joy. You are going to rest in my love.

And I'm going to joy over you with singing. Just like the prodigal son's father in the house. God says, I want you to understand this is my heart for you.

I will rejoice over you. I will joy over the work that's going to happen in your life. Because with an honest heart, you have come home, even with all your failings.

And you have desired me. Behold, at that time, He says in verse 19, I will undo all that afflict thee. And I will save her that halted or is curved or bowed down.

I will gather her that was driven out. And I will get them praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame. God said, I'm going to do a work in you.

This is the rejoicing of my heart. I'm going to take a people out of the heap of rubbish. And I'm going to put my spirit upon you.

And I'm going to cause you to dwell in the land. And everyone that walks by you is going to look and say, this land that was desolate and afflicted has become inhabited. And it's like the Garden of Eden.

At that time, He says, I'll bring you again, even in the time that I gather you. And I will make you a name and a praise among all the people of the earth. When I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith the Lord.

God said, I'm going to turn back your captivity. I'm going to change you. I'm going to transform you.

Don't be dismayed. Don't be cast down. Don't look in the mirror and look for hope there.

Look to me. Look to the one who's given you life. Look to the one who loves you and created you.

Look to the one who formed you even before you were born and called you by name even before you were conceived in your mother's womb. Look to me, He said. I will give you strength and change you and bring you home.

I will rejoice over you and the joy of the Lord will be your strength. I want to give an altar call today. Firstly, to every older brother.

Every older brother in the house today. Say, Pastor, you preach right where I live. I'm in the field, but I've lost my joy.

I could see a sinner get saved today and I'd just yawn and walk out of the house of God. I'd run to the parking garage for my car and miss the joy of my God. And never partake in the joy of a single sinner coming to Christ.

I've lost this first love because I've lost the heart of the Father. The only way I know that you can get your joy back is to say, Father, I don't deserve to be here. I stand here by grace.

God, I'm asking you to make me aware of that again. I'm asking you to give me back the joy of thy salvation. Give it back to me.

David the psalmist cried it when he had sinned against God. He said, Lord, restore to me the joy of thy salvation. God, I've lost the joy.

I've lost the joy that you have when one sinner comes to Christ. And because of it, I've lost the joy that I should be experiencing over my own life. I'm more aware of my failings in service than I am of the greatness of your salvation that you have given me.

And secondly, I'd like to call every son, daughter who's backslidden and you felt so far away from God. You felt, I'd like to live for God, but I'll never measure up. It's hopeless.

So I'll just stand away off and watch. And maybe someday something will happen that will cause me to have the hope to go home. I hope for you that this has been the day.

That you will get up and allow God the Father to rejoice over you. Allow your Savior to sing songs over you at this altar today, because that's what he will do. There'll be a song that's being sung just for you, and it's just about you.

It's nobody else's song. It's only you and Jesus singing it together. And he said, I'll rejoice over you.

I'll give you a robe and a ring and shoes. I'll plant you and build you. And it's my joy to do it for you.

It's my deepest joy. And the knowledge that it is will become a source of strength to you. You will walk in the strength of understanding that God is not angry with me.

God is not sitting in heaven picking apart my mistakes. It's his joy to cover my transgressions. It's his joy to clothe me.

It's his joy to change me. It's his joy to empower me. The deepest joy of his heart.

It's such a joy that he became a man and died. That I might become a partaker of it with him. If that's something that the Holy Spirit is calling you to today, I'm going to ask you to join those that will be coming and come to this altar, and we're going to pray together.

And I'm believing, God, that the joy of the Lord will be your strength before you leave this building today. Let's all stand. The Holy Spirit is calling you.

Step out. Make your way, please, to this altar. In the balcony, you can go to either exit.

And make your way down. In the main sanctuary, just slip out. Every son, every daughter that's far away from God, struggling, joyless, serving, distant.

It takes courage to come, but I'm asking you to come. And let God touch your life again. Hallelujah.

Now, for those that have responded today, I want you to pray this prayer with me. Father. Father.

I have sinned. I have sinned. Against heaven.

Against heaven. And before thee. And before thee.

And I'm no more worthy. And I'm no more worthy. To be called thy son.

To be called thy son. Make me. Make me.

As one of thy hired servants. God's not listening to you right now. I didn't do this to trick you.

But this is the prayer the prodigal son prayed. God wasn't listening to him. The moment you got up, he began to command something to happen in this kingdom.

He said, get the best robe. Bring out the ring. Put shoes on the feet of my son, my daughter.

Kill the fatted calf. In other words, let the sacrifice that's been prepared be now appropriated. Let it be laid hold of.

Gather them in the house and begin to make merry, because this son or daughter of mine that was lost and dead is now found. We get so used to coming home like the prodigal son. I'm so unworthy.

I so don't deserve to be here. Just make me a servant. Make me a slave in your house.

And God says, no. Not a slave. A son.

A king. A daughter. A princess.

So hard to receive that, isn't it? So hard. But the Lord says, I delight to do this. It's my joy.

This is what I'm about, God says. This is why I came. This is why you were even born.

To come back to me. Now, I want you to pray again. Father, in Jesus' name, I receive the covering for all of my sin and all of my failing.

I thank you today that when you look at me, you see the righteousness of Jesus Christ. When you look at me, it's as if I've never sinned. Oh my God, I thank you from the depths of my heart for your unsearchable mercy.

Your incredible grace. When I look at my hands, I don't see my failure. But I see a ring.

I see a ring of great authority and great power which you have delighted to give me that I might honor you by allowing you to use my life for your purposes, for your kingdom, throughout my generation. When I look at my feet, I don't see the places where I've gone that I shouldn't have gone. But I see your forgiveness and I see a commission that I should go into all the world and tell them about the goodness of my Father, about the joy of my Father, about the strength that I have found because he has loved me and received me unconditionally.

And he has vowed to change me and to establish me and to make his name a praise in the earth through my life. Oh God, I rejoice with you now. I glory with you.

I joy with you. Oh Jesus, thank you. Thank you Lord, thank you God.

Hallelujah. Hallelujah. God, thank you.

God, thank you. We bless you, we praise you. Jesus, we praise you.

This is the conclusion of the message.

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