

Topic	Responding to God According to His Word
Reference	Nehemiah 7:1-2, 8:1-8
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Speaker	David Adams

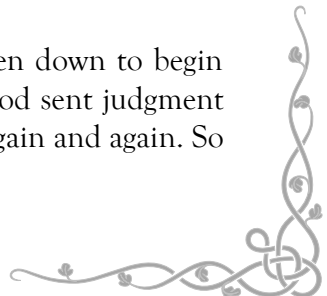
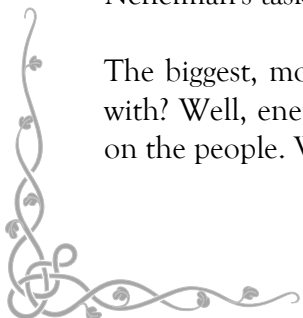
Seeing that we find in the scripture where Nehemiah said to the people, the joy of the Lord is your strength, and I pray that will be a reality for each one of you as we go through this New Year. It's fitting that on the new first service of the New Year that we're looking at a scripture passage that shows how the ancient Israelites celebrated their New Year. Now, if you listen carefully or read the text before you came today in order to prepare for the sermon, you may have thought, "I didn't see anything about the New Year". As a matter of fact, in the text, it said the first day of the seventh month. Now how can that be a New Year? If you live in Malaysia that should not be a problem, I mean, after all four or five days ago, we celebrated Happy New Year. Three weeks from now you'll be saying once again, Happy Chinese New Year. Go up to Thailand in a few months, they will have a national holiday for their Buddhist New Year. Come back to Malaysia a little bit later, still this calendar year, we will have a national holiday here where we also celebrate happy new year, the Islamic new year.

I found that in preparing for this sermon that the Jewish people had two calendars, an ecclesiastical or a religious calendar, and in that calendar it was the first day of the seventh month. But they also had another calendar, their civil calendar, and this first day of the seventh month was the beginning of the New Year and their civil calendar. So we see how they celebrated new year's day by listening to the word of God.

Just a brief reminder of where we are in the book of Nehemiah. You remember back in October, we started a series and then because of the advent of time and the Christmas time, we of course addressed those issues. But we're going back now to resume the study of Nehemiah, a reminder for Nehemiah, it fits in the Bible. Way back in Exodus, God had freed his people from slavery in Egypt. He had led them out of Egypt. He took care of them on their way to the promise land, and during the time he was leading them, he gave them a covenant and promised them if they obey the covenant, they would be blessed. If they disobeyed, there would be serious consequences.

Well, you know the story that people did not obey God. God sent them messengers. The prophets came saying, remember the covenant, repent or else there'll be judgment. People ignore them, kept doing whatever they wanted to. God kept his promise and judgment came, enemy armies conquered, destroyed their cities, carried the people off into exile. And now in Nehemiah, we pick up where God has made it possible for the people to come out of exiling and go back to Jerusalem and the surrounding area. And so we see when Nehemiah came back, the biggest physical need there in the city was there are no city walls to protect the people from enemies. Chapter seven, we see now the city wall has been complete, but Nehemiah's task is not over.

The biggest, most important task still lies ahead. Because why were the city walls broken down to begin with? Well, enemy armies knocked them down. Well, why did they do that? Because God sent judgment on the people. Why did he send judgment? Because they had disobeyed him again and again and again. So



the biggest need facing these people was spiritual renewal, spiritual revival. And we will see in our text how their attention was focused one again on God to truly be the people of God in the promise land.

This morning we're going to focus our attention just on chapter eight and we'll see how the people of God encountered God through his word and from this text we will see things that we can apply to our lives because here we will be encouraged and motivated and challenged to value God's word, will be encouraged to listen to, to study, and to seek understanding of God's word. And when we understand God's word because we value it so much, then we will want to respond appropriately to God and his word. And then we'll see that when we apply God's word that leads us to rejoice. We rejoice when we remember who God is, what he has done, what he's doing, what he will do.

First of all, we're encouraged to value God's word. Now, in our text, we see that the Israelite people placed a very high value on God's word. They came together willingly, eagerly, enthusiastically, because they wanted to hear the word of God taught and explained. They took the initiative because they valued God's word. Now how do we know that? The text tells us. Who took the initiative, not the leaders, it says the people. They told Ezra, bring the book, read to us the words that the Lord has given to us through Moses. How else do we know that they've highly valued God's word? Because they all showed up, nobody skipped out. All the people gathered as one man in unity and the unity came from a common desire to want to hear God's word. We see everybody was there, men and women, senior adults, young adults, youth, even children, now probably not any two and three year olds, but it says everybody all who could understand, they came.

We also see that the Israelite people valued God's word. When we look at verse three, look how long they were there. Basically from 6:00 AM till noon, now that's a marathon scripture reading, a marathon worship service, and you thought we preached a long time in this service, in this church. Well, we'll later see in the sermon we are supposed to apply scripture to our lives. So in trying to keep with this passage of scripture, I've prepared a six hour long sermon and how can you apply God's scripture to life? Easy. Look at the next part. Listen attentively for all six hours. No just kidding. My sermon is only half that long, but I'm not kidding on the part about listening attentively wanting to hear God speak to us.

Well, not only did they come and listen to the scripture here, for six hours celebrating new year in this way. But we see in verse 13 that on the very next day, the man came back, the heads of the house came back, why, they wanted to continue to study the words of the law, and that's still not all. We'll see in verse 18 just two weeks later, they came back again, and this time they had a festival for seven days, and each of those seven days they had Bible study. You see the people recognized the vital necessity of study and scripture. They had a hunger, a thirst for God who was revealing himself to them through his word. Their desire to encounter God through his word is similar to what the Psalmist expressed in Psalm 42, as the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you Oh God, my soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

Their desire to know God's word was similar to the psalmist also in Psalm 19 when the psalmist said, the law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul, the precepts of the Lord are right. Rejoice in the heart. The rules of the Lord are true and righteous all together. And now look at what he says next. More to be desired are the words of God than gold, more than much fine gold. When you hear that, you might think,

is this guy serious? The word of God, more important than gold, more important than wealth, more important than prosperity. Yes. Yes. He is serious. What value do you place on God's word?

Do we place as much value on the word of God as the psalmist, more valuable than gold? Well, why is the word of God so valuable? Jesus says, the words that he has spoken are spirit and life. Whoever hears the words of Jesus and believes him, God who sent Jesus will have eternal life. He will not come into judgment because he has passed from death unto life. Scripture is there to meet our deepest needs. Scripture is there to address our most serious problems. We face many problems in our lifetime. Our biggest problem is that sin separates us from God and only through a clear proclamation of scripture and our understanding of that proclamation of Jesus Christ as the way to salvation, when we respond in repentance and faith, can we be forgiven of our sin, reconciled to God, and come back into a right relationship with God?

In Romans chapter 10, faith comes by hearing, hearing from the word of Christ. Yes, scripture of utmost important, and today many churches, many individual Christians, they recognize this. Therefore they place a high priority on the proclamation and the teaching of God's word and talking to some of the youth from the youth camp, I have been encouraged to hear the emphasis placed on the Bible at the youth camp and how they've covenanted with each other to study together the Gospel of John. I thought that was great, but unfortunately, there are some Christians and even some churches who do not value highly the scriptures, and this becomes evident in the lives they lead or in the activities of some of the churches, or even in the ministries of some people who are supposedly missionaries.

Sometime back, I ran into a missionary who was drawing support from Christians, from churches being paid a full time salary to share the gospel with an unreached people group. And so I was interested in talking to this person, and she told me, Oh, I've not told any Bible stories to any of the people yet. I'm not sharing any scripture with him. Oh no, I've never mentioned the name of Jesus. I'm afraid if I do, it'll ruin the good relationship I'm building with them. And I've probably had a puzzled look on my face, so she said, Oh, but I've not been working with them very long. I said, how long a year, Being paid a full time salary to share the gospel with an unreached people group, doing wonderful work among them to help meet some physical needs, but is not yet one time said anything from scripture mentioned Jesus. She did not realize the value of scripture. I'm thinking why not work for the Red Cross, the Red Crescent, the United nations, the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation. All of these organizations do wonderful work. They meet the needs of many people in many places of the world. And she was doing some good things, I'm sure, but only we, Christians with the word of God are able to speak to the deepest needs that people have and help them know how they can be set free, how they can come into a right relationship with God.

I'll contrast that with another Christian worker I've talked to in his country, not Malaysia, another country he was also targeting an unreached people group. Also drawing a salary, reaching out to these unreached people, and when I talked with him, he was telling me about all the different activities he had. We've got this going and this go and in this ministry and that ministry, marvellous things he's doing. And then he said, and the purpose of each one of our activities and things we're doing to help in the community are so that we can expose the people to the scripture. We want to get the word of God in their hands so it can come into their heart. The purpose of everything we do is to try to lead people to faith in Christ through the use of the scripture. Because you see, that's what the purpose of the scripture is. 2-Timothy 3:15

probably the most important verse in the entire Bible about the scripture says, the purpose of this scripture is to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

So why is the scripture so important? It's only through scripture that we can come through to faith in Jesus Christ. We can't learn about Jesus and his crucifixion and resurrection just by looking at nature. We can't learn about Jesus, his crucifixion, his resurrection, just by observing nice things that people that are friendly do for us. The scripture not only shows us how to be saved, it also shows us how to live after we're saved, trains us in right living so that we will be equipped to do all kinds of good works. So we value scripture highly only through the message of scripture do we know how to be saved and how to live a life that is pleasing to God. Do you place a high priority on scripture? Does God's word play a significant role in your life?

As individuals, we all need to make sure we give importance to hearing, reading, studying, and applying God's word and as a church; we need to also make sure that the scripture plays a major role in the life of everything we do. I realized there are some groups of Christians that don't place a real high value on scripture, and instead they tend to emphasize their personal experience with God, and yes there is a danger that scripture study can become purely academic. You can maybe quote the Greek and Hebrew and the grammar and all the Bible facts, and it's obvious it doesn't mean anything in the way you live. And yes, we do want to have a personal experience with God where we experience him, speak into us, moving in our heart, effecting our lives. But that's exactly what happened to the people in ancient Israel, they experience God. How? Through study of the scripture, through their intense, six hours ongoing study, explanation, meditation on God's word. They experienced God in a very real, intimate, intense, powerful way. God touched their hearts through his word. He revived their soul, brought change to their life.

Remember it's the Holy spirit who inspired the scripture. 2-Peter chapter one tells us in the old time, the Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit who inspired the scripture does not want us to ignore his masterpiece, his written word that he has inspired. So we want to value God's word.

Secondly, we want to listen to study and seek to understand the word of God because the ancient Israelites in Nehemiah chapter 8 highly valued God's word. They were willing to listen intently. We've already seen that, for five to six hours straight the people listened attentively. They had come together of their own accord. They wanted to be there and hear God speak. They came expectantly, knowing that God would speak to them. And today I'm sure many of us are like those ancient Israelites. We too have come willingly. At least I didn't see anybody being dragged in. Now, some might've come with just a little bit of pressure, but for the most part we're here willingly because we want to be. But do we come with receptive hearts expecting to hear a message from God through his word? I enjoy coming to church at least most of the time. I attend church regularly. Sometimes I come expectantly wanting to hear God speak, expecting to hear God speak, but if I'm honest and I will be honest sometimes when I come, the reason I'm here is because it's Sunday morning and it's time to go to church.

Now, that is not all bad. I still have a chance of getting more out of that than if I just hung around the house and did whatever. Or if I went out to just enjoy a nice leisurely late breakfast. But how much better

if I, if we would come expectantly having prayed before we come, having read the scripture passage is going to be preached on that day, expecting God to move and to speak to us.

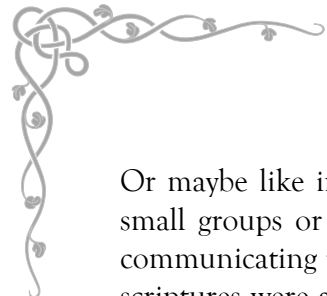
The Israelite people in the text came expecting, therefore they listened attentively and they did hear God speak amazing, five to six hours straight the people listened attentively. No sleepers. Now imagine that sitting through a six hour service with roughly 50,000 other people around you and not a single person is naughty enough. Now, of course, they did not sit through the sermon. It appears that they were standing most of the time. We see when Ezra opened the book, all of the people stood up and later we see that as the Levites were going among the people teaching them, explaining the word, the people were still standing, so maybe that's why nobody fell asleep. Everybody was standing up. It's a little more difficult to fall asleep while you're standing up.

So maybe we're doing things backwards here. Maybe next week we should sit down during the singing. That'll keep you awake and then stand up during the sermon and in that way you won't go to sleep during the sermon. It's amazing that they could sit attentively for five to six hours. Nobody slept, nobody checked their Facebook, nobody pretended to be taking notes on their phone, and they were really answering a WhatsApp message. Yeah. You laugh because I know you've seen other people do. If you've not done it, but you've seen other people do it. These people valued God's word. Therefore, they came expecting to hear God, and so they listened attentively and they did hear God speak.

Now, it's not exactly clear, real clear exactly what happened that morning, but from the text we can see that there had been a large platform, wooden platform built up front. And on this stage, Ezra, and about 13 other people were sitting there. So Ezra undoubtedly began the reading, but since the reading lasted for six hours, he possibly needed a break. And some of the other men might have read part of the time. And we also see some of the Levites men who were not on the stage as they circulated among the people. They also were reading from the book of the law of God, and they were distinctly communicating its meaning so that the people could understand.

So probably what happened was Ezra or one of the other people on stage read and lengthy passage of scripture. And then there might've been silence on the stage, and that's when the other Levites circulated among the people to make sure they understood, helped them to explain things that they did not understand, help them understand things that were a little bit difficult. And then there was reading from the front again. And then once again, the explanation among the people, we could draw a parallel in our church. It's like if. On Sunday, we come and in the service we listen to the scripture read, we hear the sermon preached, and then we go out to the Garden Cafe and along the tea among the people we're sitting with at the table, we discuss the scripture and how we can apply it to our life.

Oh, you don't do that at your table? Oh, you could. Maybe a better parallel would be, we come to church on Sunday. We hear the scripture, we hear the sermon. And then many of the life groups later that week, they will read the scripture once again. Talk about not only the sermon, but talk about the scripture. More important to talk about the scripture, then the sermon, but talk about the scripture, talk about the sermon, any questions, and then they're able to explain. And especially people who might have not as much Bible background or a new Christians, they can be brought along to help understand a little bit better.



Or maybe like in the alpha group, everybody's together. You hear the word of God, you break into the small groups or you can explain it and answer questions. Well in verse 18 we see that the Levites are communicating the meaning of the scripture. This word could be translated, they translated. You see, the scriptures were all written in Hebrew, but the world language at that time, under the Persian Empire was Aramaic. And some of these people who had been in exile under the Persians, they knew Aramaic, but their Hebrew might not have been too good. And they weren't able to understand God's word in their language. And so the Levites would help them to truly understand God's word speaking to them in a language that they could understand. It's important for people to be able to hear God speak to them in their mother tongue. That's why there are so many Bible translation projects. That's why here at this church, we have not only the English language service, but Mandarin and Tamil and Filipino and throughout the KL Klang Valley, there are so many different languages where the word of God is clearly proclaimed in language people can understand.

Well, not only was the message communicated clearly we see that the people understood the message. It wasn't just go in one ear and out the other ear, rather they understood. Now in order for the people to understand the message, there's really two big responsibilities. The first responsibility falls on the leaders, the preachers, the Bible study leaders, the alpha group leaders, the house group leaders. It's our job to distinctly and clearly communicate the meaning of the scripture, but the responsibilities do not stop there. It's also very important for the listeners to want to understand. And if they are listening and if their heart is right with God and they're willing to study and put out the effort, they can learn the scripture. So the leaders communicate the scripture and the people will be able to understand, if they want to understand.

Now, I realize there are some difficult things in scripture and there might be some passages you never totally understand, and if you're a new Christian, there's even more that you don't understand. But over time, with more and more Bible study, you will be able to understand. You can also apply these truths to your personal devotional life; to your Bible reading, Bible study at home, whether it's alone or maybe with your children. Now, the ancient Israelites did not have Bibles in their home, no phones with a Bible app they could download. We're really privileged today that we can have a Bible in a language that we understand and several possible translations, printed copies, copies on our phone. Not only do we have Bibles, many-many Bible study aids are available, commentaries. Our library has some good resources. If we're willing to take the time, put out the effort, we can study and come to a good understanding of God's word, meditating on it, apply it to our lives, so we can understand God's word if we want to.

And if we do, we'll be like the Israelite people. They rejoiced with great joy. Why? Because they understood the word of God that had been declared to them. So we're encouraged to value God's word. We're encouraged to listen attentively, to study, to seek, to understand God's word and even more importantly we are to apply God's word, responding appropriately to God as he has spoken to us through his word.

Now the first response I'll mention is how the people responded to God and to God's word even before they heard God's message being read and explained. Because even before Ezra the scribe opened the scriptures, the people had already responded to God in reverence and in humility and in submission. They had come with a teachable spirit. They recognize God's authority over them, and they recognize the authority of scripture over their thoughts, their hearts, and their lives. We'll look back at verse five, as Ezra

opened the book, all the people stood. Now this is not just a mere formality, okay? Now it's time to stand. Now, time to sit. But they stood as a sign of reverence, as a sign of great respect for God's word. They were giving honour not only to God's word, but to God who had given them the book of law through Moses. And we see in verse six that Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. Now we don't know exactly what he said when he blessed the God because the text is not there. But we can have an idea of what Ezra might've said. The Talmud is a collection of Jewish writings that are not in the Bible, but part of the Talmud was written right about the same time as Nehemiah and Ezra were involved in their ministry, and this was a collection of practices of the Jewish people and how they implemented many things in their worship.

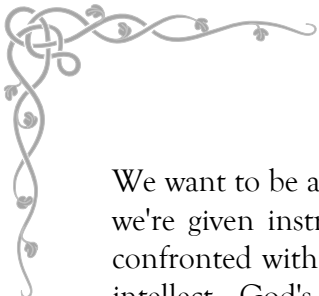
And in the Talmud, we see a blessing that was frequently read by scribes, right before they read from the book of the law. And that blessing is blessed are you Lord, Great God who gave the Torah to your people, Israel. The Torah being the first five books of the Bible sometimes called the Pentateuch, sometimes called the Law of Moses, but you have these. This blessing giving God thanks for the fact that God had given them the scripture. God had made a covenant with them and they were grateful to God for this. There's a couple of words in the text I want to emphasize in verse six that also call attention to the attitude that people had before they even heard the scripture.

The two words are going to show that the people came with humility before God and was submission to the authority of God. And those two words we see in verse six, Ezra blessed the Lord God. And then later in the verse, we see the people worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. First word, Ezra blessed God from the Hebrew word Baraq. And what does that word literally mean? The root word of this word comes from the meaning of two kneel. In other words, you are kneeling before one who is greater than I, kneeling before one that I recognize has authority over me, and it's the same word that is sometimes translated kneel in the old Testament, for example, psalm 95:6

Oh, come let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord our maker.

It's the exact same word, Ezra blessed the Lord. Let us kneel before the Lord, our maker. When we know this that can inform our understanding of what it means to bless God. Second word I want to emphasize is the word worshiped, and that's the Hebrew word. This word literally means to prostrate oneself, lay down, fall down, flat on your face. Just like in our text, it said they worshiped the Lord. They fell down prostrate before the Lord with their faces to the ground. This word is used 171 times in the Old Testament that they would fall down flat on their face before the Lord. And interestingly enough, when we get to the New Testament, which was written in Greek, not Hebrew, we see that the word most often translated worship in the New Testament has the exact same meaning. The Greek word proscaneo means to prostrate oneself, fall down flat on your face before God as an act of humility, of submission, of homage, of worship.

This will inform our understanding of what it means to worship God. We come before him with humility and respect, reverence. So that's the first response we want to look at in responding to God's word appropriately. We come before him kneeling down, falling prostrate before him, which brings us to the second point.



We want to be able to apply then God's word to our lives. When we hear a command, we follow it. When we're given instructions, we do it. When we are advised to avoid certain pitfalls, we do. When we're confronted with sin, we repent. You see, God's word does more than just inform our mind or tickle our intellect. God's word is there to shape and direct our life. It shows us how to live then we're supposed to live accordingly. We already saw that God's word is there to rebuke us, to correct us, to train us in right living so that we can live a life pleasing to God. And many of you will remember the words in the New Testament, the book of James, where to be doers of the word, not only hearers. Bible study is not just a mental exercise, is possible to gain more and more and more Bible knowledge, and we're thankful for super Christians, but we're just deceiving ourselves as the text says, if we don't apply it to our life.

It's relatively easy to acquire Bible knowledge. Oh yes, it takes work, it takes time, it is not going to just come automatically, but if you study and avail yourselves of the many helps that are available, go to seminars, listen to sermons, go to Bible studies, read. You can gain a lot of Bible knowledge, but it's not always that easy to apply it to our lives yet that's the purpose of the scripture. When we are serving the church in the United States many years ago, one day I ran into a man who was a member of our church and he complimented me on the sermon I had preached just two days earlier and he said, you know, you said something in there that was really interesting that I'd never thought of before. I'm going to think about that some more. Well, I thanked him politely for his compliment, glad the sermon was meaningful. Thank you for the encouraging words, but what I really wanted to say was don't just think about it a while. Do something about it. I didn't say that I'd already had a run in with the guy before. He had opposed a Spanish language ministry our church was starting to reach out to all of the immigrants from Latin America so they could hear God speak to them in Spanish because they didn't know English. He thought they should learn English and come to the English church. I thought it was more important that they hear God speak and then learn English as they went, and our church was offering English classes, so I didn't want to get into another confrontation with a man. I just thanked him, but I was really wanting to say, if after you think about this awhile, if you become convinced that this is truly a truth from God's word, let it affect your life.

So be careful after the service today. If any of you compliment me on the sermon, I might ask you how are you going to apply it. I won't do that to you either, even if I haven't had a run in with you. But nevertheless, the purpose of all sermons, purpose of all Bible studies is that it will affect our life, not just give us knowledge. Now, yes, I realize there are some things in the Bible that you learn that there is really no way you can apply it to your life. For example, I started off talking about the Jewish people had two calendars and sold the first day of the seventh month was also a happy new year. I learned that in preparing for the sermon, but how will I apply it to my life? I won't. Maybe in the future, if I preach on this passage again, I'll mention it again, but what can I do to change my life based on this knowledge? Absolutely nothing, but there are some things that possibly you've heard for the first time today that you can apply to your life, for example, think back to the words behind that. Give them meaning for bless God or worship God as we bless God we kneel before him in reverence. Acknowledging he has the rightful authority over us. Worshiping God means we fall down flat on our face before him, acknowledging his greatness and the authority that his word has over our life. How will you apply that knowledge to your life?

It's not enough just to go out and say, Oh, that was an interesting Hebrew lesson, interesting Greek life. So now I know some more things. In knowing what these words mean, how will that affect your worship? How will that affect the way you bless God now? No, I'm not advocating that we remove all the furniture and we stand up the whole time and then fall down flat on our face. That'd be kind of difficult for ladies with dresses or for some of our senior citizens, people with disabilities, Maybe when you have your private devotion time at home, some of you might want to try that, but more importantly, how will knowing what bless God means and worship God means in the original language? How will that affect your life? How will that affect your heart when you come before God to bless him, to worship him? Will that be expressed by the heart attitude of total submission and humility before God.

So the Israelite people in our text today were willing to apply what they learned to their lives. They not only understood God's word mentally, but they understood it with their hearts and they wanted to apply it. God touched their hearts through the reading and the teaching of scripture they undoubtedly heard once again of God's greatness and his holiness. And they realized their unholiness. They were reminded of the covenant God had made with them, and they remembered they were guilty of breaking the covenant. They had been reminded of God's great provision, his love, his faithfulness, and they were reminded of their unfaithfulness, disobedience, straying from God. They were convicted of their sin through the reading of God's word, and they repented. How do we know that? Look in the last part of verse nine,

for all the people wept as they heard the words of the Lord,

They were convicted of their sin. They were deeply troubled by their transgressions. They experienced a deep heartfelt sorrow over their failure to do God's will, so they wept. Elsewhere in our text, we see the phrase, they mourned and wept, or they grieved. Their hearts had been stirred. Their consciences had been pricked through the reading of God's word, so they wept over their sins. Where is the weeping today over our sins, over our shortcomings? Does that bring you to tears ever? The scripture says, have no other gods before me. Yet oftentimes we have things more important to us than God. The scripture says, tell the truth. Be honest and know your dealings, and a lot of the time we are, but not always. Scripture says to don't cheat others, be fair in all your dealings. Help the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden, but we don't follow that. Do we weep over that? The scripture says, love the Lord your God with all your heart, your mind, your soul, your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself, but we fall short. Do we mourn because of that? The scripture says, pray without ceasing. Scripture says, you are to be witness for Jesus. Scripture says to go make disciples of all peoples, all races, all language, all ethnic groups, all religious groups, but we don't do it when we're confronted with God's word and recognize our failure is there any godly sorrow that we experience when we're reminded by scripture that we are disobeying Jesus does that bring any stirring of our heart, sense of grief? Do we weep over the fact that we have not shared our faith with a nonbeliever in weeks, maybe months, maybe years, maybe in your entire lifetime as a Christian, when the Israelites heard God's word they were convicted of their failures, their sins, their shortcomings to the point that their hearts were broken. They grieved, they mourned. They wept over their sins. They repented. They wanted God to change their mind, change their heart, change their lives.

So evidently what was happening over this five or six hour period, the scripture was read, the scripture was explained, and the people realized, they have sinned against the Almighty God. And they went, and

there's a period of five to six hours where the people are grieving and mourning over their sin because each time more scripture was read, they realize there's even more in my life that's not right with God. Then I realized, and the more they heard, the greater they realized God wasn't the smaller they realized they were, and it brought tears to their eyes. They wept. Well, a fourth response that we see to scripture is we obey. If you're truly submitted to God, if you desire to apply God's word to your life, if you've really experienced repentance then you'll obey. You will do what God's word says.

Let's look at one example of the Israelites obedience verses 14-17, when they read the scripture, they saw that the law of Moses told them that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month. So what did they do? They went out. And they made booths for themselves and all of the assembly made these booths and they lived in these booths for these seven days during this festival time. God's word said, this is what we're supposed to do. No questions asked. They did it. They joyfully went out and did what God's word instructed them to do, go gather branches. So they did, and they built these booths or these huts and they lived in for a week. No complaints. Ah, this is too much trouble. Takes too much time, it takes me away from my work, from my farm for a full week. This is kind of silly, isn't it? I feel so uncomfortable living. I would rather be home than in this crazy booth. No, you didn't hear that. They did it joyfully.

Now, a brief word about this feast of the booths or the feast of the Tabernacles as it's called in the New Testament. The purpose of this was to remind the people of their special relationship with God, to remind them of the time after God had freed them from slavery in Egypt. And as he led them to the promised land that he gave to them, and during that time they dwelt in these temporary shelters. You see, God freed the people from slavery. Then he led them, pillar of fire by night, a cloud by day, he provided for their needs with bread from heaven, water from a rock. He protected them from enemy armies. He gave them his law entering into a covenant with them. God had told them, you are my treasured possession. God told them, I will be your God and you will be my people. And then he sealed this covenant with blood, and we hear the words of Moses as he sprinkled the blood on the people. This is the blood of the covenant.

And so the people were reminded of this special relationship with God and how God had freed them, how God had taken care of them, but they were also reminded of the words where when they were traveling to the Promised Land, God told him, if you keep the covenant you'll be blessed and here are the blessings you'll receive. But if you don't keep the covenant, there's going to be some serious problems. So the people during this festival time, they're remembering what God has done for them. They're remembering the covenant God has made, and they're remembering that not only do they have privileges of being God's special people. They also have responsibilities God expects them and wants them to live up to. God's word said, celebrate this feast and so they did. And what was the result? There was very great rejoicing. It reminds me of the old gospel hymn. Some of you might know, trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

Place your faith in God. Obey him. That then will bring the joy of the Lord, which brings me to my final point. We're able to now rejoice in the Lord because we can remember who he is, what he has done what he is now doing, and what he will do in the future. After the Israelite people had repented, grieving and weeping over their sins for a space of time that could have lasted five to six hours, Nehemiah then told the

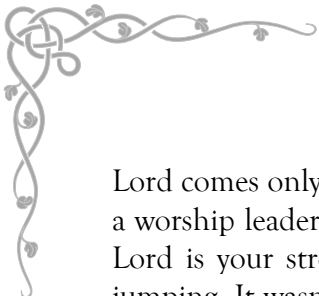
people, now it's time you can dry your tears. Five-six hours of repentance, God's heard your prayer. That's enough. Stop your weeping, stop your mourning, now it's time to celebrate. And in verse nine we see Nehemiah telling the people this day is Holy to the Lord your God. Don't weep or mourn. And then he told them, go home, get some good food, some good drink, be sure to share with those who don't have any, this day is Holy to the Lord, do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

Yes, there is a time for grieving, but there's also a time for rejoicing, for celebrating. As the Psalmist says in Psalm 30, weeping may carry for the night, but joy comes in the morning. When we repent, confess our sins in faith then God forgives us. We don't have to go through life burdened with guilt and shame, we can rejoice knowing God has restored a right relationship with us, and even in repentance we can repent with joy.

We were in Bangkok not too long ago and I heard a man preaching and he said something I'd never really heard of. He said, repent with joy. And I say what, I'm more familiar with the way they did it in Nehemiah with the weeping and the sorrow, because you realize you've not measured up to God's standard and you're convicted. But he said, if you repent and get a right restored relationship with God, that will bring joy and that will motivate you to joyfully look for other things in your life of what you need to repent. Because the more you're able to repent and bring back under the Lordship of Christ, the more rejoicing there will be, so you can repent with joy. Romans 2 chapter 4 tells us that God's kindness leads us to repentance, and the Israelites were experiencing that at this time. They heard God speak through his word, they'd had a deeply meaningful encounter with God. They had experienced repentance, and now forgiveness, they'd been reminded of God's great love for them. So they had true reason to rejoice. So Nehemiah said, dry your tears, the joy of the Lord is your strength.

When I was a teenager, young adult, there wasn't much in the way of contemporary Christian music. So people had composed different choruses to try to have something for the young people to sing in addition to hymns. And one of the types of choruses that was being composed, a lot of scripture songs, and I thought this was good because when you sing scripture word for word scripture, you remember it. And one of the songs that we sing was. The Joy of the Lord is my strength. Not real easy to sing, but a quote from scripture, some of you might've heard that, I don't know. It's pretty old. I liked that verse. It was scripture. They added other verses sometimes that were also scripture. For example, he gives me living waters and I thirst no more, an allusion to Jesus' conversation in John chapter four, also in John chapter seven, good verses, but then the song would sometimes just go on and on and on. The worship leader could just make up verses as he went. And so sometimes you would get to some really ridiculous verses. Verses not theologically sound more just to entertain or get people stirred up. For example, if you want joy, you must shout for it. So then people are going, woohoo, or praise the Lord, or trying to do something, because if you want joy, you must shout for it the text said, not biblical.

Next verse. Sometimes if you want joy, you must jump for it. So the congregation was filled with little bunnies, hopping ground. Now it's kind of cute, it brought a lot of amusement. Some people enjoyed it. I personally often felt kind of awkward because that's really not my personality to go jumping around for no reason, but anyway. Then the last verse of course was, ha ha, ha, ha, ha. As if you're trying to muster up a laugh. Well, my purpose is not to criticize the song, but just to point out, we cannot create the joy of the Lord. No matter how much we shout or how much we jump or how much we try to laugh, the joy of the



Lord comes only by God. And we see one thing I wish had happened that never did happen. I never heard a worship leader explain the context of this song. Yes, it was a direct quote from scripture. The joy of the Lord is your strength, but they never did explain how the joy of the Lord came about. It wasn't from jumping. It wasn't for hopping, it wasn't from shouting, it wasn't from trying to make yourself laugh. The joy of the Lord came because the people had understood the words that were declared to them. The joy of the Lord didn't come from some artificial created thing, it came from the fact that they had heard God speak to them through his word, they had experienced repentance. They understood it not just with their mind, but with their heart. And that is what brought the joy.

They rejoice because they understood and applied God's word. So when they understood and applied God's word to their life, that brought about the joy because they were able to remember who God is, what God had done, what he is doing, and what he had promised to do for them in the future. And that brought them joy. Today, we too can experience that and I would encourage you, if you are a believer in Jesus, value God's word, place high priority on it. Put out the effort to study and seek to understand God's word. Respond appropriately with respect, humility, submission. Seek to not just learn facts, but apply it to your life. Two of those ways we can apply it to our life as that of repentance and obedience, and then we too will experience this joy of the Lord and the joy of the Lord can truly be our strength as we go through this New Year.

If you're not a believer in Jesus, I still hope that you will experience the joy of the Lord, but it's not something you can create. The only way is to come before Christ. Acknowledge your need of him. Confess your sin to him. Ask him to forgive you. Ask him to take control of your life. Placing your faith in the fact that he has reconciled us to God by paying the penalty for our sin through his death on the cross and through his resurrection, bringing about victory over death.