

'The Joy of the Lord Is Your Stronghold

by John Piper

This sermon delves into the theme of 'serious joy' in the midst of a groaning world, emphasizing the simultaneous experience of joy, reverence, and groaning as Christians. It highlights the centrality of joy in God's being, purpose, and Christian living, rooted in the eternal joy within the Trinity. The message explores Nehemiah 8:10, revealing that the 'joy of the Lord' refers to our joy in the Lord as a stronghold and refuge against sin and guilt, leading to great rejoicing and understanding of God's mercy and grace.

Scripture: Isaiah 35:10, Psalms 16:11, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Philippians 4:4, John 6:35, 2 Corinthians 8:2, Psalms 37:4, Isaiah 55:12

Topics: "Serious Joy", "God's Mercy and Grace"

Description

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Transcript

My title is The Joy of the Lord is Your Stronghold, Nehemiah 8.10. And before we get there, for the next little while, I want to make some comments about the theme of our conference. Serious joy, gladness, and gravity in a groaning world. Serious joy.

This is a conference about joy. Serious joy, a kind of joy that you, as a Christian, experience simultaneously with weighty reverence, we call gravity. And simultaneously with painful groaning for sin, for brokenness, for futility in this world.

So not just sequentially, first groaning, then joy, but simultaneously. We call it serious joy. In fact, we define what we do at Bethlehem College and Seminary as an education in serious joy.

We call it serious joy because not only is it something we experience simultaneously with sorrow and pain and weightiness, but also because it is central, that is centrally important. It's not the negligible caboose at the end of the train. It is the fuel being shoveled into the engine of life.

It is central to God's very being. It is central to God's ultimate purpose. It is central to all Christian living.

Let me take those one at a time to up the ante on the meaning of the word serious. Central to God's very being. God has always existed.

He never came into being. He is never becoming. He said, I am who I am.

He is absolute reality. All other reality comes from Him. All other reality gets its meaning through Him.

He has always existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son.

So He switches categories from Word to Son. We beheld His only Son, only begotten from the Father, and His glory, and His grace, and His truth. So the Word is the Son.

In the beginning was the Son, and the Son was with God, and the Son was God. Co-eternal with the Father, begotten, eternally not made. In the beginning was the Son and the Father.

And when the Son came into the world and was incarnate among us, the Father did not leave us in doubt as to how He felt about that and about His Son. He said, this is my loved Son with whom I am well pleased. The Father is very pleased with the Son.

He takes pleasure in the Son. He delights in the Son. Isaiah 42, behold my chosen in whom my soul delights.

That delight of the Father in the Son did not come into being at the incarnation. God's joy in the Son did not originate, ever. It never had a beginning, as if there were a time when the Son of God was not His Father's delight.

Therefore, joy belongs to the being of God. Now, I don't have the philosophical horsepower to make fine distinctions between nature and essence and simple and complex. Here's all I mean by that remarkable statement.

I mean, if God the Father has not always delighted in God the Son, that is, if God has not always been a joyful God, then the Christian God does not exist. Joy in the fellowship of the Trinity is part of what it means to be God. Therefore, I say to you, this is serious.

This is serious joy. It's serious, not only because it belongs to the very being of God, it is serious because it is part of His ultimate purpose in creating the world. Last night at the installation of President Rigney, I referred to Isaiah 55, and I'm going to go there again for just a few minutes, because few texts, for me, freshly capture what I mean by saying God's ultimate purpose involves His joy and our joy.

So here's the text. First, a verse from Isaiah 35, and then two verses from Isaiah 55. The ransomed of the Lord, mark that, that's us.

The ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads, like a crown. They shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Now shifting to Isaiah 55. For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace. The mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the fields shall clap their hands.

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress. Instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle, and it shall be a name for the Lord. An everlasting sign that shall never be cut off.

So that's where creation is heading. This is the ultimate purpose of God in creation. A Christ ransomed people with everlasting joy crowning their head.

Sorrow and sighing flying away. Creation transformed. Trees applauding the work of God.

Joy is the ultimate purpose of God in creation. Now since this is so serious, we have to stop there and say, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. The glory of God, excuse me.

It's so serious that we need to be careful. Was I careful? In saying that the joy of the ransomed is the ultimate purpose of God in creation. The way to be careful about this is to attend to that last verse 13 in Isaiah 55.

Let me read it again to you. So after all that he had just said, he says, and it shall be or it shall make a name for the Lord. Or it shall be a name for the Lord.

And then an everlasting sign. And we need to ask what is it referred to? And it refers to what he had just said. It refers to the everlasting joy that is crowning the heads of his ransomed people.

It refers to the mountains singing and the trees applauding the work of God. This is the name of the Lord. This shall be a name for the Lord.

This shall be a sign of the kind of God that he's like. His name, his chosen reputation, his glory is I make my ransomed people glad forever in my grace. That's my name.

My glory is their great gladness in me. And from that, we deduce at Bethlehem College and Seminary, the Christian hedonist foundational statement, God is most glorified in his Christ ransomed people when his Christ ransomed people are most satisfied in him. If you remove satisfaction in God from the hearts of God's people, we cannot magnify his worth the way we ought to.

Essential to God's name, essential to the final manifestation of God's glory is the crown of everlasting joy resting on the heads of the redeemed followed by the clapping trees and the singing mountains. If you remove the crown of joy from the heads of God's people, God's purpose to glorify himself in the new creation aborts. It will only shine the way it ought to, the way it's destined to when its greatness and beauty and worth are reflected in the God-centered gladness of the redeemed.

It is, brothers, serious joy. Third, it's not only serious because it's central to the being of God and central to the purpose of God, it is central to all God-glorifying Christian living. Central.

One of the most comprehensive statements in the Bible regarding Christian living is 1 Corinthians 10:31. Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Now, if it's true that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him, then eating and drinking and everything else that we do should flow from a heart that has found its ultimate satisfaction in God. That's serious.

This is why the commands and the promises of Scripture concerning joy in God are so relentless. A few to illustrate. Rejoice in the Lord always.

And again, I say rejoice, Philippians 4. Delight yourself in the Lord, Psalm 37. Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, Psalm 32. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, Psalm 90.

In your presence is fullness of joy. At your right hand are pleasures forevermore, Psalm 16. Whoever comes to me shall never hunger.

Whoever believes in me shall never thirst, John 6. A Christian is a person who by sovereign grace has found this treasure hidden in a field and then with life-controlling joy has sold everything and bought the field. Or to use the words of Jesus, whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Jesus has become the supreme treasure of our life. The end of our quest. The end of our quest for the greatest and longest satisfaction of our souls.

That quest is over. It's over. And we're home.

And that affects everything we do. It humbles us. It breaks us.

It satisfies us. It frees us. It overflows.

It's a restless joy. Restless. It grows by drawing others into its sway so that our joy in God is increased by their shared joy in God.

And we're restless for more of that to happen. That restlessness is called love. Listen to one of my favorite verses to describe the horizontal dimension of Christian hedonism.

Paul says concerning the Macedonians in 2 Corinthians 8-2, in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty. So now get the picture. Severe affliction.

Poverty not removed. And in the middle, explosive joy. It's not prosperity gospel.

It's exactly the opposite. Still poor. Still persecuted.

Bursting with joy. And what happens? You can see why this is one of my favorite verses. In a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity for the poor saints in Jerusalem.

That's the goal of my life is to help people experience that. I know if we're not a loving people, people will not glorify our Father who's in heaven. And if that verse is right, my passion to make you happy in God is the most important thing in the world for me.

Love is the restless overflow of joy in God that meets the needs of others. This is what we mean by serious joy. Central to the being of God.

Central to the purpose of God. Central to Christian living. One more clarification.

I am going to get to Nehemiah. But I just admit half my sermon is introduction because I just love talking about this. I'm going to put this at the front of every message anyway.

At least at this conference. One more clarification. Joy.

What's that? You got a definition, Piper? You're a definition guy. Yes, I do. Here's my definition of the kind of joy, serious joy I'm talking about.

Not talking about the way everybody else uses it. Just let me define my term and take it on my terms. And we can argue about whether it's a good way to define it.

But it's mine. Joy is a good feeling in the soul produced by the Holy Spirit as He makes us see and savor the glory of Christ in the word and in the world. That's my definition.

So it's rooted in Christ and all that God is for us in Him. It's a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit. You cannot produce this.

This is a gift. Its organ, so to speak, is the soul, not the body, not the brain or the reason, though the body and the reason are affected by it. And it is a feeling.

It's a good feeling. Now, I admit that trying to find adequate words for heart realities is very difficult. And I invite your help.

If you don't like mine, come on in. If you don't like the word feeling, for example, too superficial, no, no, no, don't use that word. If you don't like the word feeling, try sense, emotion, affection, sentiment, taste, passion, liking, mood.

You like those better? Maybe. And if you don't like the word good, like good feeling, well, try pleasant, congenial, delightful, agreeable, comforting, satisfying, amiable, 18th century, sweet, happy, likable, glad, positive. All language in the end is inadequate to carry the fullness of experienced heart reality.

That's why poetry exists. That's why music exists. That's why hugging exists.

That's why kisses exist. That's why tears exist. That's why tones of voice exist.

That's why sacrificial behavior exists. Language is so utterly inadequate to capture it all. And we all long to communicate what our hearts are experiencing.

I wanna know what Noel feels about me. I want her to know what I feel about her and words, what are they? So I admit the problem. If you don't like it, join the club.

That's all we've got is words when it comes to a conference like this. Well, that's not quite true, is it? You can hug each other if you would like. I hope you do.

How does the Bible deal with the inadequacy of language? The Bible does not despair, wouldn't be a book if it despaired. God believed in this, made it. The Bible handles the inadequacy of language about our hearts feeling, our good feeling in God, our good feeling about God, our joy about God.

It handles it by multiplying diversities of words for the same reality. For example, joy in the Lord, Isaiah 29. Delight in the fear of the Lord, Isaiah 11.

Pleasures in the presence of the Lord, Psalm 16. Gladness in the Lord, Psalm 32. Exaltation in the Lord, Psalm 61.

Desire for the Lord, Isaiah 26. Tasting the goodness of the Lord, 1 Peter 3. Two, longing for the word of the Lord. Happiness in keeping the instruction of the Lord.

Contentment in the Lord, Philippians 4. Treasuring the words of the Lord, Job 23. Being satisfied in the love of the Lord. I consulted one article on joy in Isby and read that there are 27 different Hebrew words translated joy or some joy-like word in worship.

So our focus when we speak of serious joy is not primarily on a word. It's on a reality. And serious joy is just the best we can do.

So far. And if you can do better for your people, do it. Do it for goodness sake, do it.

Find language in your preaching for the sake of your people to taste and see that the Lord is good. Nehemiah chapter 8, verse 10. Please open your Bibles or your phones and I wanna show you some things.

I was surprised. I was asked to preach on this text. Happy to do it.

Never preached on this text before. Couldn't believe that. And I fully had in my mind what I was gonna say.

That's a bad idea for an exegete, right? But I wasn't surprised maybe in the way you think I'm going to say I was surprised. So let me show you the context first. The people of Israel have returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity.

Ezra the priest, Nehemiah the governor have completed and rebuilt the temple and the walls. Nehemiah 8 begins with the first day of the seventh month according to verse 2 of chapter 8 which according to Leviticus 23, 24 is the feast of trumpets. According to verse 1, the people asked Ezra to read to them from the book of Moses.

And verse 3 says, he read from the book facing the square before the water gate from early morning until midday. And then according to verse 6, the response of the people was the people answered, amen, amen, lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

Verse 8 says, the Levites joined in with Ezra and they read from the book, from the law of God clearly and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading. But I'm going to argue perhaps not entirely. Now I'm going to read very carefully and slowly verses 9, 10, 11, and 12.

Follow with me. And as I read, look for this. Look for the weeping and ask yourself, what are they weeping about? What kind of weeping is this? Second, look for the kind of holy day this is.

Look for the joy of the Lord and how those three things relate to each other. Verse 9, and Nehemiah who was the governor and Ezra the priest and the 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 as they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, go your way, eat the fat, drink sweet wine, send portions to anyone who has nothing ready. For this day is holy to the Lord, to our Lord.

Do not be grieved. For the joy of the Lord is your strength or stronghold. We'll come back to that.

So the Levites calmed all the people saying, be quiet. This day is holy. Don't be grieved.

And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions like to the poor and to make great rejoicing because they had understood the words that had originally made them cry that were declared to them. So three times Nehemiah and Ezra and the Levites said, verse nine, this day is holy to the Lord. Verse 10, this day is holy to the Lord.

Verse 11, this day is holy. Three times. And every single time they make that fact a ground for not crying or grieving.

Verse nine, this day is holy. Do not mourn or weep. Verse 10, do not be grieved.

This day is holy. Verse 11, this day is holy. Do not be grieved.

So they had, according to verse eight, they had understood something when the law was read and they were all weeping. It says they understood and they're all weeping. But in verse 12, it says, they stopped weeping and went on their way with great rejoicing because they understood what was said to them.

What kind of weeping was that? You might say, oh, this is not a problem. There's no tension here because this is happy weeping. We cry when we're happy.

No, no, no, no, that doesn't work because two times the weeping is called grieving. This is not the weeping of happiness. This is the weeping of grief.

So holiness had produced weeping and now the argument is, this is a holy day, stop weeping. A holy response to the holiness of the merciful God of Israel is not simply weeping, cannot be. Three times they were told, stop this, stop this.

There's more in responding to the holy God than weeping, so stop. What did the Levites and Ezra suggest that they put in the place of weeping? Verse 10, go your way, eat the fat, drink sweet wine, send portions to anyone who has nothing ready. Or again, verse 12, and all the people went their way to eat and drink and send portions and making great rejoicing because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

So now their understanding is not producing weeping, it's producing great rejoicing. And then the third, that was two, that was verse nine, I mean 10 and verse 12, put in the place of grieving, going your way and rejoicing. Now here's the third way in verse 10, second half of the verse, do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength or your stronghold.

So now I wonder if you would make the decision I have made exegetically and say, the term joy of the Lord, therefore, does not refer to the Lord's joy, but to our joy in the Lord. If you just hear in isolation, the joy of the Lord is your strength, you might think that's God's joy in us or in himself. Or you might think it's, no, the joy he gives is not the joy he is.

I think those three parallel statements make it clear that the author of this book intends for us to understand the joy of the Lord as our joy in the Lord, not the other way around. Verse nine and 10, I'm just gonna list them so you can hear the force of the parallel. Don't, this is verse nine and 10, don't weep.

Go rejoice with feasting. Okay, verse 12, 11 and 12, don't be grieved. And they went and they rejoiced with feasting.

Verse 10, don't be grieved. The joy of the Lord is your strength. See the parallels, boom, boom, boom.

You can't take that third one, I don't think, and make it mean something totally different than the first two. The joy of the Lord is the rejoicing that replaces the grieving in all three of those parallels. There's no warrant in this text at all, as far as I can see, to take joy of the Lord to refer to God's joy in us.

And oh, would that be a wonderful sermon to preach. Just the wrong text. Zephaniah three, the Lord will rejoice over you with gladness.

Isaiah 62, as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so God will rejoice over you. Jeremiah 32, I will rejoice in doing good to my people. Deuteronomy 30, the Lord will take delight in prospering you.

Psalms 147, the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him. That's a sermon, it's just not this text. That's the sermon I thought I might get to preach.

And I got into it, and I thought, can't do it. Even though I could name some commentaries, I could name one that took it that way. And you know what? Little parenthesis here about commentaries.

If they don't give you arguments, don't pay attention. Not a single argument in that commentary for that viewpoint. It just asserted it.

I thought, I need an argument. I can't just take your word for it. So I'm not gonna preach that message till next year, maybe.

Joe, give me another chance. That was no surprise. I always thought, and I asked Noelle last night, what she thought, I said, joy of the Lord is your strength.

God's joy or our joy? And she said, I think everybody takes it as our joy. I said, right, me too. And I think so does Nehemiah and Ezra and the Levites.

That wasn't a surprise for me. I expected joy of the Lord be that, even though I wished I could preach on God's joy. What was a surprise was the word strength and its meaning in Hebrew.

Virtually all modern English translations, translate this verse, the joy of the Lord is your strength. I love that. I believe that's what it meant for 75 years, or whenever I started thinking about these things.

The problem is, as I was, I mean, before I even read the Hebrew, I'm just looking through commentaries to see what they think. And none of them even consider the meaning strength. None of them that I looked up, every commentary I looked at just assumed is stronghold or refuge or protection or fortress.

What's with the translations and the commentators? Total agreement on translating strength, total agreement on interpreting stronghold. They're not even reading the same book, it seems like. So I had to do, I mean, what would you do? Are you going to preach on this next Sunday? What would you do? You got your English versions and you got all the commentaries against the English versions.

What would you do? Well, here's what you do. Even if you don't know Hebrew, you try to figure out how to do this word study, right? You'd go into some interlinear and you'd find what the Hebrew word is behind this. And it's *maoz*, *maoz*.

Okay, do a little, you know, log off, you click, search all the Hebrew and bang, 37 uses come up. You read them all. Yes, you do, you read them all.

You trust dictionaries. Dictionaries just do what you do, do it. So you read every one of the examples and what you find, what Piper found is 37 uses of maoz and 14 of them are translated in the ESV stronghold.

Seven of them in the ESV are translated refuge. Seven times in the ESV translated fortress. And one lonely time is it translated strength.

Here, I have no idea why. Now I was working on this sermon yesterday and therefore I didn't have time to call up those guys I know on the ESV translation committee. You know, call up Wayne Grudem or call up Justin or call up Elaine or say, what's with this? And I may have to do that.

I mean, I will do that. Though they're committed not to revising this but every 25 years. So, and that's a good policy, I think.

In case you wonder, what about the Septuagint? The Greek translation, what'd they do? And they left out the term, the joy of the Lord and use the word strength. Oh, I don't know. I really don't know.

But I'm not gonna let 10 English translations sway me. I've seen the light. The Hebrew, 37 uses and this is the only one translated strength.

So I ask this, are there any contextual constraints that would compel a normal use of the word strength over against 36 uses otherwise? And the answer is no, which leads to a positive interpretation. So this is what you do. This is what you do.

You wanna preach a sermon, the text will let you preach a sermon. You gotta figure out what you can preach. And if it's God's word, it's a better sermon than you will go to preach.

Is there warrant for translating it as strength instead of stronghold? And my answer is no. So here's the question. What are the people weeping about? What are they grieving over? It all comes out in chapter nine, right? This beautiful, painful prayer confessing hundreds of years of failure and God's faithfulness.

Here's verse 33 of chapter nine. Yet you, oh Lord, have been righteous in all that has come upon us. For you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.

That's their grief. That's why they were crying. Their guilt, their fear.

And the answer that Nehemiah 8, 10 gives is there's a refuge, there's protection. That's the flow. There's a fortress here.

There's protection against what grieves you, your sin and God's holy judgment. And what is that protection? It's the joy you have in the Lord. So replace your grieving with that joy.

Come into the refuge from sin and guilt and wrath by leaving behind your grieving and come into joy in me. Come into the stronghold, come into the refuge for the joy of the Lord is your protection. It's your refuge, it's your stronghold.

Joy in God, your savior is your refuge. That's what the people at first did not understand. In verse eight, when they understood and all they did was cry, they got it right partially, right? But not completely because it says in verse 12, the people went on their way to eat and drink and send portions and to make great rejoicing because they had understood.

We understand something now. We have a refuge. We have a stronghold against all of those fears, all that grief and failure.

The light was dawning. You can't honor Yahweh as holy if you only grieve in His presence. How much grief there is for sin, you can't honor Him if you only grieve for your sin.

Grief is good. Fear is good. Penitence is good.

Tears are good. But not if that's all you feel. God's holiness is the purity and perfection not only of His justice, but also of His mercy and His grace.

Towering people do not magnify the glory of grace. The fear of God without joy in God is no refuge from the wrath of God. Now, the reason I feel warranted in saying it like that is because He already clued us in in chapter 1 verse 11 that that's true.

Let me read that to you. So remember, Nehemiah was praying because he had to approach the king and he was afraid if the king does not like my idea, I'll lose my job, maybe my life. So he's pleading with God before he walks in to the king to say, I want to go to Jerusalem.

And this is what he says, how he prays. 1-11, O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name and grant him mercy in the sight of the king. In other words, the mercy of God is found in the stronghold of reverential delight.

Isn't that what that says? For mercy, give heed to how much we delight to fear your name and bestow mercy upon us. The joy of the Lord is your stronghold and your refuge. So let's picture it this way as we come toward the end.

On this side of the cross now, the righteous judgment of God looms over the world. It's John 3, 36. There's righteous wrath abiding, resting upon the world.

God has built a refuge. He's built a refuge, a stronghold of safety namely forgiveness, love, acceptance, perfect personal friendship with him forever, pleasures at his right hand forevermore. This is a great house in which to live and be safe and happy forever with him.

All of it purchased by Christ once for all. That's the refuge. God prepared it.

He built it. It's objective. It's purchased.

It's secure. It's complete. It's forever, everlasting.

The refuge is of infinite value and God offers it to everybody without distinction, freely, without payment. But he does not offer it to joyless grieving. He does not offer it to joyless weeping.

He does not offer it to joyless fearing. He offers it to glad receiving. God gives his blood-bought refuge to those who see Christ as their treasure and find him to be more precious than anything.

In this way, the stronghold of mercy that God built becomes ours. So objectively in God's building through the work of Christ, there's this house of safety. And subjectively, the question is, how do we enjoy that? And the answer of Nehemiah is enjoy that.

Pastors, we have a glorious calling. You have a glorious calling. This is what you offer your people every week, in every meeting, in every board meeting, in every counseling session.

Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1.24, we are workers with you for your joy. We are workers with you for your joy. Or in Philippians 1.25, I will remain with you for the joy of your faith.

That's why I'm staying on the planet, the joy of your faith. This is a magnificent calling to take the word of God and then so to preach it, and so to teach it, and so to lead with it, and so to live by it, that your people come to see all that God is for them as their supreme treasure, their greatest joy, a place of perfect refuge, both in life and in death. So brothers, give yourself to this, the glory of God in the gladness of your people in God.

This is a strong refuge. Let's pray. Father in heaven, I thank you that you have built for us a safe place against the fearful, grievous sins that we've committed and wrath that you justly feel toward us without your son.

You have built a house, and I am so thankful that what you call us to experience in order to be in that house and have its benefits forever is the joy of the Lord. Would you awaken in us that joy, and would you make us ministers of that joy for our people, I pray in Jesus' name.

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