

Rejoicing on a Holy Day

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Date: 27 November 2022

Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[0:00] Let's begin our worship this evening singing Psalm 96. Psalm 96 from the Scottish Psalter, page 358. And we're singing to a tune, Glasgow.

Psalm 96, verses 8 to 13. Give thee the glory to the Lord, that to his name is due. Come ye into his courts, and bring an offering with you.

In beauty of his holiness, O do the Lord adore. Likewise, let all the earth throughout tremble his face before. If you're able to stand, please do join us standing to sing these verses.

Give ye the glory to the Lord, that to his name is due. Give ye the glory to the Lord, that to his name is due.

Come ye into his courts, and bring an offering with you.

[1:19] In beauty of his holiness, O do the Lord adore.

Like wise, let all the earth throughout tremble his face before.

Among the heaven-sick or rings, the world shall steadfastly.

He feeds from whom he shall judge the people righteously.

Let him speak up before the Lord, and let the earth rejoice.

[2:48] Let seem and all that is dwelling, Let see and all that is dwelling, Cry out and make a noise.

Let fields rejoice on everything that springeth on the earth.

Lain woods and every tree shall sing with gladness and with birth.

Before the Lord, because he comes to judge the earth, comes he.

He'll judge the world with righteousness, the people faithfully.

[4:19] Let's unite our minds again once more in prayer. Let's call upon the Lord. Almighty and gracious God, when we come once again into your presence to worship your glorious name, we thank you for the detail and for the expressiveness of your word that talks about the creation itself rejoicing in your presence, rejoicing even in the prospect of your coming to judge the world.

And Lord, while we may think in our hearts at times that coming to judge the world on the part of God is not a matter for expressing rejoicing, yet it is, we know, for your people.

We know that when you come to judge, you will do so righteously. You will do so to set everything in its final place and to execute the justice that this world so largely lacks down to the course of history.

And we give thanks to our Lord for the prospect that you people have of your coming in your glory. You're coming to reveal yourself as the glorious Savior who died for them and rose again and was exalted to glory.

And we give thanks, O Lord, that that appearance is going to be so much more majestic and glorious than we can now imagine. And we give thanks that the whole creation will see it, that everyone who has ever lived will see it, and that every knee shall bow and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

[5:59] We thank you, Lord, for this time together once again here to worship you. And we thank you that we come around your word. And we pray that your word will again be blessed to us.

Make us thankful, O Lord, that your word is so freely available to us, that we have so many opportunities to read it, to hear its teaching, to study it for ourselves, to apply its teaching to the world as well as to ourselves.

We thank you for the privilege of being together with like-minded people who come to worship you and who come together to worship you and to value being together and to express their thankfulness for the fellowship your people have with one another.

Lord, we ask us, we call upon you in prayer, that we may know your Holy Spirit guiding our thoughts and our words and help us as we set things before you in prayer, with thanksgiving, with supplication, with petition, with our requests.

That we may do so, Lord, in the confidence that you hear us, that you hear us ever towards your people, that your promise is that you will never not be listening to them, that you will always give heed to what they say, because your word tells us that even our very sighs, those things that we express to you, not so much in word, but in the intents of our heart and in sometimes the sighs of our minds and hearts over the sorrows that we find in the world and in our own experience.

[7:34] We give thanks that you read them. We give thanks, Lord, that even the very tears of your people are set in your bottle, in your flask, so you collect them and you store them up.

And we thank you that you take note of them so that they are recorded by you, that you may come and comfort them. We thank you tonight, Lord, that you are such a great God and that in your greatness you have come and stooped down to this needy world.

Not only have you done so in giving us your word, you have given us your word personified in the person of your Son. You have come into this world to become one of us in your own human nature. And we thank you that that is ever joined to your person, to the glorious person of the Son of God and will be so forevermore. We thank you for all that you achieved during this time that you lived in this world, in our humanity.

We bless you, Lord, for the wonderful way in which you minister to your people through your death and resurrection from the dead, for the way you still do so from your throne on high and through your Holy Spirit minister to us comfort and guidance, rebuke and teaching.

[9:00] And we thank you for all of that, O Lord, for we know that our development, if our trust is in you, is safe in your hands. So bless us, Lord, again as we come together as a congregation of your people.

We thank you for all that you continue to be for us, for all you continue to do for us, for the many encouragements you give us from week to week. We thank you, O Lord, as we express our note of changes that take place even from week to week in the congregation, with illness, with some passing from the scene of time, with different changes that we take note of in ourselves and family experiences and life.

Lord, as we carry these things into your presence this evening, we pray that you would meet us in your own strength. We pray that you would enable us to rejoice before you, no matter what our circumstances may be.

Lord, we know that we are, because of our very sinful bias and intent, that we are so prone to look upon things darkly and so prone, Lord, to look upon things with a sense of despondency.

And yet teach us, we pray, to rejoice in you, to rejoice in your salvation, to rejoice in every prospect of further blessing from you.

[10:18] And we ask, Lord, tonight that you would bless every gathering of your people. We pray that you would remember all who gather in very different circumstances, two hours. Throughout the world, we know that there are many tonight who meet in circumstances of persecution, of poverty, of deprivation, of famine, and so many other things that blight people's lives.

We think of, too, those, Lord, who meet in areas of natural disaster, earthquake, mudslides, so many things, oh, Lord, that from time to time we hear of in different parts of the world and sometimes even in our own nation as well.

Lord, teach us, we pray, to have our trust in you so that whatever may happen, like the psalmist, we may say that God is our refuge and our strength and strength in a very present help in our time of need.

And that even though the creation itself would be seen as in upheaval, and even though human society may be in upheaval, too, will help us to find out rest and repose in you and to be sure, oh, Lord, that you do all things well.

We ask your blessing tonight for those who help us in different ways throughout life. We think tonight, Lord, of those who give up their time to look after patients in hospitals and other clinics and who express, Lord, their love and dedication through that.

[11:55] Bless our care homes. Bless those who work in them. Bless those who work in our districts. Bless, Lord, our district nurses, our carers. Be with them in all that they do.

Bless the various charities, Lord, that help in different ways in our locality and throughout the land. We think especially of the likes of Crossroads, Macmillan nurses, others, Lord, who give up their time so willingly and are so precious to those who come under their care.

We think, too, Lord, of the MND Scotland, when we know recently of Doddy Weir's passing and his commitment to MND fundraising and research.

But we pray, too, Lord, with thankfulness for the way that MND Scotland was set up in our own locality and through Peggy and her late husband. We bless you, Lord, for that and for the progress that was made and is made in that charity even to the present day.

And we pray for them all and pray for Peggy as she continues to have a certain role within them.

We ask, oh, Lord, that all of these and other charities who so faithfully work in our midst may come to know continued blessing and encouragement.

[13:12] Remember the work of safe families as they set up their work here in Stornoway and in the islands. We pray, Lord, for those who are established already as workers with them.

We pray as they expect to take up the work more meaningfully and fully in the new year when others are recruited. We pray, Lord, that many families will benefit from it.

We pray that you would bless them to that end. Remember the food bank and those who need the provisions made there. Gracious Lord, we commit all to you who are suffering in different ways at this time from financial loss, from loss of work, from deprivation of other kinds.

We pray, too, for those who are at this time caught up in the addictions that we find in our age of drink, of drugs. We pray for those who are helping them and seeking to come alongside them to give them strength and support.

We think of our own David and ask that you would bless him as he worked with Road to Recovery.

We pray for all others, Lord, who give assistance, even quietly and in a way that's unobserved in so many ways in our locality and in our society.

[14:26] Bless every effort made, especially, to bring the love of Christ before this needy world.

Grant, O Lord, that you would grant to extend the borders of your kingdom by bringing many needy sinners, such as we all are, into your care and under your compassion.

Receive our thanks now, we pray. Continue with us here and bless us and pardon our many sins.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Let's sing some more verses to God's praise in Psalm 27.

Our focus tonight is on Nehemiah and Nehemiah chapter 8 where we find reference to the joy of the Lord. And so our passages for praise, for singing, refer in some ways to joy and to the joy of believing especially.

Psalm 27, this is on page 32, singing to the tune Argyle, verses 4 to 6. One thing I'll plead before the Lord, this I'll seek always, that I may come within God's house and dwell there all my days, that on the beauty of the Lord I constantly may gaze, and in His house may seek to know direction in His ways.

So we'll sing verses 4 to 6 to God's praise. Amen. One thing I'll plead before the Lord, and this I'll seek always, that I may come within God's house, that I may come within God's house and dwell in all my days, that on the beauty of the Lord I constantly engage, and in His house may seek to know direction in His ways.

[17:06] For in His dwelling He will keep, the sibling troubled day, within His tent He'll shelter me, and on our walk He reign.

My hand will then be lifted high, above my enemies, and in His tent I'll sacrifice, with shouts of joy and grace.

Now let's turn to the book of Nehemiah, and reading Nehemiah chapter 8. We'll just read through the whole chapter. Nehemiah chapter 8 from the beginning.

Nehemiah chapter 9.

And he read from it, 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.

[19:16] And Ezra, the scribe, stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose.

Beside him stood Mattathiah, Shema, Ananiah, Uriah, Ilkiah, and Masaiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashem, Hashpadana, Zechariah, and Meshulam on his left hand.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, and Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God.

And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also, Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Aquab, Shabbathiah, Hodiah, Masaiah, Azariah, Josephbad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places.

They read from the book from the law of God clearly, and they gave the meaning so that the people understood the reading. 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 as they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, Go on your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine, and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready.

[20 : 53] For this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, Be quiet, for this day is holy.

Do not be grieved. And all the people went on their way to eat and drink, and to send portions, and to make great rejoicing, because they understood the words that were declared to them.

On the second day, the heads of the fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe, in order to study the words of the law.

And they found it written in the law, that the Lord had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths, during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should proclaim it, and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem.

Go out to the hills, bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written. So the people went out, and brought them, and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the water gate, and in the square at the gate of Ephraim.

[22 : 10] And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity, made booths, and lived in the booths. And there was a very great rejoicing.

Day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day, there was a solemn assembly according to the rule.

Once again, we pray for God to bless this portion of his word. To us this evening. Let's sing once again. We're singing now in Psalm 89. Again, it's the Scottish Psalter, Psalm 89, verses 15 to 18.

The tune is Newington. O greatly blessed the people are, the joyful sound that know. In brightness of thy face, O Lord, they ever on shall go.

They in thy name shall all the day rejoice exceedingly. And in thy righteousness shall they exalted be on high. Because the glory of their strength doth only stand in thee.

[23 : 22] And in thy favor shall our horn and power exalted be. For God is our defense, and he to us doth safety bring. The Holy One of Israel is our almighty King.

These verses O greatly blessed the people are. O greatly blessed the people are, O greatly blessed the people are, The joyful sound that know.

The joy of the sound that know. In brightness of thy face, O Lord, O Lord, they ever on shall go.

O Lord, they ever on shall go. They in thy name shall all the day rejoice exceedingly.

And in thy righteousness shall they exalted be on high.

[24 : 41] Because the glory of their strength doth only stand in thee.

And in thy favor shall our Lord and power exalted be.

For God is our defense, and he to us doth safety bring.

The Holy One of Israel is our almighty King.

Let's now turn to the passage that we read in Nehemiah chapter 8, especially verses 9 to 12, this middle section. Nehemiah chapter 8, from verse 9 to 12, where we find Nehemiah saying, This day is holy to the Lord your God.

[26 : 04] Do not mourn or weep, for all the people wept as they heard the words of the law. And 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, and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. Now this passage has two matters which some might find contradictory.

I'm not saying anyone here will, but some people would say to you that these are indeed contradictions. Two things are holiness and joy. The world will say to you, I just don't understand how you can tell me that a person who is holy, who keeps the words as far as possible of God's

truth, God's word, who believe in the Bible, who believe in this God of the Bible, and that you don't understand how you can tell me that these people really have joy in their lives.

Because to much of the world out there, as you know, believing the Bible, following Jesus, giving your life to God, and for God to have control over your life willingly on your part, is really not something that fills you with joy.

That's how the world thinks of it. Maybe that's how we once thought of it ourselves. But here's a passage that brings together very clearly holiness and joy.

[27 : 28] This day is holy to the Lord, and rejoice in it, he's saying, do not weep, for it is a day that's holy to the Lord. And if you think about it, you can answer that thought that the world will say to you, that you can't actually have holiness and rejoicing together at the same time.

You can say, well, do you expect to go to heaven? Would you like to go to heaven? Is that what you want to do at the end of your course? Yeah, of course I want to go to heaven. Well, do you think heaven's going to be a place of holiness?

Of course it is. Heaven is where, in perfection, holiness and rejoicing are so linked together, that is the ongoing experience of the church glorified.

Heaven is where holiness, a holy people made perfectly holy in Christ, continually rejoice in the presence of God, rejoicing in his salvation.

So here is Israel having come back. These people have come back from their captivity in Babylon all these years under Nehemiah's leadership and Ezra the scribe as well, the priest, rather, as they take charge of developments.

[28 : 48] The purpose and the aim is to reestablish a people here, a worshipping people, a people who will be gathered around the word of God once again, and form a people who will be known as the people of God in covenant with him.

And it's for that that they're repairing the temple, which had fallen into disrepair all these years. And in fact, this is why they're building the temple. It's so that there will be a community of worshipping believers once again in Jerusalem.

And here we have Nehemiah telling us something from the calendar of the Jews at the time. We're told when these events took place and that this was in fact this particular month of the year when on this month of the year certain feasts took place or festivals took place in Israel.

And they were following this as they were discovering it more and more again from the word of God, from the law of God. And in this series of festivals you have such as on the tenth day of the month, you have the Day of Atonement.

You also have it culminating in the Feast of Tabernacles or the Feast of Booths, as it's called here, where, as we read here, they were given to great rejoicing because the Feast of Tabernacles, as they had to make up these booths with palm branches and other branches, it was a reminder to them of all their travels through the wilderness for the 40 years.

[30 : 22] They didn't have a stable place in which to live until they got to the Promised Land. And so the Feast of Tabernacles was a feast and a celebration of God's keeping of them, of God's goodness to them, of God's leading them and bringing them safely through to the land of promise.

That's why there was such rejoicing as they considered the goodness of God in all that He had done for them. And here in this passage then you find in this particular part of it, verses 9 to 12 that we're looking at tonight, two things especially that come across to be emphasized.

First of all, there's the people's desire for God's Word, particularly God's law. This is the book they called for the book of the law. They told Ezra, the priest and the scribe, and the Levites who taught the people, they said, bring before us, they said to Ezra especially, bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord has commanded Israel.

So there's a desire here for the Word of God. Here they are rebuilding the community and here they are at this juncture ready now to ask for this particular, this particular, on this particular occasion in relation to the Feast of Bulls and other feasts that they anticipate, bring the book of the law of God. Let's have the book. Let's have God's Word. And that's what happened. Second thing that comes across clearly is the people's response to God's Word, mainly the response of weeping, as we'll see, which was then redirected by Nehemiah into joy, into rejoicing.

[32 : 07] That's a very important thing for us to notice as well as we'll come to that point in our study this evening. Well, here's the people's desire, first of all, for God's Word. They asked for the book.

Look at the first verse of the chapter. In fact, all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel.

So Ezra brought the book of the law. Now we're not told exactly what book of the law this was. Was it the whole of these five books of Moses from Genesis through to the five books at the beginning of the Bible as we have it?

We think it probably more likely that there would be extracts here from the likes of Deuteronomy, often called the book of the law, and Leviticus from chapter 23 especially, that speaks of these feasts in a series of feasts that the Lord had commanded Moses to set before the people.

In any case, it was the book of the law that's all we're told about it. And that came from the people themselves. You see, this was not the leaders like Nehemiah and Ezra saying to the people, now we want you to gather on a particular occasion.

[33 : 20] We want you to gather here at this water gate in the square here. We want you to gather because we're going to bring the book of the law of God. We're going to read that. We're going to explain that to you.

So gather there at this particular point in the week. No, it came from the people. The people gathered as one man. You see, that's so important.

They gathered there with a united desire. They gathered there with a mindset on the word of God to be brought out and read in their presence and explained in their presence.

It wasn't imposed by anyone. It wasn't foisted upon them. It didn't come from the people. And you notice verse 2 as well, that they brought the book of the law.

They brought the law before the assembly. And the assembly was comprised both men and women and all who could understand what they heard on the first day of the seventh month.

[34 : 18] And again, that's emphasized a bit later. It was including all those who could understand, all those who could hear and understand the word. Their children were there.

Their children were there having come to an age, at least they could listen to the word and have it explained to them. And what a great emphasis that is. Here are the people all together, young and old together.

And they're saying with one voice and they're saying with one mind, bring out the book of God.

Bring the book of God to us so that we'll hear it. Hear it. What a tremendous advantage Ezra had.

He didn't have to start appealing to people to come to gather together to hear the word of God. Ezra didn't have to use other means by which to try and persuade people that it would be good for them to come to gather together to hear what God had to say through his word.

No, the people said, this is what we want. This is what we at this moment need. Bring out the book of the law. And that's itself so important for our position this evening.

[35 : 26] Because that's why you've come to gather here this evening, is it not? You've come to gather as worshippers of God, but central to that worship is this book.

Why is this pulpit placed here? Not just to make it convenient to speak, although it is that just as in Ezra's day, they made a platform of wood to enable Ezra's voice to carry forward.

This part of the church isn't physically any more holy than that part you're sitting in. It's a convenience. It has that height to it that enables you to see who's speaking and therefore hopefully more readily listen and take in the words that are being spoken.

But it's where the Bible is placed. You have it in your possession. But the Bible that's preached from is here in your sight so that the focus will be indeed on the word of God, on the word brought out, as it were, before you.

And really, that's why you've come here tonight, isn't it? With this mind, as you're coming to church, you're saying, here's the minister. We're going to come so that the minister will open up the word of God to us.

[36 : 36] That it will be read in our presence and hopefully by God's blessing, he will be used to help us to understand what this book is saying to us. You haven't called me to be your minister to give some sort of political treatise to you.

You haven't asked me tonight to be your minister to come and preach from this Bible so that somehow or other there'll be a message that has to do with certain things that are current in the political world or in the sporting world or to do with global warming or any of those issues, however important they may or may not be in your or other people's experience.

You have come here tonight and your concern is bring out the book. Bring out the Bible. Bring out the word of God. Let's hear God speak.

Let's hear what God has to say to us through his word. Give us God's word. And that's what we have. That's what we have.

That's what we have before us. That's why we are so needy of your prayers and our own prayers to have God enable us to open up this book. And as they did on that occasion to give an explanation of its meaning as far as is possible for us.

[37 : 53] This is our great privilege that we have this Bible and we have it opened and we have it in our reformed church practice of being central to our worship and to our services.

Because it is God's word. Because it is God's word. And there is something else in it that is important as well. A survey has been carried out by a certain organization in the USA and I am quite sure that the results will be very similar in our own country as well.

And it is over the last couple of years or from some point in 2021 into this year. And that survey found that there was a dramatic decline in the number of people who responded to the survey.

A dramatic decline on their own private or personal use of the Bible. And they related those who were doing the survey. Some at least said they were relating that very much to the COVID situation where people were not able for a long time to gather together in church physically.

And that that in fact had an impact. As one of the one professor in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Professor Don Whitney, he put it this way.

[39 : 07] Isolation from other Christians has had a lethal impact on private Bible reading. When people are not in church, they're not reminded of the blessings of Scripture and its importance in their lives.

And they aren't encouraged by other Christians sharing about their own Bible reading. And he finishes by saying this, churches are also the main place where people learn how to read the Bible. In other words, although you have so many advantages now to you, so many books you can read about Bible study, so many ways that help you to try and work through the various parts of the Bible to understand it.

There is no substitute for gathering together for the Word of God to be expounded to us. And for us to share together in that experience of understanding the Bible and coming to have our minds collectively under the Word of God and the light of God's truth.

That's a privilege as people that we come as they did here to say, get the book for us, open up the book for us, tell us what the book says, guide our minds to God through His Word.

[40 : 27] And that's what they did. And that's what they did. They were taught, secondly, the people's desire for God's Word. They asked for the book, but they were taught from the book, from verse 3 right through there to verse 8.

You'll see the details of that. Not only did they read the Word to them, but they gave the sense. They actually went through the people and gave the sense of the Word to them, what the Word actually meant.

And the names, actually, of the people, a bit of a challenge reading through it, but the names are given of those who helped explain what the Word meant. They went in amongst the people.

They went through the crowd there, and they stopped, obviously, giving instructions as to what directions, as to what the Word, this law of God actually meant. They read and they gave the sense that you defined there in verse 3.

He read it, facing the square from early morning to midday, and the men and women and those who could understand. Then from verse 7, you see there the names that are given.

[41 : 31] They helped the people to understand the law while the people remained. They read from the book, from the law of God clearly, and they gave the meaning so that the people understood the meaning.

Now, that's what we're about. That's why it's so important in our services that the Word of God is read and expounded and read clearly.

I know it's so important. I'm not saying I'm good at it by any means, but it's so important to have the Word of God read clearly. Even if you've got a Bible open in front of you, but especially on occasion like that when they didn't have the Word written as we do today for each of them.

It's important to read the Word clearly. And to read the Word clearly so that the words are expressed properly, so that the emphasis is given where it should be given.

And of course, that's so important in our understanding of the Bible. We don't just read it monotonously. We don't just read it as if there was no need to express in certain places a depth of meaning or a heightened excitement or whatever.

[42 : 42] All of that comes into the Word of God as we read it. And as we read it from the pulpit, it should be something we always remember, though we do often forget, I'm sure.

And as I said, we're not by any means experts in that. But we try and tell our trainee ministers, and it's always, I hope, something has done, how important it is to read the Word of God clearly and expressively.

But even more important, to give the sense of it. That's what they said. They read the Word clearly. And they also read it and gave the meaning so that the people understood the meaning.

That, of course, is central to our worship, to our experience as gathered worshipers together. So there's the desire of the people. And you can follow that yourselves, I'm quite sure, tonight.

That's the desire in your own heart. You're saying to me, open up the book to us. Tell us what God has laid upon your heart. Bring out the sense, the meaning of the Word of God so that we will hear God Himself speaking to us.

[43 : 59] And so, secondly, we come to the people's response to God's Word. Again, you'll find the response in verse 3, also verses 5 to 6.

Verse 3 there, he read this and they listened. And then at verse 5, you'll find this emphasis here. He opened the book in the sight of all the people.

For he was above all the people. And as he opened it, all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

And the important thing, of course, is that they were so eager to hear the Word of God. They were eager to hear what God had to say to them.

And they regarded, in other words, they regarded the Book of the Law as God Himself speaking to them from this Word that He had given through Moses.

[45 : 02] And that's essentially still the case. You know, some people will ridicule the idea if you tell them that you are actually listening to the voice of God when you come to have the Bible expounded or even read for yourselves, but especially preached if it's preached faithfully.

That is essentially God speaking to you and to me, to our souls. People will ridicule that. They say, of course, that's not God speaking. That's just a book like any other book. But you know that's not true.

You know that when God blesses this Word, when the Holy Spirit comes to lay this Word on your heart, when the preaching of the Gospel is blessed to you, it is the voice of God that you're hearing. When the Lord brings out your own sense of sin, when He brings Jesus and all His beauty before you, and God is, through His Word, drawing your attention to that, who is speaking?

Whose voice are you hearing? Whose voice are you hearing? It's not a mere human voice. It's the voice of God. It's God who is addressing you tonight. Remember that.

[46 : 05] I am just a poor human being. I'm just a sinful man. Saved by the grace of God, I trust.

But an instrument, nevertheless. An instrument in the hand of God. So that you will hear the voice of God. So that you will listen to the voice of God. So that you will say, don't just bring out the book, but speak to us.

Give the meaning. Because I want to hear God. I want to hear God's voice. I want to be able to close out all the noise of the world, even for an hour or half an hour or whatever, so that I can listen to God.

I need God speaking to me. I need God to tell me how to run my life, how to live my life. I need God to tell me about Himself, about what makes Him glorious and majestic and holy.

I need to have His gospel explained. I want to hear His voice. And what did they do when the word was read and expounded?

[47 : 08] Well, first of all, they wept. They wept. Why did they weep? Because, of course, it was the book of the law of God. And the law of God exposes our sin.

It exposes our sin so as to make us know our guilt. And we feel and know our defilement, our rebelliousness in the presence of God.

We know our unholiness in the presence of this holy God. Because God comes to hit our conscience with giving us the knowledge of ourselves and what we are and what we're like.

And how we have rebels against Him and how we are undeserving of the least of His mercies. And when God brings that conviction of sin to a smaller or greater extent, it varies between one individual and another.

But to some extent or other, you and I will weep. You and I will say, Lord, I confess that I am dirty in your sight that I'm guilty.

[48 : 19] I confess that I've wronged you. I confess that I continue to sin despite all you tell me. I confess, O Lord, that I'm unworthy of the least of your mercies.

That I'm so unlike what I should be. The people wept when the law of God affected their hearts. But it wasn't left at that.

And that's really what God's Word, the brilliance of God's Word. That when God comes to lay your sin upon your heart, He doesn't do that just to hurt you.

And when you weep under the Word of God, God doesn't say, well, that's all I'm interested in. That you come to know your sin and that you weep over this sin that you know is true of yourself. I want you now, He says, to know the Gospel.

I want you to know salvation. I want you to know the brilliance of Jesus as the answer to your sin and to your lostness. And that's what Nehemiah did.

[49 : 18] Ezra rather said to them, 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 on your way. Do not be grieved. By which he means, don't be sorrowful. Don't be despondent. For the joy of the Lord is your strength.

And these words in verse 9 through to verse 11 really effectively mean literally, be at peace. Don't be grieved. Be at peace. He's not just saying to them, be quiet. Don't say anything.

What he's really saying is, don't weep. Don't think that this day because it's a holy day is a day for your mourning and just leaving it at that.

What he's saying is, now that you know something that makes you mourn, I want you now to be directed into what will make you rejoice. This day is holy, therefore rejoice.

[50 : 17] You see, the Lord's day, Sabbath day sometimes call it. It's the Lord's day, the New Testament age.

The Lord's day is a holy day. The holiness of the Old Testament Sabbath day has not gone away just because we know it in the New Testament age as the day of the Lord.

Today is a holy day. God sanctified this day and set it apart and made it holy. Did he do that so that we be filled with gloom?

Of course not. The fact is, it's a holy day where we come to give time to God, to his gospel, to his nature, to ourselves, to salvation, to his worship.

All of the things that we're familiar with on the day of God. It's a holy day, but it's a day for us to rejoice in the Lord. For the joy of the Lord is our strength.

[51 : 15] You see, that's what we said at the beginning. Those two things that so much are kept apart by the world, that are not understood really to be in friendship, if you like, with each other.

Holiness and joy. And here they are together. Don't weep, said Ezra. Don't weep, said Ezra. This day is holy to the Lord. So don't be despondent. Don't weep. For the joy of the Lord is your strength. You see, holiness and a holy day doesn't expel joy. That doesn't mean you can't have joy when you're thinking about holiness.

It's far, far from it. Holiness is not that sort of austere, grim thing that the world will tell you it is, or that the world thinks it is, or perhaps even some Christians think it is.

Jesus himself was perfectly holy. But he rejoiced. He rejoiced in spirit.

[52 : 17] He rejoiced when he saw the gospel through the apostles being blessed. He gave thanks to the Father. I know our holiness and a holy life and a holy day and holiness as a concept is no enemy of joy.

That's a misunderstanding. That's what the devil would try and persuade you is true. That's what the world thinks is true. But no, it's not true.

This day is holy to the Lord. Therefore, don't be grieved. For the joy of the Lord is your strength. You see, the world can't see this.

The world just cannot see how these two things belong together. So you and I have to show them. You have to show them that this is a day, yes, it's holy to the Lord. You have to show them that the Christian life is a holy life.

But it's not a life that squeezes out joy just because it's holy. It's a life that seeks to mirror Jesus himself, of course. It's a life that's led by the Spirit of God.

[53 : 23] But you have to show the world because it doesn't understand us. But it has to see it in your life and mine that joy does not depend on the level of health that you enjoy.

It doesn't depend on how well off you are in the world. It doesn't depend on your status in society. It doesn't depend on your achievements. You can have all of these things in abundance and still be miserable.

And you can lack all of these things and be the happiest person in the world. Because the joy of the Lord is not dependent on the likes of these things.

The joy of the Christian life. The joy that is commended to us here. The joy of the Lord. That's the joy of knowing God. The joy of knowing his salvation.

The joy of being united to Jesus. The joy of knowing that your life is secure in his hands. The joy of knowing that you have passed things over to him.

[54 : 23] And that by faith you have been unable to do that. The joy of serving God in the world. The joy of being a disciple. The joy that is yours in prospect of this complete joy that exists in heaven.

The joy of the Lord. The joy of the Lord. He said is your strength. If there's one thing that that world out there needs tonight to see.

It is real lasting joy. Joy. Listen to your news reports. Read the newspapers. Whatever else it is you have access to. And all you'll find or by and large what you'll find is just gloom and depressing.

And things which are really, whether they're deliberately chosen or not. But it seems to me that sometimes they are deliberately chosen by whatever news channel you're on. And it's repeated on the 24 hour news time after time after time.

All the things that are taking place in the world that really do fill you with gloom if that's all there was. And that's what the world is facing. That's what the world is being fed all the time.

[55 : 31] Okay, you'll occasionally get a story that's really quite nice. A story that's got a happy ending to it or whatever. But by and large it's doom and gloom.

It makes you depressed if that's all there was to this life. This world needs Jesus. This world needs the joy of the Lord.

That world out there that doesn't read its Bibles. Where's it going to see the joy of the Lord? Where is it going to have evidence that there is a joy that surpasses any mere human joy?

It has to see it in our lives, friends. It has to see it in the lives of God's people. And it has to be seen as a joy that is our strength.

That's what Nehemiah, what Ezra is emphasizing. The joy of the Lord is your strength. Your strength is not in your own ability. Your strength is not in looking at the world in a gloomy and depressive outlook.

[56 : 32] What gives you strength is to rejoice in Christ. To rejoice in His salvation. To rejoice in His Lordship. To rejoice in the fact that there's no one like Him.

To rejoice in the fact especially that He has triumphed over death. That He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

And that your life is in His hands. And that the Gospel invites everyone who hears the Gospel and to whom we can witness that this Jesus is for them as well.

I had a text or saw it up on a WhatsApp from a friend, the fellow pastor I mentioned previously, Sergei Nakhlov in Kyiv.

And in the past week or so he had a message up. He has one up every day. He has more than one up every day. But here he was in Kyiv. And you remember Kyiv in the past week has been hit by strikes from Russia.

[57 : 35] Missiles knocked out a lot of the infrastructure. Many parts of the city in darkness. People having to go back into the basements and so on. And there was a photo that he had taken of himself on the phone.

In the darkness. Holding a candle. And in his other arm, a copy of his Bible. And the candle lit up his face and the Bible.

And as it lit up the Bible and his face, in the midst of that he was beaming. He was obviously full of joy. Smiling as he held up this Bible.

And he had quoted in the text, Isaiah chapter 9 verse 1. The people who walk in darkness shall see a great light. Upon those who live in the shadow of death, a light shines.

Just picture that picture. The candle, the Bible, his beaming face. Those who dwell, they live in the shadow of death. All around them, the shadow of death.

[58 : 39] Upon them, a light shines. And then he commented this. As a prayer. Lord, grant us to see your light in the darkness.

And in this light, to see the surrounding world. Amen. There is a man who knows what joy is.

There is a man who knows where to find his joy. There is a man who can look out on a world in darkness physically, literally. As well as the darkness of evil that's trying to annihilate them.

There is a man along with his colleagues and his fellow congregation there in Kyiv. Who knows the joy of the Lord. Who has a beaming face.

Surrounded by darkness and the threat of death. And the joy of the Lord is his strength. I wish I had it to that extent.

[59 : 41] I wish I had it to that degree. To that degree that he has. And there is no reason I cannot.

Because the same God that's his God is my God and your God. And maybe the reason we don't have it as he has it. Is that we haven't asked for it enough.

And we don't appreciate our need of it enough. And only when the times of great darkness move in. Do we then realize what we've lost if we've lost the joy of the Lord.

Because the joy of the Lord is our strength. And not only so but finally. Not only were they all attentive.

Wept and then were led to joy. But this is final point. They shared out that joy. See they discovered in the book of the law. The instructions about the booths and living in booths.

[60 : 44] And they as Ezra went on here in verse 11. On to verse 12. The people went on their way to eat and to drink. And to send portions. To make great rejoicing.

Because they had understood the words that were declared to them. They shared the joy. As they shared out portions from what they had been eating.

And this feast that they'd had. It wasn't privatized. It wasn't something they could keep to themselves. God was saying to them. Share it out. Go to those who don't have it.

Or haven't made preparation for it. Take these portions of what you've eaten and drunk. And take it to them. Help them. And bring them into the celebrations too.

Isn't that what the gospel is all about for us too? Isn't that what the Christian life is about? Isn't that what celebrating the joy of the Lord.

[61 : 40] And the salvation of the Lord is about? It's not so that you and I can keep it to ourselves. There's a world out there that needs to know the joy of the Lord. And you and I have to distribute that to them as much as we can.

Here we are in times. Really hard times. I've mentioned in prayer. A number of agencies. Such as Safe Families UK for example. They're setting up here now.

And this is going to be a means by which you and I can actually contribute. By their training and by their leadership. To engage with very, very needy people in our own society.

In our own locality. Families have been transformed already throughout the UK. And I know that from our own son-in-law who is managing.

A manager of Safe Families in the West Lothian area. And there was a report in the, I can't remember if it was in the paper or the news certainly there. That people were noting from the council's point of view.

[62 : 44] The local authority point of view. That there had been such a decrease. In people needing the use of social services. Since Safe Families came on the scene.

That's no surprise. Because Christians were mobilized. Christians were encouraged. Christians actually gave themselves. To volunteer to help through Safe Families. To be in touch with families. To sit alongside needy people. Even for just to go and sit with them and say, Look, I'm here. Is there anything I can do for you? Just tell me. And hopefully, we'll have a speaker early in the new year from Safe Families.

So that we ourselves can engage with the work they're doing. And contribute hopefully to it. But here is the principle of it. In Nehemiah's day through what Ezra is saying.

Take portions. Bring them to anyone who has nothing ready. For this day is holy to the Lord our God. So here is the joy of the Lord.

[63:49] Here were the people saying, Bring us the book. Here is the book opened. Here is the book leading them to know the joy of the Lord. Here is then from that, this great directive.

Share out the joy. Let's do that too. May God bless His word to us. Let's conclude by singing to God's praise in Psalm number 4.

Psalm number 4 in Sing Psalms. That's from page 4. Singing verses 4 to 8. And the tune is Wallace. In anger do not break God's law.

Consider and be still. Present a righteous sacrifice and wait upon His will. Oh, who can show us any good? I hear so many say, O Lord shine on us with your light.

Show us your face, I pray. And so on through to the end of the psalm to God's praise. In anger do not break God's law.

[65:07] Consider and be still. Consider and be still. Present the righteous sacrifice and wait upon His will.

And wait upon His will. And wait upon His will. And wait upon His will. Oh, who can show us any good?

I hear so many say, O Lord shine on us with your light.

Show us your face, I pray. Show us your face, I pray.

You fill my heart with greater joy. And others may have come.

[66:39] As they rejoiced at armless time, when great and white above.

When great and white above. I will lie down and sleep in peace.

My heart will rescue. My heart will rescue. For you alone, O gracious Lord, will keep me safe.