

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
August 18, 2013

Dedicating the Wall

Read Nehemiah 12:27-38, 43

Key verse: “Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with rejoicing, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres” (Nehemiah 12:27).

I bet you have never seen worship like this! Picture it:

Two groups of worshippers walk in procession on top of a city wall. The two groups process in opposite directions. One group is led by a governor named Nehemiah. The other group is led by a “preacher” named Ezra.

Each group includes musicians, specially chosen and prepared for this occasion: singers and players of trumpets, lyres, harps, and cymbals. As the two groups walk along the wall, they sing, praise, give thanks, and pray “with great joy” (v. 43).

The occasion is the dedication of the newly restored wall around the city of Jerusalem. It has taken Nehemiah and his fellow workers 52 days to complete the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s city wall and gates. On this day, the new wall is dedicated to God in a joyous, if unusual, worship event.

Someone has said of many of us today: “We worship our work. We work at our play. And we play at our worship.” The unusual wall-walking worship described in Nehemiah 12 is certainly not a trivial event. It is an important worship experience marked by dedication, celebration, and rejoicing....

1. Dedication

The whole event was an act of dedication. The people of Jerusalem, led by Ezra and Nehemiah, knew that their survival and success depended on God’s protection and blessing. So, as an act of worship, they dedicated themselves, the wall, and their city to God. This process involved both ceremonial cleansing or purification (v. 30), re-dedication of their hearts and lives to God, and prayerful commitment of the wall and its gates.

Authentic worship always involves dedication. We are called to worship with the praise of our words but also with the commitment and dedication of our hearts and lives to God. Jesus said:

“Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks” (John 4:23).

2. Celebration

The worship event described in Nehemiah 12 was marked by celebration (vv. 27, 31). Still today, authentic worship is marked by heart-felt celebration.

In an article entitled “Worship or Worry?” Rod Cooper shared: “I used to be a chaplain for the Houston Oilers NFL football team. After I’d do a chapel, they’d give me tickets. One time in the Astrodome I watched running back Earl Campbell run over everybody, his own men included, to get to the goal line. When he got to the goal line, he put the ball down. The place went crazy. People were giving high fives and jumping around....

“I’m not saying that when you come to church you need to give each other high fives or do cartwheels down the aisle. But worship is a time of anticipation and expectation. We come together because all week God has been scoring touchdowns in our lives. Worship is a time to celebrate what God has done for us.”

3. Rejoicing

The worship experience described in Nehemiah 12 was marked by great rejoicing: “They offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. The joy of Jerusalem was heard far away” (v. 43).

Rejoicing is important in our worship because, as Christian philosopher Dallas Willard explains, God is “the most joyous being in the universe.” In his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, Willard illustrates with the following story:

“While I was teaching in South Africa some time ago, a young man...took me out to see the beaches near his home in Port Elizabeth. I was totally unprepared for the experience. I had seen beaches, or so I thought. But when we came over the rise where the sea and land opened up to us, I stood in stunned silence and then slowly walked toward the waves. Words cannot capture the view that confronted me....

“[I realized] that God sees this all the time. He sees it, experiences it, knows it from every possible point of view, this and billions of other scenes like and unlike it, in this and billions of other worlds. Great tidal waves of joy must constantly wash through His being....

“We pay a lot of money to get a tank with a few tropical fish in it and never tire of looking at their [beauty] and marvelous forms and movements. But God has seas *full of them*, which He constantly enjoys....We are enraptured by a well-done movie sequence or by a few bars from an opera or lines from a poem. We treasure our great experiences for a lifetime, and we may have

very few of them. But He is simply one great inexhaustible and eternal experience of all that is good and true and beautiful and right....

“All of the good and beautiful things,” concludes Willard, “from which we occasionally drink tiny droplets of soul-exhilarating joy, God continuously experiences in all their breadth and depth and richness.”

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