

## Thanksgiving in Jerusalem

### Nehemiah 12:27-47

Perhaps the greatest Thanksgiving Day in the Old Testament is found in the book of Nehemiah.

In 538 BC the Israelites are allowed by Cyrus to return to their native land after seventy years of captivity in Babylon. Approximately 50,000 people, only a small number of Israelites, returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the destroyed city.

100 years have passed since the decree of King Cyrus, and Nehemiah is now the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, a very influential position at the time. He has a comfortable position and is probably living a rather nice life. But when he hears that Jerusalem is a city without walls he becomes very concerned.

The reason for his distress is because a city without walls is essentially vulnerable to attack, open to raiders and thieves, anyone who might come by and decide that they want to plunder the city.

After seeking the Lord in prayer and talking with King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah gains permission from the king to go to Jerusalem to lead the building of the walls.

He sets to work immediately, overcoming intense opposition along the way from Tobiah and Sanballat.

We read in Nehemiah 4:6-8, “So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work. But it came to pass, that when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth, And conspired all of them together to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it.”

By the grace of God and the perseverance of God’s people, the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem is complete in only 52 days. What an remarkable accomplishment!

Nehemiah plans a great thanksgiving service found in Nehemiah 12:27-47.

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 other instruments.

Singers were brought together from the region around Jerusalem. Nehemiah had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. He assigned two large choirs to give thanks. One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right.

The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. Nehemiah followed them on top of the wall, together with half the people.

The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God. 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."

This was a thanksgiving celebration to remember for all time. It was a little of heaven on earth!

We are to be thankful at all times but it is especially important that we show thanksgiving after Christ accomplishes a great work in our lives.

It is important because through thanksgiving we recognize that it is Christ who has blessed the work of our hands. That should be the meaning of the Canadian Thanksgiving holiday. We are thankful for what Christ has done, for his grace and mercy to our souls.

Whether it is family or country or some other great work during this Thanksgiving season, thanksgiving is the recognition that only Christ can make these blessings possible.

In Nehemiah chapter 12 we find the Jews celebrating the help of God in building the wall and providing them protection from their enemies. The Lord had done great things for them so it was fitting that the people thank the Lord.

The title of my message is, **Thanksgiving In Jerusalem.** What were some of the things that characterized this day of Thanksgiving in Jerusalem? There are four things that stand out.

## **1. Thanksgiving in Jerusalem consisted in prayer.**

We read in Nehemiah 11:17, “And Mattaniah the son of Micha, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, was the principal to *begin the thanksgiving in prayer...*”

Mattaniah began the Thanksgiving Service in prayer. He praised God with a psalm or hymn which was joined with the morning and evening sacrifice.

It is always a good practice to start the day in prayer. Our Lord Jesus awoke early in the morning to pray.

Prayer sets the tone for the worship service.

Prayer is the way and means God has appointed for the communication of the blessings of His goodness to His people. —Arthur W. Pink

Prayer includes thanksgiving, confession, and request. I would suggest that the order of prayer is thanksgiving, confession, requests, thanksgiving.

“Jesus the Mediator of the New Covenant”—Heb. 12:24.

The Greek word for Mediator signifies a middle person, one that makes up the breach between two disagreeing parties. God and we were at variance by sin, now Christ mediates and becomes umpire between us; he reconciles us to God through his blood. There is no way of communion between God and man but in and through a Mediator. Christ takes away the enmity in us, and the wrath of God, and so makes peace.

Nor is Christ a Mediator of reconciliation only, but intercession. “Christ is entered, not into the holy place made with hands, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Heb. 9:24). When the priest had slain the sacrifice he was to go with the blood before the altar and mercy-seat, and show it to the Lord.

1 Timothy 2:5 says, “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

There is not one for kings and another for their subjects; one for the rich and another for the poor; one for the master and another for the slave.

All are on the same level, and the servant may feel that, in the gift of a Mediator, God regarded him with the same interest that he did his master.

The notion that saints or the Virgin Mary may act as mediators to procure blessings for us is false. There is but "one Mediator;" and but one is necessary.

Prayer offered to the "saints," or to the "Virgin," is idolatry; and, at the same time, removes the one great Mediator from the office which he alone holds, of making intercession with God.

Thanksgiving in Jerusalem began with prayer.

## **2. Thanksgiving in Jerusalem consisted in purity.**

We read in Nehemiah 12:30, "And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, and the gates, and the wall."

The atmosphere of thanksgiving is celebrated with a clean heart.

Even though the occasion called for great celebration a serious element needed to be included. It must be noted that before the people could experience joyful celebration, they had to get their hearts right with God. To enter into the blessing of God you must remember holiness always precedes happiness.

Matthew Henry writes, “The Levites purified themselves and then the people. Those that would be instrumental to sanctify others must sanctify themselves, and set themselves apart for God, with purity of mind and sincerity of intention. Then they purified the gates and the wall.

To the pure all things are pure (Tit 1:15); and, to those who are sanctified, houses and tables, and all their creature comforts and enjoyments, are sanctified, 1Ti 4:4-5.

This purification was performed, it is probable, by sprinkling the water of purifying (or of separation, as it is called, Nu 19:9) on themselves and the people, the walls and the gates--a type of the blood of Christ, with which our consciences being purged from dead works, we become fit to serve the living God (Heb 9:14) and to be his care.



When the whole assembly was purified and otherwise prepared according to the procedures given by God, preparations which were required to be carried out if they would truly please Him, they set about to perform the celebration of dedication.

They would declare their recognition that God must own and keep the walls by His own might. They were dedicated to Him, because by Him they returned. To Him because by Him they were successful in the rebuilding. To Him, because only by Him could they ever hope to live in safety going forward. To Him, because He is Worthy!

Thanksgiving in Jerusalem consisted in purity.

Paul declares the same message in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, “For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified.

For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit.”

*For this is the will of God, even your sanctification.*

It is the will or command of God that you should be holy. It is a proof that the Lord requires holiness in His people.

The word rendered sanctification is several times found in the New Testament. It means here purity of life, and particularly abstinence from those vices which debase and degrade the soul. Sanctification consists in two things,

(1.) in "ceasing to do evil;" and

(2.) in "learning to do good." Or in other words, the first work of sanctification is in overcoming the propensities to evil in our nature, and checking and subduing the unholy habits which we had formed before we became Christians; the second part of the work consists in cultivating the positive principles of holiness in the soul.

It is putting off the old man and putting on the new man created in Christ Jesus.

Thanksgiving in Jerusalem consisted in purity.

### **3. Thanksgiving in Jerusalem consisted in praise.**

Nehemiah 12:27, “And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps.”

They sang loud that day, and the noise of rejoicing could be heard far away. It was God Himself that made them to rejoice with great joy. **What a day! What a God! What a testimony!**

“Enter His gates with thanksgiving...” Psalm 100:4.

Nehemiah and the people were singing praises to God so it would have been: “Praise ye the Lord!” “Hallelujah!” “Praise ye the Lord!” “Hallelujah!”

I wonder, how many hundreds of people did it take to encircle the city of Jerusalem with a choir standing on the walls? How many thousands?

Nehemiah places the emphasis on what was in the heart of the people. It was the rejoicing that was heard afar. Sinners are lonely, hurting and depressed people.

They need their lives rebuilt. That's what the theme of Nehemiah is all about: the rebuilding of lives by Christ that have been broken by sin.

Praise is the language of a people no longer broken and crushed by sin. They are free and forgiven in Christ!

Thanksgiving in Jerusalem consisted in praise.

#### **4. Thanksgiving in Jerusalem consisted in sacrifice.**

Nehemiah 12:43, "Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced: for God had made them rejoice with great joy: the wives also and the children rejoiced: so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off."

Think of it, these people had just given heavily of their time, their energy and their resources to rebuild the city wall around Jerusalem.

Now, as they were dedicating that wall to the Lord, the text says they offered great sacrifices and they did it with rejoicing.

Many years earlier, the people of Israel had suffered under a great plague that was brought on because King David had disobeyed God. It was revealed to David that the plague would stop if David were to offer a burnt offering on an altar erected on the threshing floor of a man named Araunah. David determined that he would purchase the threshing floor so he could offer the burnt offering there.

But because David was the king, Araunah wanted to *give* him the field, the oxen for the burnt offering and the wood for the fire. David, however, would not allow that. David knew he needed to pay a price for his praise if it was to be of any value. He said *“No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.”* (II Sam. 24:24)

We could learn a lesson from David, and those Hebrews who held a thanksgiving service at the dedication of the wall of the city of Jerusalem. One of the most effective ways to express gratitude is through sacrifice.

Romans 12:1, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”

*A living sacrifice.* A sacrifice is an offering made to God as an atonement for sin; or any offering made to him and his service as an expression of thanksgiving or homage.

It implies, that he who offers it presents it entirely, releases all claim or right to it, and leaves it to be disposed of for the honour of God.

In the case of an animal, it was slain, and the blood offered; in the case of any other offering, as the firstfruits, etc., it was set apart to the service of God; and he who offered it released all claim on it, and submitted it to God, to be disposed of at his will.

This is the offering which the apostle entreats the Romans to make; to devote themselves to God, as if they had no longer any claim on themselves; to be disposed of by him; to suffer and bear all that he might appoint; and to promote his honour in any way which he might command. This is the nature of following Christ.

Thanksgiving in Jerusalem consisted in sacrifice.

In closing, perhaps the greatest Thanksgiving Day in the Old Testament is found in the book of Nehemiah. The Lord guided and protected the people in building the walls of Jerusalem. Thanksgiving in Jerusalem consisted in prayer, purity, praise, and sacrifice. May we be thankful to the Lord as Nehemiah and the Hebrews were on that glorious thanksgiving day! Let us pray.