



## Sermon, Sunday February 2, 2025

### "For the joy of the Lord is your strength"

**SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 8:1-10** <sup>1</sup>all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. <sup>2</sup>Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. <sup>3</sup>He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, 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. <sup>4</sup>The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. <sup>5</sup>And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. <sup>6</sup>Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. <sup>7</sup>Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. <sup>8</sup>So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. <sup>9</sup>And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all 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. <sup>10</sup>Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those 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."

#### **Introduction: Meeting held in the square in front of the Water Gate**

Today is the fourth Sunday after Epiphany in the church calendar. The southern kingdom of Judah was destroyed by the Babylonian Empire in 587 BC. Many people, including the leaders of Southern Judah, were taken captive and taken to Babylon. However, the Babylonian Empire, which was gaining momentum, was soon defeated by Persia. Persian king Cyrus implemented a policy of allowing many of the captured ethnic groups to return to their homeland. As a result, the Jews who had been taken captive returned to Jerusalem around 530 BC. And among them were Ezra, a priest who excelled in the study of the Pentateuch, and Nehemiah, who received the position of governor of Judea from the king of Persia. Nehemiah's main responsibility was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Ezra was a priest and a scribe skilled in the law, and Nehemiah was a politician and did his best to restore Judea.

In today's text, the book of Nehemiah, there is a story about a special crowd meeting that was held at that time. The people gathered in the square in front of the Water Gate. Priest Ezra read the Pentateuch in front of the people from daybreak until noon. The Levites and other people who know the meaning of the word interpret the meaning of the word to the people gathered at the meeting, so the people understand the meaning of the word.

According to today's text, the process by which the Jewish people understood the words of the Pentateuch had three major stages. The first is the reading of the Word. The second is the interpretation of the words read. Third is awareness of the words read.



Applying this to our religious life today is as follows. First, we must focus and listen carefully to the words of the Bible. Second, we must be able to correctly interpret and apply the words spoken to us. And we must gain enlightenment through that process. Understanding the Word means that the Word and our lives become one. This process is important for us to understand the Word through reading the Bible or worship.

## **Body: Conversion**

According to today's text, Nehemiah 8:9, the people who heard the words of the law **'all wept.'** This means that when we hear the Word, and the Word is interpreted and understood, we enter a world of deep self-reflection. Generally, during the process of self-reflection, people regret their mistakes, and this makes them cry. The fact that the Jewish people wept in today's text means that they clearly acknowledged their faults and limitations before God.

We do not know which part of the Pentateuch, Ezra read. However, those who attended today's meeting experienced their souls being shaken through the words of the Pentateuch. Perhaps, even though the Jewish people had received enough love from God, they were not satisfied with it and looked back on their fate, where they worshiped idols and were taken to Babylon.

In the Gospel, one of the parables Jesus told was the **'Parable of the Prodigal Son.'** This is a parable about God's love. According to this parable, the second son squanders his father's inheritance, becomes a beggar in a foreign country, and then returns to his father's house. It must have been a difficult decision for the second son to return home to his father. However, the second son decided to return to his father's hometown, even if it meant becoming a hired hand rather than being his father's son. I think that the feelings of this second son were the feelings of the people of Jerusalem who listened to Ezra's sermon.

Both the second son who squandered his father's inheritance in the Gospel and the people who heard the word at the meeting in today's text realized God's love again. Through this, their souls were freed, and they were able to shed tears. I hope we all enjoy this freedom of spirit abundantly in our lives.

However, according to today's text, Nehemiah, the governor of Judea, said the following to the weeping people. **'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those 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.'**

Nehemiah told the weeping people that what was more important was **'for rejoice in the Lord.'** Also, Nehemiah said, **'Today is the Lord's holy day.'** Nehemiah said that since it is a special feast, we must hold a festival and share food with those who cannot prepare food.

Why did Nehemiah say these words to the crying Jewish people?

A festival awaits those whose souls have been shaken to the point of shedding tears. Those who have experienced the dark abyss of life know better what the joy of life is. This is the same as a person who feels close to death is more likely to feel the fullness of life in everyday life. Therefore, those who do not know the depth of tears cannot fully understand the depth of the festival.

The **'for rejoice in the Lord'** that Nehemiah spoke of means that the source of joy is God. If we change this to a New Testament perspective, the source of our joy is Jesus Christ.

## **Conclusion: Joy in the Lord**

However, there is something we must not forget. Not only happy things but also sad and difficult things happen to us. This means that even if we live our religious life sincerely, we can still experience misfortune. Then, we may wonder, in today's text, what is the meaning of the words, **"The joy of the Lord is your strength"?**



I hope we can enjoy ‘joy in the Lord’ in two major areas. First, we get to experience a depth of life that other people, power, and money cannot provide. This means that things that we previously did not consider grateful are now experienced by us as truly grateful. We can experience full happiness through breathing, eating, excreting, and walking. These things are natural and very basic in our lives. However, the joy we enjoy in the Lord allows us to find true joy even in these trivial things. Second, Christians enjoy freedom from sin and death. By believing in Jesus Christ, Christians are free from the pressure to perfect themselves through self-effort and the fear of death.

The various pressures of life and the fear of death keep us from joy. There are many reasons why we cannot escape pressure and fear even though we say we believe in Jesus. One of these reasons is that we do not truly believe in Jesus. In our religious life, we say we believe in Jesus, but our faith has no substance.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ! How deeply do you think about and reflect on Jesus and his words in your daily life? Is there a clear substance in our life of faith?

There is no greater joy than knowing that we have been promised resurrection life through Jesus Christ. The ultimate source of Christian joy is Jesus Christ. Therefore, rather than worrying about things like what to eat, what to drink, what to wear, or how to be recognized by others, please actually get closer to Jesus. And I hope that we all experience the joy, peace, and freedom that He gives us. **Amen!**

