

Dear Friend,

As I am sure you are aware, we continue to go through the aftereffects of one of the most powerful storms in the history of New York City. I personally have surveyed some of the aftermath and it is heartbreaking to see the despair of so many who have lost all.

It warmed my heart, however, to see believers in Christ of all denominations working together everywhere to bring resolution and comfort to those who are suffering. At Times Square Church we had already cultivated relationships with many churches in the affected areas, through our Feed New York initiative. We are and have been able to send much in the way of physical resources and volunteers to help where most needed. My heart is gladdened by the depth of commitment and joy of those who rose up to meet the challenge. Most of our staff stayed at the church day and night in response to the need. Hundreds have poured in daily and been put to work immediately where most needed. You can go to tscnyc.org and click on the Hurricane Sandy Relief section to see what we have been doing.

Thank you for standing with us so that we, in Christ's love, can stand with others.

Yours, in Christ,

Pastor Carter Conlon

FINDING AND KEEPING THE JOY OF THE LORD

by Carter Conlon

In our generation, scores of people are living without hope for tomorrow. Even within the body of Christ, many are seemingly walking around with little joy. Of course, when I was a young Christian, it used to annoy me if I was having a bad day and someone would casually remark: "Oh, cheer up! The joy of the Lord is your strength." This did, however, prompt me to question, "What exactly is the joy of the Lord? How do I get the joy of the Lord, and how can I keep it?" I knew there had to be a foundation based on something more than just trying to smile and look like I was happy if I wasn't.

As we consider some of these questions, let us look in the book of Nehemiah, for this is where we find the origin of that familiar verse, "*The joy of the Lord is your strength.*"

■ RETURNING TO REBUILD

Although the nation of Israel had received an incredible promise that they would be blessed to be a blessing on the earth, they ended up dealing very casually with the things of God. They began to walk outside of the borders God had set, and subsequently they were taken into captivity in a foreign nation for seventy years. At the end of those seventy years, they were sovereignly released by the hand of God.

They began to unlock the mysteries and truths of the Word of God, hoping to recover what they had lost.

In the book of Nehemiah, we see the people of God returning to their homeland, attempting to rebuild out of the ruins and rubble what they had once lost. Similarly, there are many people today who once came to Christ and were given a new life, yet they ended up taking that life and living in a manner that did not bring honor to God. They strayed outside of His ways, only to end up making a mess of things. Eventually, just as the captives returned to Israel, these people come back to the house of God and attempt to rebuild the testimony that God had once given them.

Now we come to the scene where Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites gathered all the people together. They began to unlock the mysteries and truths of the Word of God, hoping to recover what they had lost: "*So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. 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*” (Nehemiah 8:3–9). Think about how the people had just endured seventy years of sorrow. Most likely there were families that had been lost, children who did not survive, homes and inheritances that were forfeited. And now, sitting in the presence of God as His Word was being opened to them, they finally recognized what they had done. They saw their wrong and understood why such captivity and tragedy had come into their lives—and they began to weep.

Even if you have walked away from God, or if you feel you have failed and made a mess of what He entrusted to you—I invite you to simply come home to the Father.

Nehemiah proceeded to say something incredible to the people: *“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”* (Nehemiah 8:10). The joy of the Lord is your strength! Suddenly these were no longer just words of the law showing the people why they had come into bondage. Words of hope were now being declared to them!

“So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye grieved. And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions (in other words, share this joy), and to make great mirth (great celebration), because they had understood the words that were declared unto them” (Nehemiah 8:11–12). That is the cry of my heart—that we, too, will be able to understand these words and truly celebrate as the people did.

■ CLOTHED BY THE FATHER

Jesus told a parable that spoke of another celebration, which I believe will help us to understand the joy of the Lord as well as how we can partake of it. In this parable, a man had two sons. One day the younger son demanded his inheritance, took it, and left home (see Luke 15). He might have felt that his father’s house was too restrictive, too narrow—a type of the person today who concludes in his heart, “There must be more to life than this—more than going to church, more than reading the Word of God and living within the borders of it. Certainly I was born for more than this!”

The Bible tells us that this younger son took his inheritance and spent it on riotous living, which means “self-consumption” in the original Greek. In other words, he took this life that he was given and spent it on himself, living however he pleased...until one day a mighty famine came upon the land.

Finally this son came to his senses and said to himself, *“How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father”* (Luke 15:17–18). He began to rehearse what he would say to his father: “I am a sinner; I am not worthy. Just make me like one of your hired servants.”

“And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). Remember that this son had not only made a mess of his life and squandered his inheritance, by this time he carried with him the stench of having been in a field with the pigs. What an incredible shock it must have been to have his father come running down the road, falling on his neck and kissing him!

When was the last time you saw God dancing over you?

Many people do not have this picture of God. Instead, they imagine God sitting on the throne with His arms folded, tapping His foot, saying, “It’s about time! Didn’t I warn you when you headed out? Look at the mess you have made of your life and the reproach you have brought to the family name. You are fortunate that I would even consider making you a slave in my house.”

Of course, that is not the heart of God. On the contrary, whenever a wayward child returns home, there are two arms reaching out and a Father running toward him, saying, “My son (or my daughter), you have finally come home! I have been waiting and watching for you. I have longed for you!”

As the son began his mantra, *“Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son”* (Luke 15:21), what was the father’s reply? He did not even acknowledge anything the son was saying. Instead, the first thing the father did was clap

his hands and say, “Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him” (Luke 15:22).

How stunned that son must have been as his father called for the best robe to be brought out. All he could do was lift his hands as they clothed him. Suddenly he found himself wearing a robe reserved for royalty—a robe that covered the smell of the hogs and of all that he had done. As he walked into his father’s house, it was as if he had never sinned against God. It was all covered! In the same way, the Bible tells us that we have been given a righteousness in the sight of God that is not our own. It is freely given to those who know that they need a Savior.

Sometimes we think it would be enough for God to just cover all of our sins and frailties. Yet notice that in the parable, the father suddenly gave another command: “Put a ring on his hand!” In other words, the father was bestowing upon his son all power and authority, much as God has given us the power to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy. God has given us power to stand against every voice that would try to condemn us; power to declare that we have a righteousness that is not our own; power to speak into darkened places; power to become what we could never be in our own strength—all freely given to us of our Father.

Then the father said, “Put shoes on his feet.” This spoke of a journey. When God once instructed Moses and Joshua to take off their shoes (see Exodus 3:5, Joshua 5:15), He was essentially saying, “No farther in your own strength, your own strategies, your own plans!” However, when we are ready to walk with God, it is as if He then says, “Now put your shoes back on. We are going on a journey

together, and you are about to learn something of Me that many people do not know. It is something that cannot be understood by those who stand proudly in their own sense of goodness, who point in your face and say, ‘Well, I have never made the mess that you made.’ They have not done what you have done, but neither will they know what you know.”

**God loves
you with an
everlasting love.
It is the the Lord’s
joy to receive and
restore you.**

■ IT’S TIME TO CELEBRATE

With shoes on his feet, the ring on his hand and the robe on his back, the son was brought inside, and the father basically instructed the servants, “Break out the instruments! Kill the fatted calf, and let’s have a feast!” So they celebrated, along with music and dancing (see Luke 15:25).

The people inside most likely were unaware of all that the son had done and they did not really care. Instead, I can picture them gazing at the ring on his hand, amazed at the authority that has been entrusted to him. They see the shoes on his feet, evidence that he has been invited by his father on an incredible journey to become the blessing that he was originally intended to be. And so the band starts to play, the fatted calf is put on the table, and thus begins a celebration like nothing this young man has ever experienced in his life!

But what tops it all off is that suddenly his father starts to dance. As the son is standing there, he suddenly realizes that it is his father’s joy to cover his sin! It is his father’s joy to put a ring of authority on his hand and to invite

him on this journey. It is not *his* joy, it is *his father’s* joy! This is the joy of the Lord, and this is what becomes his strength.

■ HE IS DANCING OVER YOU

When was the last time you saw God dancing over you? It says in the Scriptures that He will rejoice over you with joy (see Zephaniah 3:17), yet sometimes the idea is so hard to truly embrace. But remember, no matter how your day has gone, the Father is still dancing over you along with the holy angels in heaven. He is not ashamed of you, nor has He rejected you.

Even if you have walked away from God in any measure, or if you feel you have failed and made a mess of what He entrusted to you—I invite you to simply come home to the Father. Do not come home with your head hanging and with a sense of unworthiness. Imagine if the son had insisted, “No, not me! Stop the music, stop the banquet, I’m not worthy.” How he would have missed the joy of his father! Instead, just be quiet and allow God to embrace you. Lift your hands and let Him clothe you in His robe of righteousness, cleansing you of your sin. Let Him give you the power to live the supernatural life that He promises to those who belong to Him. Let Him set you free from everything that captivates you, from every lie that dominates your mind. Simply let the Father rejoice over you.

Remember, God loves you with an everlasting love. It is a love so profound that it sent Him to a cross to pay the price for your wrong—all so that you may have the privilege of knowing that it is the the Lord’s joy to receive and restore you. When you finally realize how passionately God loves you, and you understand that it is not your joy, it is His—suddenly the joy of the Lord becomes your strength.

That is what Nehemiah and Ezra were trying to tell the people. “Yes, you made a mess and were brought into captivity. Now you have come home, and it looks like you are building with rubble and ruins. But you need to understand that you have come home because you are still the joy of your Father! You are still the joy of His heart, and it is the joy of the Lord to cover you.” That is why Nehemiah instructed the people to go home, eat the fat, drink the sweet and send something to somebody else who did not understand this yet. In other words, tell somebody what God has done for you—about the mercy that you yourself have received. Let them know that what God did for you, it is His joy to do for them. The joy of the Lord will be your strength, and it will become theirs!

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■ SHARING THE FATHER’S HEART

Sadly, the older brother in the parable never understood this joy. He was living in what I regard as a joyless, goatless religion. Rather than celebrating his brother’s homecoming, he said to his father, “You never even gave me a goat to celebrate with my friends after I so faithfully served you all these years” (see Luke 15:29).

The father replied, “Son, everything I have has always been yours.” He was not talking about the palace and the farm instruments, he was referring to his heart. Likewise, God is saying, “Everything I have has always been yours. I have always longed to give you this understanding of what My work is on the earth.”

Of course, you and I know that God’s work on the earth is the salvation of souls. There is no greater joy in the heart of God than over one sinner who repents. In fact, the Scripture says that even the angels in heaven are rejoicing. They know what is in the heart of God, and they are simply entering into His joy.

Today, if you desire the Father’s heart and want to share in His work on the earth, the Lord will surely allow you to be a partaker of His joy. And you will be able to keep the joy of the Lord by being an ambassador of Jesus Christ in this generation, refusing to regard the salvation of even one soul as somehow insignificant. Soon, every time you see a soul turn to God, something within you will cause you to want to join the party and dance. You will find that the joy of the Lord will give you a song that the world cannot take away, and you will finally understand that the joy of the Lord truly is your strength. Hallelujah!

Carter Conlon
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CARTER CONLON

Carter Conlon is senior pastor of Times Square Church, where he has been on the pastoral staff since 1994.

TIMES SQUARE CHURCH

Times Square Church was founded in 1987 by Pastor David Wilkerson, author of “The Cross and the Switchblade.” It is an interdenominational church located in the heart of New York City.

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WEEKLY SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

Sunday	10:00AM	3:00PM	6:00PM
Tuesday	7:00PM	Prayer Service	
Friday	7:00PM	Church Service	

This newsletter is an edited version of “FINDING AND KEEPING THE JOY OF THE LORD,” a sermon given on **October 9, 2012** in the sanctuary of Times Square Church in New York City. Other sermons are available by visiting our website at tscnyc.org. You are welcome to make additional copies of this sermon for free distribution to friends. However, for all other forms of reproduction or electronic transmission existing copyright laws apply. This sermon cannot be posted on any website or webpage without permission from Times Square Church. Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are from the King James Version.