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A Time to Give Thanks

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TEXT: Nehemiah 12:27-43 (ESV)

And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres. And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathites; also from Beth-gilgal and from the region of Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem. And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall.

Then I brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall and appointed two great choirs that gave thanks. One went to the south on the wall to the Dung Gate. And after them went Hoshai and half of the leaders of Judah, and Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, and Jeremiah, and certain of the priests' sons with trumpets: Zechariah the son of Jonathan, son of Shemaiah, son of Mattaniah, son of Micaiah, son of Zaccur, son of Asaph; and his relatives, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah, and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God. And Ezra the scribe went before them. At the Fountain Gate they went up straight before them by the stairs of the city of David, at the ascent of the wall, above the house of David, to the Water Gate on the east.

The other choir of those who gave thanks went to the north, and I followed them with half of the people, on the wall, above the Tower of the Ovens, to the Broad Wall, and above the Gate of Ephraim, and by the Gate of Yeshanah, and by the Fish Gate and the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, to the Sheep Gate; and they came to a halt at the Gate of the Guard. So both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me; and the priests Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elieoenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets; and Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang with Jezrahiah as their leader. And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.

In line with the tradition of the pilgrims taking time to give thanks for God's sustaining hand early in the formation of our nation, and then many states taking time to give thanks, on October 3rd, 1789, the first president of the United States, President George Washington, made a proclamation of a National Day of Thanksgiving, a holiday for these United States of

America. And he said this: "Where this is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God and to obey his will and be grateful for his benefits and implore his protection and favor. I do recommend and assign Thursday, the 26th day of November next, that we may all unite unto him, unto God our sincere and humble thanks for his kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation."

George Washington and many of the founding fathers of our nation knew that there is a time to give thanks to God. There really is. And we're designed to give thanks to him. And in our text for today, in Nehemiah, we read that Nehemiah understood this as well. God has empowered Nehemiah and all those in Jerusalem in this time to rebuild the wall, to protect their city. They've rebuilt the temple and God in his grace has brought provision and people to do this. And now they've come to this time to dedicate this wall. And Nehemiah 12 verse 27 says, "At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the leaders here, Nehemiah and the leaders sought the Levites, the tribe with the leading worship leaders in all their places they lived around Jerusalem and area."

They went out and sought them and brought them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication of this wall with gladness, with thanksgiving, with singing, with cymbals, with harps, and with lyres. You know, the Bible tells us there's a time for everything, a season for every activity under the heavens. And there's a time to mourn. And there's a time to dance and a time to celebrate. I want to make some observations today about the time of celebration in Nehemiah's day. And the first thing I want to acknowledge when you see this and you read this text, it was well organized. I mean, they went out and got people recruited to celebrate. They got musicians recruited. They got people who could play cymbals and harps and lyres and singers and organized all this.

Nehemiah chapter seven tells us that there were 42,360 Israelites in the area at the time, and there were 7,337 hired workers that were helping them. And there were 245 men and women singers that returned from exile to Jerusalem at this time in their history. And they settled around the Jerusalem area, and they were all brought together for this day of celebration to give thanks to God, to dedicate this wall that he had empowered them to rebuild. They were going back to God and thanking him for his goodness and his kindness to him. In the middle of all their work and their labor, they understood that it was God that had empowered them to do this. Chapter 12 tells us the singers were brought together from around the region. They had a leader of Judah go up on the top of the wall, and he was assigned two large choirs to

give thanks, and one was to proceed to the top of the wall to the right, toward a certain gate down that way, and a second choir proceeded in the opposite direction.

Nehemiah himself and many of the other leaders followed the other officials on the wall. There were some 4,000 people on this wall. It was about eight feet wide. And so they spread out entirely around a large portion of this city. And then they began to sing and praise and give thanks to God. It had to be quite a sight in this newly refurbished city with this new wall, as they were celebrating on the top of it. You see, it was well organized in how they did it, and you could also see that it was well funded, well resourced. These individuals had brought their own resources to bear on this celebration, even on the building of the temple and the building of the wall. Nehemiah ten verse 32 tells us they assumed the responsibility for carrying out the command to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of God, the temple, and then many contributed labor and resources to the building of this wall.

They also assumed responsibility for bringing the house into the house of the Lord each year, the first fruits of the crops and every fruit tree that they had. They said to themselves, Nehemiah ten, verse 39, "We will not neglect the house of our God." This was a celebration that was well organized and well funded, and it was a celebration to give thanks and honor to God. It was well organized, it was well resourced. And you can observe in the text that this celebration was joyful. I mean, it was really joyful. Verse 27, chapter 12 tells us the Levites that were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully celebrated the dedication with songs of thanksgiving, with the music, the cymbals, the harps, the lyres, and all these instruments. On that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and the children also rejoiced. You see, in this celebration organization, from good resources and great joy, they were celebrating all that God had done for them.

The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem, verse 43, chapter 12 says, was heard far away. We observe here not only was it joyful, but it was loud. It was loud. Psalm 107 says simply this: "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so." God had come and redeemed this city, and called these people back here, and had given them a sense of redemption, coming back to what God had originally planned for Jerusalem at this time. And they were praising him. They were giving thanks to him. They were honoring him for all that he had done for them.

And the question I have when I read this text that I've been mulling over is how grateful they were, how celebratory they were, how loud they were, how thankful they were, how joyful

they were. And the question I have is this: Is God worth any less today? Is he worth any less today?

The Scripture asks another question. First Corinthians four verse seven says, "What do you and I have that we did not receive? What do we have that we didn't receive?" The God who made the world, Acts chapter 17 tells us, and everything in it, the Lord of heaven and earth. He is not served by human hands as if he needs anything. Rather, He Himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man, He made all the nations that they should inhabit the whole earth, and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. And God did this so that they would seek him. All of us would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being.

You know everything that God did for those in Jerusalem, he still wants to do for people today. He's wanting to redeem us. And yes, he blesses us physically. But more important, what he does for us spiritually is significant. God loves us, and he wants to help us live a full and meaningful and purposeful life, and to do this to redeem us out of an empty way of living, a dark way of living, a hopeless way of living, a meaningless way of living. God sent His Son into the world not to condemn the world, but to save the world. We're living on the other side of history that those in Nehemiah's time were living in. We're living on the post-Christ era, and after Jesus arrived in the world, now is a new covenant that God can have with his people. You and I can relate with him anytime, anywhere. We don't need a physical temple to come into the presence of God. We can be ushered into the presence of God right in our inner being, in our inner spirit, by being forgiven through the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus. And you and I can know him as our father, as our friend. How great a love the father has lavished upon us, that through Christ and our faith in Christ, we can be called children of the Most High God.

I mean what God has done for you and for me in the sending of His Son is worthy of great praise and great honor and great sacrifice and great joy. Boy, is he worth any less today? He helped those in Nehemiah's time rebuild their city, rebuild the temple so that they could offer their sacrifices and be right with God, and rebuild this wall around the city for protection and for thriving of life. And in our time, God gave us His Son. He came into the world that we might have life and have it to the full. Are we celebrating him appropriately? Are we coming to him with generosity of thanks and giving our best in organization and celebrating with joy and even letting the world know? Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.

The truth about God is everything we have. Every good thing we have is a gift from him. He richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. He has been good to us, and there is a time to give thanks. And that time is now. It's a time to celebrate God for who he is and for what he's done. But the human heart is stubborn. We see in our gospel text Luke 17 for today that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, and he was passing between Samaria and Galilee. And he entered a village, and he was met there by ten lepers who stood at a distance. They lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, master, have pity on us." And he saw them. And he said to them, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. And one of them – they were all healed of leprosy. And the Scripture says, one of them, when he saw he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. And Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" And he said to him, "Rise and go, your faith has made you well."

10%, 10% we see in that text actually acknowledge the goodness of God in their lives. You know, God is being patient with the world right now. God is not wanting any to perish. He's letting us have time to turn to him, to acknowledge him, to give thanks to him. And the Scripture says that we were made to do this. But in our stubborn hearts, in our pride, we resist acknowledging God. What about you, friend? Are you thanking the Lord today for the good things in your life? Do you have a sense of gratitude before him? Are you acknowledging all the things you can see that you know come from him? Have you paused to take a look and think about his kindness to you? Every good thing we have comes from him, comes down from the father of heavenly lights.

Do you know our challenge in life, our corruption in life, our confusion in life often comes from not acknowledging who God is and that he's there, and then not giving him thanks. Romans chapter one tells us this: those that neither glorify God nor give thanks to him, even though they know he's there, their thinking becomes futile and their foolish hearts grow dark. If you're experiencing any of that, friend, perhaps it's time for you to take a check in your heart and see what are you being grateful to God for? Are you seeing his blessings and his kindness to you? I know we've just come through Thanksgiving, but have you really taken time to look around and see signs of God's goodness to you in life, to see his hand of blessing and how rich he's been toward you? And then have you turned back to share thanks with him for anything he's done for you, for his kindness to us, his patience with us, his mercy towards us?

This is a God who is worthy of our praise. This is a God who loves us deeply. Yeah, he allows us to go through all kinds of struggles, but those are to draw him closer, draw us closer to him so that we might come to know him better and give him the praise and glory and honor due to him, and give the thanks to him that he is worthy of. In Nehemiah's day, they organized a great celebration. But God is really looking at our hearts, and he knows what's there. Is he seeing a sense of gratitude and honor and praise toward him in your heart? Do you have a sense of gratitude to God for his kindness to you? He is so worthy of our praise.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word, which shows us how you've worked in people's hearts in history. We see how you've worked in people's hearts in Nehemiah's time and then in the United States here, this national holiday we have from the heritage of those who gave you thanks. But now is our time, Lord, to honor you and praise you for who you are and give you thanks. And so we ask today that you help us do just this. Thank you for your many benefits, your many blessings, your kindness to us, especially the kindness that you've shown us in sending your Son Jesus into the world. To pay the penalty for our sin so that we might have life through him.

Forgive us for straying from you, and please continue to draw us back to you by the work of your spirit as individuals and as a nation, and even in our world. Father, we need your loving drawing hand to draw us to you. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.