

“Celebration”

Nehemiah 12

Week of November 12, 2023

Opening Question:

- Have you ever been part of a great celebration of worship that moved and inspired you? Tell about that experience.

Pray this prayer (one person or the whole group together):

Lord, as we come together to study your Word, we bring all of who we are with our needs, our hopes and our expectations. Meet us here in the power and presence of your Holy Spirit. Give us insight and understanding as we listen carefully for your voice. And then give us courage and conviction to align our lives with the way of Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen.

Read aloud this introduction:

We have come a long way with the people of Nehemiah’s day to an event that is filled with joyful, exuberant celebration. The Jewish people had been ravaged by three different conquering empires on top of hundreds of years of squabbles and wars with neighboring people groups.

Those who were left in the land experienced generations of economic, cultural, communal and spiritual deprivation. People of other nations who once respected or feared them now ridiculed them. Once great and ruled by great kings—a visible and living testimony to the power of the one, true, living God—they had met an ignoble and shameful end.

Hope was rekindled when, in 538 BC, a group of Jews came out of the captivity in a foreign land to join in building a new temple in Jerusalem. Progress was slow and intermittent due to political intrigue forced on them by people who did not want them to succeed.

Eighty years later, another group arrived in the capital. Led by Ezra, work resumed on the Temple, and it was finally completed. It was not as fine a structure as the great King Solomon’s temple had been, but it brought a small sense of well-being and a flickering light of hope.

Thirteen years later, Nehemiah arrived with a plan to rebuild the wall of the city. God’s guiding hand was on the work as the leaders and people joined in with enthusiasm and dedication. They completed the wall in fifty-two days, an astounding accomplishment.

But the rebuilding of the walls was not the only rebuilding project. There were injustices in their own practice with each other that needed to be corrected. As the people were reacquainted with God’s Law, they were brought to confession, repentance, and realignment of their lives with God’s ways.

The time has come for the Jews in Judah to gather and dedicate the rebuilt walls. This is a fully emotive, amazing worship experience. Out of all their generations-long shame, out of the ways God has begun to rekindle their determination to live in God’s ways, comes this day of uproarious celebration as they remember all of God’s mercy and love.

Nehemiah Chapter 12 opens with the naming of the priests and Levites who had returned to Jerusalem and Judah after the exile. They are in charge of the “songs of thanksgiving” (Neh. 12:8) and are arranged in groups standing opposite each other “to give praise and thanksgiving” (Neh. 12:24). They respond to one another antiphonally with the note for us that this was “prescribed by David the man of God.”

Invite someone in the group to read Nehemiah 12:27-43 aloud.

Questions for Exploration:

- What elements of worship and the approach to worship do you see in these verses?
- What instruments are mentioned? Compare Nehemiah 12:36 with I Chronicles 15:16.
- What sights and sounds fill the senses as we read these verses?

Questions for Pressing it Out:

- Why is worship important?
- What happens in corporate worship that is different from personal/private devotions?
- When you think of “thanksgiving” what comes to mind for you? What are you thankful for in this season?
- Is there an action step God might be calling you to in this season that would help you “flesh out” an attitude of praise and thanksgiving?

Closing Prayer (pray together as a group or have one person lead):

Creator God, from the beginning of time, you have revealed yourself as the One who brings order out of chaos. You take what is broken and make it into something new and beautiful. Build and restore us, O Lord. Take the broken-down places of our lives and our world and build them up, not so we can hide behind walls of protection, but that from places of peace and safety, we can testify to your amazing grace and love that makes all things new.