

The Fortress

Brian Carroll / General Adult

Work in Progress / Nehemiah 8:9–18

Jerusalem's walls finally stood again! For months, Nehemiah and the people had hauled stones, set gates, and rebuilt what war and exile had torn down. The city that once lay in ruins now stood surrounded by strong walls. But in Nehemiah chapter eight, something surprising happens. Ezra stands before the people and reminds them that their greatest protection was never the stone around the city.

Their true fortress was something far stronger. The joy that comes from the Lord.

Introduction

- In September of 1814, during the War of 1812, a young lawyer named Francis Scott Key found himself caught in the middle of a defining moment in American history.
 - He stood aboard a ship in the harbor outside Baltimore.
 - **And in front of him, guarding the city, stood Fort McHenry.**
 - A fortress.
 - Thick stone walls rising from the water.
 - Cannons positioned along the ramparts.
 - A final line of defense between the enemy fleet and everything behind it.
- As the day unfolded on September 13th, British warships moved into position.
 - And then the bombardment began.
 - Shells launched from the ships arced through the sky.
 - Rockets screamed overhead.
 - Explosions erupted above the fort.
 - The harbor filled with smoke.

- The air shook with the sound of cannon fire.
- And it didn't stop.
- Hour after hour, the assault continued.
- Through the afternoon and into the evening.
- And as darkness settled over the water, the attack only grew more intense.
- Each explosion lit up the scene for a brief moment— just enough to catch a glimpse of the fortress.
 - A section of wall.
 - The outline of a tower.
 - A flash of the flag.
- Then darkness again.
- And with every flash came the same question:
 - *How long can it stand?*
 - Because everything depended on that answer.
 - Behind those walls was a city.
 - Families, Homes, A future.
- If the fortress held, there was hope.
 - If it fell, everything lay open.
 - So hour after hour, he stood there.
 - Listening, watching, waiting
- The night stretched on.
 - The bombardment continued.
 - And still, the question remained:
 - *Is it holding?*

- And all he could do was wait for the morning.
- Finally, after a long and relentless night, the first light of dawn began to rise over the harbor.
 - Slowly, the darkness gave way.
 - The smoke started to lift.
 - The outlines became clearer.
 - The shapes came into focus.
- And then he saw it.
 - The flag, still flying above the fortress.
 - Which meant something greater than survival.
 - It meant the fortress had held.
 - Through the night.
 - Through the pressure.
 - Through everything that had come against it.
- It stood.
 - And in that moment, as the light spread across the water, Francis Scott Key began to pen these words:

*O say can you see, by the dawn's early light,
 What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming,
 Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight
 O'er the ramparts we watch'd were so gallantly streaming?*
 - Because what mattered most in that moment was simple:
 - When everything was tested... the fortress remained.
- Now hold onto that picture.

- Because in Nehemiah chapter 8, the people of God are standing inside a city with newly rebuilt walls.
- The gates are set, the defenses are strong.
- Everything looks secure.
- But inside the walls, the nation gathered.
 - Instead of celebrating their accomplishment.
 - They find themselves overcome with grief and mourning.
- Because as the Word of God was read, they realized something deeper.
 - Walls can stand, and hearts can still be exposed.
 - And in that moment, Ezra speaks to them:
 - ‘Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’
- Their true fortress was never the stone around them.
 - It was the joy that came from the Lord.
 - And that raises the question for us:
- When the pressure comes, when the night stretches long, when life begins to shake, what is actually holding you steady?
- Let’s take a look at the last part of [Nehemiah 8](#) and see if we can find an answer to that question.

Scripture Reading

Nehemiah 8:9–18 ESV

⁹ And 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.

¹⁰ Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

¹¹ So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.”

¹² And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

¹³ On the second day the heads of 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.

¹⁴ 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,

¹⁵ and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, “Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written.”

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing.

¹⁸ And 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.

- If you missed last week, the nation has gathered inside the city and they’ve asked Ezra to read the Word of God to them.

- It is very likely that the book of Deuteronomy is the focus of what was read.
- And Ezra spent hours reading while there were knowledgeable men who helped explain all of the words to the people.
- The reality of this event is still so mind-blowing to me when I think of how much emphasis we place on comfort and aesthetics.
 - We worry about how many dB's the sound system is playing.
 - We can tell you how many lumens it takes for video projectors.
- But these people just gathered in the streets, standing for hours.
- But as we see in v. 9, the response to the reading and explanation of the Word is very raw, very emotional.
- This reminds us, in no uncertain terms:

You can be well-defended on the outside and still undone on the inside. (v. 9)

- The walls are done, their enemies are demoralized...for this season, they have managed to provide for their physical safety.
 - But I've pointed this out before in the book of Nehemiah:
 - Building the Wall is plot device for this story.
 - Building the people is the point of this story.
 - If you've ever seen the musical, Les Mis, the students rebelling against the monarchy build this imposing barricade in the street.
 - But the barricade isn't the story - it's the set on which the story is told.
 - Here, in v. 9 we see that we've still got some work to do on the people.
- As this public reading/teaching of the Law unfolds, the people are confronted with an undeniable spiritual reality - they have done a lot of work on the outside, but God is very much concerned with the inside.

- The book of James asks us to consider this:

James 1:23–25 ESV

²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror.

²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.

²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

- When James compares the Word of God to a mirror, he is saying something important.
 - The Word reveals what a person looks like on the inside.
 - Rather than simply reflecting physical appearance, the Word does two things simultaneously.
 - It shows us the perfect ideal of what a person ought to be while also showing an image of what he truly is, discerning and revealing the thoughts and intents of the heart.
- That’s why this is such an incredibly emotional time.
 - They’ve looked in the mirror and they’ve seen both their reality and the ideal.
 - And the reality is that they are a LONG way from the ideal.
- **The writer of Hebrews said it this way:**
 - [Hebrews 4:12](#) “12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”
 - It’s hard to get more “inside” than the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

- If you want to, you can even hide the “thoughts and intentions of your heart” from yourself.
- But the Word exposes it all.
- How do we respond when we are confronted with that reality?
 - This crowd gathered in the square of the Water Gate in Jerusalem believed that weeping and grief was the right response.

God redirects his people from grief to grace (vv. 9-11)

- I won’t lie...if I finished a sermon and people filled the altar and tears were freely flowing, it would be easy to look at that and say, “The Lord moved in a powerful way today.”
 - I’ve been to camp before (and many of you have as well), and you can remember everybody in the youth group crying.
 - Some were truly dealing with sin and struggle, some were just sympathetic crying...but you think “The LORD really moved tonight.”
 - We often evaluate the work of the Spirit based on the quantity of tears shed.
- But notice what happens in this situation.
 - We might think of national weeping and say, “It’s about time you sorry sinners figured it out.”
 - But Ezra and Nehemiah and the priests tell the people to suck it up. (That’s my translation).
 - Stop crying...stop mourning.
 - This is a day to celebrate.
 - In verse 10, they tell the people to go throw a party, share with anyone who doesn’t have anything.
 - It’s easy to read that and feel puzzled.

- Wouldn't this be akin to me going to people at the altar during the invitation and say, "You guys wrap this up and let's go raid the pantry in the Fellowship Hall."
- Obviously we want to discern the LORD's hand at work in times like this, and we certainly don't want to quench the Spirit's work.
- But Ezra and Nehemiah have keyed onto something critical.
 - They're witnessing grace at work.
 - God could absolutely let us keep on going down a self-destructive path.
 - He could let us continue in our sin.
 - Jesus once compared the religious leaders of his day to "Whitewashed tombs."
 - They looked good on the outside but nothing but dead on the inside.
 - God doesn't have to intervene.
 - But thanks be to God that God intervenes.
- Nehemiah recognizes that this is a holy day.
 - Listen, when we are confronted with our sin, that is HEAVY.
 - And when God zeroes in on our sin struggles, it hurts.
 - Yet at the same time, we worship and serve a God that is willing to do the spiritual surgery necessary to deal with it.
 - And for that we should be grateful.
 - Paul said in [Romans 8:1](#) "1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."
 - If you were a prisoner on death row and you were scheduled for execution and at the last minute, the prison warden comes in and says, "The governor has pardoned you...you are no longer condemned, but are now free to go."

- You wouldn't grieve your crime, you would celebrate your freedom.
- There might be tears shed, but they would not be tears of grief, they would be tears of great joy.
- And that's exactly where Ezra is trying to move them.
 - Not away from conviction...but through it.
 - He doesn't deny their sin.
 - He doesn't minimize what they've heard.
 - He redirects them to what God is doing.
- Because this moment—this conviction, this awakening—this is not a sign that God is against them.
 - It's proof that God is working for them.
 - And that's why he says: "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."
 - Now that's a familiar verse.
 - Some of you have heard that your whole life.
- But here's the question:
 - What does that actually mean?
 - Because when we hear the word *strength*, we tend to think of something inside us.
 - Emotional strength or mental toughness.
 - The ability to hold it together when life gets hard.
 - We think, 'I just need to be stronger.'
- But that's not what Ezra is talking about.
 - He's not pointing them to strength they produce.
 - He's pointing them to a place where they can stand.

- Because that word *strength* carries the idea of a fortress or a stronghold.
- It is a place of refuge.
- In other words—God’s answer to their brokenness, was not telling them to get stronger.
- It was giving them something stronger to stand in.
- The same is true for us.
 - This hasn’t changed in the slightest over the millennia.
 - The joy that we have in Christ is a place where we can take refuge.
 - It is a joy that deepens as we come to grips with the seriousness of our sin.
 - Spurgeon said it this way, “Grief for sin is the porch of the house where the guests are full of the joy of the LORD.”

The stronghold of joy is best experienced in community (v. 12)

- Nehemiah’s encouraging tone strikes a chord with the community.
 - They don’t stand there and wallow in grief for days and days.
 - Instead, they do exactly what they were instructed to do.
 - They go home and they celebrate.
 - God’s grace is ALWAYS worthy of a celebration.
 - Paul says in [2 Corinthians 9:8](#) “8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you...”
 - And continues in v. 15 “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift.”
- But they don’t just celebrate by retreating to isolated, contemplative spaces.
 - Instead, they send portions of the feasts around.
 - Somebody shows up at the neighbors with a basket of bread.

- Somebody shows up at the neighbors with a gallon of sweet tea.
- And it says that they all make a “great rejoicing” because they understood the words.
- The word for great means that it is beyond ordinary.
- In my mind movie, I picture the streets alive with music and singing and dancing.
 - I picture families feasting.
 - I picture neighbors embracing.
 - Once this first day is over and Ezra closes the book, I imagine the afternoon and evening being a righteous block party celebrating the fact that God cared enough for them to reveal their hearts and still extend grace.
- Joy refuses to stay private.
 - In [Luke 15](#), Jesus tells three parables.
 - One is about a lost sheep that is found.
 - One is about a lost coin that is found.
 - One is about a son that went off and ruined his life and returned home when he hit rock bottom.
 - And the end of each parable is very similar.
 - When the sheep is found: [Luke 15:6](#) “6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’”
 - When the coin is found: [Luke 15:9](#) “9 And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’”
 - When the son returns home: [Luke 15:22–24](#) “22 But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23 And bring the

fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.”

- Every single instance - joy is shared.
- In other words, when joy becomes your fortress, you stop living in survival mode and start living in overflow.
- For Nehemiah, this means the joy of the Lord is not just strength—it is our fortress, our stronghold.
 - It’s a big fortress with room for everybody.
 - All you people who were teenagers in the 90’s, please don’t let me down... “It’s a big, big house, _____”
- We must remember, joy isn’t fleeting - it is enduring.
- And we see that here in Nehemiah’s community.

Joy becomes the foundation for obedience (vv. 13-18)

- This was more than a one-day event...
 - The second day, the people gather again. They want more.
 - And they found that they’re on the cusp of a festival that was traditionally an important event for the nation - the Feast of Booths.
 - Basically, it was a nationwide campout.
 - The festival served dual commemorative purposes.
 - The Feast of Booths enabled Hebrews throughout time to remember the departure from Egypt and the journey through the wilderness to the land of promise—a celebratory time of joy that recognizes God’s grace by acknowledging his deliverance and sustenance of the Hebrew people.
 - The Feast of Booths reminded Israel about God’s provision for them in the wilderness.

- Interestingly enough, the Feast of Booths is the only festival of the Hebrew calendar in which the Hebrews are commanded to “rejoice”. ([Lev. 23:40](#), [Dt. 16:14](#))
- There’s no such thing as coincidence in God’s timing, so it is only fitting that this season of rejoicing would take place during the festival that many Jews called “The Season of our Joy.”
- So the nation leans into this celebration.
 - They don’t do so because they’re guilted into.
 - They get to honor the LORD by their obedience.
 - There is no sense of reluctance at all.
 - I won’t lie - I wouldn’t really look forward to this activity.
 - It’s like sleeping in a tent in the back yard.
 - My bed is just inside that window, why am I in a tent?
 - But the people gladly gather the supplies and they have a weeklong campout on their roofs and in their courtyards.
 - And v. 17 says it well - “there was very great rejoicing.”
 - Now we see they’re obeying - not out of fear, but out of joy.
- And that’s the difference.
 - Before, the Word exposed them, and they were broken.
 - Now the Word leads them, and they celebrate.
 - So what changed?
 - They found a fortress.
 - They found a place to stand.
 - Their joy of the LORD became their strength, their stronghold.
 - And inside that fortress, obedience doesn’t feel like a burden, it feels like life.

- Think for a moment about a fortress.
 - Maybe you've toured one of those old forts like the one in St. Augustine.
 - Inside the walls, there is safety.
 - Inside the walls, there is provision.
 - Inside the walls people can rest and move and live.
- That's what join in the Lord does.
 - It creates a place where God's people are secure
 - And they start to live differently.
- Here's the thing.
 - We see in this chapter that obedience flows from joy - not the other way around.
 - Religion says that if you will obey, you will earn joy.
 - But the Gospel reminds us that grace leads to joy which leads to obedience.
 - Joy is not the result of obedience, it is the fuel for it.
 - But even more than that, joy is the place where obedience happens.
 - Because when you're standing inside the stronghold of God's joy, you're no longer trying to earn his favor.
 - You're living in it.

Invitation

- For over 25 hours, the question hung in the air:
 - *Is it holding?*
 - Through the noise, the pressure, through everything that was thrown against it...

- Would the fortress stand?
- And when the morning came, the answer was clear.
- It held.
- Now here's the truth.
 - Life asks that same question of you.
 - Not in a single moment, but over time.
 - When the pressure builds, when conviction cuts deep, when the days stretch long and the nights feel even longer
 - *Is it holding?*
- Some of us are trying to hold it together with our own strength.
 - Some of us are leaning on circumstances, on stability, on things that feel secure until they're not.
 - And when those things start to shake, everything inside starts to shake with them.
- But [Nehemiah 8](#) gives us something better.
 - It tells us that God has not left us to stand on our own.
 - He has given us a fortress.
 - 'The joy of the Lord is your strength.'
 - Not your performance, not your consistency, not your ability to get it right every time.
 - His joy.
 - A joy rooted in grace.
 - A joy grounded in forgiveness.
 - A joy secured by Christ.
 - And that joy is not fragile.

- It holds.
 - It holds when conviction comes.
 - It holds when life presses in.
 - It holds when everything else feels uncertain.
- So the question is not whether the pressure will come.
 - The question is:
 - What are you standing in?
 - Because if you are standing in the joy of the Lord, you are standing in a fortress that will still be there, when the morning comes.
 - And Scripture reminds us [Lamentations 3:22–23](#) “22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; 23 they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”