

The Revitalization of Grace Covenant Church “The Sound of Rejoicing and the Joy of Giving”

Scripture

Nehemiah 12:27–31 (ESV)

And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres. ²⁸And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathites; ²⁹also from Beth-gilgal and from the region of Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem. ³⁰And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall. ³¹ Then I brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall and appointed two great choirs that gave thanks. One went to the south on the wall to the Dung Gate.

Nehemiah 12:38 (ESV)

The other choir of those who gave thanks went to the north, and I followed them with half of the people, on the wall, above the Tower of the Ovens, to the Broad Wall,

Nehemiah 12:40–44 (ESV)

So both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me; ⁴¹and the priests Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets; ⁴²and Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang with Jezrahiah as their leader. ⁴³And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. ⁴⁴On that day men were appointed over the storerooms, the contributions, the firstfruits, and the tithes, to gather into them the portions required by the Law for the priests and for the Levites according to the fields of the towns, for Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered.

Introduction

The Christian life is hard work. The Bible recognizes it as hard work by describing it as a battle (“Fight the good fight of the faith” [1 Tim. 6:12]), a race (“I have finished the race” [2 Tim. 4:7]), and a sacrifice (“I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” [Rom. 12:1]).

The Christian life is a struggle. Jesus promised his followers not a comfortable life but a cross. But it is not only that! After times of struggle, there are often pleasant times of sweet rest. After warfare there is victory. Along with the groans of spiritual exertion, there are times of joyous celebration.

The Christian life is an occasion for Celebration. The narrative tells how Nehemiah brought the Levites, musicians, and singers in from the outlying regions of the country, took the people up on the wall, and staged a great procession or parade. It had two parts. One part was led by Nehemiah and proceeded in one direction around the wall while the other part was led by Ezra and proceeded in the other direction around the wall. Each group was led by musicians and choirs that sang praises to God and gave thanks to him. Then, after the circumference of the wall had been navigated in this manner, the people converged at the temple, offered sacrifices, and rejoiced so loudly that “the sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away” (v. 43).

Sermon Guide

The Elements of Celebration

1. Purification

The entire procession either began or concluded with the ritual of purification: “*And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall*” (Neh. 12:30). Priests, Levites, the people, the walls, and the gates were purified.

Why Purification?

The great obstacle in worship is sin. God is “of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong” (Hab. 1:13). For sinners to come

into God's presence, the defilement of sin must be removed. The filth of sin needs to be washed away. These purification rituals were symbolic of the need for spiritual cleansing. The ritual of purification pointed to the fact that our hearts are spiritually unfit for the worship of almighty God. The one who may enter God's presence has "clean hands and a pure heart" (Ps. 24:4). The only way that we may come into God's presence is through our union with Jesus Christ. Only by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone can our sins be washed away. In Christ, "I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (51:7).

How do we purify ourselves?

In the New Testament, it is a simple process. It is not by ritual but by confessing our faults and believing that God has forgiven them. Confess your failings, your sins, your mistakes. Admit them. Do not hide them. Do not blame somebody else for them. Do not gloss them over. Confess them. Not only to God, but to any who may be involved in them. Then believe that God cleanses you, that he forgives you, that he has restored you to his favor. This is what fills the heart with joy.

1 John 1:9 (ESV)

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

2. The Dedication of the Great Wall

Glad Singing. The centerpiece in these services was given to the choirs and the instrumentalists—the players of "cymbals, harps and lyres" (v. 27). Singing has always been a striking feature of the worship of God's Old Testament and New Testament people.

There is a fourfold repetition of the words joy and rejoice. But notice that it is not merely said that the people felt joyful or were enjoying themselves but that this was "because God had given them great joy." Their joy was spiritual and not just a hedonistic thing. It was exactly what Paul was to speak of later in writing to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4).

If the joy of Nehemiah's Jerusalem seems alien and Paul's unnatural, it is simply a measure of the difficulty experienced by a rich western world in finding well-being in godliness itself. What Nehemiah and Paul knew—in direct contrast to the modern doctrine that he who acquires most and succeeds best is happiest—is that joy, like love, peace, self-control, etc. (cf. Gal. 5:22), is spiritual.¹

3. GIVING

"On that day" (Neh. 12:44; 13:1). It is a sign of the genuine sense of spiritual well-being associated with the events described in recent chapters that Nehemiah now describes the commitment of the people to give to the support of their spiritual leaders—the priests and Levites.

Regular, full-hearted giving to the ministry of God's Word is a blessing that one should never take for granted. Although giving was obligatory under the law of Moses, it is rare to witness it done with such evident enthusiasm and commitment as Nehemiah describes here.

In Conclusion

It is from such passages as these that the New Testament church encouraged Christians not only to give regularly to the work of God as an act of worship, but also to do so cheerfully and with enthusiasm: "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). When God is at the center of our lives, everything we have is viewed as his, and support for gospel ministry is a joy and not a burden. When the gospel governs our giving, it is always an act of gratitude.²

We will have to take note in the next chapter of Nehemiah that this ideal situation did not last long. As soon as Nehemiah returned to Persia, things deteriorated quickly. Regular, full-hearted giving to the ministry of God's Word is a blessing that one should never take for granted. Although giving was obligatory under the law of Moses, it is rare to witness it done with such evident enthusiasm and commitment as Nehemiah describes here. It is wonderful to see enthusiastic support for a biblically shaped ministry rather than one that bends to the fads of self-help and therapeutic needs.

¹McConville, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, 142–43.

²Thomas, D. W. H. (2016). *Ezra & Nehemiah*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & I. M. Duguid, Eds.) (p. 398). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.