

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(November 20, 2022)

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Sermon manuscript

**Sermon Series:** A Prayer Life...for ALL of life  
(Learning prayer from Nehemiah)

### **GRATEFULLY Celebrating the Win**

(Nehemiah, chapters 11, 12)

Study #4

#### **Introduction: 1998-2019...**

There was a lot of celebrating going on in San Antonio during the years when Tim Duncan - and for a while, David Robinson, along with Tony Parker and Manu Ginobili and others - had an amazing run through the NBA's postseason.

As a city, we celebrated the team's post-season appearances every single year from 1998-2019. We cheered numerous players who earned places on All-NBA teams and in the All-Star game. We rejoiced at five championships.

Lots of us remember driving on busy streets late at night at 10-15 mph waving back and forth to each other and honking horns as we celebrated wins.

On those championship years, there were Riverwalk parades and banners were hung high in the AT&T center. The team and Coach Pop were hometown heroes.

There was a general, citywide sense of gratitude for what the Spurs had done for twenty-two sweet years.

This morning, we're wrapping up our series of studies in Nehemiah. We continue to learn what he has to teach us about prayer.

And to be honest, today's message has evolved over the week of its formation into more of a Thanksgiving message than I had originally planned.

So, in addition to this message being a conclusion to one series, consider it also Part One of a Thanksgiving mini-series, with Part Two coming next Sunday.

Over the next few minutes, we get to watch a celebration by the Jews that was way more joyful than any Spurs championship. Their spirit of extreme gratitude to God invites us to express the same.

The thought today is that an essential and joy-giving element of our prayer lives is that of celebration and praise to God for what He has done for us and for the victories He gives us as we serve Him.

*Review last three Sundays...*

We began our series of looks into Nehemiah by seeing that the prayer life into which God invites us is big enough to bear our most intense burdens.

Nehemiah took his grief about the state of Jerusalem to God for five months of prayer and fasting. We can be assured that God can handle the full weight of our griefs.

Our prayer life is also sufficient for daily, in-the-moment petitions and intercessions and requests. We saw that when we watched Nehemiah pray on the run and at the drop of a hat about anything and everything that came his way.

And last Sunday we learned the importance of confession of sin. Nehemiah and the rest of the Jews went to God for an extended period of confession.

That confession was a *cleansing* act - as it will be for us when we confess our sins to God. And it was an *energizing* act that led them to a godly resolve to be faithful. Our confession will energize us for faithfulness, too.

Our focus today will be on Nehemiah, chapter 12. It is the high point of the story, and it is the happiest chapter in the book.

It gives us a view of the Jews' celebration for what had been accomplished in Jerusalem by the leadership of Nehemiah, by the work of the citizens, and most of all, by the gracious provision of God.

But I want to take my time getting to chapter 12. We're going to follow Nehemiah's lead and build through a gratitude crescendo, to join the Jews in a blowout thanksgiving celebration.

*Review flow of the book...*

The book recounts Nehemiah's burden for the welfare of Jerusalem. It recounts his travel from the winter palace of the Persian Empire in Susa (where he served as King Artaxerxes' cupbearer) all the way to Jerusalem.

We watch him as he rallies the residents of Jerusalem to join him in the work. We stand in awe of his administrative ability and his leadership gifts.

He - and the people - pressed on with the work through serious opposition, finally rejoicing that after a century and a half of living with broken-down walls and gates, it was all repaired and rebuilt in fifty-two days.

But a careful reading of the book reveals that the effort of wall-building was only phase one of a two phase project.

Phase two - the more important phase - was spiritual renewal, a renewal that wouldn't have taken place without the outer protection of a wall.

After completing the wall, the people turned their attention to the Bible (chapter 8) and that's when the winds of revival began to blow. (For re-vivaling, try re-Bibling...)

Because *"the Bible told them so,"* they observed the Day of Atonement. Then, they observed the week-long Feast of Tabernacles.

Spiritual health returned as they obeyed Scripture's commands.

They got healthier as they confessed their sins to God (chapter 9) and made promises to God that they would turn their lives around when it came to:

- marriage (no inter-marrying with those who didn't obey God).
- Sabbath-keeping (a very big deal under Moses' Law).
- finances (specifically, paying tithes to keep the Jewish religious and political system going).

Good things are happening in Jerusalem. The Jews have turned a corner toward obedience. And, on the way to that thanksgiving celebration, Nehemiah turns another corner in his book.

*Review of gratitude to God for unsung heroes... (Nehemiah 11:1--12:26)*

The entire chapter and a half (Nehemiah 11:1--12:26) consists mostly of a list of the names of people who voluntarily and sacrificially gave themselves to the post-wall-building era of repopulating Jerusalem and reinvigorating the health of the nation.

We don't know these people at all, but the first readers of Nehemiah sure did.

Many of these heroic families moved from where they were happily living into the heart of a still-devastated Jerusalem NOT because the Bible told them to, but because their hearts yearned to make a difference for God's kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

Then, others are listed who didn't move into Jerusalem. They helped the nation get healthy by their faithful service to God where they had always lived, in the outlying areas of Judea. (vv. 19-36)

Nehemiah also recorded the names of the descendants of those who came back from captivity with Zerubbabel and those who came back with Ezra and were serving God at the time he wrote. (12:1-26)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> They are descendants of Judah and Benjamin (vv. 3-9) as well as priests and Levites (vv. 10-18).

<sup>2</sup> Scholarly debate rages concerning some *apparent* discrepancies in the lists of the names of priests and Levites at various places in Nehemiah. These apparent conflicts are imminently reconcilable - especially if we come from the perspective

So, why did Nehemiah list the names of these people in a permanent, written record?

Very simply, the list is an exercise in worshipful thanksgiving to God for trailblazers who paved the way for the success of God's purposes in Israel.

He and all the people with him were standing on the peak of success because they stood on the shoulders of those who had lived faithfully before them.

This record of their names honors and affirms their contribution before God and before the people.

What Nehemiah did by recording these names is good for us to do as well.

It is good and right to affirm those who have served us well for God's sake. It is honoring to God to thank Him for providing people who have blessed us.

So, here's one way in which we can take this long list of unpronounceable Jewish names and use that list to jump start our way into the world of gratitude and thanksgiving.

Can you bring to mind right now some of those people who have made a difference in your life for Jesus?

Think about those who are praying for you, encouraging you, checking up on you, building you up in the faith.

Think, too, about those who have done all of this for you in the past. Remember that friend who helped you get started on the path of following Jesus and who was such a blessing to you.

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of trusting that they are reconcilable, rather than from the perspective of trying to find mistakes. You will find help with this issue by looking into Gleason Archer's book, [A Survey of Old Testament Introduction](#) (pp. 410-416), or Cyril Barbers' commentary, [Nehemiah: and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership](#).

Here's a thought. If you know how to contact one or more of these, go ahead and do that this week. Affirm the contribution they made to your life with God.

Give them a call, write a note, or, if possible, take them out to lunch, the main purpose being to say, *"Thank you."*

And then take them to God in prayer. Ask God to richly bless them. He's already got their name written down in a list. He knows all about them. God would love to hear you express to Him your gratitude for having put that man, that woman, in your life, for good.

Then, think of those who are serving Jesus here, in this place.

There are heroes and heroines sitting to your right and left, in front and behind you. They teach your children and lead you in worship and pray for you and serve Jesus in all kinds of ways.

Before you leave today, look for a chance to thank them. Affirm them. Express your gratitude to them.

Think, too, of the people who have served Jesus well here and are no longer here. We are standing on their shoulders.

While thinking about the people who came before us, I dug into my files and pulled out this gem, a Northwest Community Church Directory from 1983.

You won't recognize the names Sally Albright, Jim and Patti Baird, Chris Bakke, Bob and Bernice Burnside, Ned and Fran Dreyer, Norberto Gonzalez, Pinson and Donna McWhorter. That's OK. God knows them.

He knows that without their contribution our church wouldn't be what it is today; might not be a church today.

We thank God for them. We are grateful to God for those who have gone before us. God has been so, so good to us here.

So, by following Nehemiah's lead, we've turned our hearts toward gratitude. And now we're turning our attention to a worship

service carried out in Jerusalem that was all about gratitude and thanksgiving to God.

What is recorded in Nehemiah 12:27 and following was not a regular Sabbath worship service. It was a special service celebrating the completion of the wall AND the spiritual revival that the people had experienced.

Here, they rejoice at what God has done AND they rejoiced that He had allowed them to be a part of it.

This was not to be a somber, solemn, calm and sedate occasion. This was a Fiesta, a God-centered NIOSA!

Certain key players were needed to make this gala event all that it needed to be.

### **The Players in This Service of Celebration (12: 27-30)**

#### **Levites - Leading Out at the Dedication of the Wall (v. 27)**

*[27] Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites from all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem so that they could celebrate the dedication with joy, with songs of thanksgiving and with songs to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps, and lyres.*

For this time of thanksgiving and praise, they needed the Levites. Why? Well, the Levites knew all the right tunes. They were the musicians in Israel.

Scattered throughout the Judean hill country were Levites who were the best harp players, zither players, and percussionists in the land. They were all called to the city for this grand event.

And then there were the singers.

#### **Singers - Singing at the Dedication of the Wall (vv. 28-29)**

*[28] So the sons of the singers were assembled from the territory around Jerusalem, and from the villages of the*

*Netophathites, [29] from Beth-gilgal and from their fields in Geba and Azmaveth, because the singers had built themselves villages around Jerusalem.*

The singers had settled down in the suburbs surrounding Jerusalem. They were called to take leading roles in the celebration.

Music, led by trained singers and trained musicians, would provide for a rocking good time on the day of dedication.

But more than leading musicians were needed on this special day. The people came.

#### **Priests - Busy Purifying at the Dedication of the Wall (v. 30)**

*[30] The priests and the Levites purified themselves; they also purified the people, the gates, and the wall.*

There was an eagerness for worship. Many of them may have spent time with God in prayer before coming to Jerusalem for this time of worship. Hearts were primed to give thanks to God.

But they also prepared their bodies by cleansing. (They “*purified themselves*”). They prepared themselves, body and spirit, to praise the Lord.

And with all the players in their places and everybody ready to give thanks to the Lord, the dedication service began.

There is a lot of physical movement going on here. We trace the movements of two specially designated marching choirs.

#### **Choreography in This Service of Celebration (vv. 31-39)**

#### **The Leaders of Judah Up on the Wall (v. 31a)**

*[31a] Then I had the leaders of Judah come up on top of the wall, and I appointed two large choirs...*

Here, Nehemiah wears a hat we haven't seen him wear to this point. We know that he is a man of prayer, a superb administrator, and

a courageous statesman. Now we learn that he was a skilled worship choreographer.

He positioned the singers and the musicians at set locations on the brand-new wall. First, we trace the movement of the first choir.

### **The Route of Choir #1 Up on the Wall (vv. 31b-37)**

***[31b]...the first proceeding to the right on top of the wall toward the Dung Gate.*** (perhaps not the loveliest of the city's gates...)<sup>3</sup>

This choir consisted of half of the leaders of Judah including Ezra the scribe, who led them.<sup>4</sup>

Ezra was a serious Bible student and teacher and a courageous man of God. Here, he is marching on top of the wall with the choir, singing his lungs out.

Beginning at a certain, designated place (near the Valley Gate, on the western side of the city), they marched south toward that Dung Gate.

Then, when they got to the Fountain Gate, ***[37]...they went directly up the steps of the city of David by the stairway of the wall, above the house of David to the Water Gate on the east.***

When they came to the Water Gate (on the east side of the city), this choir halted.

Next, we trace the route of the second choir. This was the group with whom Nehemiah was traveling around the city on top of the wall.

### **The Route of Choir #2 Up on the Wall (vv. 38-39)**

***[38] The second choir proceeded to the left, while I followed them with half of the people on the wall...***

<sup>3</sup> The locations of the gates in the old city are not known with certainty. I'm making some guesses as to the locations of the gates mentioned.

<sup>4</sup> Ezra has appeared before in Nehemiah. He is a major Old Testament character and was likely the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles as well as the book that bears his name.

Beginning at the same place as the first choir, they moved to the left (north), marching around the city on top of the wall.

(Remember that one of the Jews' enemies, Tobiah, taunted the builders with, ***[4:3] "If a fox were to jump on it, it would break their stone wall down!"*** No. This wall was solid, wide, and strong enough to hold crowds of people.)

They passed the gates on the western and northern walls (Old Gate, Fish Gate, Sheep Gate), and stopped at the Gate of the Guard.

While we are not told that they did this, I have always imagined the two choirs shouting praises to God back and forth to each other, even singing songs back and forth as they marched.

The musicians, lugging their instruments around, were playing, too, while walking on top of the wall.

The two choirs made their way to stopping points. Choir #1 at the Water Gate; Choir #2 at the Gate of the Guard.

For a moment, the music and the singing stops. The city was silent.

And then - both choirs marched, singing at the top of their lungs, to their final destination.

At just the right point, they climbed down some stairs off the wall and marched to the high point of the city and the heart of the nation's life with God: the temple.

### **Gratitude in This Service of Celebration (vv. 40-43)**

***[40] Then the two choirs took their stand in the house of God. So did I and half of the officials with me...***

There, in the temple's outer court, with the government officials, priests, and Levites present, with Ezra and Nehemiah both present, and with all the people there, they worshipped the Lord with all their hearts for all that He had done for them.

They offered so many sacrifices that the smoke was seen rising for miles. Priests were blowing trumpets and singers were singing.

And **[43] on that day they...rejoiced because God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar.**

They sang so loud that the Arabs and the Horonites and the Canaanites and the Ammonites could hear.

The work - done together - was done. It was done to the glory of God, and with the help of God. Jerusalem was safe.

The wall is in place. The gates are up. The hearts of the people are revived. The point of the day was grateful celebration, and the emotion of the day was unfettered JOY.

At the end of the day, the people determined that they were going to make corporate worship a priority - from that day forward.

### **Prioritizing Future Services of Celebration (12:44-47)**

Very simply, the leaders took steps to ensure that the money needed to put on celebrations like this would always be on hand.

To ensure this, they made sure that the tithes that were required under the Mosaic Law were collected.

The tithes collected from the eleven tribes were all given to the twelfth tribe, that of Levi. Out of that tithe, the Levites paid 10% to the priests who were responsible for the sacrifices and offerings.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *[44] On that day men were also appointed over the chambers for the supplies, the contributions, the first fruits, and the tithes, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the portions required by the law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who served. [45] For they performed the worship of their God and the service of purification, together with the singers and the gatekeepers in accordance with the command of David and of his son Solomon. [46] For in the days of David and Asaph, in ancient times, there were leaders of the singers, songs of praise and songs of thanksgiving to God. [47] So all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah gave the portions due the*

But the non-priestly Levites were the ones who led in worship, who played instruments, who sang.

With the tithe money they received, these Levites would be well supported.

They could spend as much time as was necessary preparing for times of worship. The worship could be as sweet and powerful at any time as it was on THIS day, as powerful as it was in the days of King David and King Solomon.

And with that, the infrastructure was in place and the revival has come full circle.

Everything is in order for the city to be all it was intended to be - a light to the world, magnifying the one, true God.

### **Conclusion:**

The Jews' service of celebration models for us that the posture most fitting for anyone who knows the Lord is the posture of gratitude.

When we come to God in prayer in a spirit of thanksgiving, we actually become more aware of His works. Starting our prayers with, "Thank You, Father..." opens our eyes to His mighty works.

Expressing gratitude also changes our hearts as we pray.

When we pay attention to His wonder-working ways, we are tilling the soil for a harvest of gratitude. And gratitude produces lots of wonderful fruit.

It dissipates complaint. It helps us win against depression. The soil of gratitude produces joy and peace.

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*singers and the gatekeepers as each day required, and they set apart the consecrated portion for the Levites, and the Levites set apart the consecrated portion for the sons of Aaron.*

So, we're not surprised to find that Nehemiah 12 is the happiest chapter in the book.

All the preparation work, the wall-rebuilding and the re-Bibling and the confession of sin and the promises made has now had its proper end.

The people of God are worshipping and are set to keep on serving the Lord. And it just doesn't get any better than this.

And we are reminded, right now, that we serve the same God they served. Except...

We now know so much more about Him than Nehemiah or the priests and the Levites or even Ezra knew. With all they knew about God and all they had experienced of God, they didn't know Jesus.

They didn't have what we have. Knowledge of:  
Knowledge of His perfect life, His sacrificial death, and His glorious resurrection.

The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

The strength of the encouragement of the Body of Christ, the church.

The assurance of eternal life when we simply believe in Jesus.

As much as the Jews had to praise the Lord about, we have so much more.

So, as we prepare to close this morning, please be thinking of how you could express gratitude to God in the following ways.

*We are grateful to God...*

...for those who have poured Jesus into us, and for those who have established a firm foundation for us, and on whose shoulders we stand.  
(Please call to mind the names of people who have helped you take your next steps with Jesus.)

...for allowing us to see and to participate in His work.  
(Please reflect on the ways in which God has allowed you to be involved in His pushing His purposes forward by way of loving service, in a relationship, in a formal ministry.)

...for His provision for our every need in Jesus.  
(Please reflect on the blessings you have in Jesus for which you are grateful.)

**DIYENU, indeed!**