

A Reason to Celebrate

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[0 : 00] God's word, please keep that passage open in front of you. If you can, let us just pray for the Lord's help with it as we turn to it together. Father, we do pray that you would be our guide, that you would lead us in paths of righteousness, and that as we come to your word now, you would speak through it by your spirit to make us more and more in the likeness of your Son, that we might walk in a way that is pleasing to you, that we might worship you in a way that is pleasing to you.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. I wonder if you have ever seen a miracle, a miracle, a moment in history where God's providence works itself out in a way that does not seem to conform with the laws of nature.

God is always at work, isn't he, in our world? But on very rare occasion, that work of providence happens in a way that we simply cannot explain. Miracles are very rare.

They're not that common, even in the Bible. They're kind of concentrated in the times of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Even most people in biblical times, the vast majority of them, would never have seen a miracle.

They are incredibly rare. But I did witness a miracle, not that long ago. That was about six months ago, 24th of May this year.

[1 : 30] Aberdeen were playing Celtic in the Scottish Cup final. That there is no law of nature, no amount of scientific understanding and research that could have possibly predicted Aberdeen winning that game.

And they did. Right? It is still a mystery, still a medical marvel, you might call it. And because of that, right, they, what did they do?

They celebrated, didn't they? Okay, maybe it wasn't quite a miracle. But it was, wasn't it? It was an unexpected triumph.

A victory against all the odds. Nobody gave them a chance. I spoke to one of the elders here, just before the game, who was going along. He said, I'll be happy if we concede less than five.

But they won. So what did they do? They celebrated. Didn't they? It was going to be a little bit inconvenient. The day after they won, right, they took over the city.

[2 : 44] They held a parade through the city center. Almost 100,000 people came and celebrated what had somehow just happened. Now, we could maybe see a lot of similarities between Aberdeen and God's people in the Old Testament.

A beleaguered people who spent decades suffering humiliating defeats. Let's just focus this morning on what we have in Nehemiah. In the opening chapters of this book, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem.

And it was a broken city with broken walls. Nehemiah returned to rebuild these ruined walls.

But to those looking on, Nehemiah and the people of God with him, they had no chance. Not going to happen. In chapter 2, we met Tobiah and Sanballat.

And they came along, rulers from the surrounding provinces. They looked at what was going on.

And what did they do? They jeered at the people and despised them, saying, What is this that you are doing?

[3 : 46] You've got no chance. Nehemiah and almost all the people got on with the work regardless. But even during the reconstruction, the onlookers continued to mock.

Sanballat returned in chapter 4, saying, What are these feeble Jews doing? Well, they revive stones out of heaps of rubbish. They were sure that these walls were going to be an international laughingstock.

The onlookers laughed. These people had no hope. And yet, just 52 days later, there the walls stood. Tall and strong.

Perhaps not quite a miracle, but a victory achieved against all the odds. A truly unexpected triumph. And what do you do?

What do you do when you've achieved something great? What do you do when you've triumphed even though everyone expected you to fail? Just look with me there at verse 27 of Nehemiah 12.

[4 : 51] The first verse we read earlier. The dedication of the wall of Jerusalem. The people that they sought, the Levites in all their places.

To bring them to Jerusalem. To do what? To celebrate. Against all the odds, these walls have been rebuilt in record time.

It is time to celebrate. But this is not going to be kind of an open-top bus parade through the streets of Jerusalem with Nehemiah on top, lapping up the parades for his great achievements.

It's not going to be that because Nehemiah knows he did not build these walls. And these walls weren't built for him. Back in chapter 6, we learned that the only way the underdogs managed to get this wall built was because God had been their help.

Chapters 7 through 11, where we've been for the last few weeks, have taught us, haven't we, that the whole point of these walls was so that God's people could come and hear God's words and come to God's house and worship God.

[6 : 02] So who is at the center of these celebrations? These walls couldn't have been built without God. They were built for God.

So who is at the center? It's not the people. It's not Nehemiah. It's not the walls. But God himself. He is the one being celebrated here. And that is, I think, something just worth very briefly thinking about as we come towards our first point this morning.

God is being celebrated here. But when we are celebrating other people, maybe you're planning a birthday party. I know lots of you were at a birthday party last night.

Or maybe you're getting the family together for an anniversary. How do you go about deciding what to do? How do you decide what to place on the itinerary?

How do you decide what to do? It's pretty simple, isn't it? You think about what they would want to do. But what do they want to see happen?

[7 : 07] That if you're organizing a birthday party for your friend and you know they're terrified of heights, I hope you rule out bungee jumping. Not a good idea.

If they're a vegetarian and you book a steakhouse for dinner, you've done something wrong, haven't you? But if they love dancing and you organize a ceilidh, you're doing something right. When we celebrate people, we want to think about what they want to see happen. Well, so too when we come to celebrate to worship God.

If we know him and we love him, we will not come to worship him according to what we want to do, but what he wants us to do.

When we think about what worship should be like, we should not be thinking, what would I like to see happen, but what would God like to see happen? Because this is all about him. That is exactly what we see happening throughout this chapter.

[8 : 13] A people who don't want to do things our way, but God's way. But because of all that has happened over the last 11 chapters, God's people now come to worship God in God's way.

And that is our first point this morning. And maybe I should say as well, by far and away, our longer point this morning. So for some point after 12 o'clock, we've not reached point two yet. Don't panic completely. Worshiping God in God's way.

We see that happening, I think, in four ways throughout this chapter. And each of those four ways are really kind of present right throughout the chapter. But what we're going to do is we're just going to walk through the kind of narrative and stop off at the moments where the light shines brightest on each of these aspects of worship.

So let's begin with the first way that God's people worship in God's way. There in verse one, all the way through to verse 30. God's people worshipping God's way by preparing to worship.

Preparing. We skipped over the start of this chapter more because of the length of the chapter than the content of the verses. For the most part, these verses do contain more names.

[9 : 29] But I hope by this point in Nehemiah, we've seen that names really do matter, that they're important. Let me just briefly summarize what was, I think, going on there and why. In verse one to 21, you can just have a quick glance through there if you want.

You'll see that it is centered around, maybe verse nine and 10 there, the most helpful places to look. Sorry, verse 10 and 11. Centered around a genealogy of the high priests.

Above those verses is the high priest and the priestly families that were around right at the start of when the people came back at the exile. After that is the high priest and the priestly families were around in Nehemiah's day.

Like, a hundred years has passed. It's been a long time. Why does that matter? Why is that all worth recording? Well, because when it comes to worshiping God in God's way, God had said that the sons of Aaron were those who should lead the worship.

So when the people want to come and worship God rightly, they need to make sure it is the right people leading the worship. And the previous centuries, God's people had been scattered right across the face of the whole earth.

[10:43] That there were no kind of computer records where you could trace everyone's ancestry back. You had to make sure you carefully recorded who was who, where each family had come from.

That is what is going on in the opening verses of these chapters. That they carefully recorded it so that they made sure they were getting it right and so that future generations were to get it right too. So in making preparation for the celebrations, God's people make sure it is God's chosen priests leading the way.

Now we, of course, we don't have priests, do we? You don't need to be a son of Aaron to lead God's people in worship. That does not mean, does it, that it is a free for all? The New Testament, it is clear, isn't it?

It needs to be men of certain character, able to teach and defend sound doctrine. If we want to worship God in God's way, we too need to be careful, pay careful attention to who is leading. But making sure the right priests are in place is not the only way that people prepare for worship. Just look there, verse 30 with me. Verse 30 of chapter 12. And the priests and the Levites purified themselves.

[12:00] And they purified the people and the gates and the wall. There were right people to lead the worship. And there was a right way for all the people to come to worship.

Purified. Clean. Clean. We get a picture of what this might have looked like back in Exodus 17, where the people are about to meet with God.

And so they wash themselves, they wash their garments, they abstain from certain things. All the people get themselves ready. They get themselves ready to come before God.

Now, as we've mentioned many times in this series, we do not come, do we? We don't come to a physical Jerusalem like they did in Nehemiah 12. We don't come to a mountain like they did in Exodus 19.

But the author to the Hebrews tells us that we do come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. That is where we come Sunday by Sunday as we gather together as his people in the name of Jesus.

[13:16] We are coming to a heavenly Jerusalem. It's not a physical city, so we don't need to kind of richly wash our clothes before we come in.

But does that mean that no preparation is required? Well, listen to what Hebrews 12 says later on. Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

And thus, let us offer to God acceptable worship, worshiping God's way with reverence and awe. For our God is a consuming fire.

Acceptable worship. Come and worship God's way. What does that mean? That means coming in reverence and awe. So unless you go about life with reverence and awe as your kind of default setting, which I don't think any of us do, then the way we come into the presence of God should be different from the way we go about everyday life.

That might not mean cleaning ourselves outwardly, but it absolutely does mean preparing ourselves. Preparing ourselves to come into his presence.

[14:41] Inwardly, at the very least. If we want to come and worship God in God's way, we need to make sure our hearts and our minds are prepared to do so. Come prayerfully.

Come humbly. Set apart yourself for worship, whatever that might look like. Getting ready for church on a Sunday morning should look different from getting ready to go to work on a Monday.

The people prepare themselves to come and worship. Everyone has prepared themselves to come and worship, but what happens next? Just look there with me at verse 31 onwards.

What happens next is a whole lot of singing. A whole lot of singing. Our second aspect of worship we see here. Now, for verse 31, there are two great choirs are assembled.

There's no prizes for guessing what a choir is there to do. They're armed with instruments, with cymbals, harps, and lyres. This isn't the people getting a bit inventive because they are, verse 36, right?

[15:50] These instruments have come from David, the man of God. This is God's people worshipping God in God's way. So we have two great choirs, and they all start off at kind of one point on the western side of the wall, and they set off in different directions around the city.

One goes kind of north and around, the other south and around, encircling the whole city, and then finishing off at the focal point of everything. But the reason for the walls, the focus of the last five chapters, where is it?

It is the house of God, the temple, verse 14. They come to God's house. They are not just singing. They are singing to God. And it's not just the choirs.

Who is there, too, with one of the choirs in verse 38? Nehemiah. Nehemiah is there. He's behind the choir. He knows it's not about him. But it's Nehemiah with half of the people.

Seems reasonable to assume, doesn't it, that the other half of the people are with the other choir? God's people are a singing people. They are a singing people because that is who God wants them to be.

[17:01] We have a whole book of songs, don't we, in the Bible. God tells Moses at the end of Deuteronomy, he commands him, teach my people a song to sing. We read earlier from Colossians 3.

What did Paul say? He said to the church, didn't he? Sing. Sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. We didn't read, did we, that Paul wants the Colossian church to kind of set aside those with really gifted voices to do the singing for the church.

No, he says to the whole church, sing. Sing. We are to be singing people. To put it perhaps a little bluntly, if you don't sing, you are not worshipping God in God's way.

Let's just go back to thinking about the birthday celebrations for a moment. As we celebrate someone we care about, what do you do? What do you do when the cake comes out and the candles are lit?

You sing. Or I hope you sing. You don't think, do you, I better keep kind of quiet here in case I don't hit the right notes. I mean, it's a rule, isn't it, that at least 80% of people singing Happy Birthday are out of tune.

[18:31] I am amongst them. But our choice to sing, isn't it, it isn't determined by our musical prowess. Our choice to sing is driven by the desire to celebrate the person whose birthday it is.

And so we sing and we sing loudly because we're singing for them, not for us. It is, isn't it, the invitation of Psalm 100, make a joyful noise.

God wants you to sing whether or not you are a fantastic singer or a terrible singer. That the posture of your heart is more important than the intonation of your voice. So sing and sing loudly.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord. But let's just, just very briefly, maybe think back to our previous point. I'll stress, it is absolutely okay if you sing terribly.

I'd much rather hear someone behind me singing way out of tune than not singing at all. But we should try and sing as best we can. You see a whole lot of preparation go into this, don't you, in Nehemiah 12?

[19:40] There's a lot of work behind the scenes before they come to this point. We can sing as best we can, I think, by preparing to worship. If you're at Bon Accord, if you're a regular here, you should get an email on Friday afternoons with the order of service in it.

There are the songs that we are going to sing on a Sunday. Let me encourage you, listen to them. Put them in a playlist on Spotify of songs we sing on a Sunday. Put them on on a Sunday morning, maybe even on the drive into church.

Put them on and sing along so that you know the songs we're going to sing and so that your voice is ready to worship. And it's by far and away the most important thing that we come with, hearts that are ready to worship.

But it is a good thing for our voices to be ready too. God's people are a singing people. Prepare to worship by preparing to sing.

So God's people worship in God's way by singing his praise. Thirdly then, God's people worship in God's way by rejoicing. Verse 43.

[20 : 50] Just look there. This is an amazing verse. They offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced. And God made them rejoice with great joy. And the women and the children also rejoiced.

And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. You can't really miss it, can you? Rejoiced, rejoiced, rejoiced, rejoiced, rejoiced. God's people are a joyful people.

They are a singing people and they are a joyful people. But these aren't forced smiles, are they?

Not like when someone kind of wants to take a family photo and no one's in the mood for it. No, this is real, genuine joy.

Real, genuine joy because what do we see there? It is God-given joy. He makes his people rejoice. Now, does that mean if we're not feeling that kind of joy this morning that we just have to sit around and wait for God to give it to us?

Well, I don't think so because think about what has just been happening. I think they have this God-given joy because they have just spent a day dwelling on what God has done for them.

[22 : 05] They have spent the day marching along the walls that he built through them. every step they took towards the temple on that day would have been a reminder of God's faithfulness to his words, his faithfulness to his promise, a reminder of his protection for his people.

If we want to know this joy, walk along the walls. That might sound a bit odd but it is as simple, I think, as taking time to remember all that God has done for you, all that God has done through you. That is what they were doing that day as they walked along those walls. That is what brought them this God-given joy. So remember, dwell on, think of, think of all that Jesus has done for you and it will fill you with joy.

So easy, isn't it, to be stuck in the presence? But perhaps, let me encourage you, even just this afternoon after lunch, put your phone away and just take a minute to lift your head up and look back.

Look back to where you were five years ago, ten years ago, 15, 20. Look back to where you were before you knew Jesus and what do you see?

[23 : 36] What you will see is actually probably something quite like what the people of Nehemiah's day saw when they looked back, I mean, even just a few months here. A people who were vulnerable.

A people whose future was very uncertain. A people who were unsafe, insecure, who did not know what the future held but were definitely fearful of it.

Think of where you are now in Christ. Because of the city he has built. Not an earthly Jerusalem but a heavenly Jerusalem. Think of how he, through his death on the cross, through bearing your sins, has purified you so that you who once were lost in the outer darkness can now come into the city of light where God himself dwells.

Think of rejoice in the security you now have in him. We don't stand on walls. They stood on stone. We stand on Christ. Secure in a kingdom that cannot be shaken. No power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck me from his hands. In him, we are infinitely more secure than the inhabitants of ancient Jerusalem ever were because of the walls that they walked on.

[24 : 58] They rejoiced. They rightly rejoiced in the protection they had been given. How much more should we rejoice in the eternal security and blessedness that we have with us in Christ Jesus? The words we heard wasn't right at the start of the service.

In Christ Jesus, we have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, kept in heaven for you. It is there and nothing can take it away.

Nothing is ever going to break down the walls of the heavenly city. So rejoice. Rejoice because of where you are now, despite where you were, because of what God has done.

Because of what God has done for you and because of what God has done for you. Rejoice because God does not want a miserable people celebrating him. Just like no one wants their birthday to feel like a funeral.

God wants joyful people. And he is ready to give us that joy when we are ready to remember what he has done for us. And we see here as well, don't we, that great joy, that pours out of his people.

[26 : 05] Did you pick that up at the end of that verse? Verse 43? Just the last line there. It is not, is it? It's not their singing that is heard far away. It is their joy.

It is visible. It is audible. When people walk past the doors of this church on a Sunday, they should hear a joyful people. Not just a loud noise, but a joyful noise.

When people come in, they should see a joyful people. Give thanks to God. I think that is what they do see and hear. That is an amazing thing. That is a wonderful thing. But let us not lose sight of what God has done for us, lest we lose the joy that he has given us.

So God's people worship in God's way by being a joyful people, by rejoicing in what he has done for them. And then fourthly and finally, God's people worship in God's way by giving thanks.

Maybe again just look at verse 47 in the middle there to get a sense of these verses, these last few verses. All Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and the days of Nehemiah, what did they do? They gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers and they set apart that which was for the Levites.

[27 : 25] They were thankful and so they gave. But we thought a bit about that a couple of weeks ago, didn't we? But what we see in these few verses, what we've just read there in that verse, it might not seem that interesting, but actually what we're seeing there is a commitment by the people to give, but it's a commitment to give that is rooted in a desire to keep on worshipping in God's way.

They want to supply for the needs of the singers and the gatekeepers and the Levites so that they can keep on coming back and worshipping God in God's way. Hearts that are full of thankfulness will keep on coming back in praise.

that someone with an unthankful heart will worship, will celebrate when they feel like it or when they feel they have something to gain.

A truly thankful heart will keep on coming to worship no matter what because thankfulness, true thankfulness does not think, what can I get, but what can I give?

In Luke 17, 10 lepers cry out to Jesus from afar begging that he would have mercy on them. And Jesus does have mercy on them. All 10 of them go away cleansed, but when one of the 10 men sees what has happened, how he is clean, he immediately turns back to Jesus.

[28 : 50] Not to get something more from him, but to give thanks to him. He comes back praising God with a loud voice, falling at the feet of Jesus and giving thanks.

That, I think, is what we see something of here in chapter 12, a people who realize what God has done for them and so are filled with thanksgiving. So return again and again.

A thankless heart like those nine other lepers will walk away, but a thankful heart will come back to praise Jesus again and again. Returning to worship God Sunday by Sunday, morning and evening, is a great display of our thankfulness to him.

Coming back again and again is worshipping God in God's way to joyfully sing to him, not to pay him back, but to praise him for what he has freely given. A thankful heart is a heart that lives to worship, to celebrate the God who has given us so, so much.

So there are four ways I think that we see God's people worship in God's way through this chapter. They're preparing, they're singing, they're rejoicing, and they're giving thanks.

[30 : 09] Let's just turn now to our second and final point. It is, let me assure you, very, very brief. It is extremely short, but it is extremely important. Extremely important.

God's people worship through God's Messiah. There have been a lot of kind of key figures throughout this book, haven't there? Nehemiah is the obvious one.

Ezra came to the fore in some of the latter chapters. Tobiah and Sambalat have kind of been regular visitors, albeit never particularly welcome. But I wonder if you noticed who the most prominent person in this chapter was.

He's been mentioned not only twice previously, in the whole book, both times just kind of in passing, but then all of a sudden here in chapter 12, as the people come to worship God, David is everywhere.

Verse 24, they come to praise and to give thanks according to the commandment of David, the man of God. Verse 36, their singing is accompanied with the musical instruments of David, the man of God.

[31 : 19] God's. Verse 37, the choirs go by the stairs of the city of David at the ascent of the wall above the house of David. Verse 45, the singers and the gatekeepers perform their service according to the command of David and his son Solomon.

Verse 46, we are brought back to the days of David. Everything in this chapter is happening according to David's instruction, through the instruments David has provided around his house in his city, orchestrated by his command that he gave in his day.

Where has he come from? Why has he shown up now? Well, we don't have time to kind of do a deep dive on this, but very simply, who is David? Who is David?

Not just an ancient king of Israel, but the Lord's anointed. Literally, the Lord's Messiah, the Christ. And it was through David's son that God promised to build his house, a temple, a place of worship. It was David's son whose throne would be established forever. When the people come to worship God in his way, they could not help but come to worship through his anointed, but the Messiah.

[32 : 47] They looked back to David, knowing there was a greater son of David to come. We look back, not to David, but to the promised son who has come.

To Jesus, the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Our reading in Colossians 3 ended with these words. whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

If we want to worship God in God's way, then by all means, we must be prepared. We must sing. We must rejoice. We must give thanks. But we can do none of it, or we should do none of it, without coming through Jesus.

He must be everywhere in our worship, and any worship that is not overed through Jesus is no true worship at all. We come through him. We come to him. We come for him.

There are things we must do, but all of it must always be all about Jesus. So as a church, let us prepare to worship him.

[34 : 14] Let us sing as we worship him. Let us rejoice because of all that he has done for us. Let us give thanks to him by coming back continually to worship him and living our lives for him.

And as we do all those things, let's make sure it is always and forever about Jesus. Let us pray as we close together. Let us pray for a second. Let us pray