

Celebration and Thanksgiving Nehemiah 12:27-47

What we see here is kind of like a sanctified **“Woodstock in the OT!”**

Lots of instruments, singing, a big festival, as the people give thanks to God for all that He has done. **They’ve got a great band!**

- **Singing** is mentioned 8 times
- **Thanksgiving** 6 times
- **Rejoicing** 7 times
- **Musical Instruments** 3 times

Previously, there were **workers** and **watchers on the wall**, but now there are **worshipers on the walls**, giving thanks to God in the holy city.

In **Ezra 6:16**, something similar to this happened, after they rebuilt the temple.

- In both cases, the people had **labored**, and **then** they **celebrated**.
- **The Christian life involves service, hard work, and endurance, but it is also good and right to have times of celebration and thanksgiving personally and corporately.**

In many ways, our **praise is a barometer of our spiritual vitality** – personally and corporately.

- **Praise flows when the heart is full - when enflamed with gratitude.**
 - Study revivals, and you see that new songs were written as people sang with passion over the gospel.
- **Praise is forced when the heart is cold.**
- The people’s hearts were full, and so praised flowed.

This is really the climactic point of the book.

- Nehemiah had secured permission to rebuild the walls.
- He had developed a plan for constructing the walls.
- He inspired people to labor.
- He overcame much opposition – internally and externally.
- He completed the wall.
- He encouraged and assisted in a national revival.
- He had reorganized and repopulated the city.
- Now it was time to celebrate and sing!

There had been *hardship* on the wall but now there was *happiness* on the wall!

A distinguishing mark of Christians is that we sing. We express our joy through musical praise, and our gatherings rightly involve singing.

- Many other world religions **don’t sing**. Some use **repetitive chants**. In some cases, **only the clergy sing**.
- Why? **Because other religions don’t have the good news of the gospel!**
- But the **liberated people** of God are singing people!

- **Oppression and works-based righteousness don't fuel praise.**
- **Grace fuels praise.**
- So we write hymns, songs, and spiritual songs.
- We sing them in good times and bad times, to God and to one another, with both theological depth and artistic beauty.
- **We even sing songs at funerals and grave sides** because when we grieve, we don't grieve without hope.
- For years, the liberated people of God **have filled the earth with songs.**
- And one day, **we will fill heaven with songs!**

There's much to learn from this amazing section of Scripture.

- We don't need to try to do a one-to-one correlation for everything they are doing here – **otherwise we should all process around the church building in different directions and meet here in the auditorium! (though it would be fun, and some of you could use some exercise!).**
- We want to do is look at what is *intended* by each practice that we observe.

And we must stop to recognize the obvious: *music and singing* are at the heart of this event.

- There are some who stress music to the neglect of the preaching of the Word.
- But there are others who **cheapen and lessen the importance of music among God's people, in name of their love for the Word of God.**
- They **miss the first or second song** each week because it's "**preparatory,**" right?
- Music is **not** preparation for the preaching!
- **Music is not *filler* in a worship service!**
- **It is a vitally important aspect of our worship.**
- This text illustrates this fact.

You **can't read through the Bible & miss the importance of musical worship.**

- It's all through the text: Genesis-Exodus-Revelation
 - **Revelation** has more hymns than any other book of the Bible, except Psalms: **14 hymns in Revelation.**
- **Luther:** "Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. The gift of language combined with the gift of song was given to man that he should proclaim the Word of God through Music."
- **Luther:** "I have no use for cranks who despise music; because it is a gift of God. Music drives away the devil and makes people happy.... After theology, I give music the highest place and greatest honor."
- **"The Bible is God's gift to man; the hymnal is man's gift to God."**
- If you cheapen music in the name of a love for God's Word, **you don't love God's Word the way you think you do.**

So I would like to first walk through this passage in its **three parts** to first understand it, and then I have **9 Marks of a Healthy Corporate Worship Service**. The three parts are these: (1) **Preparation**, (2) **Procession**, and (3) **Provision**.

#1: Preparation (12:27-30)

27-29: They prepare by seeking out the singers! – “the Levites” (27), “the sons of the singers,” (28), and the singers” (29).

Hamilton explains: “Back in **1 Chronicles 24**, David had organized the priests into **24 divisions**. This meant that there were two divisions of priests for each month of the year, which in turn meant that each priest would be on duty for two weeks of each year. The rest of the time the priests could attend to the realities of everyday life—farming and caring for livestock. So for two weeks the priests would serve God in the temple in Jerusalem, **and the other 50 weeks of the year they, like the rest of the people, were to serve God in the temple of creation.**”

So that’s why **they have to go find these singers; they were scattered throughout the villages. Then they got to work planning and rehearsing for this big occasion.**

Notice: some had the gift of singing/music. They were recruited.

- **“sons of singers”** that is, “the order of singers”
 - **That’s not my group! (Dan Drennen proved that for the world to see!)**
 - **They are like “the sons of the prophets” in 2 Kings.**
- **When it was Bible time, they went to get Ezra, when it was time to throw down in praise, they got the singers!**
- **This wasn’t some thrown together worship service.**
- **Some people think that **planning and diligence** are not aspects of real worship; they erroneously exalt only spontaneous worship.**
- **Good worship does involve spontaneity, but it’s also the result of care, attention, and planning – like a marriage, intimacy comes with *attention* and *preparation*.**

For years, **gifted musicians/singers working hard have blessed the church.**

- **We are blessed here at IDC to have such gifted people who play on this stage, and we have “the godfather of Christian hip-hop” himself among us!**
- **People who **write** good songs have blessed the church for years.**
- **Me and Matt Boswell (a gifted singer)... “I wrote it ... but that’s not my arrangement.”** Matt and Matt Papa write together weekly and their songs bless us, as do our friends at Austin Stone, and others.

30: They prepare by purifying themselves.

No one knows what this purification involved exactly.

- **Most likely, **fasting**, some type of **sacrifice for cleansing**, and a **ceremonial washing**.**
- **They purify the gates and the wall too! They are setting the city aside to be holy.**

- Under the new covenant, we're not bound by these strict regulations, but we must come clean for our worship to be acceptable.
- We have a purity in Christ that is **internal, not external**; a cleansing that is **actual not ceremonial**.
- We can approach God with acceptable worship because of the sacrifice of Christ.
 - "Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name." (Heb 13:15)
 - **Through Christ, our worship is acceptable!**

#2: Procession (12:31-43)

31a: You gotta love Nehemiah! One moment he's serving wine in the Persian palace; the next minute he's surveying the broken city on his horse; then he's rallying workers with his hard-hat and clipboard; he's a governor; and **now he's leading the parade!** He's not the kind of guy you would think could do this!

He knows there's a time to work, and there's a time to party!

So Nehemiah divides the people into **two choirs**.

- Both get on the walls, with one choir going in one direction, and the other going in the opposite direction.
- The two choirs encircle the city and meet at the temple.
- Excavations reveal that these walls were about nine feet wide.
 - Remember Tobiah's taunts, "**A fox will break down these walls.**" I don't think so. **Two large choirs are walking around it!**
 - Although it is not specified, judging by the locations that each choir passes, the starting place seems to have been the **Valley Gate**. On Nehemiah's first night of reconnaissance, he started at this valley gate, but couldn't make his way around the city because it was broken (2:13). Now they're leading a praise service starting there!

31b-37: The first group of wall-worshippers, Ezra's procession, follows the wall in a counterclockwise direction.

38-39: The second choir, Nehemiah's follows the wall in a clockwise direction (v. 38).

- Each choir has lay leadership, priestly leadership, and musical representation.
- So there's unity, order, beauty, and praise.

Verse 40: The choirs meet at the temple, and worship together there.

12:41: trumpets are present, along with the names of musicians

12:42: the singers sang, with **Jezebraiah** as the leader.

12:43: They offer great sacrifices

12:43: This is some joyful joy! Five times in one verse we read of joy!

We don't know what they sang, but many Psalms would be appropriate, esp **Psalms 48:12-14**.

¹² Walk about Zion, go around her,
number her towers,

¹³ consider well her ramparts,

go through her citadels,
that you may tell the next generation
14 that this is God,
our God forever and ever.
He will guide us forever.

#3: Provision (12:44-47)

44: Previously, the people made a covenant to financially support the temple ministry, and we see them keeping their promise here.

- They study the Scriptures to see what God requires for the temple provisions.
- Some of the Levites supervised the tithes and first-fruits collection, and the storing of it in the temple.
- These tithes and offerings supported the temple workers, so that they could fulfill their ministry.
- **44b:** The people rejoiced over those who led them in worship. So it wasn't begrudging giving, but joyful giving. **They loved their leaders.** They were **grateful** for them.

45-46: They believed that God was still working out his purposes to be praised in Jerusalem, so they keep the commands of David and Solomon regarding the purification process, and they continued the legacy of singing and giving thanks.

47: Even though Nehemiah's day was not a time of prosperity, the people still contributed sacrificially to support the worship of God in the temple.

- **I'm sure some were tempted to think the people listed in verse 47 were unnecessary: singers, gatekeepers, Levites, sons of Aaron. Who needs these guys!**
- **Isn't worship is an option, not a necessity?**
 - "We've still got homes to rebuild and work to do in Jerusalem, who needs these Levites!"
- They thought differently.
- **The people funded the worship of God and work of God.**
- **It is one thing to get all excited emotionally at a corporate worship event, it's another thing to write a check and contribute financially to the ongoing work of ministry! The latter is often more difficult than the former!**
- And we won't do it unless we don't first offer ourselves to the Lord (before we give an offering)

9 Marks of Healthy Corporate Worship Service

[I'm indebted to Raymond Brown's organizational ideas here]

1. Its Purpose: To Glorify God (27)

- Verse 27 – It involved *celebration*, *thanksgiving*, and *dedication*.
- They come together **to adore and praise God** for who He is, what He has done

- “Adoration is the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable, and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin.” (William Temple)
- How do you fight self-centeredness? With adoration. Get your eyes off yourself!
- **Celebration**: This should be part of our lives as Christians. Many don’t know how to celebrate. It’s an important aspect of worship. The tomb is empty! Rejoice!
- **Thanksgiving**: verse 27, 31, 40, 45-46 (ongoing thanksgiving)
 - i. We have many reasons to give God thanks – **common grace/Saving grace**
- **Dedication** – the offering of ourselves to God

2. Its Nature: Wholehearted and Joyful (27, 43)

- Not just the worship leaders rejoiced, but also the “women and children” (43)
- This is an important aspect of our faith
 - 8:10, “the joy of the Lord is your strength”
 - 8:17, “there was very great rejoicing” – celebrating the feasts
 - 12:43, “God made them rejoice with great joy”
- **Worship is not to be a drab experience.**
- “I guess I better go to church” is the wrong attitude.
- Language: **An abundance of superlatives**
 - “large choirs”
 - “great joy” (43)
 - **There’s nothing half-hearted here!**
 - They have reveled in God’s “great mercy” and “great goodness.” (ch. 9)
 - Now they give him **great praise and “great sacrifices” (43)**
- We are to come before God with joyful songs.
- “Rejoice always, again I will say rejoice.” (Phil 4:4).
- Even in sorrow, we can have joy, “As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor 6:10)

“Christianity is the happiest religion in the world. Other worshipers rarely hurry to their shrines and temples with happy spirits.” (Raymond Brown)

How could it not be, when our sins are forgiven, the tomb empty, and the throne occupied!?

- If there’s no singing, it means there’s no joy, and if there’s no joy, then we have some *gospel heart questions* to ask.
- The gospel brings us joy, which leads to praise.

“God gave us joy.” What does that mean?

It means God saved, restored, renewed them.

- There was a **second Exodus** when they came out of Babylon.
- When you study worship in the OT, you will see two major themes, **the Exodus out of Egypt, and the Exodus out of Babylon.**
- There’s **a third Exodus: several** texts speak of it in **Rev 1:5b-6.** (Cf., Col 1:12-13)
- This greater Exodus, freed from bondage of sin, leads to singing.
- We work hard to make everything about the gospel because it is the gospel that **enflames the hearts of people.**

- When the Spirit of God is at work when the gospel is exalted, it's as if we've been saved all over again! – we are filled with joy at the gospel.
- The reason many worship services are cold is that there's lack of gospel proclamation and/or a lack of gospel appropriation.

3. Its Variety: Singers/Music/Instruments (27-47)

A wide range of instruments and a bunch of people to participate.

- Cymbals, harps, lyres (27)
 - The harps were probably carried by the musicians and reflected the various moods of the Psalms.
 - Quieter stringed instruments fittingly convey expressions of gratitude for God's grace and mercy to sinners.
- Priests with trumpets (35, 41)
 - Trumpets and loud symbols appropriate exalt the greatness of God.
- Those who played according to what David prescribed (36)
- Two large choirs (31, 38, 40, 42) encompassing the walls give thanks on behalf of all the people

Sometimes a certain instrument is more fitting for an occasion than another.

- It's okay for liking one musical style over the other, but don't exalt one as the only means of giving praise. And be charitable.
- Are you singing praise to God – that's the question? In the car, in your personal life, with your family?

4. Its Priority: Purity (30)

- Before these people led in worship, they were to pursue a clean heart (cf, Ps 51)
- The prophets rebuked God's people previously for making expensive sacrifices, but not living holy lives, and for not taking care of the vulnerable around them (cf, Isa 1:11-15)
- Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for the same problem (Matt 23:23-28)
- Paul told the men to lift up "holy hands" in prayer (1 Tim 2)
- In Christ Jesus, we have something more than ceremonial purity; we have been washed in his blood – internally, actually, and eternally.

Purification precedes the worship of God.

- Before there can be spiritual service of worship, there must be purification.
- Worship is only acceptable by people who have been purified by Christ.
- Non-Christians may be better singers/musicians, but something massive is missing: a lack of purification through Christ.
- God is more concerned about spiritual purification than musicianship!!!!

This doesn't mean we shouldn't appreciate the gifts and talents of unbelievers. We should! We believe in God's Common grace.

- You can listen to great musicians and give God praise.

- You can watch LeBron fly through the air, and be amazed at his God-given ability.
- You can watch surgeons work on the human body, and be amazed at what God has done in giving those gifts to him/her.

It's one thing to recognize these gifts, and give God praise for giving them, but it's another thing to say that God readily receives the worship of one who has not been purified by the blood of Christ.

- Worshipers must come to God acceptably and that is through Christ.

5. Its History: Traditions of the Past (36, 45-46)

The people enjoy a sense of continuity with the people of God before them.

- They worshiped corporately in the spirit of David and the previous singers of Israel.
- They would have sung Psalms as well, which we still do today.
- We are debtors to the past, which is why we've said we want our worship to be both "Ancient" and "Modern."
- We intentionally plan certain elements to remind us of our great history as Christians, like the Creeds, and the public reading of Scripture, and so on.
- The Lord Supper also reminds us of our place within history.
- Our heritage is important. It's a unique feature of our faith.
- To be sure, we should always avoid dead tradition, and rote, mindless worship services, but there's a way to have both present vitality, and historical appreciation.

6. Its Witness: Testifying to the World (31, 38, 43)

These choirs on the wall were a public witness to the outside nations.

- In verse 43, the joy of the city made news elsewhere.
 - Like the roar of the crowd at a stadium (WF Football Game)
- People could see and hear of their gladness.
- Any person outside the faith, who joins our gatherings, should know what we believe and why we are singing, and they should detect our joy!
- Worship is not just for you, and not just for your brothers and sisters, but also for outsiders – that they would know that God is among us (1 Cor 12:23-25)
- Acts 16:25 – the result of Paul and Silas singing in prison? Salvation!

7. Its Unity: Rejoicing Together (27-28)

- Those from the countryside and those in the city came together to adore and praise God.
- One of the most beautiful aspects of worship is to see people from diverse backgrounds joining together in unified praise!

8. Its Quality: Excellence (42)

- There was preparation and there was excellent presentation.
- Everything was done well, and had been carefully planned.
- There was leadership given by Jezrahiah.

- The Lord is worthy of our best efforts in all things, both in our personal lives (Col 3:17, 23-24) and in our corporate gatherings.

9. Its Cost: Personal Contribution (44-47)

- We worship God not just with our preparation, and with our instruments and singing, but also with our offerings.
- Giving was...
 - Organized (44) – men were appointed for this service
 - Specific (44) – contributions, tithes, firstfruits
 - Grateful (44) – Judah was pleased with the worship leaders
 - Obligatory (47) – All Israel contributed
 - Regular (47) – daily portions
 - Universal (47) – everyone including the Levites participated
- The NT picks up this theme of contributing to the work of ministry in a similar way.
- Interestingly, when Nehemiah lefts Jerusalem to return to his work in Persia, upon his return he finds **that things have deteriorated.**
- One of the first things to suffer was ***the generous support of the temple (Brown).***

If we don't continue to worship with our lives, our lips, and our resources, we too will suffer.

And our gathered worship is one of the ways we are *strengthened* for our scattered mission.

“Our Lord went to Gethsemane fortified not only by prayer but by a ceremonial meal and corporate singing, matters which engage not only the spirit but the body and the senses.” (Derek Kidner)

We are “fortified” – encouraged, strengthened, refreshed – to endure hardship as we come together and take the bread and cup, hear the Word, and sing and pray together.

**What a gift it is to worship with the people of God.
And it's a rehearsal of the future.**

Revelation 5:6-14

⁶ And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God

from every tribe and language and people and nation,
¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many
angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

¹³ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in
them, saying,

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Of all people, we have more reason to sing than any other people in the world.