

A Joy Stronger than Walls

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Date: 08 June 2025

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[0 : 0 0] Morning, everyone. Morning. Thank you, Emma, for reading that. In preparation for my sermon this morning, I did what any Gen Z-er would do, send a text to their friends.

! It wasn't just any text, it was a text with a question. And I asked my childhood friends, my friends from Hong Kong, those I knew from the UK, from different walks of life, this question. I asked them, where does your joy come from? Where do you find joy? Now, here are a summary of the responses I got.

Some said they found joy in spending time with those they love, family, friends. Others said the positive results of their actions. I have a friend of mine from the Royal Navy, he's here today as well, and he said he derived joy from leading a group of 40 individuals through Dartmoor.

Under the roughest conditions. And so that's where he derived his joy from. And of course, nature, doing what we love. There was one response that caught my eye, however.

[1 : 1 1] It was a rather poetic response, and I screenshotted that exact text from my friend. Where does he find joy? In the eyes of his mother as he is greeted.

And I thought, that's rather poetic. Quite a different person from the last time I saw him. And my suspicions were slightly justified because he admitted to being slightly... ..

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[5 : 2 6] !!!! he was even shorter. He was knee high. No, the wooden platform which the people themselves had constructed was a symbolic picture of how they placed God's word above everything else, elevating it physically as they did spiritually. And I think that's why they also stood up when the book was being opened in verse 5 and then in verse 6 where they lift their hands in praise and they bow down with their faces to the ground. For the people, the word of God had the highest authority. It was to be honored above anyone and everything else. That's what honoring the word of God looked like for the

Israelites and they gave the word their full attention and the highest authority. And so when I was reading this, it did certainly challenge me to reflect on how I had been honoring the word of God in my daily schedule. And for us, it might not look like this every day. Honoring the word of God might look something different. Maybe it's like starting the day with scripture where we reach out for our phones but we choose to give our first attention and our first priority to the scriptures instead. Maybe honoring God today looks like spending time in God's word during a busy schedule, studying the word, reading the word, hearing God speaking to us and giving him the authority over the decisions and the events of our lives. What does honoring God's word look like in our daily lives?

Do we give the word our great attention and the great authority it deserves? Not just on Sundays but daily. Now you might be thinking, well yes, honoring the word of God looks like that but how does any of this lead to joy? Well I think some of us might recall an incident that happened a few months ago with Heathrow where the airport experienced a significant power outage due to a fire at a nearby electrical substation. Thousands of flights were cancelled and about a quarter of a million passengers had their flights severely delayed or rerouted. So it led to this big question, why did

Europe's busiest airport have a single source of power? Now in a similar way, when we depend on something or someone for our joy or even ourselves for joy, we do rely on them to be our generator, our joy generator if you will. We will give them the attention and we will give them the authority over our lives. We basically honor them. So joy depends on them just as the airport depended on this power generator for its operations. So something happens to them just as it happened here. We feel the effects of it, good or bad.

But sadly, no matter how wonderful the things we derive joy from are, none of them last. The Bible tells us the grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever.

What's our main generator of joy? Our career maybe? Our achievements maybe? The people we know? What happens to this joy when sometimes people disappoint? When the things we love disappear?

[9 : 15] When we ourselves fail? You see, God never changes and he never takes back his word. He never fails. God and his word are our most stable, most reliable and strongest source of joy. A joy stronger than walls and more reliable than any power generator. So there's our first step in finding this great joy. It's when we honor the word of God. And how about when we understand the word of God? Well, in verse 7, as Emma's read, we were given a list of 13 names. And these 13 people in verse 7 are different to those listed previously in verse 4 because these 13 are said to be making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. It's quite similar to what happens here at Bethel, where there is the public reading of the word and then there is the preaching of the word, where preaching essentially is what the leaders are doing here. They're making the passage clear and helping us understand it so we can apply it in our own lives. But what's different here compared to what we do at Bethel is that upon understanding the word, the people in verse 9 weep, they mourn, they cry.

What's more, they seem to be told off by Ezra and the leaders at the end of verse 9. If we can read together, it says that this day is holy to the Lord your God, do not mourn or weep, the leaders say. Now this seems strange to us as modern readers because we see, first of all, the emotional reaction of the people, but we also see the seemingly cold response from the leaders. And I think context helps to get a better picture here because this day was holy, as we're told in this passage. It was the first day of the seventh month. It was the start of a series of festivals in the Jewish calendar, including the Day of Atonement and, as we'll read later, the Feast of Booths. It was an exciting time for the family. There were lots of food, there were drinks, there were singing and dancing, a bit like the church lunch we're having a bit later, except the singing and dancing is voluntary. It was a time to give thanks to God for his goodness and his faithfulness, thanking God for bringing their ancestors out from Egypt safely to the promised land. But you see, as the people remembered how faithful God had been to their ancestors, they remembered how unfaithful they had been to God. They wept as they started to understand the bad news.

The people had not kept God's laws and commands. They'd broken them. They'd ignored them. They'd done the very opposite of what they were told to do. But you see, despite what they'd done, God was still good to them. He had brought them back to Jerusalem. He had helped them rebuild the wall. He was still their God. And this was what the leaders were reminding the people of. The leaders weren't telling the people off for their tears. No, they were redirecting them to God, their source of joy. Let's read verse 12, where it tells us that all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food, and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

You see, the mourning of their sins, the weeping over the sins, opened the door to this immense joy found in God's forgiveness, love, and goodness. So when the people understood the word of God, they were filled with a great joy, a comforting joy, a strong joy, a joy stronger than walls.

[13 : 12] But how about obeying the word? Well, in the verse we've just read, we see that as soon as the people are told by the leaders to stop weeping, and instead rejoice, they obey. And so the first day ends in an act of obedience. The second day begins in verse 13. And as we read this pattern of honoring, understanding, obeying the word of God, repeats again. You see, in verse 13, the people first honor the word of God, where the heads of all the families gather to give attention to the words of the law. Then in verse 14, they understand that there was something they hadn't been doing, that they were commanded to live in these temporary booths or shelters for a week. That's why it was called the Feast of Booths. But they hadn't been doing that.

So in verse 16, they obey and they observe the Feast of Booths as commanded. And so they go out and they bring back branches and build temporary shelters or booths on their roofs, their courtyards, and so on.

By obeying and living in these tents as a family for a week, the people were again being reminded of how their ancestors lived during the wilderness, when their journey from Egypt to Canaan. And so they remembered again of how good and faithful God had been to them. And so they celebrated it.

And celebrating it as God had commanded them actually led them to have even greater joy, joy they hadn't experienced in ages. As we see, the end of verse 17 tells us, from the days of Joshua, son of Nun, until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this, and their joy was very great. Now, I have to be honest with you. It's always puzzled me how obedience and joy could be related. How can something like obedience, which springs to mind obligations, duties, everything boring, how can that possibly produce joy? Is that the same idea of obedience we have? It was certainly the idea I had when I was a child. Maybe it's dutifully carrying out orders from higher up. Maybe it's wearifully ticking off boxes just to say you've done it. Being painfully cautious to avoid disappointing the person you love when you get asked the dreaded question, have you done it? But if only we could be free from those obligations. Only if we could be free from all those restrictions. That's true joy, isn't it? When the only person we have to listen to and obey is us and what we want. [16:09] The truth is, the people found even greater joy when they obeyed God's word. See, just as you read at the end of verse 17, their joy was so much greater upon obeying. And this is why true freedom freedom isn't about having no restrictions in place. True freedom is when we have the right restrictions in place. And it's that freedom which brings us great joy. Luanga, one of my CU friends at Woking, responded to me in a perfect way that summarizes this. Joy is that feeling when you're doing something you were created to do. You see, just as a fish thrives in the sea and a glider flies freely in the air, or when a train runs swiftly on its tracks. Each is free, but only within the boundaries they were made for. You take a fish out of the sea and it stops moving. A train off its tracks and it becomes dangerous. As Tim Keller put it, the ultimate environment in which the human heart and soul soars is in the service of God is in the service of God. Rather than serving ourselves and obeying our desires, we we find greatest joy, as you read from this passage, in serving God, in obeying God. Because then we are doing what we were made to do. Because the God we serve, friends, is the God who created us. And he's the God who loves us. And he's the

God who knows everything about us more than we could possibly know about ourselves. Again, if I'm very honest, I struggle obeying God's word. Do you? In fact, I struggle with the first step. I don't always honor the word of God as I should. I know I should, but still I struggle. Do you? Too often I rely on the walls I've built for my joy, whether it's my abilities, my education, my background, my future, the people I know. I rely on them to bring me joy rather than relying in God for all my joy. And all this, knowing I'm not doing the right thing, far from bringing me joy, often does the opposite to us, doesn't it? It leaves us feeling guilty. It weighs us down.

It drains the joy right out of us. But just like the people whose weeping turned to great joy when their gaze turned to God, so too can our sorrow be transformed to joy when our eyes are lifted to Jesus. You see, friends, Jesus is the greatest proof that despite how many times we fail, God still delights to give us his joy.

[19:08] He still delights to give us his joy because he gave his greatest joy, his greatest joy of all, his son Jesus for us. The Word made flesh.

The Word incarnate. You see, what we have failed to do, Jesus has done. Jesus has honored. He's understood. He's obeyed his Father's will.

He did so his whole life. He honored, understood, and obeyed his Father even in such agony when he was crying and praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.

He honored, understood, and his Father even to the cross. Even as he hung on the cross. Even as he breathed his last.

But that wasn't his last breath. He lives. You see, Jesus lived the life we could never live and died the death we deserved, but he rose again so that we can be with him forever.

[20:13] And because of Jesus, we're gifted this joy rooted in not what we do or what we fail to do or what we can do, but in what Jesus has done for us.

And this, my friends, is the most liberating joy of all. A joy that outlasts everything. A joy that even outlasts death. This is the joy Jesus offers.

And this is the joy found in God's word. So coming back, the question we started off with, where do we find joy?

Where do you find joy? Is it in the walls we've built? The Israelites spent 52 days building their wall, and we might spend 52 years building our lives, our career, our reputation, but does any of it last? We may say we find joy in God and his word, but is he our main source? Is he our main power generator? Or is Jesus just a backup generator?

[21 : 22] Someone we only turn to and we run to when the power goes out, when everything else fails, when our walls collapse, you see, the joy found in God's word is the only joy that lasts forever. The only joy that's stable. The only joy that's stronger than any walls man can build. And this is the joy here revealed in God's word to us, friends.

This is the joy stronger than walls. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, Father, thank you for your rich, rich word.

Your word speaks to us today as it did thousands of years ago to the Israelites. And we have the great privilege of seeing the fulfillment of your word in your son, Jesus.

Lord, let our joy rest in you and your word. The people in this chapter only had the first five books of the Bible with them, and they were bursting with joy. Lord, we have the complete word of God, and we have it more available than they ever did.

[22 : 33] So thank you, Father. Thank you that your son, Jesus, lived the perfect life, died in our place, and rose for our sake so that we too can share in the same joy that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit share.

We praise you that you've made this joy available to all of us. All who can understand can take part of this great, great joy. We praise you for all this, and we thank you for so much more.

We thank you, and we praise you in your beloved son's name. Amen. Amen.