

Nehemiah 11-12¹

A Day of Dedication

Introduction

ILLUSTRATION: This year (2009) marks the 20th anniversary of the coming down of the Berlin Wall. At the recently concluded APEC Summit Meeting in Singapore, a piece of the wall was brought over and displayed as a commemoration of the historic fall of the Berlin Wall.

The Berlin Wall was built by the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) to separate East Berlin from West Berlin. The Wall included guard towers placed atop and contained anti-vehicle trenches and other defences.

Before the Wall's erection, 3.5 million East Germans had avoided Eastern Bloc emigration restrictions and escaped from East Germany, many by crossing over the border from East Berlin into West Berlin. During the period from 1961 to 1989, the Berlin Wall stopped almost all such emigration.

After its erection, around 5,000 people attempted to escape over the wall, with the resulting death toll estimated as between 100 and 200.

During a revolution sweeping across the Eastern Bloc, the East German government announced on 9 November 1989, after several weeks of civil unrest, that all East Germany's citizens could visit West Germany. Crowds of East Germans climbed onto and crossed the wall, joined by West Germans on the other side in a celebratory atmosphere. Parts of the wall were chipped away by a euphoric public over the next few weeks. Later, industrial equipment was used to remove almost all of the rest.

The fall of the Berlin Wall paved the way for German reunification, which was formally concluded on 3 October 1990.

The Berlin Wall will forever be infamous as the barrier that had divided a nation and people for almost quarter of a century. Today, you can still see shrines dedicated to people who have been killed

¹ 1984 NIV

trying to cross over the wall.

On the contrary, the Wall of Jerusalem completed (not collapsed) in Nehemiah's time was a wall that united the nation and people of Israel.

Nehemiah knew that the nation of Israel could never be strong as long as Jerusalem was weak. But Jerusalem could not be strong unless the people were willing to dedicate themselves to sacrificial giving. Nehemiah called on the people to dedicate three forms of sacrificial giving to the Lord for the sake of their city. These are sacrifices that God still calls His people to give for the sake of the church He is building in this world.

In Neh 11 and 12, we learn three forms of sacrificial giving that God is calling us to dedicate to Him as His people today. First, the call is to ...

I. Dedicate by giving ourselves to God (11:1-12:26)

After the restoration of the walls and gates of Jerusalem, it was important that the Jews inhabit their capital city and make the population grow. People were needed to protect the city. It might have been safer for the people to live in the small outlying villages. But somebody had to take the risk and move into the city.

Also, if the people really loved God and their holy city, they would want to live there. After all, why rebuild the city if you don't plan to live there? But most of all, God had brought the remnant back home because He had a special job for them to do. To abandon the restored city was to avoid the working out of God's will in and through them. God needed people—live bodies—in the holy city.

Never underestimate the importance of simply being physically present in the place where God wants you. You may not be asked to perform some dramatic ministry, but simply being there is a ministry. The many men, women, and children who came to populate the city of Jerusalem were serving God, their nation, and future generations by their just being there in the city.

ILLUSTRATION: I was preaching at a church one time on the topic of serving God. At the second worship service, I was asked to preach in Cantonese. There were a good number of Cantonese-speaking, elderly people in that service.

Having them in mind, I said this, "Some of you may think that you have no more use in terms of serving God because you say, 'I am nearer to the end of me than the beginning of me.' But by being here today and sitting among us in worship and listening to God's Word is already your faithful service to God and to the church."

I felt specially blessed that day because I saw many elderly people there in the service, sitting and attentively listening to God's Word.

Many of them looked frail, but they ministered powerfully to me because they looked at me with toothless smiles to indicate that they heard and understood what God's Word through me had to teach and encourage them.

Often times, we think it is waste of time to be there if we have no part in the programme or are not called to do/say something. We feel good on the platform but feel left out in the pews.

We may not be asked to do some highly visible ministry, but simply being there is already a ministry. So don't come to church only when you are on duty or when you are desperate or when you need some help. Be in God's house not just to perform your duty, but most of all, to show your devotion to Him. The new residents who came to populate the holy city of Jerusalem were there not because they all had big duties to perform, but they all had a great devotion to God.

Neh 10:37-38 tells us that the people promised not to neglect the house of God (temple) by promising to tithe their produce. Going further, Nehemiah decided to tithe the people—i.e. 10 percent were chosen by lot to move from the villages into Jerusalem together with those who had volunteered (11:1-2).

Also, a variety of people were needed for the temple ministry that was so important to the Jewish nation.

- The priests officiated at the altar and the Levites assisted them.
- Some supervised the maintenance of the building (11:16) while others ministered with prayer and praise (vv. 17, 22).
- There were nearly 200 men appointed to guard the temple (v. 19). Since the tithes and offerings were stored in the temple, it was important that the building be protected.

It took many people, with many skills, to maintain the ministry in Jerusalem. God uses many people with different gifts and skills to get His work done in His church. Each person is important and each task is significant.

Since there were few residents in the city and since the housing situation was bad (7:4), it isn't surprising that many of the Jews were unwilling to move. When the exiles returned to the land from Babylon, they would naturally want to settle in their native towns and villages. This loyalty to their native cities was what made it difficult for Nehemiah to get people to reside in Jerusalem. While it is good to cultivate local loyalties, we must remember that there are larger obligations that must also be considered. The work of the Lord is bigger than any one person's ministry or the ministry of any one

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church.

Some of you have been in this church all your life as a Christian and this church is the only church you know how church is like. Good for you. But be open to learn and work with God's people in other churches so that you can continue to remain and minister in this church with fresh and varied experiences.

Nehemiah called people out of their villages to reside in the holy city of Jerusalem. He also called priests, Levites, and temple workers to serve in the holy temple. To do this, these people must first be willing to be physically present in Jerusalem.

Indeed, in any dedication to the Lord's work, we need first to give of ourselves to God before anything else.

The second form of sacrificial giving is to ...

II. Dedicate by giving praise to God (12:27-43)

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 singers 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 singers 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.

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 scribe led the procession. At the Fountain Gate they continued directly up the steps of the City of David on the ascent to the wall and passed above the house of David to the Water Gate on the east.

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, over the Gate of Ephraim, the Jeshanah Gate, the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate. At the Gate of the Guard they stopped.

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 ... 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.

The Jews were accustomed to having workers and watchers on the walls of Jerusalem. But now Nehemiah and Ezra assigned people to be worshipers on the walls. They conducted a dedication service with such enthusiasm that their shouts and songs were even heard far away (v. 43).

The people had dedicated themselves not to “neglect the house of our God” (10:39b). Now it was time to dedicate the work that the people had done. This is the correct order, for what good are dedicated walls without dedicated people? Note that the emphasis was on joyful praise on the part of all the people.

These people were happy because the wall was finished. They had achieved their objective. But more importantly, they were joyful because God had helped them to finish it. They were co-labourers with Him. Aware of God’s love and acceptance, they wanted to celebrate joyfully.

There is another clue that tells us what celebration should be based on. Neh 12:30 says: “When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.”

Purification is necessary to celebrate. You cannot do it with a hypocritical heart. You cannot celebrate with your life in ruin. There is a need for purification.

We need a periodic cleansing of our lives and hearts. This is what is manifested here. The priests and the Levites had to purify themselves before they purified the walls, the gates and the people because they were participating in something related to God.

How do we purify ourselves? In the New Testament, it is a simple process. It is not by ritual but by confessing our faults, and believing that God has forgiven them.

There is still a third element that is found in Neh 9:31: “I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks.”

Thankfulness is always part of true celebration. These people were thankful. You can well imagine what they were thankful for. They must have been grateful indeed for the godly leadership of Nehemiah. They were thankful for God’s moving of the king of Persia’s heart that permitted this whole project to come into being. They were grateful for the wisdom of God that allowed them to overcome their enemies, for the spirit of unity and cooperation that prevailed, and for the strength to labour.

Do we give thanks every day to God for the blessings we are enjoying at the moment? We are so trained by the media to grumble and complain, to focus on what we don’t have instead of what we do have. One of the first signs of a growing, maturing spirit in Christians is that they begin to give thanks to God for what He has poured into their life; for the opportunities that are before them; and for the present blessings that they do enjoy. So these are the elements that make up celebration—joyfulness, purity, and thanksgiving.

The order for the dedication service was unique. The leaders and singers were divided into two groups. Ezra was leading one group and Nehemiah was directing the second group. Both groups started in opposite directions but met at the temple area where the service climaxed with sacrifices offered to the Lord.

Why did Ezra and Nehemiah organize things this way? Why not just meet at the temple area?

- To begin with, it was the walls and gates that were being dedicated. And it was only right that the people see and touch them.
- But there is another reason for this unique service. The people were bearing witness to the watching world that God had done the work, and He alone should be glorified. The enemy had said that the walls would be so weak that a fox could knock them down (4:3), but here were the people marching heavily on the walls! What a testimony to the unbelieving Gentiles of the power of God. It was an opportunity to prove to them that this work was of God.

By marching on the walls, the people had an opportunity to see the results of their labours and realize that the work had not been done by one person. True, Nehemiah had been their leader, and they needed him; but “the people had a mind to work” (4:6). Various people and families had laboured on different parts of the wall (Chap. 3), but nobody “owned” the part he or she had worked on. The wall belonged to God.

You can expect serious problems after a church building programme if individuals in the church start claiming “territorial rights”. No matter how much work or money we have put into a building programme, this does not earn us the right to claim and control some area of the building. It all belongs to God and must be used for His glory. As the Jews marched around the walls, they were symbolically saying this, “Yes, we all had a part in the work and a place to serve, but now we are giving it all to the Lord that He alone might be glorified!”

In the ministry of the church, we don’t exercise beneficiary rights by way of dividing money among us. But we do make allocations of budget, time and space for the different ministries. We will have problem if each ministry asserts that it deserves more or better because of this or that reason. But if we see each as a part of a bigger whole that belongs totally to God, we can learn to give and take in our ministry together because we have mutual esteem of one another.

- There's another reason for this march around the walls: It was a symbolic act by which they stepped out by faith to begin an important journey with God. Too often, a church dedication service marks the end and not the beginning of ministry as the congregation breathes a sigh of relief and slips into idle mode. The new building then becomes not a milestone but more like a millstone! If we stop launching out by faith, then what God has accomplished will indeed become a millstone that will burden us. What we start in faith will become something that stresses us in frustration if we stop stepping out in faith.

But the most important thing about this dedication service was not the marching around the walls. It was the expression of praise that came from the choirs and the people. The people offered their praise thankfully (12:24, 27, 31, 38, 46), joyfully (vv. 27, 43-44), and loudly (vv. 42-43), accompanied by various instruments (vv. 27, 35-36).

So great was the people's praise that the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away (12:43). The people dedicated to the Lord by giving their praise unto Him.

A third form of our sacrificial giving is to ...

III. Dedicate by giving our gifts to God (12:44-47)

At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, firstfruits 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 singers 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 singers 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 singers and gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron.

The final account in Neh 12 is the great offering that was taken at the service in the temple.

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, the Levites, the temple singers, and gatekeepers (12:44-47). The people had covenanted with God to support the temple ministry (10:39b), and they kept their promises.

The people brought their tithes and offerings, not only because it was the commandment of God, but also because they were pleased with the priests and Levites who had blessed them in their ministry. Indeed, our material gifts are really spiritual sacrifices to the Lord IF they are given in the right spirit.

We are told that these offerings and contributions were given with pleasure—"Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites" (12:44). The Scriptures carefully instruct us that offerings mean nothing if they are not given cheerfully. If you have no pleasure in your giving, God Himself is not pleased with your gift. He does not care how big or small it is. If all you are after is to make an impression on others by the size of your gift, God is not interested in that.

God could take an insignificant amount and use it more mightily than He would with a larger gift. What God looks for always is a note of pleasure, of delight, of cheerfully returning to Him out of a thankful heart.

ILLUSTRATION: A stingy man went Christmas shopping. Everything he saw was too expensive for him except for a \$50 vase that was on sale for \$2 because the handle had been broken off. The man bought it and had the salesman ship it by mail so that his friend would think that he had paid \$50 for it and that it had been broken in shipment.

A week later after Christmas, he received a thank you note from his friend saying, "Thank you for the lovely vase. It was so nice of you to wrap each piece separately."

When we give a gift offering to the Lord, we must dedicate it with a cheerful and willing heart even if it is just one simple piece. Otherwise, the two or more pieces will only serve to embarrass us rather than please the Lord if our attitude and motive for giving is wrong.

Conclusion

Someone once said, "A church greatly used by God is not about great programmes or buildings, but about sacrificial people giving with great dedication to God."

Dedication to God is about sacrificial giving.

Before we can bring our material gifts to the Lord, we must first give ourselves to Him. And then we give of our praise to Him for what He has done in and through us. Thirdly, we give our gifts to Him with cheerful hearts as our returning to Him only a portion of what truly belongs totally to Him.

Let's seek the Lord to help us make this day and everyday, a day of our dedication to Him.