

“The People of Joy”

Nehemiah 12:27-47

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Nehemiah 12:27-47

²⁷ *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. ²⁸ And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathites; ²⁹ also from Beth-gilgal and from the region of Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem. ³⁰ And 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. ³² And after them went Hoshaiiah and half of the leaders of Judah, ³³ and Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, ³⁴ Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, and Jeremiah, ³⁵ 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; ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ 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.*

³⁸ *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, ³⁹ and above the Gate of Ephraim, and by the Gate of Yeshanah,[a] 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. ⁴⁰ So both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me; ⁴¹ and the priests Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets; ⁴² and Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang with Jezrahiah as their leader. ⁴³ 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.*

⁴⁴ *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. ⁴⁵ 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. ⁴⁶ For long ago in the days of David and Asaph there were directors of the singers, and there were songs[b] of praise and thanksgiving to God. ⁴⁷ 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.*

Introduction

The Christian life is hard. The Bible recognizes it as hard work and describes it like a battle. We hear phrases like “fight the good fight”, “I have finished the race”, and “become a living sacrifice”. This lifestyle often leads to struggles, warfare, and groans of spiritual exertion. However, Jesus promises that alongside the difficulty, there will be times of sweet rest and joyful celebration in the victory. We can get glimpses of the coming eternal joy through our lives on earth.

Why were the people of Israel celebrating so joyfully? What occasion caused such great rejoicing? It might have been the completion of the wall. However, their joy stemmed from their thankfulness to God. When grace goes into our hearts, results such as love, joy, thanksgiving, and generosity come out. We don't always feel joy during hardships and difficulties, but there is joy amidst all of that. The key is to focus on that joy and being faithful to God amidst the circumstances. The people of Israel were not commanded to be joyful; they simply were. Just like the Israelites, we too can have great eternal joy.

I. Joyful Celebration [v. 27-29]

This section describes the Levite's role at the dedication of the completed city wall. Families of Levitical singers had settled in villages around Jerusalem to be near their place of work. Two great choirs led the groups around the walls. The Israelites had become singing people, singing praises unto God. Why were they singing? The completion of the wall was undoubtedly one. Here are four more.

A. Rebuilding of their lives

The rebuilding of the wall for the Jews meant the rebuilding of their lives. Before, they were sent to exile by God. Exile was meant to show the slavery of their hearts to sin. When the Israelites repented, He brought them back. God's attitude towards them was not just of forgiveness; also, He was going to bless His people and use them for His glory! The Israelites realized that their God had not forsaken them. Similarly, God does not just forgive us; that's just the beginning. He restores us and uses us again!

B. Rebuilding of their families

Verse 43 says “the women and children also rejoiced.” It's a good example of everyone's involvement; in context, it means that it was not just professional musicians singing. Even though the musicians were leading, everyone was involved.

C. Rebuilding of their nation

The rebuilding meant the nation of Israel was being raised again. Nowadays, there's less patriotism than previous generations in America. Contrast that with the celebration as a nation in this passage.

People have often asked me where I'm from. I say I'm from Chicago, but the Koreans are also my people. They ask me who I root for during the Olympics. and I say that I root for both the Koreans and the Americans. I ache for both, pray for both, and care for both.

Like the Israelites, we have a primary identity with the kingdom of God. However, we also possess secondary identities, including ethnicity and nationality. We need to use these identities to support the kingdom of God. If we live in this country, we should do

our best to return as much as we can and be outstanding citizens, as we have received benefits and gifts from the United States, even if our ethnicity or homeland is elsewhere. We should pray for our country and our secondary identities and should work for the kingdom of God as we work for our own country. The Israelites built a wall for their nation, but ultimately for the kingdom of God.

D. Rebuilding as God's people

This was the Israelites' primary identity. Why do we rejoice over the rebuilding of the wall? In the Biblical narrative, most of us are considered Gentiles and not Jews. The focus is not on the work of God in one nation but on the work of God in his people. The focus is not on the history of Israel but on the redemptive history of God's people. This is also our history. We have many similarities to the Israelites: They were freed from exile, just as we are free from our sin in Jesus Christ. They built a wall for the Kingdom, we are doing work for the Kingdom. They were building as God's people, we are building God's people.

II. Joyful Dedication [v. 32-39]

This was an act of dedication. How do we know that we've received God's grace? If we've truly received it, we cannot help but dedicate ourselves to God. The Latin word for dedication means "to offer, to give." When something is dedicated to the Lord, it is given for His control and use. The people were not just dedicating the wall; they were dedicating everything within it, including themselves and their own lives.

A. They purified [30] - No

Hebrews 7:27

He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

1 Peter 2:9

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

The Israelites purified themselves, the people, the gates, and the wall. Everything was made pure, because everything in the city of God was to be used by God. The people understood that God was holy, and they sought to please Him by purifying themselves from their sins.

Based on Leviticus, we can assume that the priests purified their clothing. The priests of the Old Testament cleansed themselves with sin offerings, fasting, and abstinence from sexual intercourse within marriage. All of these are applicable to us, as they all point toward Jesus for our lives. The sin offering represented the priests' inability to cleanse themselves through their own strengths. Their fasting also declared their need for their Lord. Abstinence from sexual intercourse was out of care for their own hearts; they did not want to be divided before the Lord, so that they could receive His power. For us, the washing of clothing means clothing ourselves in Christ. Hebrews 7:27 says that unlike the priests, Jesus had no need to cleanse Himself and paid it all when He offered Himself

as a sacrifice. Through this sacrifice on the cross, He cleansed all of us. 1 Peter 2:9 says that we are royal priesthood representing Him. We need proclaim the excellency of Him.

B. They dedicated [31, 38] - Yes

Genesis 13:17

¹⁷ Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.”

Joshua 1:3

³ Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses.

In response to God’s Word, the Israelites dedicated their lives through this service. Ezra led one group in a counterclockwise direction around the wall and Nehemiah follows the other group in a clockwise direction. At the climax of the ceremony, the two groups met at the temple area. This symbolized a dedication of all the people within the walls to God. These were the same walls that the doubters in Nehemiah 5 said a fox could knock down. This was a testimony of the power of God and reality of faith to the unbelieving Gentiles.

God gave the wall to His people, and His people were giving it to God. God will give to us, as He has throughout all the Bible. God gave it to Abraham in Genesis 13:17, and in Joshua 1:3, God gave to Joshua as He had promised Moses. Through the joyful march and dedication, the Israelites acknowledged God’s sovereignty. They were saying “You have given this city to us, and now we give this city to you. We, our family, our nation, we, as a people, are yours.”

Can you give everything to God? If not, something else is your God. You’re in love with something more, in fear of something more than you are of God. True submission to God means that we cannot help but give all we have to Him.

The emphasis in this ceremony is on the joyful praise from all the people. God has given us the gift of music. It elevates recitation to a more meaningful, deeper practice. Music goes into our hearts; it comes alive and becomes memorable. Christians are singing, joyful people.

The mark of received grace is gratitude. When you know God’s grace, you cannot help but fall on your face.

III. Joyful Declaration [40-47]

They were giving thanks, rejoicing as God’s people. Who are God’s People?

A. The People of Thanksgiving [40]

The choir was an embodiment of thanksgiving. As they were giving thanks, that became their identity. We are to be people of thanksgiving, an embodiment of God’s grace. When we see each other, we need to see God’s grace, and thank God.

B. The People of Sacrifice [43]

Offering great sacrifices meant pointing forward to the great sacrifice in Jesus Christ, but receiving Jesus means for us that we must become living sacrifices. Whatever we do in our lives, we need to show what He has done in our lives, so people can see Him.

C. The People of Joy [43]

God made them rejoice; the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. Notice that the song wasn't what was heard, but rather their joy that was heard through the means of song. In v. 43, the word joy is overflowing. The Israelites weren't just acting like joyful people, but joy became the very song that they sang.

D. The People of Joy Uncontainable [43]

When God gives us joy, the joy overflows and we can all hear it. An example of joy is a stadium erupting during a sports event. You might know what exactly happened, but you will know that something good happened. In the same way, people should be able to walk by the church and should be able to hear that something good happened. Let the joy of the Lord be heard far away, just as it is in this passage!

I went to Frankfurt, Germany last Monday. Between last Sunday and this Sunday, I was in Germany, speaking for the COSTA movement. One of the men speaking at this conference, Rev. Daniel Lee, is one of movers and shakers of Korean Christianity. He was speaking on the second night! I really wanted to hear him speak but was assigned to speak at a youth meeting. I spoke, and afterwards, I ran back hoping to catch Rev. Daniel Lee's last sentences. When I came back, he was done and everyone in the congregation was up at the front and praying. I missed the sermon, but I could tell when I walked in, "something good happened here." I pray that whenever someone walks into any CFC meeting or gathering, he/she will realize that something good happened here. I pray that we will become people of joy.

IV. Joyful Contribution [44-47]

From a climax perspective, v. 43 is the perfect poetic end to this passage. However, this part about offering, giving money, and organization, might seem anticlimactic, but is extremely important. These people reoriented their lives according to God's Word! They changed and realigned their lives in response to the Word of God. They applied what they learned, and from this perspective, the ending for this passage is fitting.

Martin Luther once said that there are only two days for him: that day and today. That day is when Jesus comes, and today is when we must be faithful. The people of Jerusalem were being faithful! They became organized, served one another, moved their lives to align with the Word of God, and gave financially. The people had a covenant with God to support the Kingdom of God.

The Israelites' worship was in obedience to the direction given by David and Solomon. Because they knew these people were doing the work of the Lord, they were only too glad to bring their offering.

A. The Contribution of the People [44]

The Levites and temple workers didn't receive land. They offered their services to the people, and people gave offerings from their work. So, the workers could continue to serve them; it was their system of serving one another.

B. The Contribution for the Priests [45a]

Those who received the offering performed the services of their God; they served the people who served them, according to the command of David and his son Solomon. They order their lives according to God's promises; it was not keeping the mere tradition of David, but also, they were honoring what was commanded through David. Thus, they can follow the covenant stream of God's promises.

C. The Contribution for the Levites [45b-46]

The Levites were helpers of the priests, singers, gatekeepers, directors of the singers, and people who performed the services of God. They were singing and serving the people as well, so that the people would be strengthened and blessed.

D. The Contribution of the Israelites [47]

They made contributions for the Lord during this service. Should we also give tithes and offerings in the New Testament Church? If you are a Christian who is attending a church, make sure to give to that church. I believe that's the tithe minimum, so that the work of God can go on. The rest of your money should be used for necessities in your lives. You can prayerfully decide your necessities. Be ready to provide for the needs of spiritual leaders with what you have saved up. This will strengthen the body of Christ, the local community and the world.

Financial giving should be done with immense joy! It should be an expression of the grace we receive. Generous giving will result in God's blessings, and He will always provide what you need. When God is your desire, He will grant you everything you desire. When the joy is received, you will joyfully give. Our gifts cannot be substitutes for giving ourselves, but rather a symbol of giving ourselves. Nobody is attracted to a stingy man! We all appreciate the warm hearted and generous people.

The definition of ministry is to keep close to God and to keep close to man while bringing them together. God can give his grace through you! Note that in v. 44, Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites that ministered. The people joyfully gave financial support to their ministers, because the ministers themselves were not the source of joy, but a means of joy. All of Israel were strengthened to become a Lion of a Nation.

Conclusion

It is our duty serve one another. It should be our delight to give financial support, love, and time to our loved ones. We should also be fulfilling our duties with one another, doing them all with great delight. Offering should be an enjoyable and joyful time, giving thankfully for the Kingdom of God.

We need to start seeing the people around us as God's grace. The Israelites saw different people as God's grace; that's how they were blessed. If anyone blessed you, thank and encourage them. If we start seeing them as God's gift, we will be more generous to people.

I always feel like I'm not doing enough for CFC. I feel like I need to pray more, counsel more, or just be more as a pastor, but I know that all of you are thankful for me. There are many moments when people are blessed, they say thank you to me. I know I did nothing; God did something in them. When they see me as God's gift and blessing in their lives, it brings them joy. We need to look to each other like that. We need to appreciate anyone who God uses to bless us.

1 Samuel 4:5

As soon as the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded.

Ezra 3:13

so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.

There were many occasions where the loud noise of praise was heard by other people in the Old Testament as indicated in 1 Samuel 4:5. On another occasion in Ezra 3:13, there was a joyful shout among the younger generation that had never seen the temple rejoice. Also, there was weeping among the older generation because the work was not complete yet. These people are like us! Sometimes, there is joy but also weeping, because the Kingdom of God is not completed. Here in Nehemiah 12, the wall was completed, and the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. There was fullness of joy.

Nehemiah 12:43

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.

Matthew 21:9

And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

We must be joyful as we see Jesus, knowing that one day it'll all be complete. Until then, we need only to receive grace, and through that receive joy. Joy is a response to receiving Jesus Christ, and it is God-centered. It is no longer about circumstances but is about remembering the faithfulness of God in all circumstances.

There is a constant battle between our two natures. Because of that, we must fight for joy. There are many reasons to cry, but there are also many reasons to sing. We must be joyful to see Christ; it is a daily and moment to moment choice. When we become people who choose Jesus, joy will be expressed, and people will be affected.

Many good things happened here in Germany. [Shows picture of people after conference] These are the people who stayed after the conference and then left the next morning. We were texting each other the other day and realized that each one of us was in a different country. Five different people, five different countries; yesterday together and today separated. It's all so that the joy of Jerusalem will be heard far away. Let's go out, so that the joy of Jesus Christ can be heard far away.