

Celebration

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[0:00] Last week we saw Nehemiah resume his plan to repopulate Jerusalem.

! And in those verses we see the dedication of the wall.

The dedication is a major celebration. The word dedication comes from the Latin verb which means to offer or to give. And when an object is dedicated to the Lord, for example, it means it's given to him for his control and use.

So when a person dedicates himself or herself to God, it's for the same reason. And we dedicate ourselves for God's use. So let's read the verses before we dig into them.

So here are Nehemiah 12, verses 27 through 47. And they say, Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, they sought out the Levites in all their places to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings and singing, with cymbals and stringed instruments and harps.

[1:23] And the sons of the singers gathered together from the countryside around Jerusalem, from the villages of the Nedophethites, from the house of Gilgal, and from the fields of Geba and Asmapheth.

For the singers had built themselves villages around Jerusalem. You wondered why I called them village people last week, didn't you? So tonight the village people actually are going to sing. But then the priests and the Levites purified themselves and purified the people, the gates, and the wall. So I brought the leaders of Judah up on the wall and appointed two large thanksgiving choirs. One went to the right hand on the wall toward the refuse gate. After them went Hoshiah and half the leaders of Judah, and Azariah, Ezra, Meshulam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemiah, Jeremiah, and some of the priest's sons with trumpets, Zechariah, the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemiah, the son of Mataniah, the son of Micaiah, the son of Zechariah, the son of Asaph, and his brethren, Shemiah, Azariel, Maliah, Giliath, Maya, Nathaniel, Judah, and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David, the man of God.

Ezra the scribe went before them. By the fountain gate in front of them, they went up the stairs of the city of David, on the stairway of the wall, behind the house of David, as far as the water gate eastward.

The other thanksgiving choir went the opposite way, and I was behind them with half of the people on the wall, going past the tower of the ovens, as far as the broad wall, and above the gate of Ephraim, above the old gate, above the fish gate, the tower of Hananel, the tower of the hundred, as far as the sheep gate, and they stopped by the gate of the prison.

[3:10] So the two thanksgiving choirs stood in the house of God. Likewise, I and half of the rulers with me, and the priest, Elakim, Messiah, Benjamin, Micaiah, Eleni, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets, also Messiah, Shemiah, Eleazar, Uzi, Johanan, Mickelijah, Elam, and Ezer.

The singers sang loudly, with Jezariah, the director. Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy.

The women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off. And at the same time, some were appointed over the rooms of the storehouse for the offerings, the firstfruits, and the tithes, to gather them in from the fields of the cities, the portion specified by the law for the priests and the Levites.

For Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered. Both the singers and the gatekeepers kept charge of their God, and the charge of the purification, according to the command of David and Solomon his son.

For in the days of David and Asaph of old, there were chiefs of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. In the days of Zerubbabel, and in the days of Nehemiah, all Israel gave

portions for the singers and the gatekeepers, a portion each day.

[4 : 36] They also consecrated holy things for the Levites, and the Levites consecrated them for the children of Aaron. So you can see from that passage, we have a description of the worship service in Jerusalem for the dedication of the city's walls.

The description for the completion of the walls was given way back in chapter 6. That's when Nehemiah wrote, So the wall was finished on the 25th day of Elah in 52 days.

That's Nehemiah 6.15. Elah was the sixth month. That's around August, September in our time frame. And the 25th day would place the completion of the walls then in mid-September.

If you remember, the public confession and covenant renewal ceremony described in chapters 9 and 10 had taken place on the 24th day of the following month. That put it in mid-October.

And presumably, the dedication of the walls took place immediately after that. In Nehemiah 12.31, Nehemiah is referred to in the first person again.

[5 : 38] So this suggests that the account of the dedication comes from Nehemiah's own personal record. Like we've seen from Nehemiah in other places, what follows is a detailed description of the ceremonial procession and praises with which the walls of the city were dedicated to the Lord.

The purpose of the occasion was made very clear. In 12.27, it says the purpose was to celebrate the dedication with gladness. Last week on the handout, I said this week would be titled Dedication. After reading it over several times, Celebration felt like a better title for the lesson. You heard when we read it that two choirs walked in opposite directions around the city and they symbolically enclosed the entire city with their songs of praise.

And it was a symbol of consecration. You also had musicians playing stringed instruments, trumpets, and cymbals that accompanied the choir. Ezra proceeded with the southern group and Nehemiah went with the northern group.

And the climax occurred when both choirs entered the temple where they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced for God made them rejoice with great joy. Some people over the years have wondered why the account of the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem has not been held until now and why it wasn't inserted at the end of chapter 6 where we were first told that the wall was finished.

[7 : 03] But if it had been inserted there, it wouldn't have been the fitting climax to the book that it is. Nor would the book have demonstrated so much unity that we see here. Remember that the book has two parts.

The first and longer part concerned the building of the walls and that was the task in which Nehemiah played the leading role. And this part fills chapters 1 through 7.

The second shorter part concerned the revival in Jerusalem and the rededication of the people. And in the revival, Ezra the priest and the spiritual head of the nation is the prominent person.

And this part occupies chapter 8 all the way through 12.26 that we finished last week. In the dedication of the walls that we're looking at tonight, these two important sections come together. Ezra leads one half of the celebrating people. Nehemiah leads the other. And they come together in unity to dedicate the walls and the city to God.

[8 : 03] Moreover, and this is the most significant part, the two groups actually circle the walls which Nehemiah had built and they converge at the temple. And of course, the temple is the spiritual center of the people's lives.

And that's where Ezra presides. So you see the two coming together there too. They start out at the place that Nehemiah built and finish up at the place where Ezra is the leader.

One commentator said this. He said, when the people march on the walls to the temple, they do so after having placed the temple once again at the center of their thoughts. The walls thus appear for what they are, not a monument to the strength of Judah, but God's gift for the protection and perpetuation of his name in the world.

We're going to break tonight's passage into four sections. Each is going to highlight something about the worship service or the preparation for the worship service.

And verses 27 through 30 show us the people preparing for the worship service. So we see the people preparing. Let's go ahead and read 27 through 30 again.

[9 : 12] They say, built themselves villages all around Jerusalem.

Then the priests and Levites purified themselves and purified the people, the gates, and the wall.

You know, this is really not too much different than how we do things today because when we have special meetings, we need to prepare for them in advance if they're going to be good meetings.

A good dedication service will require much planning and organizing by the people of the congregation or it won't be an honorable service to God. And that's true for any church service. Church services should be carefully and wisely planned and that's why we should be thankful for people like Dan who do take the time to plan out the worship services that we have every week. Nehemiah, as we've noted in previous studies, was also a man who did things right. He prepared well for every endeavor he pursued and this characteristic of his is very evident in this passage tonight on the dedication of the walls.

[10 : 43] He prepared well for this dedication ceremony and he got the people to do the same. According to verse 27, Nehemiah sought out the people that he wanted to attend.

The Levites were his focus. We know that some Levites lived in Jerusalem but a number of them lived outside of Jerusalem. Those outside of Jerusalem had to be called to come to Jerusalem for this consecration of the walls.

The Levites were especially needed for the dedication ceremony because they were the ones who would lead in the proceedings. We see also that the Levites responded favorably to the invitation. Verses 28 and 29 show us that. When those verses talk about the sons of the singers gathering themselves from the villages around Jerusalem, we need to realize that in that day all of the singers were Levites.

So the fact that they were able to have two celebration choirs shows just how many of the Levites responded. Think how any pastor would react to having so many people respond to an invitation like that.

[11 : 51] You know, every pastor would surely like to have the cooperation from his church members when it comes to special meetings. But very seldom does the pastor really experience a good response to special meetings.

So we should remember that and we should remember that the best way to support our new pastor is to be present for church events and to invite others to come with us. After the priest and the Levites gather, they lead a purification ceremony before beginning the service itself.

Verse 30 says, Then the priest and the Levites purified themselves and purified the people, the gates, and the wall. So Nehemiah didn't record all the details of this cleansing ritual, but from passages in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, it probably involved such actions as ritual sprinkling with water, animal sacrifice, fasting, and abstinence.

It also indicates an Old Testament ritual of washing. The priest and the Levites as well as the people in general needed cleansing from their sins and that's what the washing symbolized. We know that the great obstacle in worship is sin and for sinners to come in God's presence, the defilement of sin must be removed.

[13 : 10] The filth of sin has to be washed away and the purification rituals were symbolic of that need for spiritual cleansing. Before a minister preaches purity to the people, he needs to practice purity himself.

Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy 3 tell about ministers' qualifications and they emphasize this truth. The priest and the Levites in our text were not hypocritical.

They started with themselves and of course we expect the same thing from our preachers and pastors today. After the priest and the Levites purified themselves, the rest of the people were next. They probably merely washed themselves in their clothing, which of course would have been much more of an ordeal back in that day than it would be for us. The ritual of purification pointed to the fact that hearts are spiritually unfit for the worship of the Almighty God and the one who can enter into God's presence must have clean hands and a pure heart.

The only way we can come into God's presence is through our union with Christ and the only by faith alone in Jesus Christ can our sins be washed away. Even the walls and the gates were purified if you notice that from the verse.

[14 : 26] There's little precedent for this in Israel's history except for the provision given in Leviticus for cleansing private houses. That comes from Leviticus 14, 49 through 53.

Given that the city had been in the hands of Gentiles for so long and that so many Jews had died on the walls during the Babylonian siege of the city, the purification of the walls was probably viewed as a necessity.

In addition, the walls and the gates performed or formed the perimeter of the holy city and so it was important for them to be viewed as cleansed and holy too. One thing we need to keep in mind

though is this.

We have to avoid getting so caught up in the outward ritual that we miss the point. It's easy to ensure ritual cleanliness while avoiding purity of the heart.

It's one thing to be outwardly clean. It's quite another to be pure in spirit. We know that during his ministry Jesus frequently encountered religious zealots who were far more concerned about external cleanliness than they were about inward holiness.

[15 : 35] Think about how many times he exposed the Pharisees. He exposed them with things like fastidiously washing the outside of the cup and dish while inwardly they were full of greed and self-indulgence.

So we need to be careful to avoid thinking that these rituals of purification are good enough. We need to purify our hearts as well. When everything is ready Nehemiah divides the people and their leaders and also the priest and the Levites into two groups and we talked about how these groups form two large choirs.

Ezra's at the head of one group and Nehemiah's leading the other and they walk through the streets. They actually get up on the walls. They circle the city and they meet together over at the temple and there surrounding the temple area they engage in a responsive anthem back and forth. You may wonder how they were able to march on the wall but according to excavations Nehemiah's wall was nearly nine feet wide so this made the wall stronger and it also made the wall easier to defend.

Chances are Nehemiah likely had long been planning to have the people march on the walls when the walls were finished because if you remember way back when we studied chapter 4 we saw Sanballat, Tobiah, and others mocking the Jews about how weak the wall would be when they did get it finished if they ever got it finished.

[17 : 01] Here's Nehemiah 4.3 It says, So how light is a fox?

And Tobiah was saying that even a fox would cause the wall to crash. Here we see that the completed wall was more than strong enough to hold the fox it was strong enough to hold many people and I'm sure Nehemiah wanted the people to remember that as they got up on the wall. He probably wanted them to remember just what Tobiah had said and that would be another living example of how much God had provided for them by building such a strong wall.

Verses 31 through 42 give us the details about the parade around the city and the convergence at the temple and this second section of our lesson particularly focuses on the people singing.

So your next blank there is the people singing. We're going to read parts of verses 31 through 42 again except this time we're going to omit some of the names as we go through.

[18 : 11] I just can't get away from the list of names in Nehemiah. He does such a good job recording people and that's great but it is a little frustrating as we go through them. But looking at 31 through 42 here's what they say.

So I brought the leaders of Judah up on the wall and appointed two large Thanksgiving choirs. One went to the right hand on the wall toward the refuse gate. After them went Hoshiah and half of the leaders of Judah and Azariah, Ezra, Meshulam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemiah, Jeremiah and some of the priests' sons with trumpets.

And then we have others listed who went with the musical instruments of David and the men of God. Ezra the scribe went before them and then verse 37 says by the fountain gate in front of them they went up the stairs of the city of David on the stairway of the wall beyond the house of David as far as the water gate eastward.

The other Thanksgiving choir went the opposite way and I was behind them with half of the people on the wall going past the tower of the ovens as far as the broad wall and above the gate of Ephraim above the old gate above the fish gate the tower of Hananel the tower of the hundred as far as the sheep gate and they stopped by the gate of the prison.

So the two Thanksgiving choirs stood in the house of God likewise I and half of the rulers with me and the priest with trumpets. And then verse 42 ends by noting the singers sang loudly with Jezrahiah the director.

[19 : 45] Singing has always been a striking feature of the worship of God's Old Testament and New Testament people. And this is not true of other religions some religions use repetitive chant in fact many of them use repetitive chants and in some the clergy actually sing but generally the religions of the world really are not characterized by singing.

The other religions of the world are usually grim things. It's only in biblical worship that the people of God are characteristically joyful and express their joy in great singing.

I never had really thought about that until I studied this chapter and saw that note but it's true.

Christianity and Judaism are two of the few religions where people actually express their joy with singing.

And verse 45 says that everything done that day was according to the command of David and his son Solomon. So this means that the people of God sang psalms as they were singing and it seems natural for them to have chosen Psalm 48.

It speaks directly to the sense of the occasion. Listen to the last stanza of Psalm 48 because it describes exactly what they were doing that day. These verses are Psalm 48 verses 12 through 14 and they say walk about Zion and go all around her count her towers mark well her bulwarks consider her palaces that you may tell it to the generation following for this is God our God forever and ever he will be our guide even to death.

[21 : 25] It would be nice if Nehemiah had said what they sang when they actually were singing but that does certainly seem to fit with the occasion. And true this occasion is a special one but every act of worship should be marked with celebration and joy and the sound of glorious God exalting music.

And of course that's important because we should address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs singing and making melody with all our hearts. And of course that is Ephesians 5 19. So we've seen the preparing and we've seen the singing we see the third attribute of the celebration next and we see the people rejoicing the people rejoicing and this section covers only one verse but there's a lot in this one verse and that's verse 43.

Verse 43 says also that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced for God had made them rejoice with great joy. The women and children also rejoiced so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off.

You probably already noticed it as we read it but the root of the Hebrew word for joy or rejoicing occurs five times in just this one verse.

[22 : 45] So that's why the section is headed with the word rejoicing. It didn't take too much thinking to come up with that section header for this lesson. But we see more than rejoicing in this verse.

We also see that sacrifices were part of the worship service. our text refers to those sacrifices as great sacrifices. There's a lesson for us to learn in that.

No worthwhile dedication comes cheaply. Some try to proclaim a Christianity that requires little cost but Christianity is founded on the greatest sacrifice of all.

Of course, what is that? Exactly. It's founded on the greatest sacrifice of all which is what Christ did on Calvary. And in light of that truth how can we do less than make great sacrifices if we're going to be dedicated to promoting the cause of Christ?

So when you look at the description of what happened that day the rejoicing is listed after the sacrificing. And that's an important thing to note as well because dedication will always involve sacrificing.

[23 : 54] There's trial and tribulation in dedicated service to God but the joy it brings more than compensates for that. And that joy will not only be on this earth but the greatest joy will come in eternity.

The world's idea of joy is centered around selfishness but the divine idea of joy is centered around sacrifice for the honor of God. The world's joy is a mirage and short-lived at best but the joy of the Lord is magnificent and eternal.

Think about those last two sentences. The world's joy is a mirage and short-lived at best the joy of the Lord is magnificent and eternal.

How do you think priorities would change if believers consistently live like they believe those statements? It's kind of a sobering thought isn't it? But it also reminds us that we should be joyful. joyful. And many Christians endure joyless lives because their practice in the nitty-gritty situations of life doesn't conform to what they know that God expects of them.

[24 : 58] As a consequence they suffer from frustration and face eventual defeat. But if we keep in mind the ultimate joy then we should be able to live more joyful lives.

So the solution to joylessness is to once again set ourselves apart to the Lord. Whether we call this consecration dedication or sanctification is of little importance.

What is important is that we give God first place in our lives and when this is done the inner reality of our faith will take the place of conformity to an external set of standards and from this premise we'll be able to develop true spiritual identity and grow towards maturity and of course that will bring us more joy.

Think about something else. Think about the witness that true Christian rejoicing provides. We see that from verse 43 as well. The end of verse 43 says that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off. Can you imagine the people of the other cities just thinking I wonder what they're up to? They're having a really good time. Maybe I should figure out what's going on. Up there. More than the literal sound is involved here also involved is the fact that the consecrating of the walls sent a message to all the heathen nations around them about the greatness of God.

[26 : 22] That should be a major lesson to us today too. Knowing the Savior should make us sing and it should make us sing loudly enough that the neighborhoods in which we live and worship actually hear it.

Renewed hearts are difficult to hide when we really think about what Christ has done for us. Like the Jews, our testimony for the Lord will expand as our dedication for the Lord expands.

When our dedication increases, our testimony will increase. And if we as a church and other churches want to reach out into their communities with the word of God and also throughout the world on mission, they'll have to be dedicated in the work of God and people will need to see us doing that work with joy.

When you think about it, churches are often looking for better and more novel methods of proclaiming the word of God to the world. Some of that may have its place, but what would really help churches to reach more people is for the church to simply become dedicated to the Lord. Dedication will always expand the ministry of the church, and Nehemiah's life was an inspiring story of dedication. He was greatly dedicated to God, and that's why Nehemiah was able to accomplish so much for God.

[27 : 36] Before we leave this section, we need to notice one more thing about verse 43. Notice the source of the rejoicing. Verse 43 says, God had made them rejoice with great joy.

The people's joy that day was spiritual rather than being a self-centered joy. The people were rejoicing in the Lord instead of rejoicing in themselves. It was exactly what Paul was to speak of later when he wrote to the Philippians, rejoice in the Lord always.

Again, I say rejoice. And of course, that's Philippians 4.4. So here's a quote for you. It's from J.G. McConville. He said, If the joy of Nehemiah's Jerusalem seems alien and Paul's joy seems unnatural, this 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, and other fruits of the spirit, is spiritual.

So in other words, joy doesn't come from material things, it comes from the spiritual fruit that comes from knowing the Lord. verses 44 through 47 describe one more thing about the celebration.

[29 : 02] We've already seen the people preparing, the people singing, and the people rejoicing. In the last four verses of the chapter, we see the people giving. The people giving.

Listen to verses 44 through 47 one more time. They say, At the same time, some were appointed over the rooms of the storehouse for the offerings, the first fruits, and the tithes, to gather them from the fields of the cities, the portions specified by law for the priests and the Levites, for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who ministered.

Both the singers and the gatekeepers kept the charge of their God and the charge of the purification according to the command of David and Solomon, his son. For in the days of David and Asaph of Old, there were chiefs of the singers and songs of praise and thanksgiving to God.

In the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah, all Israel gave the portions for the singers and the gatekeepers a portion for each day. They also consecrated holy things for the Levites, and the Levites consecrated them for the children of Aaron.

Strictly speaking, the account of the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem ends with verse 43, but in Nehemiah's mind, the account doesn't really end there. It continues with the appointment of men to be in charge of the storerooms for the temple and the provision of supplies for the temple services.

[30:33] Nehemiah actually draws a line of continuity from the times of David and Solomon to his day. The last verse of chapter 12 even includes a reference to the time of Zerubbabel nearly a century earlier.

And as a result of faithful worship the people gave willingly and thankfully. And we above all other people should rejoice in God.

In fact, only those people who have been redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ have any real deep cause for rejoicing. But that's not all we have to do. We have work to do too and we need to go ahead and get on with it.

The people of Nehemiah's day showed that they understood that because they translated their joy into action. They actually demonstrated their joy by living it out and they did that by supporting the people who ministered to them.

And of course that's really not any different than what most churches do today. We support the people who minister to us as well. We've touched on some aspects of application already as we've gone through the verses but we actually can learn several things from the Jews example here in chapter 12.

[31:41] They demonstrated the proper way to approach a worship service they purified themselves and made sure that they were in the proper frame of mind to worship. During the worship service itself the Jews focused on praising God.

God gave them joy as they remembered all the hardships that God brought them through while they rebuilt the wall. And as we worship we should remember what God has done for us and let those memories bring joy.

You know when you think a lot about the contemporary Christian songs today a lot of them focus on what God can do for us and make us the center of the songs really we need to remember that the worship is for God and not for us.

The Jews also were willing to make sacrifices as an extension of their worship and such worship is more than a once or twice a week thing. It's a way of life.

We saw at the end of the chapter how the Jews demonstrated their commitment by wholeheartedly giving to support their ministers. And we should have a similar response to worship.

[32:48] That worship should lead us to give and it should lead us to give more than just money. We should also give our time and our talents as well. God's the source of everything we are and everything we have.

We should recognize that and use those talents and gifts to bless him. At the beginning of the lesson we discussed how the dedication was a big celebration.

The people of Jerusalem and its province had much to celebrate. The dedication of the walls is the climax to the months of hardship that the people have endured. And as they walked around the very walls they helped to build, this experience actually brings them together and gives them a sense of accomplishment.

Furthermore, the whole ceremony serves to establish confidence in the Lord. They know that he has helped them even though at times they had thought of quitting. So the building of the wall has restored their national prestige.

Their awakened spiritual sensitivity has also led to a spiritual renewal of a lasting kind. The repopulation of the city of Jerusalem has given them a sense of corporate strength and now as they walk around the walls that they have helped built, they sing praises to the glory of God and offer their thank offerings and they receive a new sense of worth and the result of course is God-given joy and it's not just any joy, it's exceeding joy that they have.

[34:13] And as the Jews did, we also need to find ways to unite the community and glorify God together. Special celebrations are a help to the believing community and they're also a testimony to the unbelievers.

We too must see ourselves as part of God's continuing plan. In our passage tonight as well as elsewhere in the Old Testament thanksgiving and worship and celebration were expressed through sacrifice.

Although the type of sacrifice is different in New Testament worship, sacrifice is still important. The joy that God gives is genuine and can be best experienced in fellowship with the community of God's people and we shouldn't be ashamed to be heard when we praise God.

When we're right with God, other things will fall into place. We'll delight in those who minister to us in Christ's stead. We'll count it an honor to see that they're properly supported in their work.

We'll also have a renewed respect for the word of God and as we internalize God's word, we'll find that its message transforms our lives. This will not only give meaning to the here and now, it will also add the dimension of joy to our experience.

[35 : 26] So hang on to that last part. Once again, it said, as we internalize God's word, we will find that its message transforms our lives. This will not only give meaning to the here and now, it will also add the dimension of joy to our experience.

The writer to the Hebrews summarized the connection between praise and sacrifice. He said, therefore, by him, let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name.

But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. Those verses were Hebrews 3, 15, and 16.

Listen to them one more time tonight as we close. Therefore, by him, let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name.

But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices, God is well pleased. Thank you.