

EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 19 **The Work of Consolidation, part 2 (Nehemiah 12:27-13:3)**

by Dr. Ralph Davis

II. The Celebration in the Joy of the Lord (Nehemiah 12:27-43)

We are not sure how long after the completion of the wall (Neh. 6:15) this dedication occurred. One has the impression that the dedication took place after the events of Nehemiah 7-11. It was not something to be neglected, but there may have been other, more pressing concerns at the very time when the wall was finished.

How might we characterize this celebration?

A. It was careful (Neh. 12:30)

That is, the whole occasion was prepared for by ritual cleanliness. I don't know precisely how they cleansed the gates and wall, but see Exodus 19:10,14-15 on the rest. This sort of approach stands in direct opposition, not ritually but in principle, to modern evangelicalism, where the last thing one seems to find amid all the chatter and good cheer is this serious preparation. Our approach is casual rather than careful.

B. It was memorable (Neh. 12:31-39)

The first group, with Ezra (Neh. 12:31-37)
The second group, with Nehemiah (Neh. 12:38-39)
The goal was the temple (Neh. 12:40-42)

Note the detailed locations around the wall (Neh. 12:31,37,38-39).¹ Stan Evers is doubtless right: "What memories must have flooded into the minds of the Jews as they walked the walls on which they had spent so much time and energy!"²

So the processions rivet their minds and imaginations to the work and pain and ordeal they had endured — and yet at the same time it was all an act of worship. The purpose was thanksgiving; the focus was not on "our achievement" but on "God's enabling." But circling the wall added concreteness and vividness to this thanksgiving. It gave particularity to their worship. They retraced "on location" (like a Reformation tour of Scotland?) God's work through them, and offered praise to him for it.

¹ You may need to consult the diagrams recommended in connection with Neh. 2 and 3.

² Evers, Stan, *Doing a Great Work*, 197.

The Puritans seemed to have a knack for this “memorableness.” Walter Pringle told his children the exact places where certain things happened to him, such as his first experience of prayer “at the north-east of Stichel Hall.” Years later he committed his newly born son to God “at the plum tree on the north side of the garden door.”³ Faith revels in and flourishes on such memories; it delights to crunch along the top of a wall that God kept them building in the face of ridicule and threats.

C. It was joyful (Neh. 12:27,43)

As is often pointed out, there are five occurrences of the root *samach* (be glad, gladness) in verse 43. Stan Evers points to the occasion of Ezra 3:13, where there was much weeping with the joy; here, however, God has entirely taken the sadness away! This is yet another instance of Psalm 30:5 (“Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning”).

III. The Perseverance in the Worship of the Lord (Nehemiah 12:44-13:3)

A. Mundane provisions (Neh. 12:44-47)

The joy and delight in those who led in worship (Neh. 12:44b) led to action that would insure the proper continuity of worship. See Numbers 18:21-32 for the portions referred to in verse 47. Kidner puts it nicely: “It is one thing to shout on a great occasion, but another to offer the sacrifice of praise continually and to make realistic provision for the church’s needs.”⁴ Or note, in more detail, H.G.M. Williamson:

“Unlike a fairy story, however, this ‘happy ending’ [=12:27-43] does not mark the conclusion of the book. The text hurries on (*At that time*, 12:44; *On that day*, 13:1) to deal with matters which we might too quickly dismiss as mere routine, namely financial provision for the regular temple services (12:44-47) and purification of the congregation in obedience to the law of God (13:1-3). Without such routine, the author seems to imply, the joy of a single day can never be sustained. Although it is usually the highpoints of success which impress themselves on the memory, the true gauge of spiritual progress in the individual as much as in community life is the extent to which what might be passed by as ‘the normal’ has been transformed. The form of the

³ Ryken, Leland, *Worldly Saints*, 209.

⁴ Kidner, TOTC, 127.

narrative at this point emphatically asserts that without such progress in regard to the ordinary, the climaxes and celebrations will fade all too quickly into tarnished memories.”⁵

So here we are taught the importance of ongoing, non-special obedience. It is too easy to neglect or despise this. Paul Johnson, in his *Intellectuals*,⁶ tells how Tolstoy loved to “perform” but cared little for common duties. For example, he was not moved to pay off debts he owed to poor people. There was no “visibility factor” in such mundane matters, no heroics to put on display.

B. Essential separation (Neh. 13:1-3)

The reference is to Deuteronomy 23:3-6. How did they interpret that passage? Did they infer from the mention of Ammonites and Moabites that the text intended the exclusion of “all foreigners” (Neh. 13:3)? Observe how in Nehemiah 13:2 they recall not merely the threat of man, but the protection of God.

There is a refreshing simplicity about this passage. There is something refreshing when the people of God order their lives out of the Word of God. Their practice simply flows out of what they “found written.”

Keep in mind Ezra 6:21 as you read this passage. The separation of Nehemiah 13:3 presupposes that such folks clung to their paganism. Converts to Yahweh were welcome.

So, praise (12:44-47) and purity (13:1-3) must mark the ongoing life of God’s people.

⁵ Williamson, H.G.M., *NBC*, 1994 ed., p. 440.

⁶ Pp. 111,115.