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The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength

by T. Austin-Sparks

First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, Jan-Feb 1957, Vol. 35-1.

"Go your way; eat the fat and drink the sweet, and send portions unto him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy unto our Lord. Neither be ye grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." (Nehemiah 8:10) - or stronghold - "The joy of the Lord is your stronghold".

My intention is just to take that last sentence - "The joy of the Lord is your stronghold".

Really to get the meaning and value of that statement, it is necessary, of course, to see it in relation to the context; that is, in its setting in this whole book: so we must approach it along that line.

An End-Time Message

You are aware, I believe, that Nehemiah is the last bit of inspired Hebrew history in the Bible. Its position, of course, in the binding, is a little misleading, but that is the fact. Until the year 1560, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were one book, and they were called the First and Second Books of Ezra. They go together; they form what I have said is the last piece of inspired Hebrew history in the Bible, i.e., in the Old Testament. Now, of course, as you read these two books, you find yourself in the presence of conditions which are not difficult to discern in our own time. These books mark events and conditions at the end of the 'old' dispensation. They cover about one hundred and twenty years. Ezra and Nehemiah give the history of that period. Zechariah and Haggai are the Prophets of the same period. And during that one hundred and twenty years, beginnings had been made to try to recover what had been lost when Israel went into captivity. A remnant returned, and set to work to try to rebuild, and then the effort faded, and a period of some years marked inaction; and then another attempt was made, a little progress was achieved, and another interruption, and another period of inaction and silence and waiting. One period lasted for sixty years with repeated

attempts to recover the original position and fulness, but by reason of a low state of spiritual life, spiritual declension and weakness, there were these interruptions, these periods of inaction, when the work of recovery was suspended.

It is not difficult to see a similarity between that dispensation and this. Remember the days of fulness under Joshua - what days they were! Conquest and possession and fulness! Remember the days under David - what days they were! What a forty years of fulness and life! How the order of God obtained! And now - look at all that has been lost.

We too, we Christians, look back to beginnings in fulness, the great days of the Church at the beginning, what fulness! what life! what Divine order! And then - the same things happened. Many attempts have been made to recover; movements have taken place, and then they have faded out, for some reason they have been arrested; the whole thing has been brought into suspense. And there are those periods in the history of the Church when nothing was happening, all seemed to be silent; and then a fresh movement, and for a time, things seemed to be back on the way again; and again, interruption - and that is the history of the Church. And I think that today there is not a very great deal of difference between the situation as in Nehemiah's time and our own. Lost fulness, ruined Divine order, through spiritual declension, a low standard of spiritual life.

The Former Glory - And Now

The people who had this burden upon their hearts are the people who are here before us in the Book called the Book of Nehemiah. Look then into their hearts, and you will get the clue to these words of this verse. First of all, they were very conscious of the difference between what things were formerly and what they were in their own day. That comes out very clearly. There were old men who remembered, and when they saw even this reproduction, wept; when they remembered the former glory, they said that this was nothing like it was. Of course, there are always a lot of people who are always living sentimentally in a past, but, in this case it was quite true; and while we do not want to be pessimistic and melancholy, there is no doubt about it that conditions today are very different from what they were at the beginning; and although we have not lived in those days, we know well enough, both in the Word, and in our hearts, that a great deal has been lost: the Church is not today the effective, spiritually wealthy thing that it was at the beginning.

And then these people were also bitterly conscious of their own loss, their own spiritual loss. You know that they had lost their language: and there, as they were gathered together by Ezra and Nehemiah, they had to have a large number of interpreters scattered among them, when the Scriptures were read, because, in the seventy years, they had lost their own language, and did not understand the Scriptures; and as the Word was read in public, the interpreters had to say - 'That is that; the meaning of that is so-and-so': and they were conscious, made keenly conscious, that they had lost their understanding of the Word of God. It is a very paralysing thing to realise that the Word of God is so very largely closed; there is so little spiritual understanding of the things of God. You know how baffling it is to realise that God's Word is not an open book, and is not a disclosed revelation to the heart. Well, that is how they were, a great deal had been lost in that way.

And then their desire, strong as it was, and true as it was, to recover this testimony, this former glory, this former fulness, was beset by enemies on every side. You know the story - Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, and all the rest - enemies all round! A little, weakened, despised, crippled people, of so little account, and enemies everywhere. "What do these *feeble Jews*?" All that, I say, constituted a situation, a state of things, very disheartening, and created a need for some refuge

from despair, some refuge from overwhelming sense of weakness and hopelessness, some stronghold, into which to flee.

In that context we have these encouraging words: - "Neither be ye grieved; for the joy of the Lord is your strength". What does that mean, what does the 'joy of the Lord,' mean? The *Lord's* joy - a stronghold: that is the word here. 'The Lord's joy - a stronghold'. Well, see it, as you may from the earthly standpoint; but the Lord is evidently looking upon this in a different way, from Heaven.

You know, it does not look like it, but if you like to go to Isaiah 35:10 you will find these words "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads...; and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." That was a prophecy as to the return of this very remnant. The Lord sees here a ransomed people. It was never any pleasure or joy to the Lord that they went into exile - that broke His heart. If the cry of the prophets echoed the heart of God, it was a broken heart, when His people had to go into exile and captivity. And when the Lord brought again out of captivity a people, be they but a small people, a despised and weakened people, nevertheless, a people whose *heart* was set upon His satisfaction, the Lord had something that gave Him joy, and turned His sorrow away. The joy of the Lord is in having a people, be it ever so small, so despised, so weak, nevertheless, whose heart is set upon that which is according to His heart. If you are in oneness with the heart-beat of God, you may have many enemies, and you may have many things to deplore and grieve over, in yourself, and in yourselves, nevertheless, if you are one with the heart-purpose of God, you are right in the way of the Lord's delight, the Lord's pleasure, the Lord's joy; that can be a refuge for you. It is a tremendous thing to have the assurance that, after all, weak as we may be, imperfect as we may be, despised as we may be, opposed and persecuted as we may be, nevertheless, we are on the line of the Lord. Our hearts are for the Lord; it is what will satisfy the Lord that is the only thing that concerns us. Remember, that is a strong position. The Lord draws around such His mighty defences: it is all right! You are in a strong position if you are one with Him, no matter what you may be in yourself.

A Ransomed People

In having a ransomed people - ah, yes, - not only in that initial sense, of being converted and saved, but a people ransomed from what Babylon means! Ransomed from those conditions which have emaciated and weakened and spoiled His testimony through the ages. Ransomed from those things - they *are* His people, but His people as a ransomed people; not ransomed in that they have *become* His people, but now as His people, they are ransomed from those things. That is a special joy to the Lord. And to be with the Lord in that, is to be in a strong position - "the joy of the Lord is your stronghold".

A Representative Remnant

But then, they were also a representative people. You know the Lord has always found joy in something that is representative of His mind. In every sphere it is like that. Take the harvest - well, He ordained that in the time of the harvest, they should go out in the fields and scan the crops, every day, to discover, to see, the very first ripe ears, and when they found, over the whole field, just a few ripe ears, according to His ordinance, they gathered them, and brought them into the presence of the Lord, as representing all the rest that would come afterward; and there was joy, the joy of harvest, in just the few ears. It was something taken account of by the Lord - a simple Divine ordinance, but embodying a wonderful principle. And you can extend that over other things, such as the firstborn as precious to the Lord - it is representative. Now today, He is the Firstborn from among the dead, and oh, the preciousness of Him, as representative of all the sons that He is going

to bring. This remnant was representative of God's thought and mind about His people; and they, therefore, were very precious to Him, *very* precious to Him. Malachi, the last one to prophesy, makes it very clear: 'They shall be my peculiar treasure in that day that I do make'. Something specially precious to the Lord. And, dear friends, it is a strong position to be in, to be very precious to the Lord: as representative of His mind; when there may be much otherwise, that He might have some who do answer to His heart. 'My peculiar treasure' - something the Lord gathers around, as though that were to be looked after for Him.

The Lord Does Not Lose Heart

Here in this, we have a recovered testimony, and everywhere, everywhere it is made so clear in the Word, the Lord has never given up; everything may have seemed to have gone at times. Yes, there may be long periods of silence, with nothing happening, but the Lord has not abandoned it; He has not given up. And any sign of movement, again and again, towards completion, restoration, finds Him there, finds Him in that, finds Him interested, finds Him alive. Here in Nehemiah, so far as would be, and could be, under those Old Testament conditions, things were coming to completion, the wall was being finished, the Temple was built, the testimony was being recovered in representation, in type, and, well, here is the spirit of it. "Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy unto our Lord". Holy unto our Lord - something sacred to the Lord. "Neither be ye grieved; FOR the joy of the Lord is your stronghold".

In a word, it is to be in a strong position to be in what the Lord really desires and has His heart set upon - His pleasure. Even if there is much to regret, much for which to be sorry, and even if there is much opposition, if there is that which the Lord really wants, it is a strong position to be in. "The joy of the Lord is your stronghold".

How the Lord Sees Things

You see, the Lord sees everything. The Lord did not just see those poor attempts, those imperfect successes, but He saw them in the light of His end; He saw, this was right in line with the end. Oh yes, this city may be a comparatively poor thing, even when it is finished, and it may fail again: but the Lord sees beyond this. It is a token, it is a pointer, it is in the direct line of His eternal city. He sees through this city to the greater City. You see, this is symbolic of that ultimate, and although this will fail, ah, it is on the way to the one that will never fail, and the Lord sees through the token, to that which it betokens. We may only have the token, and it may be poor and imperfect, but, it is precious to the Lord because it is in line with what He is after, what He has set His heart upon. And He has set His heart upon "the city which, hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

There may be still much disappointment, but if we have that which is true - in principle - to God's purpose, although not full and perfect in expression, but true in principle, and our hearts are set upon all that can possibly be of that kind, Heaven will make perfect our imperfections at last, and the perfect City will swallow up the imperfect one.

God Needs Men

Now, I close by reminding you - and here is a very practical application of this - Nehemiah was not an official prophet, nor was he an official king, nor an official priest; he was only a man among the people. The official side of things was in much weakness. Kings had all gone wrong and failed; the priests were corrupt: even Joshua the high priest, was clothed in a filthy garment. The prophets, well,

they had done their work, and were seeking to do it, but there was much weakness. But here is a *man* who is none of those officially, just a man, and he rises up to take this whole thing as the burden upon his heart, to bring God full satisfaction. My point is this, what God wants is *men*, who will take the thing on their hearts. You may not have official designations, you may not belong to the official ecclesiastical, or political class, but you can be a *man* for God; you can be a *person* who takes this on your heart. You may meet the disheartenments that Nehemiah had to encounter, you may find there is much slackness amongst the Lord's people, as he found, *but* he stands out as a man of courage, a man of faith, and he brought the testimony as far on to recovery as ever it was brought at the end of that dispensation. If we could catch something of the meaning of this - "the joy of the Lord is your strength", it would deliver us from a great deal. That is, let me change the word, 'the pleasure of the Lord', that comes from Isaiah 53 "and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand": that is only another way of saying 'the joy of the Lord'. To be in the Lord's pleasure because in line with the Lord's end, will save us from much. You see what it meant here. "Go your way" - what they might have done and said - 'I have lost my appetite; I am not inclined to eat anything, or drink anything: I am going away to be miserable': 'it is all a poor look-out'!

But mark you, here it is; you are in the way of the Lord's purpose; therefore, eat the meat, drink the sweet; send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared. This joy of the Lord is a great delivering thing from ourselves, and our own troubles. It turns us out to others. It releases us for service. We are no good in service if we are miserable; that is, if we are self-occupied with our own troubles, whatever they may be, spiritual or anything else. If we are turned in on ourselves, that cripples us for service. It is only when we come into line with what the Lord is after, really in line with that, the Lord's joy, the Lord's pleasure, that we are any use to anyone else. "Send portions" - great delivering from self-occupation, to be occupied with the good of others - send portions. And it is a command - "Neither be ye grieved". That is not just a kindly exhortation, a little bit of trying to stimulate us to be a little more cheerful. "Neither be ye grieved" - we are commanded to rejoice in the Lord. "Rejoice in the Lord always, and *again I say*, Rejoice!"