

The Sound of Rejoicing

by Ray C. Stedman

The city of Berlin will be forever famous for its infamous Wall. I recall walking up and down in front of that wall and seeing the shrines that are dedicated to people who have been killed trying to escape from the Eastern Zone. The Berlin Wall has gained fame as a wall that divides, but the city of Jerusalem is also famous for its walls. In Nehemiah's time, it was a wall that united the people together.

The latter part of Chapter 12, to which we turn this morning, tells the story of the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem. It describes a wonderful event which evidently was postponed for awhile until the city had been repopulated. Last week we looked at the section that described how Nehemiah filled the city again with people. Now it is completed. The wall is built. The gates are hung. It is a well defended, beautiful city, filled with people. The time has come for celebration and the dedication of the wall.

In this section we have an account of a great procession around the top of the wall. There are choirs and musicians, and, of course, officials and politicians. You cannot get away from them. Because this is clearly a religious gathering they also take an offering. You cannot do anything religious without an offering! So the two divisions of this chapter are the great procession and the great offering.

The opening verses, beginning at Verse 27, give **the elements that make up true celebration.**

At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres. The singers also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem – from the villages of the Netophathites, from Beth Gilgal, and from the area of Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built villages for themselves around Jerusalem. When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.

I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks. {Neh 12:27-31a NIV}

Here are the choirs, the instrumentalists and the singers, all gathered to celebrate the great achievement of building this wall. They were not only celebrating but they were dedicating. There are many occasions in the life of a people for both celebrating and dedicating. Recall the words of Abraham Lincoln at the battlefield of Gettysburg when he dedicated that site:

We are now engaged in a great Civil War, testing whether any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come here to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place to those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do so.

It is proper to dedicate. And it is proper also to celebrate when God has brought us to a place of achievement.

The Holy Spirit has been careful to include in this account the three aspects that make up true celebration. I hope you caught them as I read the verses to you:

1. The first one is in Verse 27, "The Levites were ... brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully." One of the primary elements of true celebration is the expression of joy. A general attitude of joy ought to characterize all Christians.

It is amazing to me how many Christians never appear to be joyful. They are always gloomy and grim. As I have often said, they look like they have been soaked in embalming fluid! I am reminded of what a little girl said upon seeing a mule for the first time: "I don't know what you are but you must be a Christian because you look just like grandpa!" There are a lot of long-faced Christians around.

The German philosopher Nietzsche said, "If the Christians expect me to believe in their Redeemer they have got to look a lot more redeemed!" There are times of sorrow and sadness, of course, but Christians ought frequently to exude a sense of joy because they have something to be joyful about.

Joy is not the same as happiness. These people were happy, but they were also joyful.

- Happiness is liking the present moment because it pleases us. We are enjoying the moment and therefore we feel happy.
- But joy is much deeper and more long-range. Joy appreciates the past, the present, and the future, not because the circumstances are pleasing, but because the heart is right with God.

That is what fills us with joy.

There is a sense of acceptance and of being valued by God himself. Happiness therefore is basically for the moment, but joy is intended to endure for all time. Happiness depends upon happenings, but joy depends upon justification, on being acceptable in God's eyes and being co-laborers with him. Happiness comes from without, but joy comes from within. Circumstances cannot change joy. Happiness fades quickly, but joy lasts forever.

These people were happy because the wall was finished. They had achieved their objective. But they were joyful because God had helped them to finish it. They were co-laborers with him. His hand was involved in their labor. Aware of God's love and acceptance, they therefore were joyful and wanted to celebrate joyfully.

2. There is another clue hidden in this paragraph that tells us what celebration should be based on. Verse 30, "When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall." **Purification** is necessary to celebrate. You cannot do it with a hypocritical heart. You cannot celebrate with your life in ruin. It becomes a festival of empty words. There is a need for purification.

Remember how the psalmist puts it in the wonderful 24th Psalm:

**Who may ascend the hill of the LORD?
Who may stand in his holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to an idol,
or swear by what is false.
He will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from God his Savior.
Such is the generation of those who seek
him,
who seek your face O God of Jacob.**
{Psa 24:3-6 NIV}

Many people seem to be afraid of this word, *purity*. They think it describes a goody-goody two-shoes, self-righteous kind of person. But purification in the Christian life stems from the same philosophy that motivates us when we wash dishes. You do not set your table with dirty dishes, do you? If you do, don't invite me to dinner! No, we wash dishes frequently because they ought to be clean. We do not want

to serve our guests with dirty dishes. And God does not do his work with dirty vessels!

We need a periodic cleansing of our lives and hearts. This is what is manifested here. The priests and the Levites had to purify themselves, and they purified the walls, the gates and the people because they were participating in something related to God.

How do we purify ourselves? In the New Testament, it is a simple process. It is not by ritual but by confessing our faults, and believing that God has forgiven them. It is that simple. Confess your failings, your sins, your mistakes. Admit them. Do not hide them. Do not blame somebody else for them. Do not gloss them over. Confess them. Not only to God, but to any who may be involved in them. Then believe that God cleanses you, that he forgives you, that he has restored you to his favor. This is what fills the heart with joy.

Remember how simply John puts that in his first letter: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all iniquity," {cf, 1 Jn 1:9}. This word is true. So if we daily find occasions to admit our weaknesses, our faults, our ugliness, our short tempers, and our unhappy words, we can immediately receive from God the gift of forgiveness, and rise purified, to be an instrument of his working.

3. There is still a third element in this that is found in Verse 31:

I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks. {Neh 12:31 NIV}

Thankfulness is always part of true celebration. These people were thankful. You can well imagine what they were thankful for:

- They must have been grateful indeed for the godly leadership of Nehemiah.
- They were thankful for God's moving of the king of Persia's heart that permitted this whole project to come into being.

- They were grateful for angelic protection that watched over them as the wall was being rebuilt.
- They were grateful for the wisdom of God that allowed them to overcome their enemies,
 - for the spirit of unity and cooperation that prevailed,
 - for strength to labor, and
 - for the supply of food and shelter.
- I think primarily they were thankful for the will to work, which enabled the project to be carried through to completion.

This raises the question: Are we properly thankful?

Do we give thanks every day to God for the blessings we are enjoying at the moment?

We are so trained by the media to grumble and complain, to insist on something we do not have, to focus on that instead of on all we do have. One of the first signs of a growing, maturing spirit in young Christians is that they begin to give thanks to God for what he has poured into their life; for the opportunities that are before them; and for the present blessings and liberties that they do enjoy.

So there are the elements that make up celebration: joyfulness, purity, and thanksgiving.

Then we learn, as this account goes on, that **Nehemiah divided his choirs to march around the city.**

One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right, toward the Dung Gate. Hoshai and half the leaders of Judah followed them along with Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah, as well as some priests with trumpets, and also Zechariah son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph, and his associates – Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah and Hanani – with musical instruments prescribed by David the man of God. Ezra the scribe led the procession. At the Fountain Gate they continued directly up the steps of

the City of David on the ascent to the wall and passed above the house of David to the Water Gate on the east. {Neh 12:31b-37 NIV}

This segment began on the western side of the wall, went down around the southern end of the city, and up onto the eastern side where they approached near the temple.

The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. I [Nehemiah] followed them on top of the wall, together with half the people – past the Tower of the Ovens to the Broad Wall, over the Gate of Ephraim, the Jeshanah Gate [the Old Gate], the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate. At the Gate of the Guard [which is called earlier the Inspection Gate or the Judgment Gate] they stopped. {Neh 12:38-39 NIV}

These two choirs marched in different directions around the wall, circumventing the city, and joined together again on the eastern side before the Temple. It must have been a wonderful sight, with colorful banners flying, instruments playing and choirs singing.

Probably it was inspired by the story of Joshua and the taking of Jericho. Joshua was told of the Lord to have the people march around the city of Jericho once a day. Then on the seventh day they were to go around seven times and the trumpets were to be blown. When they did so, the wall of the city collapsed and they were able to take it. I do not know whether that is what inspired this procession about the wall or not. It might also have been Nehemiah's memory of that moonlit ride he himself attempted around the city when he first arrived. He mounted his donkey but found it impossible to go clear around because the valley was strewn with rubble and ruin. That was when he saw the awesome task that lay before him. Perhaps as he remembers that he is determined to celebrate now by marching these choirs around the top of the rebuilt wall.

By the way, in the Old Testament this action of walking around an object or a piece of land is a way of claiming a certain thing for God. Abraham was told to walk around the land of promise and God would give it to him.

This raises the question, have you ever by faith walked around a situation and claimed it for God? Have you prayed your way all around every aspect of it, surrounded it in God's name, and asked him to give it to you? This is the action today that would correspond to this event in Nehemiah.

We next read that the choirs joined together and entered the temple for **the great service of thanksgiving.**

The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God; so did I, together with half the officials, as well as the priests – Eliakim, Maaseiah, Mijamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah and Hananiah with their trumpets – and also Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malkijah, Elam and Ezer. The choirs sang under the direction of Jezrahiah [that's Hebrew for Glenn Pickett!]. And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away. {Neh 12:40-43 NIV}

What a great occasion! All the members of the various families, men, women and children, rejoicing together at what God had accomplished in their midst. The sacrifices which they offered were thank offerings prescribed by the Law as an expression of thanksgiving.

There is a correspondence to this in the life of believers today. It is spelled out in these words from the book of Hebrews,

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Heb 13:15-16 {NIV})

Praise and sharing. This is the way to express our thanksgiving, joy and celebration today: praising God for what he has done and sharing with generous support and help to others around us.

I was grateful last week to hear a man tell me about his wife who comes from another culture.

When she came here she did not know anyone. She was expecting a baby, and when the baby was born a group of women from this congregation, without saying a word to anybody, began to bring her meals. Every night for a month they brought meals to that woman! She was greatly impressed by this willing dedication to helping her in a time of pressure.

This is what pleases God, and it is what he looks for.

The final account in the chapter is **the great offering which was taken** at the service in the temple.

At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, firstfruits and tithes. From the fields around the towns they were to bring into the storerooms the portions required by the Law for the priests and the Levites, for Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites. They performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did also the singers and gatekeepers, according to the commands of David and his son Solomon. For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the singers and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the singers and gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron. {Neh 12:44-47 NIV}

Notice three things that are especially pointed out about these offerings. Here are more of these clues that God implants in a paragraph which, if pursued, will throw light on the whole paragraph. Here is one:

1. We are told that these offerings and contributions were given with pleasure: "Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites." The Scriptures carefully inform us that offerings mean nothing if they are not given cheerfully. If you are not pleased as your motive for giving, God does not want your gift. He does not care how big or small it is. If all you are after is to make an impression on oth-

ers by the size of your gift, God is not interested in that. Jesus told of a widow who put in two tiny pieces of money into the treasury, saying that she had given more than all that the rich people has cast in that day. God would pick up that insignificant amount and use it more mightily than he would the larger gifts of the wealthy. What God looks for always is a note of pleasure, of delight, of cheerfully returning funds to him out of a thankful heart.

My dear friend and patron Dr. H. A. Ironside used to tell the story of an old Scotsman who inadvertently dropped a gold sovereign in the collection bag at a church service. In Scotland, when they take up the offering the ushers use a long pole with a bag on the end of it which they pass among the pews. This old Scotsman put in a gold sovereign by mistake when he meant to put in only a shilling. As soon as he realized his mistake he tried to retrieve his sovereign. But the usher pulled the bag back and said, "Nah, once in, always in!" The old man said, "Ah weel, I'll get credit for it in glory." The usher replied, "Nah, you'll get credit for the shilling!" That is all the old man intended to give. So we are to give as God has given, freely and gladly.

2. There is a second clue here that states that these offerings were given, "according to the command of David and his son Solomon." David and Solomon lived 500 years before Nehemiah, so here is something that had been passed along through the centuries and had become a tradition by the time Nehemiah led this celebration. But it was a good tradition. It included, as we are told here, the requirement for the singers and the gatekeepers also to perform the service of purification. The ushers (gatekeepers), the instrumentalists, the musicians and the soloists all were to be purified before they performed. They were to be sure that they were not pleasing themselves or performing to get attention. They needed to be cleansed from selfish ambition and self-aggrandizement. People in the public eye can easily be tempted to act from a wrong motive. This speaks of the need for each one who ministers today to purify his or her motives before performing.

What a great tradition that is! I have been grateful through the years for the preponderance of musicians and soloists that have ministered in this church out of a sense of love and for the glory of God. This service of purification, which was a traditional thing, looked back to the fears of David and Solomon that someone would misuse the service they were called to minister in for their own glory.

3. Then there is still a third point made, in the closing sentence of this paragraph. It says, "They also set aside the portion for the other Levites." They were careful to take care of others who were not able to be there, or who were busy performing and therefore did not have opportunity to share in the offerings. Whatever the reason, they recognized that they deserved a part of the offering as well.

This is a beautiful picture of the oneness of the nation Israel. God was constantly seeking to teach these people that they belonged to each other. They were not individualists, doing their own thing, but they were workers together with God.

I do not know any truth that is more important in the body of Christ than to recognize that God uses people different than we are. They have different gifts and yet he uses them. We need to appreciate them for that. We must recognize that our way of serving God is not the only way but that we belong to and need one another. We need more emphasis today on how important other Christians are to us.

Some time ago I clipped out this modern parable called, *The Carpenter's Tools*:

Brother Hammer, because he was too noisy, was asked by the other tools to leave the shop. But he said, "If I am to leave this carpenter's shop, Brother Drill must go too. He is so insignificant that he makes very little impression." Brother Drill arose and said, "All right, but Brother Screw must also go. You have to turn him around again and again to get him anywhere." Brother Screw responded, "If you wish, I will go, but Brother Plane must leave also. All his work is on the surface; there is no depth to it." Brother Plane replied, "Well, Brother Rule will have to withdraw if I do, for he is always measuring folks as though he were the only one who is right." Brother Rule complained against Brother Sandpaper, saying, "I just don't care; he is rougher than he ought to be. He is always rubbing people the wrong way."

In the midst of the discussion, the Carpenter of Nazareth walked in to perform his day's work. He put on his apron and went to the bench to make a pulpit from which to preach the gospel to the poor. He employed the screw, the drill, the sandpaper, the saw, the hammer, the plane and all the other tools.

After the days' work was over and the pulpit was finished, Brother Saw arose and said, "Brethren, I perceive that all of us are laborers together with God."

And so we are! We ought to take special care to recognize that mutual cooperation and mutual support of one another is part of the service of celebration. So let us celebrate with joy, in purity, and with thanksgiving unto God!