

Nehemiah: Dedication Service

Nehemiah 12:27-47

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

*The Lord's Day Evening
February 8, 2009*

Now turn with me once again to the book of Nehemiah, as we come to the penultimate study in Ezra and Nehemiah. There's one more to go in chapter 13. Tonight our reading is in chapter 12, and it begins at verse 27. And then if you turn back to chapter 6 and verse 15, we're going to pick up something that Nehemiah wrote in verse 15 of chapter 6. Now if you've got your fingers in those two places, chapter 6 and chapter 12, let's look to God in prayer.

Father, we thank You again for the Scriptures that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Help us again tonight to by Your Spirit read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Now back in chapter 6 and verse 15, we read,

“So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.”

Now turn to chapter 12 and verse 27, and we are a month later:

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. And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathites; also from Beth-gilgal and from the region of Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem. And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall.

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. And after them went Hoshai and half of the leaders of Judah, and Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, and

Jeremiah, and certain of the priests' sons with trumpets: Zechariah the son of Jonathan, son of Shemaiah, son of Mattaniah, son of Micaiah, son of Zaccur, son of Asaph; and his relatives, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah, and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God. And Ezra the scribe went before them. At the Fountain Gate they went up straight before them by the stairs of the city of David, at the ascent of the wall, above the house of David, to the Water Gate on the east.

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, and above the Gate of Ephraim, and by the Gate of Yeshanah, and by the Fish Gate and the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, to the Sheep Gate; and they came to a halt at the Gate of the Guard. So both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me; and the priests Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets; and Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang with Jezrahiah as their leader. And 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.

On 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. And they performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the command of David and his son Solomon. For long ago in the days of David and Asaph there were directors of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers; and they set apart that which was for the Levites; and the Levites set apart that which was for the sons of Aaron.

Well, thus far God's holy and inerrant word. May He add His blessing.

Now a month has gone by since the walls of Jerusalem had been completed. We read in chapter 6 and verse 15 (we've just read the text together), it's the twenty-sixth day of the month of Elul, which would put it somewhere in mid-September. And in chapter 9 and verse 1, which was just the day before when they had had the dedication service and the covenant renewal service, we are in the middle of the next month — the twenty-fourth of the next month. It's mid-October. We notice again here that Nehemiah now writes in the first person.

The purpose of this grand occasion we're told in verse 27 was to celebrate the dedication — the dedication of the walls, that is — “to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgiving, and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres.” What a sight it must have been! Two choirs, one going southward on top of the wall with half of the leadership of the city, and another choir going northwards — one with Ezra, one with Nehemiah. We're given some detailed description of areas of the wall. It would require some deft maneuvering to walk on the top of it at times — certain rocky surfaces — and it appears as though perhaps they went down from the wall and up some steps and then climbed onto the wall again. And they meet eventually in the temple.

It's a dedication ceremony, and four things emerge here that I want us to see.

I. Purification.

The first is *purification*. We read it there at verse 30:

“The priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall.”

We're not told what this purification ritual entailed. We know from passages in Exodus and Leviticus, and certain passages in the book of Numbers, that it probably involved sprinkling with water. It would have involved sacrifice when they got to the temple. It would have involved abstinence from sexual union, and it probably would have involved fasting.

The walls are going to be purified. The gates are going to be purified. The people are going to be purified. The priests and Levites are going to be purified. It's a reminder, isn't it, that we're all sinners; that no one can come into the presence of God, no one can serve the Lord, no one can worship God unless they are first of all purified, unless there is this washing ritual. The book of Hebrews in chapter 9 refers to these purification rituals. It calls them *baptisms*. They are baptisms. They are symbols of washing, symbols of the fact that we are unclean. We're dirty. We're unfit for the presence of God.

They have come back to Jerusalem. They have come back to be the Lord's people in God's holy city and to worship in His holy temple. They have dedicated now the city to God, and they're dedicating themselves to the Lord. But before they can do that they must have clean hands and a pure heart. [“Who can ascend to the hill of the Lord? He who has clean hands and a pure heart.”]

Of course these rituals of washing could never make the heart clean. We're apt to ask the question, “How were those in the Old Testament saved?” The answer was that they believed in Jesus, whom God would send. How were these purified? Because they believed in Jesus, whom God would send. They believed

in the One who said, “I have a baptism with which I must be baptized;” the One who would go to the cross and bear our sins in His own body upon the tree; the One who would die in the place of sinners like you and me; the One through whom alone cleansing can come. This is just a little picture of countless numbers of pictures under the old covenant that pointed to the coming of a deliverer, of a Savior, of a Messiah who would cleanse us from our sins.

The walls had to be purified. They were unclean, you see. People had died on these walls. The city had been occupied by Gentiles for a century or more. It needed to be cleansed. It needed to be purified.

“Nothing in my hands I bring;
Simply to Thy cross I cling.
Naked, look to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace.
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.”

“There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains.”

Yes, joyful and a celebration this day certainly was, but first of all there was sin to be cleansed. And it couldn't be cleansed by rituals of sprinkling of water, and not even by the cleansing that a sacrifice in the temple might offer. They believed in the Savior whom God would send. *Purification*.

II. The processional.

Secondly, I want us to see the *processional*. It's one of those sights you'd love to see. You know, if you could go back in time...have a little space ship, go back in time, plant yourself somewhere up on a little mountain overlooking the city of Jerusalem, just watch this unique occasion, listen to the songs, listen to the instruments as they played, as they sang the Psalms of David, as they made their way in processional celebration. And Nehemiah wants us to know that the joy that was in Jerusalem could be heard far away. What a day this was! What a month this has been! What a presence of God and of God's blessing this city has known! Musicians playing cymbals and harps — small harps, harps you can carry — and lyres and trumpets. And a choir leader. Ezra hired a choir leader.

The church has been divided about music...still is divided about music. Nothing divides a church more than music. I have dear friends who love to argue this late into the night. Is it acceptable to employ musical instruments or choirs in the new covenant economy? Oh, I have dear friends...we could spend hours and hours

just debating that little point. Well, the only way that you could say no to that would be to suggest that musical instruments or choirs were part of the ceremonial aspect of Old Testament Law, as though in some way they pointed to Jesus Christ, and at the coming of Christ they were done away with. [That doesn't make any sense to me at all!] The other argument, it seems to me, would be to say that these are things that belong to the infancy of the church, and now that we've grown up as Paul speaks about it in Galatians 4, we don't need those things. [I've been in churches where we need those things! *[Laughter]* So that argument doesn't mean much to me either.]

What a blessing music is. Now you have to be careful, I understand. Huldrych Zwingli, the Reformer, for example, banned music from the church. He was a great musician. He knew how music can affect a person. I can be reduced to tears in seconds listening to music. I understand that. Music is a delicate instrument. Praise God for music, and for singing and for celebration in the church. There isn't anything like it on a Sunday morning when your spirits are a little heavy and dull and sleepy, and all of a sudden Connie starts playing the organ and your spirits begin to lift — playing something that you know well, something that reminds you of certain words...words that speak of Christ and of the gospel, and of the shed blood and of forgiveness, and of the sweetness of Jesus Christ — and your spirits are immediately lifted and your affections are engaged in the worship of God.

I wonder what they sang. I imagine they must have surely sung Psalm 48:

Walk about Zion and go around her,
Number her towers,
Consider her ramparts,
Go through her citadels,
That you may tell the next generation
That this is God,
Our God forever and ever.

Oh, I can imagine they sang that!

I wonder if they sang... Oh, when I came to First Presbyterian Church in 1976-1977 as a student, I sat in the back there on a Sunday morning and I remember the choir singing Hubert Parry's rendition of Psalm 122:

"I was glad when they said unto me,
'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'"

I still love that piece as a piece to open worship. And I wonder — can't imagine that they did not sing that particular Psalm as they walked around the ramparts.

What's the lesson? The lesson I think for us here at First Presbyterian Church is

to be grateful to God. To be grateful to God for music, and music ministry that helps us worship God, that rouses our affections in the worship of God.

III. Praise.

The third thing I want us to see is *praise*. In various places in the text — in verse 27 we read of thanksgivings and gladness; we read again in verse 42 that the singers sang; and we read in verse 43 that “they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced...and the rejoicing was with great joy...and the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.” This was a day of joy.

I understand there are days of great sadness in our lives. That's the beauty of the Twenty-third Psalm, isn't it?

“The Lord is my Shepherd;
I shall not want...
He makes me to lie down in green pastures.
He leads my soul...He restores my soul...”

It's a picture of great peace and tranquility and blessedness and provision. But there are days when I'm in the valley of the shadow of death. There are days when I'm surrounded by enemies. You may not be here tonight filled with this level of joy. I understand that.

This is a unique day. This is a special day. All of us have known days in our lives when God filled us with great joy: the day we got married; the day when we held our first child in our arms; the day when children did something and it made you thankful and grateful to God for the provision that He's given to you. Well, this was such a day. God had been merciful. God had restored His affections to them. God had renewed His covenant with them. God had brought them out of Babylon. God had given to them promises. He had spoken of the Savior that would come. There was hope this day! There was a vision this day! There was a wide horizon this day. Their eyes had been opened to the beauty and majesty of God, and they sang a new song. Oh, we are grateful for days like that! Days of great praise and days of great gladness.

IV. Pleasing performance of the Levites and priests.

But there's a fourth thing here that I want us to see, and that is in the section from verses 44-47. And it's the *pleasing performance* of the Levites and of the priests. “On that day...”

(verse 44) — and commentators suggest that it was that very day —

“On that day men were appointed over storerooms, and contributions, and first fruits, and tithes, to gather into them the portions required by the Law for the priests and for the Levites....”

All around the temple on the outer wall there were storerooms that housed food and grain and pots and pans and all kinds of things, but things that were necessary for priests and the Levites who would spend upwards of several days, perhaps a week, in ministry there before they would go back to their villages. There would be a rotor, and the Law of Moses required that tithes would be given to the Levites, and tithes would be given to the sons of Aaron.

Don't you love Nehemiah? What's the best day to talk about tithing? A day when there's great joy and great gladness, and great celebration. I can imagine Nehemiah making the most of this day and reminding them of their obligations to support the work of the ministry in the temple.

You notice how it says in verse 45,

“They performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the command of David and his son Solomon.”

At the end of verse 44, they rejoiced over the priests because they did their labor according to the command of David and his son Solomon. They rejoiced because the priests and Levites were engaging in worship that was according to biblical principles. That seems to me what Nehemiah is saying there.

What a great blessing that is, when worship is done according to the commandment of God, according to the commandment of Scripture; not according to whims, not according to fashion, not according to 'felt needs,' but according to what God had laid down in His word. And there seems to be a wonderful sense here of unity among priests and Levites and people, and that unity between priests and Levites and people is seen in their giving in verse 47:

“All Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah...”

[He's drawing a line from a hundred years ago in the time of Zerubbabel right down to this day that this dedication service has been taking place]

“...they gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers; and they set apart that which was for the Levites; and the Levites set apart that which was for the sons of Aaron.”

Giving comes from thankful hearts. There are some passages like this. You read the Apostle Paul say in I Corinthians that “God loves a cheerful giver.” Nehemiah is recording what a blessing this was, that here were a people who not only loved

God and loved the things of God, but their lives demonstrated that in their ready willingness to support the work of the Lord.

We've seen such giving here in the past year. What a blessing that is. What a blessing that is to belong to a community that does that. Oh, let's be sure to give God thanks! Let's be sure to give God praise.

But, oh, for days like this! Wouldn't you want to see a day like this once in your life? A day when it seems as though God has come down...God has come down in blessing...the Holy Spirit has descended upon His people so that their hearts and their souls are entirely for one thing: to serve the Lord. "This one thing I do." Maybe that's what the book of Nehemiah has been saying to us in recent weeks, that too often our lives are halting between two opinions. Too often our affections are too divided. And, oh! for the work of God's Spirit to come down and take hold of us, so that we might be out and out for God. May God so grant it.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for this passage of Scripture, revealing as it does an occasion that is so long ago and yet so beautiful, so majestic, so inspiring; an entire people living out and out for Your glory, desiring to give their lives in the way You had meant it to be. We know that this did not last. We know in the next chapter we will see this deteriorating. And, Lord, we pray, rend the heavens and come down. Minister to us. Restore unto us the years that the locusts have eaten, and may we find our own hearts so engaged in the things of God that the things of the world may grow strangely dim in the light of Your glory and grace. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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