

## Dear Friend,

Welcome to 2022! A year closer to the soon return of Jesus Christ! No doubt people celebrated as the clock hit midnight and a new year was born. Most of the celebrations, however, soon return to the only realities that people can see with their natural (as opposed to God-given) eyes.

Broken families, vanishing dreams and seemingly never-ending promises that are quickly losing their illusive whispers of future happiness are all that is left when the mist of temporary joy lifts. We are indeed living in what seems to be a hopeless time...except for that which God is working silently in our midst. He is bringing His people home to Himself.

The illusions which this world offers are quickly beginning to fade from view. Many are turning back to what they once knew or at least now long to understand. If you are one of them or know someone who is, let the truth of this newsletter bring a new and lasting joy into your heart! Jesus loves you! Let me say it again. Jesus loves you! As you turn towards Him, He comes running towards you! Do you find this hard to believe? Read on! And when you are finished, the Lord Himself invites you to join in the dance! Happy New Year!

Celebrating with and  
because of you,

Pastor Carter Conlon

## UNDERSTANDING THE JOY OF THE LORD

Carter Conlon

**M**any people do not understand the joy of the Lord, but I hope to make it clear to you today from the Word of God. To set the stage before we look in the book of Nehemiah, the children of Israel had been taken into captivity because they had dealt carelessly with the presence of the Lord. They had been held captive for seventy years by a nation called Babylon, which eventually fell to the Medo-Persians. Later, in three separate stages, the people were allowed to return home to begin to rebuild their testimony. The last group of people to return was under the leadership of a man called Nehemiah.

Nehemiah was a cupbearer, or butler, in the Medo-Persian king's court (see Nehemiah 1:11). His brothers had given him a report of what was going on in Jerusalem—how the people who had gone back were trying to rebuild but were greatly discouraged. When he heard the report, it broke his heart, and he began to pray. God gave him incredible favor to return to Jerusalem, and he encouraged everybody in the vicinity of their home to begin to build. Miraculously, the construction of the wall was accomplished in fifty-two days.

When the wall was completed, Nehemiah, Ezra the priest, and other leaders gathered all the people together to open the words of God's book. Remember, it was their casual attitude regarding God's Word that got them into trouble in the first place.

When the priests opened the Word of God, the scripture says, *"Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. Then all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen!' while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. ...So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, 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 nor weep.' For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law"* (Nehemiah 8:6, 8-9).

When the Word of God was opened, I am sure that failure was all the people could see. Have you ever felt that way? You open the Bible, and it is almost as if a red light goes off on every verse you read. Fail! Fail! Fail! That is how these people must have felt. "Oh, God, You warned us, and we did not take it seriously. You told us what would happen to our

children, but we did not listen, so we ended up in captivity and brought Your name into reproach.”

As they read the words of God, they once again recognized the calling of God on their lives. Abraham was their father, and through them, there was supposed to be a blessing that would touch the whole known world. So the people wept when they heard the words. There was ruin everywhere.

However, something strange was said in the midst of it all. *“Then he said to them, ‘Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, ‘Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.’ And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them”* (8:10–12).

The people might have wondered, “How are we supposed to pretend we are happy when we’re not? Do we put a plastic smile on our face and walk around saying, ‘The joy of the Lord is my strength’ even if we don’t feel any of it inside?” Yet, we see here that the people understood the words declared to them, and they rejoiced greatly.

You might ask, what were those words? And what is this joy of the Lord that is supposed to be my strength?

## The Lost Son

To understand this principle of the joy of the Lord being our strength, let’s look in the Word where Jesus talked about a certain man who had two sons. His younger son said to his father, *“Give me the portion of goods that falls to me.’ So [the father] divided to them his livelihood. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living”* (Luke 15:12–13). This young man had a relationship with his father, as the children of Israel did with God in the Old Testament, but he did not appreciate it. He basically concluded, “I’m done with this place. There must be more to life than this.”

Interestingly, the father did not even seem to resist. So the son took his inheritance, went far, far away from the heart of his father, and wasted it all on himself. This is like Christians who never find their

purpose in life. They fail to understand that they are called to be ambassadors of an incredible kingdom. And so rather than living for the benefit of others, they choose to live for themselves.

After this son had spent everything he had, a severe famine came upon the land, and he began to be in want. He ended up in the fields, feeding swine—and nothing could be worse for a Jewish boy than feeding pigs. This is the type of Christian who ends up doing things he never believed he was capable of—perhaps becoming hooked on pornography, feeding the unclean thing.

The son was so hungry, yet he could not find anything that would satisfy. The society around him was selfish—nobody would give him anything to eat. There is nothing worse than knowing whose son or daughter you are, yet being in the world, and being totally rejected. That is what happened to this young man. The scripture says, *“When he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father”* (15:17–18).

I can just see him going down the road, repeating his mantra, “I am no longer worthy.” How many people come to church like that, trying to get right with God? They sit and say, “Father, I am not worthy. Make me like one of Your hired servants. I am so sorry for what I have done. I will come to the altar, cry, and repent. And that will be my whole testimony—what a horrible mess I made of my life, and You graciously allowed me to come home.”

*“But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him”* (15:20). Just imagine the scene—suddenly the son looks up and sees an old man running down the road. His robes are flowing; his white hair is blowing in the wind.

This father saw his son far away because he had been waiting for him to come home. That is what God is like! That is the purpose and mission of God in this world all along. He did not come to save the righteous; He came to save sinners. He came to us because we are weak and foolish. He came because only He could bridge the great divide between the kingdom of God and us.

## An Unexpected Welcome

How surprised the son must have been when his father embraced and kissed him. Under the religious rules of

that time, when you embraced somebody, you took their smell upon you. When the father embraced his son, he took the smell of the pigs upon himself. Likewise, when Jesus went to the cross and spread His arms open wide, He took our smell. He took our stain and our shame. He took all the foolish things that you and I have done, even as believers. He took it all upon Himself!

As the son starts saying, “Father, I have sinned. I am no longer worthy. Make me one of your hired servants,” the father does not even acknowledge him. Instead, the first thing the father does is call to his servants, “Bring the best robe in the house and put it on my son!” (see verse 22).

That robe was reserved for royalty. When it was put on the son, it covered the smell of his shame. It covered the places he had been. How stunned the servants must have been! The Bible says in the book of Hebrews that the salvation of God is something the angels desire to look into. They do not understand that Almighty God, who lives in perfection, has set His heart and desire on you and me! We are His trophies forever. The best robe in the house of God is the blood of Jesus Christ—the covering that takes away the stain and reproach of what we have done.

As if that were not good enough, the next thing the father said was, “Bring the ring and put it on his finger.” The ring was the sign of the father’s authority. The signet ring on the son’s finger meant that when he sealed a document with that ring, he carried the full authority of his father. Just as Jesus says to us, “Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions. and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you” (Luke 10:19).

And then the father said, “Bring shoes and put them on my son’s feet” (see Luke 15:22). In other words, “Son, you are going to take a journey. I am going to send you places, and you are going to talk about me.” What do you think the son’s message was from that point onward? Was it the seven steps to success, obey this, do that? No! “You must meet my father! My life was a mess. I was living in a pigsty but when I returned home, he came down the road and embraced me. He covered me, empowered me and invited me on a journey to tell others about him!”

## The Father’s Joy

The father then brought him into the house, and this

is where it gets really interesting. The scripture says that the father had the fatted calf killed and arranged a celebration with much music and dancing” (see Luke 15:23–25). Now you can just picture the son standing in the corner of the room. He wore the robe, the ring, the shoes, and now he was the center of attention of this entire gathering. The musicians started to play, and the dancing began. I have attended a Jewish wedding and have observed the older Jewish men dancing. How they dance in a circle and raise their hands is just amazing.

So the son looked at his father jubilantly dancing, and suddenly it hit him: “It is my father’s joy to bring me home! It is my father’s joy to cover my failure. It is my father’s joy to empower me over my enemies. It is my father’s joy to call me to represent him in his kingdom!” He looked, and it was not his joy—it was his father’s joy—that became his strength!

“The joy of the Lord is your strength.” That is what Nehemiah and the others were telling the people. It is God’s joy to bring you home. It is God’s joy to restore you. It is God’s joy to give you the power to rebuild what was lost. It is the joy of the Lord to do this for you. That is the source of your strength! Yes, it becomes your joy, but it is His joy first!

That is why Nehemiah and the others in Israel said to the people, “Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared.” In other words, God is inviting you today to feast on His incredible joy. And as you do so, allow it to spill over through your life onto all those around you who have never experienced it! Hallelujah!

Carter Conlon  
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Update from Our Bible School

Living for the Benefit of Others

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

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