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Peninsula  
Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

*We All Worship Something*

Nehemiah 12:27–47

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*series: Nehemiah: Rebuilding Your Broken World*

We all worship something. The word “worship” describes the acts of the mind, heart and will where we joyfully acknowledge the worth of God. In the 1600’s a group of English and Scottish theologians gathered, with layman, to bring the church of England into greater conformity with the Church of Scotland. From this gathering emerged the Westminster Shorter Catechism which states, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” In other words, we were made to worship!

Isn’t it true that Christians don’t always live like we were made to worship? Sometimes the Christian life seems more like hard work than glorifying God and enjoying Him forever. What if life could be different? What if joyful worship marked everything we do? That is one of the reasons why it is so important for us to gather here in worship. When life deflates us, extracts our hope and steals our joy, we can gather with others to worship our great God. This is a celebration service. Worship is not about a feeling we receive; worship is about glorying God and enjoying Him forever. Is your life an example of joyful worship?

For the last nine weeks we’ve been studying the book of Nehemiah. Today we continue our series “Rebuilding Your Broken World.” Open your Bible to Nehemiah 12. The book of Nehemiah started with Nehemiah in tears over the state of Jerusalem. Then God worked in the heart of a king, granting Nehemiah permission to travel to Jerusalem. Nehemiah traveled there, inspected the wall, and inspired a group of broken people to take on a monumental task. We sat on the edge of our seat to see how God’s people would respond to relentless opposition. Finally, with calloused hands and their faces covered in sweat, the wall was completed! Then it was time to repopulate God’s city. And last week we saw revival when God’s word was read by Ezra the priest.

The wall is built. The enemy is silenced. The city is full and it’s time to celebrate. It’s time to celebrate and dedicate the completed wall. In Nehemiah 12 we find a joyful worship service. In verses 27–47 the word “joy,” or some variation of joy, appears five times. This is significant because the Israelites have gone through immense struggle, faced depressing circumstances and unimaginable difficulty to get to this place.

### **Preparing to Worship**

Before the worship service can begin the necessary preparations must occur.

**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. When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall (verses 27–30).**

The text never tells us how long after the completion of the wall this dedication took place, but knowing Nehemiah we can assume it was very soon. The worship for this service was extremely important, so important that Levites were sought out to celebrate. The Levites were the ones who performed all the various functions revolving around God’s Temple and its worship. Not only were the Levites sought out to participate in the worship service, so were musicians. This gathering of the people united the residents of Jerusalem with the Israelites residing in the countryside.

Look how they came in verse 27—joyfully. They were brought to joyfully celebrate but before they could celebrate they needed to be purified (v. 30). We don’t know exactly what this purification consisted of. Scholars believe it had something to do with ceremonial washing; fasting was probably an aspect; it could have involved abstaining from sexual relations and possibly sin offerings. The gates and the walls were purified also, possibly by sprinkling them with the blood of the sacrifices. All of these were part of the purification ceremony described in the Law of Moses. It would not have been uncommon to purify animate and inanimate objects.

Why start with all of this purification? Because joyful worship requires a pure heart. Have you ever tried to worship while harboring or hiding sin from the Lord? It makes it near impossible. Some people come to church, put on a fake smile and try to worship the Lord all while hiding sin in their hearts. We must remember that to worship joyfully our hearts must be clean before God. The book of Hebrews says, *“let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water”* (Heb.

10:22). We know it's Christ who purifies us, but we also play a role in preparing ourselves to enter His presence.

How do you prepare yourself for worship? Before you walk in these doors do you ask God to cleanse your heart? Are you in the regular habit of confessing your sin and claiming the shed blood of Christ as the basis of your forgiveness before worship? These are questions you may have never thought of before reading this text. Think of an athlete. They don't walk into the stadium right before the National Anthem is sung. They plan ahead to arrive early so they can be mentally focused. They arrive early; they prepare themselves beforehand.

Let me share a few observations with you about our church: when our worship services start this room is about 20% full. There are actually times that I've turned around in my chair and thought, "God, is anyone going to show up today?" Other times I've been standing in the lobby and I see people walking in quickly who seemed rushed. People are finishing phone calls in the courtyard. I've even seen what appears to be couples having intense conversations (some people call these fights). By the time we're singing the third song this room is packed and one of our ushers is coming to the front row asking us to have everyone squeeze in so they can find open seats.

This is not an indictment on anyone; this is an encouragement to begin preparing yourself for worship before you arrive. This is an encouragement to use the time on your walk or drive here to prepare your heart for worship. This is an admonishment to confess your sin before arriving here so you're ready to worship. The truth is, God cares most about the heart in worship. I know there are times you are here early. There are times you're doing good to just get the kids checked in. I also know parking is crazy and you can have a hard time finding a spot.

## Joyful Worship

After purifying themselves they were ready to dedicate the wall and worship. Listen to what takes place next.

**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 first person narrative style resumes again. It hasn't been until Nehemiah 7:5 that we've seen the first person pronoun. Nehemiah took a backseat during the revival, but now he is back leading the people in joyful worship.

Let's start with the first part of v. 31. Imagine what this might have looked like! Imagine a bunch of men climbing to the top of this wall. Maybe there were a few ladders. Maybe some guys were boosted up by their friends. I can imagine a few of them laughing as they are trying to balance on the shoulders of the man under them. The leaders are on top of the wall reaching out their hand to help and the choirs begin making the ascent to the

top of the wall. It's a beautiful sight. People from all walks of life are ascending the wall to dedicate it. One group would be led by Ezra the priest while the other would be led by Nehemiah. The people would climb the wall on the Western side. Ezra would head south, or counterclockwise, while Nehemiah would head to the North, or in a clockwise direction, praising the Lord.

**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.... Ezra the teacher of the Law led the procession.... 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, (verses 31, 36b, 38).**

You might be wondering, did they really have to climb on top of the wall and celebrate in this manner? This is the same wall that the Israelites were ridiculed for back in chapter 4. Do you remember when Tobiah mocked Nehemiah by saying, "This wall is so unstable that if a fox jumped on it the whole thing would topple over!" Nehemiah ignored the ridicule and continued working. Excavations have been done in Jerusalem and estimate the completed wall was almost nine feet wide. Here we see it able to support all these people who have just climbed on top! This says a lot about what they had accomplished. Climbing the wall was a visual reminder of what God had done. This is the cherry on top of an ice cream sundae!

What did the people do once they were on top of the wall? They gave thanks in the way King David had prescribed with musical instruments.

**...and his associates—Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah and Hanani—with musical instruments prescribed by David the man of God (v. 36a).**

Verse 31 says there were two choirs, verse 35 mentions trumpets in addition to the cymbals, harps and electric guitars we saw back in verse 27. So the people are on the wall, giving thanks to God. Do you wonder what they are singing? Many scholars think they may have been singing from the book of Psalms, possibly from Psalm 48. *"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"* (Psalm 48:12–14). There are times in our life that we need visual reminders like this. We need to be united in our worship, standing up high, side by side with others worshipping God.

The two companies march around the entire city worshipping God. Scholars estimate the wall was 1.5–2 miles in circumference. After walking the wall the two companies meet on the other side and head to the Temple of God.

**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—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 (verses 40–43).**

This is the crux of the entire passage, right here in verse 43. This is the pinnacle of the entire book of Nehemiah. The two choirs just walked the circumference of Jerusalem, worshipping God, and now they gather together in the house of God to worship Him. There are a bunch of guys' names that I can't pronounce and we get to verse 43 and see the repetition of rejoicing. Scholar Mervin Breneman says: "'God had given them great joy' is the climax of the work of Ezra and Nehemiah."

Earlier this year I was in Cambodia teaching a conference for the local pastors. The day before the conference began we had a free day, so Mark Mitchell and I decided to adventure the city and see the tourist spots. The first place we arrived at was Wat Phnom. Wat Phnom is the highest location in Phnom Penh standing a huge 27 meters above sea level. On top of this small hill is a Buddhist Temple or what is called a "Wat." I had never observed Buddhist worship before and was quite surprised by what I saw. The people were lighting candles, releasing birds and laying money at the feet of statues. They knelt on a hard floor and offered prayers.

People throughout the world are following similar patterns of worship right now. They are tireless in practicing different religious exercises. People are beating their bodies, reciting receptive mantras and embarking on long spiritual journeys believing these will relieve their guilt, shed their anxieties, and register their allegiance to false gods. Besides these religious activities, the thing that struck me the most was the lack of joy. On Wat Phnom that Sunday morning I saw not one smile, no laughter, and seemed like joy was not invited; joy was absent.

Compare that with what we observe here in Nehemiah. At the dedication of the wall there was great rejoicing! When you read the text in English we see four mentions of joy, but in the Hebrew text joy appears five times. In one instance, it's repeated immediately after itself, reading "rejoicing joy." When this happens in the Bible, the writer is using the repetition of the words to draw our attention there. It is also very unusual for women and children to be mentioned in Hebrew culture, so having the women and children mentioned tells us everyone was involved. I'm not sure we understand the impact we can have by singing. The impact of their worship was heard far away. I'm impressed with the

fact that verse 43 doesn't say the **song** was heard from far away, the text tells us the **joy** was heard from far away. People may ignore voices and words, but the surrounding people couldn't ignore the joy!

Do a quick comparison with me. Imagine you have moved and you are looking for a new church family. The first church you walk in to seems lifeless. The worship is dead. No one is singing along with the worship team. People are standing, but you actually wonder if anyone has a pulse. The teaching is great but when the pastor says, "Amen" 30% of the people leave. Next Sunday you decide to visit another church. When you arrive in the parking lot, two minutes late, the singing is so loud you hear it right when you open your car door. You walk into the auditorium and people are engaged in worship. They are singing joyfully to God. The worship team is jubilant and excited to worship. The sermon is equal to the church you visited last week. When the pastor says, "Amen" people are invited to their feet to sing one more song to the Lord and thank Him for His goodness.

Which church family would you rather be a part of? The one that is worshipping joyfully to the Lord or the one where you wondered if anyone had a pulse during worship? Do you choose the first church or the second church? This might be hard, but let's take it one step further: who do **you** most resemble in worship? Do you find yourself joyful or joyless in worship? The thing we learn is this: Worship God with a joyful heart.

You might ask: Does joy come **before** worship or does joy come **in** worship? I think the text is teaching us that God gives us joy when we worship. The Psalms are full of instruction on joyful worship. Psalm 33:1 says, "*Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him.*" You may feel joyless when you walk in but it is fitting for us to sing to the Lord. When we gather you have a reason to worship God with a joyful heart. You have the hope of eternity. You worship a living and active God who cares personally about each and every one of us. Sure, you might have struggles in the week but joy is found when we sing to the Lord.

## **Generous Giving**

The rest of the chapter presents us with another aspect of joyful worship: the offering of our money and our service for the Lord's work.

**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. They performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did also the musicians and gatekeepers, according to the commands of David and his son Solomon. For long**

**ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the musicians and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the musicians and the gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron (verses 44–47).**

Much of what we've talked about in joyous worship has been the subject of singing to the Lord but here we find another way we can be joyous in our worship: we can worship in our giving. In fact, back in chapter 10 the people made a commitment to support the temple ministry. Did you know that giving of our resources is part of worship? When we pass the baskets around during the worship service that is not something we do because we have to keep this place running. It's an act of worship to God. It's a way of expressing our love and generosity to Him.

And notice something very significant here. In verse 44 we see the people gave not just because they were commanded to give but because they were pleased with the leaders who served them. Isn't that the case that when there is Godly leadership in place it makes it easier to give? When leaders are doing the right thing it makes it far more enjoyable to give to them. That's part of integrity in the leadership of the church—if leaders can't be trusted with the sacred gifts of the people they shouldn't be leading. The instruction King David gave 500 years earlier is still having an impact on Jerusalem.

Christian leader Gordon MacDonald shared the following story about how God transformed him from "giving as merely an institutional obligation" to a cheerful giver. "The process began when my wife Gail and I made a missions trip to West Africa. On the first Sunday of our visit, we joined a large crowd of desperately poor Christians for worship. As we neared the church, I noticed that almost every person was carrying something. Some hoisted cages of noisy chickens, others carried baskets of yams, and still others toted bags of eggs or bowls of cassava paste.

"Why are they bringing all that stuff?' I asked one of our hosts. 'Watch!' she said. Almost every person in that African congregation brought something: a chicken, a basket of yams, a bowl of cassava paste. I saw that giving, whether yams or dollars, is not optional for Christ followers.

"Soon after the worship began, the moment came when everyone stood and poured into the aisles, singing, clapping, even shouting. The people began moving forward, each in turn bringing whatever he had brought to a space in the front. Then I got it. This was West African offering time. The chickens would

help others get a tiny farm business started. The yams and the eggs given could be sold in the marketplace to help the needy. The cassava paste would guarantee that someone who was hungry could eat. I was captivated. I'd never seen a joyful offering before. Obviously, my keep-money-under-the-radar policy would not have worked in that West African church. Those African believers, although they never knew it, had moved me. I began to understand that giving—whether yams or dollars—was not an option for Christ-followers. Rather it was an indication of the direction and the tenor of one's whole life."

This passage has been a kick in the pants for me. This summer I've struggled with having joy in the Lord. I've struggled to worship with a joyful heart. I've found myself wrestling with thoughts and wondering if I had lost my joy. A few weeks ago I was preaching at a summer camp near Big Bear Lake and the worship overpowered me. As I began singing I felt my heart begin to change. Studying this passage has been exactly what I needed to hear. When I asked us, as a group, to worship God with a joyful heart, I was talking to myself also. I am encouraging myself to worship God with a joyful heart in all I do.

Christianity itself is joyous. This is not difficult to apply. Nehemiah taught us that times of rejoicing are not a one-time experience but are ongoing moments in the lives of those who have committed themselves to God. The account of Biblical celebration of worship is an invitation to us. We are invited to rejoice. We all battle our daily struggles which is why it is vitally important for us to purify ourselves before we worship God. We need to examine our hearts and do our best to prepare ourselves for worship. It's appropriate for us to arrive early and to sing with joy. In fact, we should be the most joyous group of people on the Peninsula right now. We celebrate the great acts of God on our behalf, particularly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When we do this others are going to notice our joy. People around us are going to start talking about us. They are going to start talking among themselves about the joy we exude. Then there will come a day when they will ask us about the joy we have. Others may have moments of happiness, but our joy will outlast that. The Jews rejoiced as they worshipped God. Their joy flooded the surrounding areas. It wasn't their circumstances that had changed, it was their hearts. Your circumstances may not change, but you can still choose to worship God with joy. The reality is, we all worship something, so let's choose to worship God with a joyful heart.

*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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