

How to Spot a Spiritually Strong Person (Family Worship)

Nehemiah 8:1-10

Bellevue

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Kids, in the Bible passage we're about to explore, we learn this truth: the joy of the Lord is your strength. That's right. True strength comes from God. Not from bulging biceps, or cat-like speed. Our strength comes from trusting the Lord.

Did you know that the Bible does clearly teach that every person who becomes a Christian is given, by God, a supernatural gift! That gift doesn't make you a superhero like we just saw in the video, but it does give you the ability to affect other people in extraordinary ways.

Preaching, for example, which is my gift—has the mysterious power to pry into peoples' personal lives, causing them to feel convicted. Hebrews says:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Hebrews 4:12

That's right, the Bible can cut right through you, in a way that no human words can. You might say that the words of God are super-powerful. When you become a Christian, you get a gift too. It may not be preaching, but it will be something that sets you apart from the rest of the world, making you a force to be reckoned with.

This is why being involved in a church, where you share your gifts but also receive the gifts of others, is important. By drawing from the gifts of others, we can become spiritually strong.

Nehemiah 8, where we turn today, gives us a great picture of what spiritually strong people look like. Here's what's about to happen. A huge crowd of people have gathered together in the city of Jerusalem to hear a man named Ezra read the Word of God. For a very long time, the people have not been listening to God's words.

Now that Nehemiah has rebuilt this wall around the city, and people are feeling safe, they now need to get back into a close relationship with God.

Notice what happens in 8:1...

...all the people gathered together at the square in front of the Water Gate. They asked the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had given Israel. ² On the first day of the seventh month, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding. ³ While he was facing the square in front of the Water Gate, he read out of it from daybreak until noon before the men, the women, and those who could understand. All the people listened attentively to the book of the law. ⁴ The scribe Ezra stood on a high wooden platform made for this purpose. Neh. 8:1–4

Since a picture is worth a thousand words, let me give you one. Here is Ezra is standing high up on a wooden platform. He has opened the Old Testament Scriptures and according to v. 3, he read out loud for six hours! Six hours! Now let's get real: how many of you would show up tonight if I said, "Come and join me at 5 PM for a six-hour, standing, Scripture read-a-thon." I'm fairly certain we'd see a small group.

I recently asked one of our sons what his favorite part of my preaching was. I was fishing for compliments, for sure. It didn't take him long to respond. He said, "I like the length of them." No comment on brilliance, compelling applications, or spiritual depth. The best part of your preaching is that you say it and send us to lunch.

I'm not sure how that particular son would have survived this day in Nehemiah 8! And to be fair to him, I'm not so sure I would have either. From sunrise to high noon—they stood and absorbed the Scriptures.

But the length of time is what makes this moment so remarkable: no person in the crowd said to be complaining. There is no verse that says, "And though some people were saying, "When's he gonna wrap it up," the Lord blessed the day." No, none of that. Nobody is slipping out early to get the corner booth at the restaurant. When we read this, the reaction expected is one of amazement. These people must have been starving for God's Word. And they were.

The first sign of a truly strong person—he or she has...

A Spiritually Strong Person

1. Has an insatiable appetite for the Word of God. (vv.1-4)

Do you know what the word insatiable means? It's a spelling bee word. Here's what the dictionary says...

Insatiable (adjective) describes a desire, need, or appetite that is too intense or great to be satisfied. It means you are always wanting more and never feel like you have enough.

This describes my relationship with Gibson's donuts. If I have one, I want two. If I have two, I want three. Those things create an insatiable feeling. I want more and more.

That's the way these people were about God's Word. And I can tell you—devouring Scripture for six hours is life-giving. Eating boxes of glazed is not.

Notice V. 1 says the people asked Ezra to bring the Scriptures out. They wanted to hear from God because they wanted to change and grow. The book of Romans says, "we are transformed by the renewing of our minds."

You can be sure that you are growing spiritually, when you have a growing interest in knowing what's inside the Bible.

One of my favorite stories Jesus ever told captures this idea beautifully. Jesus said that a man was walking through a field one day when suddenly he stumbled upon a buried treasure hidden beneath the dirt.

He noticed something was there—he could see that something had been buried. So he dropped to his hands and knees, using his bare hands, he pulled back the layers of the soil, and freeing the chest. He must have felt like he had found a winning lottery ticket. What could possibly be inside?

He took a big rock and he busted the lock. He couldn't believe his eyes. There were no words that could adequately express the joy he felt inside. From now on, his life would be different. He knew that his story would not be divided in two—all that happened before finding the treasure, and all that happened after.

Jesus is telling this story, to those who would listen, and at this moment he says the man knew instantly the right thing to do. He'd make a bold decision that he'd never regret.

Jesus said:

"When a man found the treasure, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field." Matthew 13:44

Notice **the joy** the man felt in his soul! What was in the box brought him more joy than all this other possessions—combined! He would gladly everything he owned in order to have what it held.

So what did he do?

He put the box back in the ground. He smoothed over the soil so that nothing was sticking out. Before leaving, he looked both ways ensuring that no one saw.

And the man ran right home. He put his house, his vehicles and his baseball cards—all of it—sold to some rando on Facebook Market. The Apostle Paul said, “⁷ But whatever I gained, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.” The man sold it all—with a look of sheer joy on his face! He put it all in boxes—sold—so that...

the stack of cash in hand, could now be used to buy those ten acres, that parcel of land that others had walked but never noticed. Out there in the middle, under a small patch of smoothed over soil, he had found a new life.

Famous missionary Jim Elliot once said:

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

—Jim Elliot

That is such a powerful statement and a perfect summary of what it means to be a Christian. What’s in the box isn’t gold—it’s God. And once a person experiences the power of the Word of God, once the voice of God cuts into a man, he is never the same. All things before now counted as loss.

One of the best stories to illustrate this idea is from the life of Augustine of Hippo—a man that lived a long time ago. Who was Augustine?

Augustine was a typical teenage boy who has been born in the year 354. As a teenager, he spent most of his time doing bad things. He was not a well-behaved kid and his mother Monica prayed for him constantly that he would become a Christian—that God would rescue her son. But Augustine was smart and successful—which made him prideful, and even though he was popular, he was inwardly restless. Nothing seemed to satisfy his soul. Everything he tried—he just wanted more, and he was never happy.

Then one day, while sitting outside, he was feeling depressed, like something was missing in his life. At that moment, he heard the voice of a child somewhere nearby repeating a simple phrase over and over: “Take up and read. Take up and read.”

Augustine assumed that God was trying to get through to him. He found a Bible and threw it open. A verse from Romans stuck out to him, about sin, and instantly, the words of Scripture told him the truth about who he was. The word of God got through to him, in a way that his mother or anybody else could.

Augustine said that in that moment, that “light flooded into my heart.” And just like the man who found that treasure in the field, Augustine felt that everything he had valued in life suddenly felt kind of cheap. Everything was different now.

He surrendered his life to Christ and eventually became one of the strongest leaders of the early church. He wrote a book called *The Confessions*, that still sells thousands of copies today—1500 years later.

What changed Augustine? The Bible. This is why we give every first grader a Bible, because we want every child to have their own Bible from the moment they learn to read. Inside are the words of life!

So my first point was this: A spiritually strong person has a huge appetite for Scripture. Second, a spiritually strong person...

2. Enjoys discussions about Scripture. (vv.7-8)

Let me show you what I mean. Look at what happens next. As Ezra is publicly reading the Scriptures from the platform, something else starts happening. Small groups start to form and other teachers get involved.

Listen to verses 7 and 8:

⁷ [13 teachers], who were Levites, explained the law to the people as they stood in their places. ⁸ They read out of the book of the law of God, translating and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read. Ne 8:7–8

So, here is scene two: Now, these 13 teachers have turned and spread out among the people. They let the people ask questions. They explain the meanings. They help people grasp what God is saying.

And this is a beautiful picture of what spiritually strong people do. They talk about the Word with other people. They want more than just surface level exposure to the Word. They want to interact with it, discuss it with others who also seek to grow. And once a person starts to have conversations like this, around weighty matters, small talk just seems kind of boring if it goes on for long.

This is one reason we challenge every person in our church to get involved in a life group. According to the math, lots of people in this room are stuck in scene one of this story—they here the preaching of Scripture, which is great! But they are not going to grow as strong spiritually, if they refuse to get into a small group. What I’m doing now is a big deal, but you are all staring at the back of someone’s head while listening to sermon.

God has given many in the church the gift of teaching Scripture. In small groups, those teachers can make things more clear. They can ask questions, confess struggles, and pray for one another.

Now, you may wonder—what questions were the people asking there in scene two? V.8 says these men “translated and gave the meaning” so the people could understand.

Some scholars believe they were translating the old Hebrew language into Aramaic, the language many of the people now spoke. Other Bible scholars believe the emphasis is less on language translation and more on explanation and application of Scripture. Either way, the point is clear: These teachers helped bridge the gap between hearing the Word and knowing how to apply the Word. This is an important part of discipleship.

Now, before we move, I want to make sure that I mention v. 6. It says: *⁶ Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and with their hands uplifted all the people said, “Amen, Amen!”* Do you see that? Do you think it’s weird that the older people around you say, “Amen!?” It is kind of odd, right? When they call your number at the burger joint—Number 36—no body says, “Amen!” That’s not a term you hear often, outside of church.

Why do some grownups do that? Because the bible says its cool! The actual word “amen” means, “I agree” or “That’s so true.” When the preacher says something that creates emotion, it’s a good thing for somebody in the audience to shout AMEN. It’s kind of like a person saying, “You’ve got that right!” It’s a good thing for people for people to respond enthusiastically, without interrupting the speaker.

Now, let me show you the last sign of spiritual health that shows up here. I have said: 1) a spiritually strong person has an insatiable appetite for Scripture, and 2) they go deeper in discussions about Scripture. Now, notice the way that the word of God affects our spirit. Our attitude.

When the people first hear the Bible being read, they start to cry, because they know they have broken so many rules. But look what Ezra says:

“This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep....” Do not grieve, because the joy of the Lord is your strength.” Neh 8:9–10

It’s good to feel sorry for our mistakes, but here’s the good news—God is a god of grace! He wants us to feel forgiven. He wants us to rejoice in getting a second chance.

A Spiritually Vibrant Person:

3. Exudes the kind of joy that comes only from the Lord. (v.10)

Here we have it—one of the most beautiful lines in the entire Old Testament:

“The joy of the Lord is your strength.”

What does it mean? It could mean that your strength won't show when you finally earn a straight A-report card, or win Valedictorian of your class. Or when you win the state championship in your sport, or earn a scholarship from a Division 1 school. You would think that earthly accomplishments would make you feel strong, but they never make a person feel as good as you would think.

Lasting joy comes only from the Lord.

I told you about a famous Christian named Augustine. Now, let me tell you about the life of C. S. Lewis.

When Lewis was just a boy, his mother died of cancer, and the grief of losing her deeply wounded him. For many months, he had begged God: “Please save my Mom!” But no miracle came. Hence he said, “There is no God. When you die, that's it. Game over.” He ruled out the idea of life after death.

But throughout his life, Lewis kept having strange experiences that filled him with pleasant feelings and made him wonder if God could possibly be out there—establishing contact through punctuated moments of joy.

The first time this happened—when his heart was filled with the warmth of another world—he was outside playing, and his big brother walked up with something he had designed. It was a tiny toy garden, with a biscuit tin lid as the base. Complete with miniature moss and little trees, Lewis saw it and later said something almost magical stirred inside him. In that moment, he felt a homesickness for a land he'd never seen. Unexplainable joy.

With time, these little tastes of heaven would happen every now and then, which made him finally say:

If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world. –C.S. Lewis

The joy of the Lord became C.S. Lewis' strength, which inspired him to write *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a story of four children who find a portal to a beautiful land they never believed existed. A land ruled by a loving Lion.

C.S. Lewis discovered what Nehemiah knew. When you put your trust in God, there is a joy, joy, joy, joy down in your heart, down in your heart to stay. There is a joy that comes only from God, that can be your strength!" So if you love God, let people see that joy you have in in serving Him.

When Jesus Christ died on the cross, he took away the fear we have in punishment, but he also removed the fear we would normally have of death. Because three days later, he rose again and appeared to his disciples. After teaching them for a period of time, he flew up into heaven right before their eyes, soon after the Holy Spirit came and filled the hearts of the Christians. The Bible says that the Holy Spirit is like a deposit that guarantees our inheritance. The Holy Spirit speaks to the Christian, reminding them often that this world is not their own, that a better world awaits. This is called hope. The Spirit gives us hope. But also, the Spirit gives us joy.

So what do you do with that God-given joy? How can we do more than just acknowledge it? How do we grow and share the joy of the Lord.

Let me suggest a few practical ways to let "the joy of the Lord" become your strength.

1. At dinner time or bedtime, share one burden and one blessing with your family.

I heard someone say years ago that life is like a set of railroad tracks running side by side. There's always a track of joy, and there's always a track of pain.

That's so true, isn't it? At any given moment, you can usually see something beautiful blossoming in your life, while also carrying something stressful, disappointing, or unwanted. That's why one practical exercise for families is this. Tonight, at dinner time or at bedtime, start a new ritual of sharing one hard thing from the day, and one good thing God gave you that day. One burden, one blessing.

This helps train our hearts to remember that joy is not pretending life is perfect. Joy is remembering God is still good even on hard days.

And when families do this together, something beautiful happens. Your loved ones learn how to celebrate with you, and they also learn how to pray for you. Some homes only talk about problems. Other homes only pretend everything is fine. Healthy Christian homes learn to speak honestly about both.

2. Set a goal to cut complaining.

In Philippians 2:14, the Bible says:

Do everything without grumbling or arguing. Phil. 2:14

That word for *grumbling* hearkens back to the Old Testament story of Moses leading the people out of Egypt. God had rescued them from slavery. He had parted the Red Sea. He was leading them toward the Promised Land. But when they got uncomfortable... when food was short, water was scarce, and life got hard... they started complaining.

They said: "We would have been better off staying in Egypt!"

And God punished the people for being grumblers.

So, when Paul tells the people: "do everything without grumbling," he is reminding them of that story, but also, I found this funny—the Greek word for grumbling, when spoken out loud, actually sounds like whining. The word is: *gong-goos-MOS (gongysmos)*.

Today, if a mother tells a boy to unload the dishwasher, he might say, *gongysmos!* He's letting her know that he heard what she said, but he's not happy about it.

Just the other day, I was hanging curtains in our house because I wanted to make my wife happy. Happy wife, happy life, right? So, there was a window on each side of the TV and both curtains were perfectly installed. When I stepped back to admire my work of art, I was sure that Lynley would shed a tear. When she turned the corner and saw it, she turned her head funny and said: "Would you mind switching them? The curtains have a rod that pulls them closed and you've got that on the wrong side."

I didn't say it out loud... but in my heart:

"GONG-GOOS-MOS."

I grumbled. I didn't argue. I didn't protest. I switched the curtains minus any joy of the Lord.

It was not my best moment, because one of the ways we spread the joy of the Lord is by doing things for others without grumbling. Psalm 100:2 says, serve the Lord with gladness. Not serve the Lord with *gongysmos*. Ask God to help you stop grumbling.

3. Write personal notes.

One of the best ways to make someone else's day, and increase your own joy at the same time, is to tell another person very specifically how they have blessed your life.

Think about it. Most communication today happens through rapid fire texts but I asked my kids last week: would you rather get a kind text from a person, or a handwritten note? Does it even matter anymore? And they all agreed—the handwritten note means more. Why? Because people often hang onto those notes, reading back over them to

squeeze all the juice from the lemon. But also, because a handwritten note says very clearly, “I sat down, I slowed down, and I thought about you today.”

Hebrews says, “Let us consider how we can spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” Writing someone a note is a great way to do that. Now maybe you wonder: “What would I even say?” When I sit down to write, my mind goes blank.

Here’s a great place to start, Galatians 5:22-23:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Look at that verse and yourself:

What person comes to mind when I read each of those words? Write a name next to each word.

For example:

The first fruit is love. Who in your life has loved you well? Who has made you feel seen, appreciated, protected, encouraged? And then ask: How did they do that? What moment stands out? What did they say? What did they sacrifice?

Then sit down and put words to it.

“Dad, thank you for always showing up.”

“Mr. Sam, thank you for teaching our small group every Sunday.”

“Coach, thank you for giving me so much playing time this year.”

“Grandma, thank you for always peeling my oranges when I’m at your house.”

And here’s the amazing thing:

Not only will that note become a treasure to the person receiving it, the act of writing a note expands the heart of the author. Joy is a residue that remains after counting a blessing.

Put kind words onto paper, and hand them to other human beings.

Those are just three ideas for spreading the joy of the Lord: Open up with family—share a burden and a blessing. Cut the complaining. And write someone a kind note.