

International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes

Lesson Text: Nehemiah 12:27-36, 38, 43

Lesson Title: Dedication of the Wall

Introduction

Most of us know what it is to confess sin to God only to leave the place of confession and go right back and commit the same sin again. It is one thing to confess sin; it is another to forsake sin and truly follow the Lord in commitment and service. The people of Nehemiah's day were genuine and sincere in their confession of sin. The reading of God's law had convicted them and their confession was more than words. Proof of that is in their resulting prayer and covenant they made with the Lord in Nehemiah 9:38. Eighty-four signatures on that covenant are recorded in Nehemiah 10. They include Israel's leaders, priests, Levites, and other officials. Their signatures on the covenant was their pledge to separate themselves from their pagan neighbors and to support the work of God and the temple (Nehemiah 10:32-39). But to support the work of the Lord there needed to be a populated Jerusalem. So Ezra and Nehemiah began the work of bringing people back within the walls of the city.

Before the walls of city of Jerusalem were rebuilt, the people did not feel secure in living there for obvious reasons. Now that the walls were finished, it was time for the people to move back to the city. In Nehemiah 11, Nehemiah exercised his governorship by placing one out of every ten Jews in Jerusalem to live (Nehemiah 11:1). The rest of the people were free to live and re-establish their families in the land. Nehemiah understood that it was no benefit to have rebuilt walls and a rebuilt city if there were no people living there. Jerusalem needed people who were energized and excited to be back home and living close to the place of worship. People were also needed for temple workers and worshippers.

Basically, there were two kinds of people that returned to live in Jerusalem, those who Nehemiah appointed and those who volunteered. Nehemiah 12 opens with and extensive listing of *"the priests and the Levites that went up with Zerubbabel."* These are those who had returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity. All of the names listed may seem unnecessary but serves as a reminder that God's work and worship is done by individuals. Each person in this list is important and must carry out their responsibilities in order for God's work and worship to continue. The same is true of believers in the church today.

In Nehemiah 6:15, we are told, *"So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days."* At that point there was no celebration of any kind or dedication. Part of the reason there was no celebration was because the completion of the wall was not an end in itself. Only after the people were forgiven, renewed, and right with God would the celebration and dedication be appropriate. That time for that celebration and dedication had come.

Preparing for the Dedication (Nehemiah 12:27-30)

Verse 27

"And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps."

Part of preparing for the dedication of the wall involved locating the "Levites" from their homes and getting them "to Jerusalem." Not all "Levites" lived in Jerusalem so they had to be "sought" and brought to the city (Nehemiah 11:36). Since one of the "Levites" primary roles included Temple worship it is necessary that they are a part of this dedication (1 Chronicles 23).

"To keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing..." means that the Levites were assembled to put together "choirs" or groups of singers to sing praise and thanks to the Lord. They used "cymbals, psalteries, and with harps." This dedication was in similar fashion to Solomon's dedication of the temple. Solomon had made the temple dedication one of praise and thanksgiving and had incorporated the use of "cymbals, psalteries, trumpets and harps" (2 Chronicles 5:13). "Cymbals" in Nehemiah's day were much like cymbals today. They were metal percussive instruments that made a sound when struck together. "Psalteries" were some type of stringed instruments with a sound box, possibly shaped like a guitar. "Harps" were most likely stringed instruments similar to a lyre, or a "u" shaped stringed instrument. All of these instruments were easily carried which worked well as the people marched around the gates to celebrate.

For the dedication of the walls recorded here in Nehemiah 12, singing and musical instruments seem to dominate the people's worship. Ten of the seventeen verses in Nehemiah 12:27-43 mention something musical. The Old Testament is filled with musical expressions of worship. Singing is one of many physical expressions of worship in the Bible along with standing, sitting, kneeling, shouting, bowing, clapping and raising of hands.

Note: Not all Christians come from the same areas and traditions. Some Christian traditions discourage physical expressions of worship. They prefer to sing quietly or sit quietly and worship with reservation. Others prefer a more expressive form of worship with a lot of emotional involvement. Certainly, true worship involves both the mind and the emotions. Our personal worship and corporate worship should not be a morgue, but it should also not be a barn dance. There is a biblical balance somewhere in the middle. Worship is about Him, not us!

Verse 28-29

"And the sons of the singers gathered themselves together, both out of the plain country round about Jerusalem, and from the villages of Netophathi; Also from the house of Gilgal, and out of the fields of Geba and Azmaveth: for the singers had builded them villages round about Jerusalem.

"The sons of the singers" were the Levites who were designated singers (1 Chronicles 15:16-22). These Levites "gathered themselves together" for the dedication celebration. They came from "the plain country" or districts surrounding "Jerusalem." The phrase "round about Jerusalem" is mentioned twice to help us understand the location from which these singers came to Jerusalem. "The villages of Netophathi...the house of Gilgal...and the fields of Geba and Azmaveth" are listed as areas from which the "sons of the singers came." That indicates that all these individuals came from areas in and around Jerusalem. "Netophathi" was a small country town located near Bethlehem (1 Chronicles 9:16). "Gilgal" was approximately 15 miles from Jerusalem and "Geba" and "Azmaveth" are small villages 5 or 6 miles northeast of Jerusalem. Since these "singers" did not actually live in the city of Jerusalem, they "builded themselves villages round about Jerusalem" in order to more readily attend the temple services.

Verse 30

"And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, and the gates, and the wall."

Another note of preparation recorded by Nehemiah is that of ceremonial purification. So sacred and holy was this occasion of the dedication of the walls that cleansing and purification involved not only the "priests and the Levites" but also included "the people, and the gates, and the wall." The text does not give details as to what the purification involved but in other instances in the Old Testament purification involved fasting, bathing, changing into clean garments,

and offering special sacrifices (Genesis 35:2-3; Numbers 8:21-23; Ezra 6:20; Nehemiah 13:22; Malachi 3:3).

The text also does not tell us specifically how the "gates, and the wall" was purified. Perhaps a special cleaning was done by washing the walls or removing anything that appeared to be dirty or contaminated. Certainly the people would have considered anything unclean that had been touched by human hands. The detail of how this was done is not the issue. What is important is that the people considered Jerusalem to be the "holy city" (Nehemiah 11:1), therefore, everyone and everything connected with this dedication must be purified and holy.

Question: Why did Nehemiah take such pains and give such attention to detail for this dedication? Why not just sent out a few bulletins and who ever showed up have a short service, let the Levites sing a few songs, ask Ezra to read a few verses, dedicate the wall to God and go home? The answer is that this was God's work, this was God's wall, and God was worthy of this type of preparation for a dedication service. Perhaps we could all learn something from Nehemiah's detailed preparation. Too many things associated with our worship today are just quickly "thrown together" at the last minute. Is it any wonder there is no glory and manifest presence of God in our meetings? How much time and preparation do you put into your Sunday school class? How often does your choir practice? How much time and preparation do you as a teacher or preacher invest in your lessons and sermons? Nehemiah is doing what he is doing in relation to his preparation because he had a burden when there were no walls.

Participating in the Dedication (Nehemiah 12:31-38, 43)

Verse 31-34

Then I brought up the princes of Judah upon the wall, and appointed two great companies of them that gave thanks, whereof one went on the right hand upon the wall toward the dung gate: And after them went Hoshaiah, and half of the princes of Judah, And Azariah, Ezra, and Meshullam, Judah, and Benjamin, and Shemaiah, and Jeremiah,

"Then I" tells us that what we are reading is Nehemiah's account of what takes place at the dedication. Nehemiah takes the purified people and "appointed two great companies" by dividing them into two groups or processions. Nehemiah was careful to place each individual and group in their proper place and give them their responsibility. The first group, most likely led by Ezra, walked around the walls and "gave thanks" were on "the right hand upon the wall toward the dung

gate" which would be toward the south and they followed the wall in a counterclockwise direction. The direction of the second group is recorded in verse 38-39.

"And after them" is the singers. After the singers, who in each procession took the lead, came "Hoshaiah," possibly the same Hoshaiah who signed the covenant in Nehemiah 10:23, and then "half of the princes of Judah." That means "half" were with one group and the other "half" with Ezra's group (Nehemiah 12:40). Three other men are mentioned, "Azariah, Ezra, and Meshullam." The "Ezra" listed here is not the scribe "Ezra" and counterpart with Nehemiah since he is listed as the leader of the second group in Nehemiah 12:36.

"Judah, and Benjamin, and Shemaiah, and Jeremiah" are more familiar names. "Judah and Benjamin" are the well-known names of two of the tribes of Israel and the inclusion of their names probably refers to certain people from those tribes. "Shemaiah and Jeremiah" are people from the priestly families (Nehemiah 10:2, 8; 12:1, 6).

Verse 35-36

"And certain of the priests' sons with trumpets; namely, Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Michaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph: And his brethren, Shemaiah, and Azarael, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethaneel, and Judah, Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God, and Ezra the scribe before them."

A group of the priest's blew "trumpets" as the people marched in dedication around the rebuilt walls. Their names are listed here and it seems to indicate that "Zechariah" is their leader. "With the musical instruments of David the man of God" suggests that they may have been using additional instruments other than those listed in Nehemiah 12:27. If they incorporated "instruments" used by "David," they may have been using "pipe instruments, flutes and timbrels" (Psalm 81:2; 149:3; 150:4).

"And Ezra the scribe went before them" means Ezra led the group that marched to the right in a counter clockwise direction. Nehemiah 12:37 says, *"And at the fountain gate, which was over against them, they went up by the stairs of the city of David, at the going up of the wall, above the house of David, even unto the water gate eastward."* The second group marched to the left, northward, in a clockwise direction as stated in the next verse.

Verse 38

"And the other company of them that gave thanks went over against them, and I after them, and the half of the people upon the wall, from beyond the tower of the furnaces even unto the broad wall"

Nehemiah identifies the second group that "gave thanks" as they marched around the wall. He is marching with them "from beyond the tower of the furnaces even unto the broad wall." There is no exact location known for the "tower of furnaces" although it is mentioned in Nehemiah 3:11.

Ezra's Group: The *choir, Hoshaiiah, Chiefs; Priests with trumpets*: Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah; *Levites with musical instruments*: Zechariah, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah, Hanani; *Places mentioned where they marched*: Dung Gate, Fountain Gate, Steps of the city of David, Stairway of the wall, House of David, Water Gate

Second Group: The *choir, Nehemiah, Chiefs; Priests with trumpets*: Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, Hananiah; *Levites with musical instruments*: Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, Ezer, Jezrahiah; *Places mentioned where they marched*: Tower of furnaces, Broad wall, Ephraim Gate, Old Gate, Fish Gate, Tower of Hananeel, Tower of Meah, Sheep Gate, Prison Gate

If you are asking yourself what is the importance of all these places and people the answer to that may not be simple. However, think about what type of a dedication service this would have been without the preparations and without the participants. The Holy Spirit led Nehemiah to record the names of all these people and places because this is a very personal experience. Without the people and the places this event would have been like a wedding without a bride and groom. One of the highlights of a wedding is to read the program and try to put names with faces and ask questions like, "Is she kin to the bride," or, "Why is he in the wedding?" Rest assured, everyone who is involved is there for a reason or because of relationship. And the same is true of the dedication of the wall.

Verse 43

"Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced: for God had made them rejoice with great joy: the wives also and the children rejoiced: so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off."

"Also that day" is icing on the cake. In addition to the singers, the music and the marching, the people "offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced." There is nothing to indicate that "sacrifices" were required at this dedication but they were offered none the less. "Sacrifices" were a part of the life of God's people in the Old Testament and it is an expression of their love and thanksgiving to God. The Hebrew writer tells us, *"By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name"* (Hebrews 13:15).

The people "rejoiced" because God had given them "great joy." Notice the dominance of the thought of "rejoicing" and "joy" in this verse. The words are used five times, "rejoiced, rejoice, great joy, rejoiced, joy." This worship and praise involved the "wives and the children." It is seldom mentioned in the Old Testament that women and children are mentioned in connection with "joy" and "rejoicing." Usually "women" and "children" are mentioned in connection with sorrow. The one exception is the rejoicing of the "women" at the Red Sea (Exodus 15:20). In addition, up until this point in the dedication, all the music and singing has been done by the professionals. Now, the "women and children" get in on the praise. This is a powerful lesson for all of us. True biblical worship is not about professionals. It's about God's people (Colossians 3:12).

The "joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off" could be the most significant statement about this entire dedication story. It means their music and joy was known far and wide. Israel's shouting and praise was said to be "heard afar off" on two other occasions but those were associated with defeat and mixed with sorrow (1 Samuel 4:5; Ezra 3:8-13). But here, what was "heard afar off" seems to be that of pure "joy" and "rejoicing."

Conclusion

What makes worship meaningful to you? Do you plan to worship? Do you have a spiritual gift or a God-given ability that could enhance the worship at your church? Do you make any preparations for worship or do you just show up to watch the professionals? Does it matter if you are spiritually clean in your heart and mind when you come to worship?

If you answered all these questions honestly then you are probably aware that your worship is far below what God intended. In order to improve your worship, read and pray through Psalm 95:1-11. *"O come, let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with*

thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills is his also. The sea is his, and he made it: and his hands formed the dry land. O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our maker. For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. To day if ye will hear his voice, Harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my work. Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways: Unto whom I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest."

Amen.