

# FORTRESS

## BEGINNING

***There have been times in my life when I was so discouraged, I didn't care what people thought of me.***

**Illustration:** I remember a difficult time a few years ago, I had allowed my focus on building *my* kingdom to take priority over building *God's* kingdom. My attention shifted from ministry to making a business succeed. Before long, the only focus was keeping the business going. Had you known me back then, you wouldn't have known I had an eternal home in heaven. No one could tell that the Creator of the Universe, Jesus Christ, was living in me – I looked and acted like someone without God in my life – and I was miserable.

And the ironic thing was that the cause of all of this discouragement in my life was tied to the fact that I had let my closeness to God to slip away. Even though He was living in me, I was ignoring His presence in my life. I was ignoring His desire to fellowship with me. I was ignoring His purpose for me.

And when my "kingdom" came crashing down, I definitely could not retreat to my joy in the Lord. Because I was distant from Him, I wasn't joyful in Him.

### **Here's the Thought:**

When I allow life circumstances to distance me from God, my life doesn't show joy to people around me.

***Transition:*** *Have you ever felt like you had to fake your "joy in the Lord" to the people around you because you're expected to come across as joyful because you're a Christian?*

## CONNECTING

I think many of us can relate to feeling a certain amount of pressure to put on our “church happy face” along with our church clothes as we get ready to see other believers at a service or in Sunday School.

The reason this happens is we get so wrapped up in living life, we aren’t thinking about God and His purpose for our lives, and we wind up not looking very joyful.

And not appearing joyful might be okay if it were just us believers on the earth, but there’s a whole population of unbelievers out there that are looking for something different. They’re all looking for joy but all they’ll find without Christ are counterfeits.

It’s us Christians who are claiming to have the truth and claiming to have the God of the Universe living in us, so the world is looking to us for something that they can’t find in the world, *authentic joy*.

### **Here’s a Mystery We Need to Solve:**

How can Christians allow their life circumstances to actually show and not hide the joy of the Lord to the people around them?

***Transition:*** *The Jews in Nehemiah’s day had been captured and deported from their homeland. And then some of them were permitted to return to Jerusalem only to find the city in ruins. They knew what it was like to be overwhelmed by life circumstances. They knew what life without joy was like. Let’s take a look at what they did to let the joy of the Lord shine again in their lives. Turn to Nehemiah chapter 8. Nehemiah 8:1-12*

## Story Background

**In our last study, the wall around Jerusalem was supernaturally completed.** Even non-believers attributed the miraculous reconstruction project as having been accomplished by the Jewish God. In spite of fierce opposition and internal strife, God was able to complete the rebuilding of the wall through the faithful persevering believers working with Nehemiah.

**In chapter 7 of Nehemiah, gatekeepers, guards, and worship leaders are put in place right after the wall was completed.** And the sparsely populated city was to be repopulated with the children of Israel and God placed it in Nehemiah's thoughts to take a census of the Jews already living in Jerusalem.

**In chapter 8, the construction dust had settled, now it was time to shift the people's focus to the very reason the city needed rebuilding in the first place.** Adjacent to the Temple was a large square that was just right for public assemblies. The people came to this square to hear the reading of the Law. They came to hear God's Word. Ezra the scribe had come to Jerusalem thirteen years before Nehemiah did. Let's see what these two did next.

### Text: Nehemiah 8:1-12

**8:1** And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street [*plaza*] that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel. **2** And Ezra the priest

brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. **3** And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law. **4** And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit [*platform*] of wood, which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood [*all of these guys:*] Mattithiah, and Shema, and Anaiah, and Urijah, and Hilkiah, and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pedaiah, and Mishael, and Malchiah, and Hashum, and Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam.

So, here's the picture, all of the Jews that were old enough to understand what they were hearing came out into this large square adjacent to the temple and requested that the Book of the Law of Moses be read to them. It's interesting they came asking to be taught and Ezra and Nehemiah weren't enticing them with donuts and coffee ☺ So a large, upraised wood platform was built in order for the crowd to see and hear Ezra and the other men of God.

**8:5** And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up: **6** And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

**Why do you think they bowed their heads with their faces toward the ground?** Maybe this was symbolic of their humility in the presence of God. They probably felt they were unworthy to lift their faces toward heaven.

**8:7** Also [*all of these guys*] Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place. **8** So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.

**When it says the teachers “caused the people to understand” the reading of the Word and “gave the sense of it,” what does that mean?** They explained the principles of how the covenant (*the agreement*) relationship between God and them worked and what it meant to them as believers, both past and present. *The teachers helped the believers see the relevance of God’s Word to their lives right then, that day.*

**8:9** And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the LORD your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law.

**Why were the people in mourning and weeping?** Hearing God’s Word exposed the truth behind the Jew’s current circumstances: Jerusalem had been destroyed because the Jew’s had not kept their part of the agreement (covenant) with God. *They felt conviction, guilt, and regret.*

**8:10** Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is

holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; **for the joy of the LORD is your strength** [*stronghold, fortress, protection*].

**8:11** So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye grieved.

**12** And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth [*great joy*], because they had understood the words that were declared unto them.

So the people went to feast, to send food to fellow believers without, and to celebrate with great joy.

### ***Passage Recap Questions***

**1. What did the Jews get together and make a request for?** **To hear God's Word read to them.** In unity, these believers gathered as one and asked Ezra to read the written Word of God to them.

**2. Did the Jews just listen to the reading of God's Word and then end their meeting?** **No.** The relevance of the Word was explained to them so that they understood what it meant for them in their present lives. Their reaction to the teaching of God's Word shows they "got it".

**3. How did the Jews respond to the teaching of Ezra and Nehemiah?** **They were mourning and weeping from guilt.** They understood it was their abandonment of their relationship with Yahweh that had caused Him to allow Jerusalem to be destroyed. **But the spiritual leaders also explained to them that they should stop crying and be joyful. In fact, their joy in the LORD was their FORTRESS.**

## Summary of the Bible Passage

The relevance of God's Word caused the Jews to restore their closeness with God and brought the fortress of His joy.

**Too many Christians today, myself included,** are not exposed to God's Word in a meaningful enough way to bring us to cause us to get really close to God. Then we let circumstances steal away the one safe place we should always have in Him, our joy.

***Transition:** We have to figure out how to stay close to God amid tough times and hide in the "fortress of joy" that seems "weird" to unbelievers, and "fake" to Christians who have never experienced it.*

## APPLYING

### Here's the Main Idea for the Lesson

The relevance of God's Word causes believers to get close to God and brings the fortress of His joy.

### *Group Discussion*

**Question** What is the joy of the LORD our fortress against or protection from? The joy of the LORD protects us from the circumstances in life that cause us to abandon closeness with God and that remove signs of God in our lives.

**Question** Do you think most Christians are joyful?

**Question** What do you think causes Christians to not be joyful?

**Question** Is it a big deal if we're NOT joyful?

### **WHAT do Christians need to do?**

We need stay close to God in order to have the protection of His joy; both to run to amid difficulties, and for others to observe as a testimony of His presence in our lives.

### **WHY do we need to let God's joy be seen in our lives?**

A fortress is stable and safe. No matter what a Christian confronts, they can have a safe place that offers stability and unbelievers need to see this.

### **So HOW do believers let God's joy be seen in the various aspects of our lives?**

1. Christians must seek regular (*daily*), relevant or meaningful exposure to God's Word.
2. Christians must be honest with God and restore closeness to Him when convicted.
3. Christians must choose not to let the emotions that come with life's difficulties overtake us; we must take refuge in the fortress of His joy.

## **INSPIRING**

Our church and our community will see a change in us as we seek closeness to God and enjoy the benefit of the joy of the LORD. It is our strength. The world needs to see it. We can show it, even this very week. Why wait, get into His Word, be honest with Him, and watch Him work. None of us will be the same!

### ***Remember:***

The relevance of God's Word causes believers to get close to Him and brings the fortress of His joy.