

Final exams are just about done, if not already. School assignments are finishing up. Work is probably slowing down as people put the finishing touches on projects they want complete before the end of the year. Parties get planned and hosted. Decorations go up and get put in place. It's kind of the season of finishing and completing. And when things are done, completed, and wrapped up there is a strong sense of joy.

Joy came for the Israelites every year at harvest time. The long growing season drew to a close. The last great push of work was needed. Harvesting was a good deal of work, but once it was complete it gave the feeling of accomplishment and joy. Joy that for another year they would have food. Joy that emptying cupboards would once again be filled. Those were reasons for great joy.

God wanted them feeling that joy, but for a different reason. If they had joy because of their accomplishments it was misplaced. They hadn't made the seeds to plant. They hadn't caused those seeds to grow. They hadn't brought the sunshine and rain at just the right time. When their bellies were filled and the harvest done they still didn't have accomplishments to find joy in. Joy would have to be found somewhere else.

In the first lesson, as the Israelites got to the harvest season, they were also joyful about something else. For seventy years Jerusalem had been empty, completely destroyed, while the people were in exile. They returned to rubble and no safe place to live. Rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem started. After lengthy delays Nehemiah led them to rebuild the wall in fifty two days. Finally finished it was a reason to be joyful. At the celebration their religious leaders started reading the Word of the Lord to them. Soon the people's joy faded. They understood it quite well. That was the problem. No harvest, no wall, no renewed sense of Israelite pride could overcome what God was saying. How could they have joy? They wept as they listened to the condemning words of God from his law tell them how they missed the mark. They weren't what God expected them to be. They were sinful and opposed to him. Joy was gone.

You understand what you read in the Bible. Understanding is a mixed blessing. What the Bible says isn't always so pleasant to hear. In fact maybe you're like me and all too easily you compare God's expectations with your own life. Reality strikes any joy. God isn't happy with me. God demands perfection and I don't measure up. You and I miss the mark and do things that God tells us not to do and then don't do things he tells us to do. His Word declares us sinful and unworthy. We should be joyless.

If you're like me your conscience might be sensitive. When you do something wrong before God, something sinful, you feel it. Sometimes for a long time. The grief over having sinned again leads to guilt. And the guilt is hard to get rid of. The guilt even becomes a way of life. It's always there, something you just can't shake. Satan looks to push us further into guilt by trying to rob us of joy. Then instead of joy we feel guilt. Then guilty for not feeling joyful. I'm sinful. I don't deserve forgiveness. I am not worthy. I'll never be happy. I feel so ashamed. I'm so guilty, what can I do? Any joy we may have had because we understood God's Word quickly evaporates. You and I never find joy our own way. Never.

As the Israelites listened to the Word of God it wasn't an appropriate time for weeping or mourning. **"This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep. For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Lord."** How could they push out the sadness? How could they dry the tears they rightly shed for breaking God's commands? If it wasn't the time for crying, grieving, or guilt, what was it? The day was sacred, it was set aside for God. They needed to be still. It was a day for understanding the Word of the Lord. That was to be their joy. Understanding the Word meant they saw and remembered all the things God had done for them. He supplied them and strengthened them to rebuild the wall. He arranged for their safety. He freed them to return to their land. God was good to them. He demonstrated his love for them. In that they found joy.

You want joy? You want to push out the guilt and the sadness? **"Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."** Still your minds, your grieving hearts, and your guilty consciences. Still them as you understand the Word of God. There God gives you and me joy. God shows you what he's done, right now preparing you as you watch for Christ to come. Christ comes in a manger, God with full power and majesty, all wrapped up in a tiny package of a baby. The Word made flesh gives us our greatest joy. God's planned rescue is beginning. The promises are coming true. The good news is that Jesus already came once, he was born, he lived, he died, and he rose again. Praise him because it's understandable. We grasp it all by faith and apply it with joy to our lives. Jesus means I have joy in sins forgiven and guilt gone. Joy in understanding God's Word. The joy of the Lord is your strength!

First birthday parties are fun. Everyone wants the baby to smile and do something. Usually they don't. Put the presents in front of the baby and the baby can't open them. Put the cake in front of the baby, and that's the big moment everyone has their camera out for. Surely the baby will grab the cake and smash it into their face. Surely a big mess is coming, something funny. Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Even more surprising would be if after the party the parents said, alright that was it for birthdays. We won't celebrate, count, or recognize anymore. Just as surprising would be the reaction of the Israelites after hearing the Word of God. Would they stop? Would they continue to learn and understand further?

The joy of the Israelites carried over to the second day as they continued listening to more of the Word of the Lord. They heard about a long forgotten festival God gave Moses called the Feast of Booths. Every year at harvest time God instructed the people to make booths to live in for a week. These temporary shelters called to mind their travels through the desert after leaving Egypt centuries earlier when God provided everything for them. The booths also reminded them of God's providing love and the joy God gave them with the harvest. The people resolved to celebrate this festival. Their celebration was joyful. ***"And their joy was very great."*** Their joy continued not because of booths though. The weeklong festival gave them even more time to keep learning the Word of God.

Ongoing study of God's Word might seem tedious. Things move fast, there's always new technology, new jobs, new learning to move on to. Anything that seems to slow down or doesn't catch our attention or hold it in the first ten seconds is probably not worth our time. The Christmas story? Again? Can't we do it different? Can't we jazz it up a bit? We've studied the Bible before, why keep going? Isn't there something else we could talk about on Sundays, like steps to greater wealth, how to live healthier, or what does the Bible say in secret code?

You're here and that's reason to be joyful. It's not because we build booths, celebrate festivals, or even because of Christmas. We have joy as we hear and learn God's Word even more. Being in the Word regularly has benefits. God speaks to you about the promised Savior through people like John the Baptist. We learn we aren't worthy to tie the Savior's shoes, but in his love the Savior stoops down and gives himself for us anyway. He comes to our level and pulls us up to his. He serves us in love and in love gives us all good gifts. Feel the joy yet? The more you hear about Jesus the more joy you'll have. The more you interact with the stories of the Bible the more you'll want to hear more about God's love. Joy comes from knowing and believing in Jesus Christ. And knowing and believing only come through hearing God's Word. The joy of the Lord is your strength.

Remember where the joy of the people of Israel came from. ***"Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days."*** The harvest, safety of walls, and national pride all came and went. True joy came from studying the Word of God. If you want more joy don't look for it in things that come and go. Joy is found in God's Word. How can you find more time to study God's love letter? Maybe start today reading Luke's gospel for the Christmas season. Use the lessons to study devotionally all week long. Walk through the psalms. Memorize a favorite passage per week. Be regular in connecting to the Word made flesh. Identify times when you feel down. Fill those moments with words of Christ. The more we ponder Jesus the more attracted to his Word we'll be and want to get back to it often. **The joy of the Lord is your strength!**