

“THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH”

NEHEMIAH 8:8-12

INTRODUCTION

IN 1969, A TELEVISION SERIES DEBUTED ON THE PUBLIC BROADCASTING SYSTEM, WHICH DIVERTED OUR MINDS AWAY FROM THE HORRORS OF THE VIETNAM WAR, CIVIL STRIFE, RIOTING, THE CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE AND THE VERVE OF A NEW REALITY IN THIS NATION.

THAT SERIES WAS CALLED “SESAME STREET.”

FOR THOSE OF US FROM THE 1960S, WE REMEMBER THE CLASSIC WORDS OF THE INTRODUCTION OF THE SERIES, “SUNNY DAY, SWEEPING THE CLOUDS AWAY; ON MY WAY TO WHERE THE AIR IS SWEET; CAN YOU TELL ME HOW TO GET; HOW TO GET TO SESAME STREET?”

LITTLE HAS CHANGED ON THIS SHOW SINCE 41 YEARS AGO:

THE STREET IS STILL CALLED SESAME STREET;

BIG BIRD IS STILL YELLOW;

THE COOKIE MONSTER STILL EATS COOKIES, ALBEIT DIET COOKIES;

BERT AND ERNIE STILL LIVE TOGETHER;

COUNT DRACULA IS STILL COUNTING;

KERMIT IS STILL GREEN;

MISS PIGGY IS STILL A HOG;

GORDON, BOB, MARIA, DAVID, LUIS AND OTHERS STILL LIVE THERE.

HOWEVER, THERE IS A CHARACTER ON THIS LIVELY,

COLORFUL STRIP OF BROWNSTONE APARTMENTS THAT UNFORTUNATELY RESISTED MANY OPPORTUNITIES TO CHANGE.

HE HAS BEEN THE SAME WAY OVER 41 YEARS AND HE REFUSED TO CHANGE, EVEN WHEN PARTS OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGED, THE DEMOGRAPHICS CHANGED, AIDS AND HIV AWARENESS HAVE COME THROUGH THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND THAT ONE CHARACTER HAS GONE FROM BAD TO Badder FROM WORST TO “WORSER” FROM TOUGH TO TOUGHER – HIS NAME IS OSCAR THE GROUCH.

YOU KNOW HIS STORY – OSCAR LIVES ON SESAME STREET, BUT HE HAS REFUSED TO MOVE INTO REGULAR HOUSING, HE PREFERS TO STAY OUTDOORS IN A GARBAGE CAN FILLED WITH TRASH.

HE HAS NO SOCIAL LIFE. HE HAS VERY FEW FRIENDS. HE HAS MADE A WORLDWIDE REPUTATION ON BEING A GROUCH.

THE DAY CAN BE SUNNY – HE’S GOING TO FIND SOMETHING TO GROUCH ABOUT.

THE CHILDREN COULD BE PLAYING ON THE SIDEWALK – HE’S GOING TO FIND SOMETHING TO GROUCH ABOUT.

FREE ICE CREAM COULD BE GIVEN AWAY – HE’S GOING TO FIND SOMETHING TO GROUCH ABOUT.

AS BELIEVERS IN THE LORD JESUS CHRIST, WE HAVE NO RIGHT TO BECOME ‘BROTHER THE GROUCH’, ‘SISTER THE GROUCH’, ‘PREACHER THE GROUCH’, ‘DEACON THE GROUCH’, ‘TRUSTEE THE GROUCH’, ‘USHER THE GROUCH’, ‘CHOIR MEMBER THE GROUCH’, ‘MUSICIAN THE GROUCH’, ‘TEACHER THE GROUCH’, ‘YOUNG PERSON THE GROUCH’ – BECAUSE WE HAVE CLAIM TO SOMETHING THAT THE WORLD CAN’T GIVE US – WE HAVE JOY.

THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH SOMEONE WHO CLAIMS TO KNOW THE LORD FOR THEMSELVES, KNOW THE BIBLE BACKWARD AND FORWARD, AND YET CANNOT EXPRESS OR DEMONSTRATE ANY JOY!

THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH SOMEONE WHO HANDLES THE WORD OF GOD AND PRAYS AND YET CANNOT EXHIBIT ANY 'JOYFUL CHARACTERISTICS'.

I'VE COME TO SUGGEST THAT YOU MAY NEED SOME JOY IN YOUR LIFE.

WE HAVE ACCESS TO JOY. *NOT* HAPPINESS – BECAUSE NOWHERE IN THIS BOOK DOES IT SUGGEST THAT BECAUSE YOU'RE A *BELIEVER* YOU'LL ALWAYS HAVE *HAPPINESS*.

WE HAVE ACCESS TO SOMETHING MUCH GREATER THAN HAPPINESS, MORE PROFOUND THAN JUST '*FEELING GOOD*', DEEPER THAN '*INTENSE PLEASURE*'.

WE HAVE *ACCESS* AND WE FIND OUR *RELIEF* AND *COMFORT* IN JOY.

EVEN WHEN THINGS ARE BAD AND MAY NOT BE GOING YOUR WAY, YOU CAN STILL HAVE JOY.

“WEEPING ENDURETH FOR A NIGHT, BUT *JOY* COMETH IN THE MORNING.”

TRANSITION TO THE TEXT

IN THIS PERICAPE, EZRA THE PRIEST IS STANDING BEFORE THE JEWS, BOTH MALE AND FEMALE, WHO HAVE RETURNED FROM EXILE LED BY ZERUBBABEL.

WHEN THEY RETURN HOME THEY BEGIN THE PROCESS OF REBUILDING THE WALLS OF JERUSALEM, AND NOW IT IS FINISHED.

HOWEVER, THE PEOPLE ARE NOW GENERATIONS
REMOVED FROM THE WORD OF GOD.

THEY DON'T KNOW HOW TO READ ANY HEBREW. THEY
DON'T KNOW HOW TO PRONOUNCE THE WORDS ANYMORE.

EZRA IS ONE OF THE FEW FOLK LEFT WHO CAN READ,
UNDERSTAND AND PROCLAIM THE WORD OF GOD.

THE BIBLE SAYS THAT EZRA STANDS BEHIND WHAT THE
BIBLE CALLS A PULPIT AND WE WOULD CALL A LECTERN,
MADE OF WOOD AND THE CONGREGATION STOOD AT THE
READING OF THE WORD OF GOD.

THEY GATHER TOGETHER TO HEAR WHAT GOD HAS TO
SAY IN THE WORD OF GOD.

I NEED TO SAY THAT WE CAN GET RID OF SOME THINGS IN
THE CHURCH – BUT WE STILL NEED TO HEAR THE WORD
OF GOD.

WE CAN CHANGE THE ORDER OF WORSHIP, COLORS OF
UNIFORMS, HOURS OF WORSHIP, BUT WE STILL NEED TO
HEAR THE WORD OF GOD.

GOD WILL SEND HIS WORD AND HE ALWAYS EQUIPS
SOMEBODY TO PROCLAIM THE WORD OF THE LORD.

FAITH COMETH BY HEARING AND HEARING COMES BY THE
WORD OF GOD!

THE REASON WHY SOME PEOPLE *DON'T* HAVE JOY IS
BECAUSE THEY *REFUSE* TO CONNECT-TO-THE-WORD OF
GOD!

THEY HARDEN THEIR HEARTS, THEY LOOK FOR A
LOOPHOLE, THEY SEARCH FOR EXCUSE, THEY THINK THE
PREACHER'S '*PICKING-ON-THEM*' ,

THEY REFUSE TO BE TAUGHT - IF YOU'RE IN NEED OF JOY, YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO CONNECT TO THE WORD OF GOD!

E.M. BOUNDS SAID THAT "WE CANNOT MAKE TOO MUCH OF THE WORD OF GOD."

THESE MEN AND WOMEN CLAMORED AROUND EZRA TO HEAR WHAT THE LORD HAD TO SAY.

THEY WERE EXCITED TO HEAR WHAT THE WORD HAD TO SAY.

MY PRAYER FOR THE ABYSSINIAN BAPTIST CHURCH IS "LORD, GIVE US SOME PEOPLE WHO ARE HUNGRY AND THIRSTY FOR THE WORD OF GOD! LORD, GIVE US SOME PEOPLE WHO ARE EXCITED ABOUT THE WORD OF GOD!"

WHEN YOU GET THE WORD OF GOD IN YOUR HEART, IT WILL CHANGE YOU, YOUR WAYS AND YOUR ATTITUDE.

ALLOW ME TO TESTIFY: THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE PERRY SIMMONS THAT YOU SEE TODAY THAN THE PERRY SIMMONS WHO DIDN'T LOVE THE LORD'S WORD.

THE OLD ME COULDN'T CARE ABOUT SCRIPTURE.

THE OLD ME DIDN'T WORRY ABOUT SUNDAY SCHOOL.

THE OLD ME DIDN'T SAY AMEN DURING THE WORSHIP SERVICE.

THE OLD ME FOUND FAULT IN EVERYBODY ELSE.

WHEN THE LORD'S WORD *GOT INTO MY HEART*.

WHEN I STOPPED FIGHTING WHAT THE LORD WAS TRYING TO DO IN MY LIFE.

WHEN I LAID DOWN MY EXCUSES AND WHEN I STOPPED TRYING TO FIND A LOOPHOLE - THAT'S WHEN I RECEIVED JOY - BECAUSE HIS WORD WAS IN MY HEART!

EZRA OPENED THE BOOK TO READ. DR. WARREN WIERSBE SAYS, "EVERY TIME THE BIBLE IS OPEN, GOD'S MOUTH IS OPEN."

GOD'S WORD WAS CHANGING SOMEBODY. IS THERE A WITNESS HERE?

GOD WORD WILL HIT YOU WHERE YOU LIVE, PICK YOU UP WHEN YOU'RE DOWN, PROPEL YOU WHEN YOU FALL BEHIND, GIVE YOU PEACE IN A STORM, HELP IN A TIME OF TROUBLE, REASSURANCE AFTER BEING REPOSSESSED, POWER WHEN YOU'RE WEAK, GIVE HOPE WHEN YOU'RE LOST, COMFORT WHEN YOU'RE ALONE, LOVE WHEN YOU'RE LONELY, GIVE CLARITY WHEN YOU'RE CONFUSED, AND MOST OF ALL HIS WORD . . . WILL GIVE YOU JOY!

WHEN EZRA READ THE WORD AND GAVE THE SENSE OR THE MEANING OF WHAT GOD WAS SAYING TO THE PEOPLE, THEY UNDERSTOOD THE WORD FOR THEMSELVES.

ONE OF THE MOST *SATISFYING* THINGS TO SEE AS A PASTOR IS WHEN THE PEOPLE UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'RE PREACHING AND APPLY THE WORD FOR THEMSELVES.

I KNOW WE HAVE A HABIT OF SAYING "PASTOR I ENJOYED THE MESSAGE" BUT I'D RATHER HEAR YOU SAY "PASTOR, I UNDERSTOOD THE MESSAGE AND I'M GOING TO DO BETTER."

AFTER THE READING, THE HEARING AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD, NEHEMIAH THE 'TIRSHATHA' WHICH MEANS HE WAS THE 'GOVERNOR' OF JUDEA, EZRA THE PRIEST, AND THE LEVITES DECLARED THAT "THIS DAY IS HOLY UNTO THE LORD YOUR GOD; MOURN NOT, NOR WEEP."

BUT THE PEOPLE COULDN'T HELP THEMSELVES BECAUSE OF THEIR JOY OVER HEARING THE WORD FOR THE FIRST TIME EITHER IN THEIR LIFETIMES OR IN A VERY LONG TIME!

I HAVE A FRIEND IN GEORGIA WHO EVERY TIME HE PREACHES THE WORD A TEAR RUNS DOWN HIS FACE.

PEOPLE MADE SOME BAD COMMENTS ABOUT IT AND HE TOLD ME HE DOESN'T PAY THOSE PEOPLE ANY ATTENTION.

I ASKED HIM WHY AND HE SAID THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT THE LORD HAS DONE FOR ME!

GOD'S WORD WILL GIVE YOU JOY!

THE PEOPLE WERE TOLD TO GO THEIR WAY, EAT THE FAT, AND DRINK THE WINE, AND SEND PORTIONS UNTO THEM FOR WHOM NOTHING IS PREPARED; FOR THIS DAY IS HOLY UNTO THE LORD. NEITHER BE YE SORRY, FOR THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH.

LISTEN, GOD'S WORD WILL GIVE YOU JOY. JOY SHOULD CAUSE YOU TO CELEBRATE! CELEBRATION OUGHT TO LEAD TO SERVICE!

NOTICE THAT THEY WERE TOLD TO GO THEIR WAY, EAT THE FAT, DRINK THE WINE AND THEN DO SOMETHING FOR SOMEBODY ELSE!

I'VE DISCOVERED THAT MANY OF US KNOW HOW TO GO OUR WAY, EAT THE FAT, DRINK THE WINE – BUT WE *DON'T WANT* TO SERVE OR DO *ANYTHING* FOR *ANYBODY ELSE*.

JOY WILL BE THE MOTIVATOR FOR YOUR SERVICE!

IF YOU HAVE JOY IN YOUR HEART, YOU ARE CHARGED BY THE LORD TO SERVE SOMEBODY ELSE.

YOU CANNOT SERVE BY BEING *MAD, GRUMPY* AND *DISENCHANTED*.

YOU CANNOT REPRESENT GOD WITH YOUR FACE ALL *FROWNED UP*.

THEY WENT OUT AND SENT OUT PORTIONS TO OTHER PEOPLE !

THE JOY OF THE LORD GAVE THEM THE STRENGTH TO CELEBRATE, STRENGTH TO SERVE, THE STRENGTH TO ENDURE, THE STRENGTH TO PREPARE, THE STRENGTH TO DELIVER WHAT WAS DECLARED UNTO THEM.

CONCLUSION

I'M CLOSING HERE, BUT I ASK YOU ABYSSINIAN BAPTIST CHURCH, DO YOU HAVE JOY????

DON'T FOOL ME HERE, DO YOU HAVE JOY? JOY UNSPEAKABLE JOY!

I'M NOT GOING TO BE A *CHURCH GROUCH!*

I'M NOT GOING TO BE A *PREACHER GROUCH!*
I'M GOING TO HAVE JOY EVEN WHEN I'M SAD.

I'M GOING TO HAVE JOY EVEN WHEN THE STORM RISES!

I'M GOING TO HAVE JOY EVEN WHEN I'M NOT UNDERSTOOD!

I'M GOING TO HAVE JOY BECAUSE JESUS DIED ON A CROSS!

I'M GOING TO HAVE JOY BECAUSE HE WAS BURIED IN A BORROWED TOMB!

I'M GOING TO HAVE JOY BECAUSE HE GOT UP WITH ALL

POWER IN HIS HAND!

IF YOU DON'T WANT TO BE JOYFUL, DON'T HINDER ME!

IF YOU DON'T WANT TO PRAISE HIM, DON'T BOTHER ME!

IF YOU DON'T WANT TO THANK HIM, DON'T TALK ABOUT ME!

I'VE GOT JOY ...

ANYBODY HERE GOT JOY?

