

## **Nehemiah 12 - It's time to worship!**

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It had been an uphill battle, to say the least!

Our story of Nehemiah began in a foreign land hundreds of miles from Jerusalem. When he felt the call to rebuild the wall, it must have looked foolish at best, and impossible at worst. Yet, obstacle after obstacle had been overcome. With the king's permission, supplies provided for free, and a military escort at his side, Nehemiah arrived at the ravaged city with his assignment intact: rebuild the wall.

But the challenges didn't stop there. Constant attacks from the outside had been defeated. Secret attempts to discredit Nehemiah from within his own community had been overcome. Discouragement and exhaustion had been pressed through. Brick by brick, day by day, carrying tools in one hand and a sword in the other, they had completed this monumental task. The wall was finished. There was one thing left to do ... worship!

As we draw near to the conclusion of this powerful book of Nehemiah, we see a glorious picture. The people are marching and singing on the very wall they had sacrificed so much to build. It is quite an image. Nehemiah created

two large choirs, complete with priests, Levites, vocalists, and instrumentalists. Nehemiah was basically forming two big marching bands who would lead the people in two simultaneous parades that would go opposite ways on the wall until they met each other in the temple area. Two groups of people, led by Nehemiah and Ezra – parading around the city on top of the freshly completed wall.

They were the ones who had built this wall. They had completed their assigned task, in most cases, right near their own dwelling places ... adjacent to their homes. Families had worked together under extreme circumstances, at times risking their very lives. They would not forget this challenging experience that had grown their faith and united their community. They could point to a specific section of the wall and say, 'I carried that stone and put it in place!' For the rest of their lives they would look at that wall and know that they had been part of something amazing.

The wall itself was very, very wide. We think of walls being a pile of bricks maybe 12 inches wide. This wall could have been between twelve and twenty *feet* wide – not uncommon dimensions in those days. Whatever the

exact width, it was wide enough for the leaders, singers, and the people to walk along comfortably.

Can you imagine singing praises to God on the very wall that everyone had said would never be completed? Can you feel the people's hearts beating fast as they passed over their section of the wall? Can you see their faces beaming with pure joy as they joined together for a God-led worship party? What a glorious picture it would have been. Men, women and children gathered together for worship. They paraded on the wall, sang and rejoiced - and the presence of God moved among them. They offered sacrifices and, likely, thanksgiving offerings too. The joy was contagious. In fact, there was so much enthusiasm that the celebration could be heard a long distance away.

Nehemiah could probably not have been happier. All of the doubters, resisters, and flat-out opponents who lived in the outlying areas could hear the joyous service and know that God had completed what he said he would do. The whole nation gathered itself in front of the temple and cried, *'You did it, Lord. You used us, and for this we are deeply grateful.'*

So, the purpose of this act of worship was to celebrate what God had done, thank him for such astonishing generosity, and dedicate the people and their work to his glory. We read in verse 27: *'The Levites were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving.'* Grateful celebration, thanksgiving and dedication are the three main themes, and they take us to the heart of what worship is really about.

First, the Israelites magnify his name. They celebrate who God is. Celebration in worship does not begin with what we are doing when we pray or sing or speak or ponder in adoring silence. It begins with who God is, and what God has said and done. We glory in those unique acts which took place before ever we had the desire to think or say anything to him.

Second, the people acknowledge God's gifts and give thanks for them. They marvelled at God's astonishing and totally undeserved generosity to them and, with a sense of adoring wonder, give public expression to their immense gratitude. Their thanksgiving was specific and they were thanking him that day for so much. For Nehemiah's response on hearing the news in Persia that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the gates

burned; that Persia's king had allowed Nehemiah to go to Judah; for the material resources given to them; for the safe journey; for those who had joined with Nehemiah in the rebuilding; for protection against their enemies; for the strength to continue when the going was tough; and for spiritual confidence that, even when dogged by discouragement and ridiculed by their enemies, they had continued to trust him. Most of all, they were thanking him for their completed building enterprise, which they now wished to dedicate to his glory.

Which brings us nicely to the third theme of worship: dedication. The Israelites offer themselves in dedication. To dedicate means to 'put over the work of human hands to God's ownership - to surrender to him all that he has given to us.

Next week, the rebuilding of our church will be complete. It's been a long journey with many setbacks over the years. But it began with a vision, and there would have been much prayer, both in discerning God's will for the re-ordering of the church, and for the necessary funds to guarantee the success of the project. There was inevitably conflict – there always is when pews are involved(!) – and there will have been times when it was hard to keep

going. However, prayer *was* answered. The resources *were* provided, craftsmen *were* employed and the rebuilding began. But the rebuilding itself hasn't been without its difficulties. In the first week, some interesting Victorian underpinning of columns was discovered which needed resolving; we found no proper flooring under the ramp by the door and a solution had to be worked through; and a lack of metal covers over all of the heating channels meant that others had to be sourced. Interestingly, the one aspect of the project which passed very smoothly was the reconstruction of the pews. They are simply beautiful.

So, the building work *is* complete and, like Nehemiah and the Israelites, it's time to worship - to celebrate what God has done, to thank him for such astonishing generosity, and dedicate the work to his glory. We glory in what God has done, and we marvel at his generosity towards us. Like the Israelites we can be specific in our thanks – to those who first cast the vision; to those who have been persistent in prayer; to those who submitted faculties to the DAC; and those who were part of the approval process; to those who produced plans, sought tenders and engaged contractors; those who contributed financially and those who applied for grants; and for the

builders and carpenters themselves, who have worked with such care over the last few months, preserving what is precious about the church, as well as creating something of beauty that will help people to worship for years to come. But many of us have also been involved. Mac, in designing the new communion rail, and Pat and her team of needle-workers in creating the new altar frontal. How many of us in the weeks to come will look upon the frontal and say, *'That was my bit. They are my stitches,'* knowing that you have been part of something amazing.

And over our weekend of celebration in June, Bishop Stephen will come and will dedicate the work to God. Where, like the Israelites, we put over the work of human hands to God's ownership, and ask him how he wishes to use both us, and the new space going forward. I doubt that we will have two choirs, complete with priests, vocalists and instrumentalists climbing and walking the walls, unless Frances has plans I don't know about(!), but there is much planned.

It's timely that the conclusion of the project should come in-between Palm Sunday and Easter Day. Today, Palm Sunday, when the streets of Jerusalem, 500 years after

Nehemiah's rebuilding of the walls, were full. Full of people celebrating and cheering as Jesus entered the city on a donkey, as cloaks and palms were spread on the road, and the people sang, *'Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!'*

A people celebrating the arrival of a king, celebrating the culmination of centuries of history. *'The Lord will appear'* said the prophets. *'The Lord will come to his temple.'* Foretold centuries earlier by the prophet Zechariah.

And Easter Day, when we celebrate Jesus' resurrection and the joy of Mary in the garden when she realises that her Lord is alive.

So we have much to celebrate, both today and in the weeks to come. But, as we do, let's ensure that it's to God that we give the glory. That, like the people of God two and half thousand years before us, we *celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving.'* And that our grateful celebration, thanksgiving and dedication take us to the heart of what worship is really about. Our glorious, astonishingly generous God.

Amen.