

# HEAVENLY MUSIC

## *SERIES: THE MESSAGE OF NEHEMIAH*

Steve Zeisler

---

The best-known stories of this nation and probably of the English language in general end with the familiar phrase "...And they all lived happily ever after." The prodigal came home to a feast. Dorothy made it back to Kansas. The house of bricks was too strong for the big, bad wolf. The one ring that ruled them all was melted in the Cracks of Doom in Mordor.

Now, why is it that so many stories have the same shape to them? They begin with sorrows and uncertainty, then some important intervention takes place, there is struggle after the intervention, and finally there is homecoming and joyful celebration. I think the reason is because that is the story of the human race. The human story began with banishment from the garden. We were broken, and God intervened with salvation. Then we have a period of struggle to "work out [our] salvation" (Philippians 2:12), a period of faith-building. And then, finally, there is a celebration at the very end: going home to God's presence, living happily ever after.

The story of the book of Nehemiah is a historic witness to the restoring work of God in people's lives. What happened in this account is reproduced over and over again in our experience as people. The record ends with the city's having been beautifully strengthened. In chapter 11, the repopulation of the city occurred. Those who had abandoned it finally moved back again, and it became a living place.

But let's recall the beginning of the book. Nehemiah 1:3 told of terrible circumstances. Nehemiah's brother Hanani reported to him, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." Then in chapter 2, Nehemiah was given permission by the emperor to go back to help his people. Shortly after he arrived, he went on a moonlit ride around the city. Verses 13-14: "By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through..." The place had so much rubble that even one man riding a mount could not easily make his way through it. The city was a ruin.

Yet we'll find in chapter 12, at the end of the story, that there is a celebration. Nehemiah is once again going to make a circuit of the city. This time he is part of a parade circling the city on top of the rebuilt walls, singing the praises of God. What once was broken has been made well. They will live happily ever after.

Now I said that chapter 12 is the end of the story, and in many ways it is. In chapter 13 there is an instructive epilogue, and it's going to say some very important things to us. But the final word of the great story of the rebuilding of the walls is chapter 12. God is good at restoration. He makes beautiful what once was ruined, and it's our privilege to celebrate his work. We can learn something about that in our examination of chapter 12.

Let's read verses 27-30.

### **A musical 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.

The Levites were the tribe of Israel that was given responsibility for spiritual leadership for the nation. Priests would come from the tribe of Levi. Ezra the scribe was a Levite. And here we find that singers and musicians who would lead in worship were also most often gathered from the tribe of Levi.

It will help us if we can use our imagination and enter into the story. The wall had been rebuilt, the city repopulated. The time for great celebration had come, but there wasn't enough room for all the visitors to stay in Jerusalem during the time of rehearsal and preparation. Apparently they built temporary shelters, tent villages (v. 29), for themselves around Jerusalem.

We have wonderful musicians in our church who sing and play instruments of all kinds. They meet for rehearsal, learn from each other, tune their instruments, practice, write music, and arrange it. What the verses above are describing was very much like what our orchestra and choir do. These Levites who had musical gifts were living in tents outside the city for some period of time, practicing. The singers were working on lyrics and arrangements, probably in four-part harmony.

You may have opinions about what sort of instruments ought to be played in church. We might note that cymbals, the percussion instruments, are listed first. I don't know what to make of that, but it sounds like a lot of fun, doesn't it? Clearly they were planning a joyful celebration, not a lament.

But in addition to all of the striving for excellence and rehearsal and playing instruments and singing and getting ready to perform, in verse 30 it says something very important: At the end of the day, they purified themselves to be worship leaders. That is, they put God first. They didn't just do music. They determined that God be at the center. To me that solves any problems of music style preferences or perhaps prima donna performers (as anybody who is given a platform can be). Rather than asking whether we like this style or that style of music, the better question is, "Is this person God's man or woman? Is this person leading for the Lord's sake?"

Many of us participated in family camp at Lake Siskiyou last week. We were living in tents, and every day there was a group of musicians that met to practice for the evening campfire. They would get guitars out and tune them, sing, and talk about what songs to sing and how they would harmonize. Then at night they would gather us together around the campfire and lead us in worship in somewhat the same way as we see here in Nehemiah.

## **Decorum and spontaneity**

Well, what happens after all of this rehearsing and planning and prayer and preparation? Let's look at verses 31-36:

**I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks. One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right, toward the Dung Gate. Hoshaiah 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 Micaiah, 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.**

This is one of the two choirs. Ezra, one of the great figures of this time in Israel's history, was the vanguard of this wonderful choir parading in one direction around the city, heading toward the temple. Verses 37-40a:

**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.**

**The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. I 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 Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate. At the Gate of the Guard they stopped.**

**The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God....**

Nehemiah, the other great leader of the nation, was with this second choir marching the other direction around the city on the walls. They met together at the temple square, where they stopped. The two choirs gave thanks and took their places in the house of God.

Verses 40b-43:

**...So did I, together with half the officials, as well as the priests-Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, 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. 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.**

This is an amazing scene, isn't it? All the people, musicians in the front, leaders amidst the people, were marching around the walls of Jerusalem and singing to each other across the city. And the sound of the joy in their voices could be heard not just in Jerusalem but far away in the regions all around.

To begin with there was decorum. We know that the choirs had practiced, and presumably they sang well. There would have been a professional beauty to the music, excellence in the name of the Lord. But it's hard for me to imagine that it stayed filled with decorum for very long, because this was a large group of people, and there is specific reference to children and young people along with everybody else in the parade. I don't know if you've ever been in a parade with children, but they don't stay organized for very long. The word rollicking comes to mind. I'm quite sure that this parade, with the spontaneity of the joy of the Lord infecting people, eventually became festive and fun, that the unexpected occurred.

When our children were young, the children on our street used to decorate their big wheels, wagons, pets, and so on for the Fourth of July. We would block off the street and play John Phillip Sousa music as loud as we could, and the children would march up and down the street. They would get out of line, and the pets would go running off, and it got to be sort of crazy after a while, but it was great fun. I think probably there was some of that in this parade around the city on the walls.

The party atmosphere, though, was not just a party. They ended up in the temple, not just having fun for fun's sake, but joy for God's sake, and there they offered sacrifices and worshiped him with abandon and delight.

## **Being thankful**

The end of chapter 12 makes reference to the future of temple worship. Verse 44:

**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.**

As the city came to life, as the people put God first, as they celebrated with both decorum and spontaneity, as the Lord magnified himself in their midst, the giving that was required by law, that was expected and proper, flowed naturally. It was merely necessary to appoint people to keep track of it. There were no sermons on giving. There was no new effort made to generate funds. That says something, too, about the genuineness of the people's worship. When God is at the center, people can't help but contribute out of hearts of gratitude.

What did the choirs sing about? We don't have any specific lyrics that have come down to us from that time. But I do want to make one observation about what we are told they sang. Verse 27 says that they "were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving...." The songs were filled with words of gratitude to God for who he was and what he had done. Verse 31 makes the same point: "I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks."

Verse 40 says the two choirs gave thanks and then took their places in the house of God.

Evidently, whatever else they sang, it was founded on a serious and thoughtful effort to appreciate God.

We are always before him as those who are indebted to him for his mercy, his kindness, his person. The bedrock of everything else that we say or do in worship needs to be an awareness that we are the beneficiaries of a good God. We have to build our worship on gratitude and thanksgiving.

The last half of chapter one of Romans is a description of a descent into hell. The human race tears itself apart, preferring sin and unrighteousness to God. There is a series of steps by which the human race accomplishes this descent. But verse 21 tells what set off the descent: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." They knew God. They didn't glorify him or even do the minimum, give him thanks. They didn't bend their knee or speak a single word of appreciation. And having made that choice to refuse God the thanks that were due him, their foolish hearts were darkened, and all of the descent into the mire that followed is recorded.

Philippians 4 speaks about our prayer life. Verse 6 says you shouldn't be anxious about anything, and the alternative to anxiety is prayer. Don't be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, present your requests to God. Now, it doesn't say actually that. If you've memorized that verse, you'll realize I've left something out. What Philippians 4:6 actually says is this: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God." The starting point of asking God for things has to be the prior acknowledgment that we're grateful for what we already have. We make our requests appreciatively.

The last point I would make concerns the last sentence in verse 43: "The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away." Now, commentators have pointed out, and I think rightly, that there is an interesting, subtle point made there. It doesn't say that the sound of their singing and musical instruments was heard far away. Presumably that's what people heard. If everybody is singing together in unison, that makes a loud sound and can be heard at a distance. But what verse 43 records is that the sound of the rejoicing, that is, the heart, the content of what they were singing, was heard. People could recognize at a far distance not just music but joy, gratitude, delight in God, the enormous privilege it was to know him and worship him.

I'm convinced that this is what God intends for us in the restoration process. He is taking what was broken in our lives and fixing it, and the end of the story is that we live happily ever after. The end of the story is good-home, victory, the new Jerusalem descended from heaven as a bride adorned for her husband, every tear wiped away. It's a great festival at the end, a wedding reception to end all wedding receptions. And as God does his restoring work in us, the joy of our celebration, our appreciation, our gratitude, our worship, ought to be heard somewhere else. There ought to be something infectious about us. People on the outside can see and hear and observe even from a distance that there is something about the Christian faith that is beautiful and attractive.

There's sometimes an inversion layer in the atmosphere in this area in the summer. We live in Palo Alto, and Shoreline Amphitheater is in Mountain View, but there are some occasions when the sounds at Shoreline Amphitheater bounce off the inversion layer and land right in our back yard. It's as if we were in the amphitheater ourselves, the music is so loud. At least twice in the last few years, this inversion layer occurred when Jimmy Buffet was singing at Shoreline Amphitheater. Jimmy Buffet music is celebratory, in a way. It's mostly about sun and sand and alcohol and marijuana. *Margaritaville* is an example. There is fun in the music, but there isn't joy.

There is a big difference between music that is light and frolicking and easy to listen to, that even brings a smile to our face, and music that expresses joy, that apprehends God as he is so that our songs overflow with a message that is eternal, bright, and real. And the privilege that we have is for our lives to be tuned as instruments, for God to be heard through our experience, for people on the outside to be won to him.

Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

---

Catalog No. 4619  
Nehemiah 12:27-47  
Ninth Message  
Steve Zeisler  
August 8, 1999

[Back to Index Page](#)

Copyright© 1999 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.

