

Celebrating What God Has Done **Nehemiah 12/Ephesians 5:18-20**

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Last week we looked at Nehemiah 3 and saw how beautiful it is when God's people pull together for a task motivated by the glory of God: rebuilding the broken wall of Jerusalem. The Babylonians had destroyed it in 586 BC. The events of Nehemiah are around 140 years later, 445 BC. This restoration was in spite of decades of indifference, incredible opposition from critics and enemies, even death threats. Nehemiah and the people continued to build. Everyone was on the wall. Everyone did their part until 52 days later, when Nehemiah 6 records the moment,

"So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God." (Nehemiah 6:15-16 ESV)

Thinking Nehemiah is all about the wall is like thinking Jonah is all about the whale. What happened to Jonah in the whale is like what happened to Israel on the wall. Renewal. Repentance. Revival. While the people were rebuilding the wall, God was rebuilding his people. The climax of this revival is recorded in chapters 8-9 where there are two national worship services: one to hear the Word of God, the other to confess national sin. The people listened intently to the Law and committed themselves again to being the covenantal people of God. The revival produces restoration: 1) The Feast of Booths is celebrated for the first time since Joshua's days. 2) Worship at the temple is restored. 3) Priests and singers are back. 4) Leaders are put in place. 5) Societal and family order in Israel once again revolved around a functional temple, a walled city, and a covenantal people.

The rebuilding of the wall was a powerful symbolic moment of God's rebuilding his people. It is God fulfilling his promise to Jeremiah, to bring the people back. Aren't you glad God is a God of redemption? Of second chances? That he is slow to anger and abounding in love?

The high point of the revival is Nehemiah 12. Here they dedicate the completed wall and themselves to God. Notice the reverence and pageantry.

"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....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 12:27-31, 38)

To help visualize this, here's a depiction of the finished wall and city.



All the Levites and singers with all their instruments gather and they begin a processional. Half of them go north around the city. Half of them go south around the city. They meet and fill the courtyard of the temple mound for one giant and joyous worship service.

Imagine the people in the processional who themselves worked on the wall. What were they thinking as the assembly walked over the section they had built? They were bursting with pride...*Yeah, I built this section. I'd be thinking, I hope this doesn't collapse right now!*

But it all stood. The picture is one of joyous celebration in what God had done. They dedicated the wall to God, but truly, the real dedication was of themselves. To build it, everyone was on the wall. To celebrate it, everyone was in worship.

"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." (Nehemiah 12:43)

The emphasis is on their joy and the intensity of that joy. *God made them rejoice with great joy.* How wonderful to see what God had done! How personally gratifying for each of them to see their own contribution to the great work. Everyone was on the wall, now everyone was in worship. Isn't this how it so often is? First, we sacrifice and give. Then we worship and praise. As my dad taught me as a boy, *"Work first, then play."* Spiritually, God puts our crosses before our resurrections.

But what joy when we are part of a work that God does and then we get to celebrate it and give him the glory. Note the features of this exciting day.

Dedication to God

"And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall." (Nehemiah 12:30)

Music and song

Singing. Cymbals. Harps. Lyres. (Nehemiah 12:27). Harps and lyres were essentially guitars and mandolins. Cymbals were percussion. So the sound was more bluegrass than symphony. It was a parade; a Jewish marching band. And there were singers. There was no doubt clapping. Dancing to this day is part of Jewish culture. This was essentially a hoedown.

Joy/thanksgiving

This is noted in verse 27. They would celebrate this day with gladness, thanksgiving, and singing.

"God had made them rejoice with great joy." (Verse 43)

This was God-empowered gladness. They didn't have to manufacture it, or smoke or drink anything to get into a good mood. God gave them great joy and the sound of the music and singing and cheering was heard far away.

Have you ever heard a football stadium in the distance after a touchdown? The roar echoes and reverberates. Something big happened. Indeed it had. The wall and the people were dedicated to God.

We aren't on a wall or in a temple. We are separated from this event by 2,500 years. But we are the people of God on the other side of an even greater event; a greater accomplishment; a greater salvation. The parallels are striking.

"And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Ephesians 5:18-20)

This is one long sentence so it needs to be taken as a whole thought. There is one thing not to do followed by a list of things to do. Don't be drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit. "No" to control by alcohol, "yes" to control by the Holy Spirit, which he calls "filling."

The filling of the Spirit is the ongoing work of God in our lives in which we submit our lives to the control of the Holy Spirit which produces his good fruit in us. Most people identify the fruit of the Spirit from the list in Galatians 5:22-23. Rightly so. *Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control.* How do you know when someone is controlled by the Spirit? Those qualities are evident in their life, all of which we desire greatly. For example, who doesn't want a little more peace in their life?

I think we can look at Ephesians 5 as a second list of the fruits of the Spirit. When someone is drunk with alcohol, the alcohol is controlling them and everyone knows what that looks like. If not, purchase a ticket to any Bears game and you will be enlightened.

The Christian is someone who has the Holy Spirit in them; the indwelling and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. As I mature as a Christian and the Spirit increasingly controls my life, what does that look like?

We see here in Ephesians 5 a New Testament description that parallels closely Nehemiah 12. What did we see there? Dedication. Music. Joy. Thanksgiving. When God is in control of a life or a church, what does it look like?

On the Wall
Dedication to God
Joy/Thanksgiving

In the Church
Filled with the Spirit
Joy/Thanksgiving

It shouldn't surprise us that joy is an integral part of a God-controlled Christian because, after all, God is the most joyous person of all. God is a glad God. Is that your view of God—joy? *"In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."* (Psalm 16:11)

At 5:30 this past Friday, 50 years ago, one of my heroes died, C.S. Lewis. Jennifer and I did a "babymoon" trip and one of the goals was to see where C.S. Lewis was buried. It's a funny story and involved a pregnant woman running through the rain and the mud...but I digress. He is buried in the graveyard next to a little church, Holy Trinity Church. Here's a picture we took quickly because a cab was waiting.



I love C.S. Lewis and part of what I love is his writings about joy. He had it right when he said, "Joy is the serious business of heaven." And elsewhere he said, "We are halfhearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." (C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, pp. 3-4)

What does he mean by that? The joy we derive from anything other than God is like the child enjoying the mud pie in the slum. If that's all you know, the happiness is as good as it gets. Talk to that child and describe what it's like to make a sand castle by an ocean or to run down the boardwalk, or to splash in the waves—he can't even conceive of it.

The God of the Bible is a God of joy, who through Christ, offers real and lasting joy that is not dependent on the provisions of this world because its source is not in this world. There is more joy in God through Christ than drink, sex, power, success, houses, car, name, fame, or anything else apart from God can provide. God is a God of joy. From this fountain of joy flows a deep and abiding thanksgiving. Look at how Ephesians 5:20 describes it, "*giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

Don't misread that. We don't give praise for anything God doesn't praise. God doesn't praise evil. God doesn't delight in sin or human misery. Neither should we. The devastation and loss of life from the Washington, Illinois tornadoes last Sunday are not an occasion for thanksgiving. The thousands dead in the Philippines' cyclone is not occasion to give thanksgiving. Don't force superficial thanksgiving on tragedy.

But the Christian has an ongoing thanksgiving, a "radical gratitude" (R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, p. 176). Thanksgiving. The word is self-defining. "Thanks-giving" is giving thanks. Nehemiah and the people gave thanks to God for restoring the wall and restoring them. They looked at God's saving work on their behalf and they broke out in song.

New Covenant Christian thanksgiving does the same but we look back to a different event. They looked to the wall, we look to the cross. The cross reminds us of God's amazing love. *How could he love somebody like me?* It reminds me of Jesus' obedience to the Father and his love for sinners. When I find my identity and hope in the cross, from that flows an ongoing radical gratitude. Thanksgiving. A joy that the world didn't give and the world can't take away.

The opposites are also easy to see: Grumbling, murmuring, complaining, bitterness, anger. Francis de Sales said, "The evil one is pleased with sadness and melancholy because he himself is sad and melancholy, and will be so for all eternity. Hence he desires that everyone should be like himself." (as quoted by John Ortberg, *The Life you've Always Wanted*, p. 68.)

Music and Song

"...addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart." (Ephesians 5:19)

This doesn't mean we walk around like we are in a musical. "*Good morning and welcome to Bethel Church!*" The key is the end. *Make melody to the Lord with your heart.* As the old hymn says, *In my heart there rings a melody.* The inward joy and melody of gospel gladness flows out of us with thanksgiving to God which we sing and pray to him and also express to others. It also flows out in actual songs, here called *psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs*. Commentators struggle to define the difference between them. We know the source—the inward melody of gladness in God that flows out in lyric and vocal melody. Have you ever met someone and thought, "I'll bet they are a Christian," and you ask them and they say, "Yes I am!" It's like you can hear their internal melody of faith. Christianity is and always has been a singing faith.

I love singing with you. I encourage you to sing in your private times with God. Sing in the midst of your prayers. It seems to me that all homes should have a good hymnal or song book. Families, it is a holy thing to sing to God at the table no matter what Miss Manners says. Let's be a thankful singing Church.

But let's not be fake about it. Ephesians 5 shows the flow chart. It's the same in Nehemiah 12. *Filled with the Spirit. Dedicated to God.* An inward melody of heart that is so thankful for what God has done through Jesus for us. The inward melody has an outward expression. Thankful words and thankful songs said and sung to and with each other multiplies the joy as we share it with each other. This is called a Spirit-filled church. That's what it looks like. That's what we aspire to.

As we move into this Thanksgiving week, do we not have much to be thankful for? Let's just think about this a moment. We begin with all that God has been for us in Christ. We think about Him. Think about the person God used to introduce you to Jesus. How thankful I am for my parents being that in my life. How thankful we are for God's love, mercy, grace, patience, and promises. How thankful we are for the blessing of the church and of our church, Bethel Church. What a great team of staff and leaders. So many servants of God serving faithfully. If you would have told me a year ago that we would be on the cusp of Mission Them 2.0 and have a 41,000 square foot ministry building in Gary two blocks from City Hall, I would have probably fallen over. We met with mayor of Gary on Friday and let me just say that the city is excited too. Who would have thought that would be Bethel Church 2013? Whether we make our fundraising goal or not, whether we move in these directions or not, I have never been a part of a church like this Bethel, and I am profoundly grateful to be here.

On and on we could go. Not that we don't have hard things. We've had families lose loved ones and this Thanksgiving someone will be missing. Relationships are hard. Circumstances are painful. We are all going through "many dangers toils and snares." That is the power of New Covenant thanksgiving. It is rooted in an eternal truth that is not influenced by circumstances. Our happiness tends to be circumstantial.

This is something I find so challenging in our daughter Kiralee. For some reason, by the mercy of God, he gave us a happy baby. Of course, she's not always happy, but generally a smile isn't too far from her. May I show one photo?



I often see her total joy and I think, what does she have to be happy about? She doesn't have anything we adults look to for joy. No steak and potatoes. No solid food at all. No shiny car. No house. No savings account. No Facebook page. She can't walk, talk, or even chew. Yet her joy is convicting. I think it is a picture of Christian joy. She feels safe. Her needs are met. She knows parental love.

In Christ, we are safe from God's wrath. All our needs are met. Our heavenly Father loves us. When our joy is joy in God, it cannot be taken away.

So may your week be that—filled with thanksgiving because we have someone to thank and so much to thank him for.

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