

If we were to survey all the Bible verses found on your Christian fridge magnets, I wonder which verses would be the most popular? It can't be too long, so perhaps something like Hebrews 13:8 – “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.” Or that perennial favorite, Psalm 23:1: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” But I think the second half of Nehemiah 8:10 would be a contender too. “The joy of the LORD is your strength.” It's a verse I commonly see on fridge magnets, bookmarks and virtual posters on Pinterest! There's even an old song in which the first verse simply repeats this line over and over again – I won't torture you by trying to sing it, but quite likely a number of our older folk will know it.

Now that's a lovely sentiment, isn't it? “The joy of the LORD is *my* strength!” Who doesn't want that? A deep, abiding joy – one that's God-given and strength-giving! I'm sure many do, that's why it's on so many fridge magnets! We want this kind of joy! And we want churches that exhibit such joy! We want churches that help us pursue, and find such joy! And yet for many of us, such joy remains stuck on our fridge doors, never to take root in our lives. Oh, we can try to manufacture it in our churches! Perhaps if our music becomes more lively and contemporary! Perhaps if we have a more dynamic and charismatic speaker who can give spiritual TED talks! Maybe that will do the trick! But it never ever seems to bring the true reformation and revival and joy we long for. Just where can we find such joy? And how can we pursue such joy?

Now, if you had been living during Nehemiah's time, there hasn't been much joy either! For more or less the past century, your people have been forced to live in exile in a foreign land. You've lost the war, so you've

been forced to live away from the familiar smells of Sarawak laksa, from the sound of marketplace chatter in Hokkien and Bahasa Sarawak, from the familiar sights of places like the Waterfront or Wisma Saberka or the DBKU building. That's what it was like. Indeed, God's people have not just lost their land, but all the other things that marked them out as God's people. Their temple was gone. Plundered. Destroyed. They had no king. They've all been captured and eliminated. They might have been God's people, but it was hard to find visible evidence they were supposedly God's chosen ones! No wonder they sang songs of lament, like the one we find poignantly captured in Psalm 137.

“How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?
If I forget you, Jerusalem,
May my right hand forget its skill. (v.4-5)

But now, is there hope? After all these years in exile, Cyrus, the new Persian king, has agreed to let the Jews go home! They can go and rebuild the temple! They can go and repair the walls of the city, which had been lying in ruins for many years. That, in a nutshell, is what the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are all about. It's all about a rebuilding project.