



If someone were to ask you, “What does God want from us more than anything else?” what would you say? If we were to say, “Hmm... maybe don’t lie, cheat, or steal and maybe give to the poor.” Not a bad answer but not quite hitting the mark. Let’s make our answer a little more religious. “Don’t lie, cheat, or steal and maybe give a lot to the poor, and go to church, and help out the church and give money to the church.” Nice try, but that answer still doesn’t quite nail it.

The Bible says the greatest is love. God created us as an object of God’s love. God made us to love us. This means that God created us for the purpose of having a love relationship with him. So what God wants from us more than anything is for us to love him back.

One day Jesus was asked the question, “What is the greatest commandment?” In Matthew 22 Jesus answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.” Nothing is more important. That means if we miss out on this, we miss out on the very reason God created us and put us on earth.

There is a term for expressing love to God. The term is called “worship.” We tend to think of worship as going to church as some kind of regular ritual or routine. We may shape our view of worship through such activities as singing, prayer, giving an offering, hearing a sermon. All can be very appropriate expressions of worship, but these expressions will be meaningless if the heart of the worshipper is not genuinely wanting to express love to God. The essence of the most important thing to God is a heart attitude, a heart response to God.

Worship literally means to proclaim worth to something. We proclaim worth to God by telling God we love him and by showing God we love him. Through our thoughts, our words, our actions, the greatest thing we can do is express our love. We can do that alone, or in our community groups, or in a large crowd. Looking back on my Christian life, some of the most powerful and meaningful moments took place in larger corporate worship settings.

Today we look at a passage that demonstrates beautifully Corporate Worship. By the end of our service I hope you will feel loved by God more than ever, and I hope you will have learned to express your love to God more than ever. For some of us here today, this may be the first time we really ponder that worship is a team sport. He loves when we express our worship individually, but he also loves it when we express our love with other members of God’s family.

Our story this morning starts with a wall at the center of it. In chapter 6 it was announced that the wall around Jerusalem was completed. It was an amazing accomplishment in just 52 days. This was a big deal. Why are they waiting until chapter 12 to celebrate this?

Remember the book of Nehemiah has two parts. The first and longest is about the building of the wall, which goes through chapter 7. Then starting in chapter 8 we hear less from Nehemiah—the guy who was basically the general contractor, governor, overseer, God’s man to lead the rebuilding project—and we begin to hear more from Ezra, the priest and spiritual leader of the nation. Over the past few weeks we were inspired as we studied Ezra’s public reading of God’s word from the temple, and then observing the people’s response. We learned that it was less about an actual wall and more about God’s grace and mercy and power to rebuild the wall.

We were inspired to apply this and recognize that it is all about God’s grace and mercy, and our trust in who he is, and what he does to rebuild our broken world. Looking at this kind of corporate brokenness, this kind of corporate dependence, studying this corporate hunger for God’s word, this corporate turning back to God looks a lot like genuine spiritual revival to me.

And now they are about to have a corporate worship event to dedicate the wall around the city in an amazing display of celebration. Chapter 12 begins with a long list of names. Then verse 24 says,

**“And the leaders of the Levites were Hashabiah, Sherebiah, Jeshua son of Kadmiel, and their associates, who stood opposite them to give praise and thanksgiving, one section responding to the other, as prescribed by David the man of God.”**

When I try to picture this, I think of two groups of loyal fans on opposite sides of a stadium shouting back and forth, “We got spirit yes we do, we got spirit how about you?” Back and forth, and in this case God is on the field and they are celebrating his performance on their behalf. They were offering praise and thanksgiving with joy to God as their king, David, their model worship leader, had taught their ancestors years before.

We get the impression that this praise and thanksgiving was happening regularly, as if it was some kind of preparation for the upcoming big game which was to lead to something bigger.

### **Celebrating Through Worship Compels Us to Prepare**

Starting in verse 27 we see preparation for the big game taking shape.

**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 musicians 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 musicians had built villages for themselves around Jerusalem (Neh. 12:27–29).**

You get the sense that worship was never meant to be drab or boring. There was nothing stereotyped or monochrome about this service that was being planned. We observe a wide variety of musical gifts to be used to express adoration and praise. In case you are wondering, a lyre looks like a small harp. It's from the classic Greek period, I think I saw Spock playing one in the original *Star Trek*! In verse 41 we can read that the priests played trumpets. But with all the diversity of instruments, chapter 12 indicates that choral music was given the most prominent place. So the first thing we see is that the worship leaders were brought into Jerusalem from their outlying villages outside Jerusalem. You get the idea that there were little hamlets where the worship leaders lived together. That shouldn't surprise us. My years of working with worship leaders, they always loved hanging out with each other.

Preparation began with gathering the worship leaders and their teams, these celebration experts gathering together to design a celebration service like nothing they had seen before.

The word dedication refers to setting something aside for the Lord's purpose, or devoted to him. These worship leaders gathered together their team and planned the dedication service. As they planned they must have spent time looking back. For inspiration they remembered that this didn't start with Nehemiah, but God laying the vision on Nehemiah's heart. They remembered that Nehemiah's heart was broken for what broke God's heart and it led him to pray and plan; that God gave him the courage to ask the king for help. They remembered that it remained an uphill and difficult project. To outsiders, it looked foolish at best and impossible at worst. Yet obstacle after obstacle was overcome. He got the king's permission and the needed supplies for free, not to mention a military escort at his side. He was ridiculed and despised by his enemies and they threatened to attack them. The people were tired, discouraged and fearful. But brick by brick, day by day—sometimes they carried a tool in one hand and a sword in the other—they continued to rebuild their broken world.

Inspiration must have been flowing now to these worship leaders. They remembered that families built sections of the walls together. They remembered seeing their enemies seeing all of this, coming to the conclusion that no rag tag band of Israelites couldn't make this happen; only God could do this.

**"When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall" (v. 30).**

Great leaders in God's kingdom know that they cannot make themselves clean, but to lead they needed to be right before God. So before the first singer sang a note, before the first string was plucked, before the first shout of joy was allowed to go forth, they cleansed themselves. The priests first cleansed themselves. They sacrificed sacred animals, likely sprinkled the blood on the wall and gates. They washed themselves with water, and confessed their sins. Then it says they purified the people.

When I visited Israel a few years back, we saw a whole bunch of uncovered ruins. I saw the ancient ruins of many synagogues. Right outside the main entrances to these synagogues were some curious uncovered holes in the ground with carved steps leading down into them. They looked like and were about the size of hot tub. They were called Mekvehs. They were small pools that the Jews filled with water and every Jew in their preparation for worship was to ceremonially wash in the Mekvehs. I saw a bunch of these outside the temple ruins in the ancient city of Jerusalem. Can you imagine the picture of person after person getting a ceremonial washing before entering the temple. Did they go in wet?

I think of Peter preaching in Jerusalem in Acts chapter 2, and it says 3000 were saved and baptized. I imagine these new Christians jumped into the Mekvehs to celebrate the internal cleansing work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts with the outward symbol of washing with water in the Mekvehs.

It is right for us to consider preparation when we enter into worship. It is right to remember what God has done. It is right to do some self-examination. But just a heads up, whenever we turn inward and examine we feel guilt. Think about it. Who can be truly joyful in celebration while anchored in guilt? The more we are aware of Christ, the more we are aware of our sin, and the more guilt we feel. But God's word is unmistakably clear: Ephesians 1:7-8 says, **"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding."** Verses like these are like jumping into a Mekvah. They prepare us to celebrate with joy. To put it another way, when we claim the riches of God's grace and we trust that Jesus Christ truly offers us 100% forgiveness for our sins, our guilt is removed. When we rebuild our broken world with Jesus Christ at the center, we will overflow with joy from God.

**"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" (v. 31).**

The second choir included Nehemiah:

**"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," (v. 39).**

Everyone climbed up on the wall. The singers, the instrumentalists, the priests. They climbed the walls with their cymbals, their harps and lyres, and most importantly their voices.

The two choirs proceeded on top of the wall each going a different direction. It was like a Disneyland parade with people lining the wall watching and joining in. Remember how they were ridiculed in chapter 4? The enemy said that the walls were so weak a fox could knock them down, and now the people were marching on the completed walls which were likely 20 feet thick. As they marched on top of the walls, everyone could see what was happening.

**“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” (v. 40).**

The two choirs continued until they met at the entrance of the temple and entered and assumed their normal places of worship.

**“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” (v. 43).**

Note the superlatives: Great sacrifices, great joy, heard far away.... It was interesting to see that the root of the Hebrew word for “joy” or “rejoicing” occurs five times in verse 43 alone. God had given them great joy. And for miles around, unbelievers heard the sound of praise. Isn’t rejoicing something that we would want to hear coming out of a church on Sunday? The best singing and sometimes the loudest singing come from a rejoicing heart. We should never underestimate the power of hearing believers’ praises to draw people to God.

### **Celebrating Through Worship Compels Us to Rejoice**

It was becoming clear to the people that this was not just about a completed wall. It was becoming clear that this wall was not just to protect their city; this was a faith story of God’s faithfulness and power. This wall was God’s idea to preserve the place where God was to dwell. This wall was a megaphone that was proclaiming the name of God to the entire world.

What did they sing while they were on that wall? The Psalms, certainly. They could have put Psalm 48, verses 12-14 to song: *“Walk about Zion, go around her, count her towers, consider well her ramparts, view her citadels, that you may tell of them to the next generation. For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end.”*

God has given us a gift by allowing us to sing. God truth put to music can bring joy to our hearts like nothing else. God’s truth put to music allows us to connect our hearts with the heart of God through the heart of the artist. I know for me when I find out the inspiration behind a powerful song I am also inspired. If it was written from a place of joy, I’m made joyful. If it’s written from a place of pain, I connect to that pain and find encouragement and hope. Songs written from the heart of an artist illuminated by the Holy Spirit touches our heart like nothing else. Are you are feeling inadequate this morning? Are you feeling overwhelmed, fearful? Let inspired and sacred music touch your soul.

Chapter 12 is a celebration. They were celebrating God’s timely interventions to prove that God alone rebuilt their broken world.

Also, we read that the Israelites were compelled to sing songs of thanksgiving. They thanked God for his generosity; he provided everything to rebuild their broken world.

I remember about seven years ago I was pastoring in another church and we dedicated a large addition we had purchased and remodeled for our church. It was a children’s wing, a youth wing and a large multipurpose gathering place. I remember when we gathered to dedicate this building, we didn’t struggle to rejoice. It just happened. Many of these generous and spiritually mature people set aside their inhibitions and praised God for all to see. Even the Norwegians and Swedes in my congregation! It was amazing. The only time I had ever seen Norwegians and Swedes throw aside their inhibitions to demonstratively praise was when they were cheering the Green Bay Packers!

Have you ever noticed that when you have done something that fills you with great joy—a book you read, a mission trip you went on, a movie you saw—it is natural for you to tell your friends to read that book, go on that mission trip, or see that movie. We instinctively rejoice in whatever we enjoy. You don’t have to tell my daughter to praise the virtues of her fiancé. You might have to tell me, but not my daughter!

But here is an interesting principle that lifts out of our story today. Enjoyment when shared is actually contagious. Corporate praise when it’s a spontaneous overflow of enjoyment from the heart draws others in.

If you struggle with joy, remember what the Lord says, “I delight myself in you.” If the Lord were to say, “I endure you,” we’d understand that. If the Lord were to say, “I forgive you,” we know we need it. But what he says is, “I delight in you.” We have a hard time imagining a God who can delight in the fellowship of angels and the heavenly hosts anytime he wants find more delight in fellowship with you and me.

Here is the other side of this: The Scripture not only tells us that the Lord delights in us, the scripture also tells us to delight ourselves in him as well. We know all about trying to honor him and be reverent. And truthfully we can do that and keep God at arm’s length. But God is compelling us to set aside inhibitions and rejoice and enjoy and delight in him. So think about what he has done for you. Think about why he has done it for you. Give thanks for his generosity to you and let rejoicing arise naturally.

The Presbyterians have a great catechism. It starts with a question: “What is the chief end of man?” They answer, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” When we enjoy God we glorify him. True joy is not dependent on outward circumstances, but upon the right inward focus. I believe the Jews on that wall laughed as well as sang their way all around that wall. Had their circumstances really changed all that much? No. Everyone around them still hated them. But they had changed. They had the right focus.

Nehemiah chapter 12 has taken us on a 3-stop worship journey. We began with preparation, then it flowed into joyful celebration, and now we land on sacrifice. In verse 43 it said they offered

sacrifices at this dedication service. That's an important point. True worship is always costly. The Old Testament's entire worship was built around a sacrificial system. The only acceptable type of animal offered was one that was unblemished. That is worship: Giving to the Lord the best we have.

**"At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, first fruits 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" (v. 44).**

They give their best as a response of worship. Verse 44 uses words like contribution, first fruits, tithes, gathering and storing for a future. This Dedication service led by Ezra and Nehemiah was big day, but verse 44 tells us that worship is not just for the here and now, but it is also for the future and into eternity.

So today we worship. We are in church. We love God. We want to follow God. But tomorrow is Monday. Then Tuesday. Then Wednesday. The apostle Paul picks up on this notion of sacrifice seven days a week when he says in Romans 12:1, ***"In view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship."***

The idea of sacrifice involves the animal first being killed, then the body would get placed on the altar, and then it would be consumed with fire. Say you take a creature that is "living," still alive, and put it on the altar and say, "Stay. Stay there until you are consumed." Then you light the fire. What is that creature going to do? If he can, he will scoot off the hot altar. Instead, Paul is saying for the Christian, "Of your own volition, you crawl back on. You surrender. Day by day, moment by moment. It's going to feel like you are going to die. It's going to scare you, but it's the only way to true joy."

Surrender is almost never just an internal event. It's not just about feeling devoted. Usually it involves external actions. You should know this: Usually these external actions have a cost. Usually surrender to God requires behaviors that come with a cost.

As I see it we have three options. Option #1—We can live with a rebellious heart. I'm not going near that altar. It's too hot. I will be joyful if I could only get what I want when I want it.

Option #2—We can live with a committed heart, where we have determined to set aside ourselves. And that is what Nehemiah and his people did. They set aside themselves. They

put themselves on the altar and they gave their time, their talents and their treasures as a living sacrifice and it was then that they found joy.

Option #3—This is where I think most of us struggle as we think about what it means to be a living sacrifice. We find that our heart is divided. It's like we approach the altar; some of us make heartfelt decisions to stay on the altar, but when that altar heats up we lose our nerve, we no longer trust and we slither off into a dark corner for a while. I'll keep this part of me, this pattern, this relationship under my control. I will hold that grudge, enjoy the pleasure I get from the bad habit. I will keep it secret.

We know God wants full surrender. God makes it clear, but we kind of like it hazy. Passages like Nehemiah 12 and Romans 12 remind us of God's clarity on this issue. I know folks right here today that could stand up and say, "Living with a divided heart is a miserable way to live." They would go on to tell you, "Jesus said, 'You lose a life, but you gain a life, and the life you gain is way better than the life you lose.'"

It starts with getting yourself out of the way. It starts with setting aside self. And it looks like trusting God and climbing back up on that sacrificial altar on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and so on.

Some of us here are Steve Kerr fans. You know him because he is the head coach of the Golden State Warriors. Years ago, Steve played for the Chicago Bulls. One year the Bulls were in the NBA Finals and Steve hit a 3-point shot at the buzzer to win the game. The following year, the Bulls found themselves in a similar situation and Kerr relates the story, "As we called timeout and came to the bench, I told the coach that it would be a great time for me to take a three point shot. He told me to shut-up, that I was to take the ball and give it to Michael Jordan and then get out of the way. So, that is what I did. But for what it is worth, I think that I did a great job of getting out of the way!"

How good are we at getting out of God's way? Let's conclude our service today with a get-out-of-the-way-and-climb-back-on-the-altar-and-trust-God response. May these final songs, our final act of corporate worship, touch our hearts.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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