

13. GIVING THANKS TO THE LORD

In November 1989, while Americans prepared to celebrate Thanksgiving, East Germans were celebrating an unforgettable moment of thanksgiving of their own. The wall which kept them apart from freedom since August 1961, was about to come down. That means that the communist regime was about to be over. Truly, they were in for celebration. A festive scene almost identical to this twentieth-century phenomenon occurred thousands of years ago in Nehemiah's day. The Germans were celebrating for the wall coming down, but the Israelites were celebrating, for the wall went up.

A. START OF CELEBRATION - PURIFICATION

Today, we are going to join these Israelites in their massive celebration and thanksgiving to their God for His goodness.

Nehemiah 12:27-29 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 gladness, both with thanksgivings and singing, with cymbals and stringed instruments and harps. And the sons of the singers gathered together from the countryside around Jerusalem, from the villages of the Netophathites, from the house of Gilgal, and from the fields of Geba and Azmaveth; for the singers had built themselves villages all around Jerusalem.

Before these celebrations began, however, a time was set aside for purification.

Neh. 12:30 Then the priests and Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, the gates, and the wall.

How did they do the purification? As we studied in the offerings of the OT in Leviticus chapter 1-5, more than likely, it had to do with sin offerings, guilt offerings and peace offerings made on behalf of the people. Before the celebration of the wall could begin, the people's hearts needed to be pure, cleansed through the confession of sin.

When we come to church services, we tend to hang around and chat with other people before the services begin. I am not against it, because fellowship is very important. But we can do our fellowship with other people after we do something first. If we choose to set this time aside and to worship and honor Him in songs and studies of the Word, shouldn't we be more careful with how we conduct ourselves here in the church? May I suggest that when we come into this place before the services, we ask God Almighty to cleanse us with the blood of Jesus by confessing our sins and prepare our hearts to worship and listen to the Lord?

B. CELEBRATION IS IN THE AIR

Neh. 12:31 So I brought the leaders of Judah up on the wall, and appointed two large thanksgiving choirs. One went to the right hand on the wall toward the Refuse Gate.

I remember the conversation among Nehemiah's enemies prior to the construction of the wall. We can find it in Nehemiah 4:3.

Nehemiah 4:3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall."

It doesn't look like the wall is going to come down by the weight of a fox.

Let's skip to v.43.

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

When these divided groups met back together in the temple court, a joy reigned that is almost unparalleled in all of Scripture.

The people offered their praise thankfully (Neh. 12:24, 27, 31, 38, 46), joyfully (v 27, 43-44), and loudly (v 42-43), accompanied by various instruments (v 27, 35-36). It was not a time for muted meditative worship. It was a time for "pulling out all the stops" and praising the Lord enthusiastically.

It was not only the "professional musicians" who expressed praise to God, for the women and children also joined in the singing (Neh. 12:43). They had heard the Word at the Water Gate (8:2), so it was only right that they now express their worship; for learning the Word and worshiping the Lord must go together. We must never permit the accomplished ministry of worship leaders to take the place of our own spontaneous celebration of the Lord's goodness. Otherwise, we will become spectators instead of participants; and spectators miss most of the blessing.

C. THANKSGIVING IN ACTIONS

Neh. 12:44 And at the same time some were appointed over the rooms of the storehouse for the offerings, the firstfruits, and the tithes, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the portions specified by the Law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who ministered.

Besides dedicating the wall to the Lord that day, the people also committed themselves to supporting the priests and the Levites financially and to keeping consecrated lives.

Neh. 12:47 In the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah all Israel gave the portions for the singers and the gatekeepers, a portion for each day. They also consecrated holy things for the Levites, and the Levites consecrated them for the children of Aaron.

The word "Thanksgiving" was mentioned for six time in this chapter 12. These Israelites realized that they couldn't build the wall in 52 days without God's help. And they also realized that they wouldn't be there unless God brought them out of the bondage of Babylon.

How about you? You might say, "What is there to be thankful when I am going through a horrible time?" We can say that and not realizing that the very breath we are taking is given by God. He made us and gave lives into our bodies. As much as He gave us a life to live, He can take that life away from us right now. But in His mercy and grace and love, He allows us to have another breaths to breathe, so that we may give Him thanks. Once we get to know God our Creator, true joy will flow through our bodies and souls.

Eph. 5:20 giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

We might like to live with grumbling attitudes and be miserable, but we should live with joyful heart for God. It is our choice to be miserable or cheerful by realizing who God is and giving Him thanks.

Two men were walking through a field one day when they spotted an enraged bull. Instantly they darted toward the nearest fence. The storming bull followed in hot pursuit, and it was soon apparent they wouldn't make it. Terrified, the one shouted to the other, "Say a prayer, John. We're in for it!" John answered, "I can't. I've never made a public prayer in my life." "But you must!" implored his companion. "The bull is catching up to us." "All right," panted John, "I'll say the only prayer I know, the one my father used to repeat at the table: 'O Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful.'"

According to Eph 5:20, we are supposed to give thanks to God in all occasions. Yes, that is including bad occasions, such as sickness, divorce, death, financial difficulties, loss of jobs and other bad things.

Why? For a couple of reasons:

- 1) God is not done with us yet.
- 2) Because it could be worse.

Scottish minister Alexander Whyte was known for his uplifting prayers in the pulpit. He always found something for which to be grateful. One Sunday morning the weather was so gloomy that one church member thought to himself, "Certainly the preacher won't think of anything for which to thank the Lord on a wretched day like this." Much to his surprise, however, Whyte began by praying, "We thank Thee, O God, that it is not always like this."

Neh. 12:45-46 Both the singers and the gatekeepers kept the charge of their God and the charge of the purification, according to the command of David and Solomon his son. For in the days of David and Asaph of old there were chiefs of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving to God.

D. REMEMBERING TO SAY "THANK YOU!"

In the Old Testament we find an interesting story of how King Jehoshaphat took an uncommon approach when his enemies waged war against him. Instead of sending in his army first, he sent in the choir and musicians. Imagine the scene: "All right, guys, here's the plan today. An army is out there, armed to the teeth. So, we are sending in the choir and the musicians." If I had been a choir member or musician, I might have wondered whether the king liked our music. But God had directed Jehoshaphat in this unusual battle tactic. We read that Jehoshaphat appointed people to sing to the Lord, praise the beauty of holiness, and go out in front of the army saying, "Praise the Lord, for His mercy endures forever" (2 Chronicles 20:21). So that is exactly what they did. The Bible tells us that when they began to sing and praise, God sent an ambush against the enemy, and they were destroyed. God's people were able to go into this situation giving thanks, because He was in control.

Psalm 107:8 Oh that [men] would praise the LORD [for] his goodness, and [for] his wonderful works to the children of men!

How often do we have to remind our children that they should say, "Thank you," after they receive something good from other people? Why is that we don't remind ourselves to thank God for what He has done for us?

In approaching God to ask for new blessings, we should never forget to thank Him for the blessings He has already given. Have we recently come to God for help and He came through for us? Did we come back to say "thank you"? If we would stop and think how many of the prayers we have offered to God have been answered and how seldom we come back to God to thank Him, it just might amaze us. We should be just as deliberate in giving thanks to God as we are in asking for His help.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) Every morning, I recommend that we start the day with commitment to God, "Lord, this is the day that you have made, I will rejoice in it and be glad."

I am not saying that it is some sort of magic spells that makes our day special. But it will prepare our hearts to be in the Lord and trusting the Lord that He is in control. When we remember that, we can be rejoicing and we can be thankful.

2) Giving thanks to God in all occasions, especially bad occasions, would blow non-Christians' minds away.

Daniel 6:10-11 Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days. Then these men assembled and found Daniel praying and making supplication before his God.

3) Give praises to the Lord with songs.

Let's sing songs to the Lord. I don't care if we are not wonderful singers. But let's sing to Him praise and worship songs we know. While we are singing, let's try to understand what we are singing and whom we are singing to. If we mean what we are singing, we will realize that we are singing love songs to the Creator of the universe, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. The most mind boggling thing is that He actually listens to our songs and enjoys them and is pleased by us. But be careful, singing praise and worship songs to God with all of our hearts has a side effect. It will make you cheerful in the midst of chaos.

Ephesians 5:18-19 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,

4) Let's remember the very basic: Jesus

2 cor 9:15 Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!