

THE JOY OF THE LORD IS OUR STRENGTH



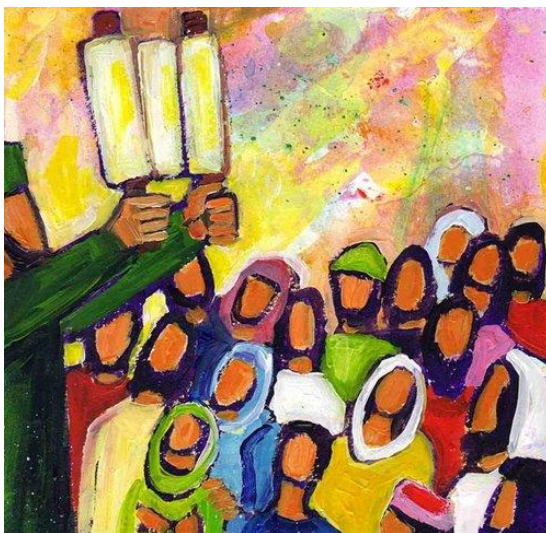
You turned my mourning into Joy
Rebecca Brogan

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until mid-day in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden pulpit which they had made for the purpose ... and Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and when he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God; and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands; and they bowed their faces to the ground ...

And Nehemiah who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." So the Levites stilled all the people saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Nehemiah 8:1-12

It was a vast assembly in the square of a Jerusalem that was now but a ghost of the city it once had been. People who have spent their entire lives in exile and all their lives were told by their parents and grandparents what a magnificent place Jerusalem had been. Now they come back to this! It's Rosh Hashana and the congregation has gathered to hear the word of God. Ezra the scribe gets up on this wooden pulpit specially made for the occasion and opens the scroll containing the Torah and blesses the Lord God. Quite spontaneously everybody says, "Amen."



Ezra: This is a sacred day Berna Lopez

And then as he begins to read the law of God, a very strange thing happens. Down toward the front of the assembly a huge hulk of a man begins to sob like a baby. Ezra keeps on reading. A woman way back toward the rear of the assembly cries as if her heart is breaking. Ezra continues to read and the people drink in the word. Men who hadn't cried since they were little children, find their faces and their beards wet with tears. Everywhere you look, you see weeping.

What does this mean? It means that the Spirit of the living God has moved upon this assembly and given it the gift of deep, genuine, broken, heartfelt repentance. Finally, Ezra stops reading.

The word of God has done its work.

Their hearts have been broken, and now they're ready for the comfort of God.

Ezra says,

"Do not mourn and weep, this day is holy unto the Lord. Go your way, eat the fat and drink the sweet wine and send portions to those for whom nothing has been prepared, and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

Gradually the weeping subsides and in its place comes a joy such as they had never experienced before: **the joy of the Lord**. And they rise up, go their way, and eat and drink and send portions to people who have nothing. The same Spirit that had moved them to weep now moves them with a joy that they were meant to have when man was first created. A joy that will now be their strength as they rebuild the ruined city and revive the wasted nation.

The joy of the Lord is your strength....

The joy of the Lord is a very strange thing. Invariably it comes to us by means of the gift of weeping. The weeping may not be on our faces but it will surely be in our hearts. When we are visited, truly, by the joy of the Lord and not by some cheap counterfeit, the first evidence of the coming of the joy of the Lord is that the heart of stone begins to break and all the hardness and all the indifference and all the bitterness and all the arrogance crumbles. We begin to see ourselves as in the sight of the living God, and as we do all the flesh-strength that seemed to hold us together in the past drains away, and we have no choice but to break, to weep. Then we are visited by the joy of the Lord.



Mourning into Dancing Marybeth Stafford

What is it that causes these people to weep as Ezra reads the word? As they're listening to Ezra read the word of God they know that they haven't been obeying it. They have fallen far short. They're so far from God! They've wronged Him in so many ways! There's no choice for them but to just break inside their hearts. And the minute they begin to admit that they have been wrong, (no longer defending themselves, no longer try-ing to give excuses for themselves), God comes in with joy that becomes their strength against all the failure and all the disobedience and all the un-belief which has plagued their lives in the past.

Now exactly the same thing happens to us. The joy of the Lord is our strength against all the things which have defeated us and made a mockery of our intentions to walk with God. But the joy of the Lord does not come into our hearts initially by means of singing and dancing; it comes rather by means of weeping.

*They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.
He that goeth forth and weepeth bearing precious seed
shall doubtless come again with rejoicing
bringing his sheaves with him.*

If you ask God to give you joy and find that soon He takes you through a valley of tears, do not suppose that He's playing some weird trick on you.

He's answering your prayer, bringing you to your heart's desire by means of the only possible way you will ever have it.

The joy of the Lord is our strength against despair.

No doubt there are some of us who are living in despair right now.

By despair I mean your soul is numb, your heart is dry, you just see no hope, nothing to look forward to, nothing to live for.

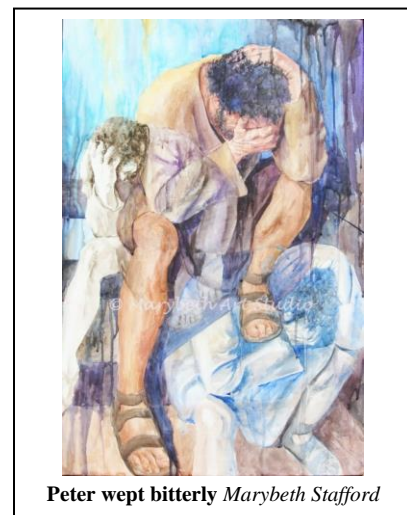
Now the strange thing about despair is that when it gets hold of your heart you can't cry. Oh, you can shed crocodile tears to get sympathy, you can weep little tears of self-pity. But the deep brokenhearted cry of repentance is impossible to you. When Judas finally realized what he had done to His Master there was no weeping. Judas could not weep.

He had closed and locked his door against the joy of the Lord, and found himself in the prison of despair. There seemed open to him only one last desperate step, and Judas took it without one tear.

Compare this with what happens to Peter when he wakes up and realizes what he has done in denying his Lord.

Peter went out and wept bitterly.

And as Peter wept he was beginning already to taste the joy of the Lord which would flood his being three days later. When the joy of the Lord visits our despair we suddenly realize that our numbness and our dryness of soul are simply unbelief in the face of a God who has given us everything He has, laid down the life of His Only Begotten.



When we see how we have hurt God, broken His heart, we begin to break. And as we offer to Him the sacrifice of a broken heart joy comes to us as we've never known it. And that joy becomes our strength against ever having to fall back into despair again.

The joy of the Lord is our strength against vanity.

We are living in vanity when we are building our lives on a foundation which has no more substance than air.

- Pinning our hopes,
- drawing our satisfaction,
- laying up our treasure.....

.... in such a way that one good storm will take it all down the drain.

When we're living in vanity,
it's impossible to weep for anything except *our own petty disappointments*.

But to weep for what we have done,
for the fact that *we've wasted our lives*, seems to be impossible.

When the joy of the Lord begins to visit those of us who are living in vanity,
and we open the door of our heart to it, we suddenly see...

- how we've been throwing our lives away,
- all the people we've been hurting,
- all the people we've been letting down,
- all the damage we've been doing.

We see that we've been breaking God's heart.

And we turn around and we offer to Him the sacrifice of a broken heart.

Then the joy of the Lord becomes our strength against vanity.

When Jesus told Zacchaeus to come down out of the tree, Zacchaeus was living in vanity. But the fact that he climbed that tree was already indicative of a change. Zacchaeus scrambled down out of that tree and received Jesus joyfully.

And the fact that this joy was the joy of the Lord is evident in that it was the kind of joy which brings about a heart-change. There was no out-ward weeping, but before dinner is over Zacchaeus stands up and says,

***Half my goods I give to the poor.
And if I've defrauded anybody I'm going to restore fourfold.***

He doesn't just say, "I'm saved," and go right on doing the same evil he'd done before.

This heart-change means that Zacchaeus was weeping in his heart for what he had been and what he had done.

And he made the change with the joy of the Lord.

The joy of the Lord is our strength against a fruitless life.

***By this my father is glorified, that you bear much fruit
and so prove to be my disciples....***

***I have said these things to you that my joy may be in you
and that your joy may be full.***

It's amazing how we can go for years and years without ever batting an eyelash over the fact that we have produced absolutely nothing with our lives for anybody else. It doesn't even bother us that we send people away empty again and again. Then one day we wake up and recognize this.

We want to be useful, to truly serve, only to come up against a second shock.

We discover that we have nothing to offer. People come to us for help and we find that we have nothing to give them, our cup-boards are bare.

When you finally get to the place where you start going next door to your neighbor, (who happens to be the Heavenly Father), and pound on His door and cry out for bread,

***Somebody has come in the middle of the night and
I have nothing to set before him, give me something!***

When you're doing this, then you're approaching the joy of the Lord. You won't be pounding on that door very long before it will open and into your heart will flow the joy of the living God which will be your strength to feed the hungry with the living bread of the true and living God.





Bear Fruit Signe Flink

*For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.
Then he said to them. "Go your way, eat the fat and drink the sweet wine and send portions to
him for whom nothing is prepared;
for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved,
for the joy of the Lord is your strength.*

May it be that joy that comes into our hearts afresh,
even if it has to come to us as it came to them by means of

weeping, brokenness, repentance...

That we may rise up
out of our despair,
out of our vanity,
out of our fruitless lives,
out of our temptations,

and do the will of our Father with hearts that are filled to overflowing with no other joy but His.



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