

Spiritual Renewal – Step Eight
Giving Thanks to God
Spilman Memorial Baptist Church
Dr. H. Powell Dew, Jr.
September 3, 2023

Text: Nehemiah 12:1-47 (read 27-31, 38-40, 43-47)

Purpose: The people of Israel came to dedicate the city, including themselves, to God for the goodness demonstrated to them by God. They came and purified themselves, processed around the city, proclaimed the goodness of God, and brought their provisions into the storehouse of God.

A young private sought permission from his Commanding Officer to leave camp the following weekend. "You see," he explained, "my wife's expecting."



"Oh..." said the Officer, "I understand. Go ahead and tell your wife that I wish her luck."

The following week the same soldier was back again with the same explanation: "My wife's expecting." The Officer looked surprised. "Still expecting?" he said, "Well, well, my boy, you must be pretty bothered. Of course, you can have the weekend off."

"When the same soldier appeared again the third week, however, the Officer lost his temper. "Don't tell me your wife is still expecting!" he bellowed.

"Yes sir!" said the soldier resolutely, "She's still expecting."

"What on earth is she expecting?" cried the Officer.

"Me," said the soldier simply.¹

In 1991, I had the opportunity to go to Moscow to distribute Bibles.

This was right after Boris Yeltsin was elected and the old communist block was finally broken. This was the first time in almost 70 years that the government allowed people to buy, own, or even possess a bible. The official stance of the government at the time was – God is Dead. All churches (except for the officially sanctioned ones) were closed. Individuals were imprisoned and bibles were confiscated and burned.



I had won a free trip, all-expenses paid from the National Bible Society to help pass out bibles and get a report on how they had distributed the 1,000,000 Bibles. I even watched as the President of the National Bible Society handed Boris Yeltsin the 1 millionth Bible.

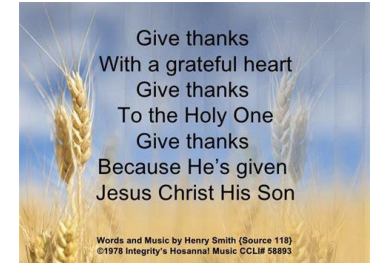


While we were there, several other people were passing out other material, one of which was a cassette tape with worship songs recorded in the Russian language. I put it in my battery-operated Cassette Walkman tape player with earphones and listened to the most beautiful worship song I had heard. I didn't understand the words, but my spirit was touched by the wonderful sounds of worship. When I came

back to America, I called the recording company and asked what were the songs on the cassette tape. That song was:

Give Thanks by Henry Smith

Give thanks with a grateful heart
Give thanks to the Holy One
Give thanks because He's given
Jesus Christ, His Son



Give thanks with a grateful heart
Give thanks to the Holy One
Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son

And now let the weak say, "I am strong"
Let the poor say, "I am rich
Because of what the Lord has done
for us"
Give thanks.

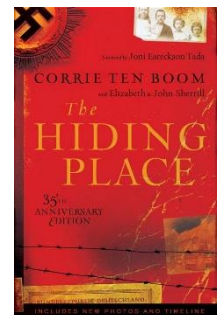


When life is good and things are great, it is easy to sing those types of praise and worship songs.

I do need to remind you the scripture reminds us to "Give Thanks" in *EVERYTHING*.

Giving Thanks for Fleas

Corrie Ten Boom in her book, "*The Hiding Place*," relates an incident that taught her an important principle. She and her sister, Betsy, had just been transferred to the worst German prison camp they had seen yet, Ravensbruck. (This was during WWII.)



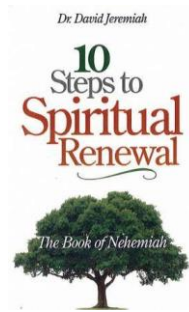
Upon entering the barracks, they found them extremely overcrowded and flea-infested. Their Scripture reading that morning in 1 Thessalonians had reminded them to “*rejoice always, pray constantly, and give thanks in all circumstances.*” Betsy told Corrie to stop and thank the Lord for every detail of their new living quarters. Corrie at first flatly refused to give thanks for the fleas, but Betsy persisted. She finally succumbed.

During the months spent at that camp, they were surprised to find how openly they could hold Bible study and prayer meetings without guard interference. It was several months later when they learned that the guards would not enter the barracks because of the fleas.

As we turn our attention to our scripture passage this morning, we see the people of Israel had just spent 70 years in exile in Babylon. They were allowed to return to their homeland. I am sure during those times; it was hard to praise the Lord and give thanks. It is my prayer that during this sermon series, we can have a Spiritual Renewal.

In previous sermons, we covered seven of the ten steps identified in the Book of Nehemiah for Spiritual renewal.

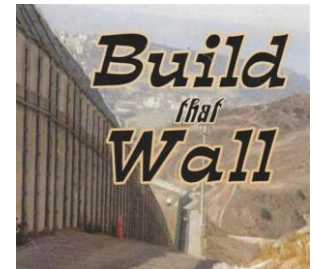
- The first step was getting back to God’s word.
- Secondly, we are to get serious about being obedient to what we are instructed to do in God’s word.
- Third, they got serious about their sin.
- They next got caught up in worshipping God.
- Fifth, they became accountable to one another for their conduct.



- Sixth, they pledged to give regularly and systematically to the work of the Lord.
- The step we examined last week involved offering themselves to the service of the Lord.

The very first task that Nehemiah was directed to do was to rebuild the wall. We saw back in Nehemiah 6 that it only took 52 days to do that. In the next five chapters, the importance of the wall disappears while the rebuilding of the spiritual fortification of Israel is undertaken by Ezra. The people needed walls for their protection, but they needed the spiritual protection of the Lord.

Building a wall will not save our nation if we do not have the spiritual protection of the Lord. Yes, we need a wall, but we also need to have the Lord and His word take on a central role in our lives. This only comes about through obedience to God’s word.



There is a passage in Deuteronomy that explores the blessings and curses provided by God. If they were obedient to the teachings and words of God as presented by



Moses on Mount Nemo, then they would be personally blessed with health and wealth, but if they were disobedient and forgot God’s word, then they

would be destroyed. The people in Nehemiah’s day knew this all too well. They had forgotten God and they knew the calamity that came upon them. They sincerely wanted the blessings of God and they went about it seriously.

Likewise, our nation will not last long on the time line of history if we continue to ignore God's Word and continue in our disobedience, debauchery, and devaluing of life. God will not be mocked. He will have the final say.

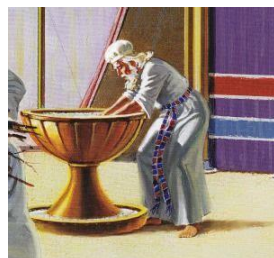
Now that the leaders, priests, and Levites were ready, they determined to dedicate the walls back to God. The word used in verse 27 usually means to "*consecrate or set apart for God.*" But in this case, it means "*to mark the beginning of a new thing.*" This dedication was not just a completion of a project, it was the beginning of a new era for Israel.

Four things happened as they dedicated this wall around Jerusalem.

I. Purification²

The Levites had been summoned from all around the nation to come to Jerusalem for the dedication of the wall.

Once they came, they purified themselves. Once that was done, they purified the people, and then the gates and walls. This was a symbolic cleansing of all that was there in God's city. They couldn't begin to worship God if they were dirty. They couldn't begin to praise God if the people had not been purified. They probably saw some dirt and grime that was on the walls and gates from when they were installed and they needed to be purified as well before they could begin to thank God for His goodness to them.



This reminds me of the truth that anyone that claims to be a child of God will not continue to live in sin. The indwelling Spirit of God came to convict the world of "*sin, and of*

righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8) You cannot be a child of God and live in filth. You will want to come away and purify yourself. Once you have done that, you can come into God's presence thanking and praising Him.

II. Procession

The second thing I notice in this service of dedication, is they formed two choirs, or two processions, led by the leaders Ezra and Nehemiah.

One choir went in one direction around the top of the wall of the city and the other went in the opposite direction on the top of the wall.



These two choirs mentioned in Nehemiah reflected an elaborate ceremony for the dedication of the walls. This procession was intent in on praising God and celebrating what He had done. They were putting their best forward to praise God.

Everyone was represented – the people, the priests, and the princes. Everyone was involved in the project and everyone wanted to be involved in the dedication. Most churches



today operate on an 80/20 rule. You know what the 80/20 rule is? It is where 80% of the work done in any group, churches included, is done by 20% of the people. In Nehemiah's day, everyone was involved and everyone was ready to celebrate.

I believe churches would celebrate more if the 80% that did nothing got involved. The more we get involved and invest

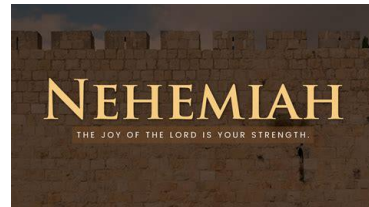
ourselves in God's work, the greater we will be willing to celebrate when the time comes. If you want to reconnect with the church, you need to get involved in Sunday school or Wednesday Bible study. If you want to reconnect with your mission and purpose, get involved in the lives of others or in the community. If you are not involved, then you will have no reason to celebrate. Don't live life from a defensive posture, move forward and get involved.

As much pain as the people in Nehemiah's day had over their past grief, they were joyful that day because of the goodness of God. If you look at life there may be times of grief but joy does come to us if we continue to seek God's goodness in our situations. We need to remember that the joy of Easter morning and Christ's resurrection was only possible because of the grief and pain of Good Friday.



III. Proclamation

The third thing that happened there among the people was a proclamation. Verse 43 says, *"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."* Don't you love that – their joy was heard afar off!



Some may have been singing but others were shouting with joy. Even if you cannot sing, you can still express your joy unto God. They were not simply praising God for the completion of the wall, but rather the renewal that had

occurred in their hearts and lives. Every step of spiritual renewal moves us closer to God and that renewal wells up joy in our heart.

Someone once said J-O-Y stood for Jesus first; Others second, and Yourself last. I believe J-O-Y could also stand for Jesus on one end and Yourself on the other and "zero" in-between. When there is nothing between you and Jesus then joy will dwell in our hearts. When we are spiritually and intimately connected with God, joy – and the other fruits of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22 will be ever present in our lives.



That joy can remain as long as sin stays out of our life. Once sin enters back in, the joy goes because there is something between you and God. While Israel was separated from Jerusalem because of their sin and rebellion against God's word, they were downcast. Now that they were back home, they could rejoice.

Does anyone have more reason to be joyful than a Christian? I don't think so. We have forgiveness for our sins through Christ. We have the Spirit of God dwelling in us to comfort us and guide us. We have God's word to lead us day by day if we avail ourselves to use it. People that walk in the blessing of God have more than enough reasons to express joy at all times.

Proverbs 17:22 says, *"A merry heart does good, like medicine."*

Proverbs 15:13 says, “*But by sorrow of the heart, the spirit is broken.*” A broken heart and a broken spirit go hand in hand.

For a Christian, a joyful heart should be part of our normal life. If your spirit is downcast day in and day out, then look at what is blocking your joy with God.

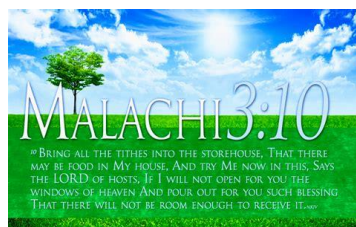
IV. Provision

In the last four verses of chapter twelve, we see the last step Israel took to give thanks – they brought great provisions into the house of the Lord.

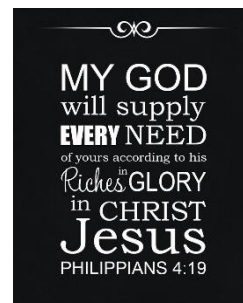


Once the people were settled into the city, surrounded by a newly dedicated wall, enjoying the goodness of God, it was time for them to make practical applications to their commitments. It was time to turn their thanks-giving into thanks-living. They wanted to thank God with their hands as well as their hearts.

As the people gathered there around the Temple, they realized the storehouse of the Lord was running low. The support needed to attend to the needs of the Levites was running low. The Levites did not inherit any land in Israel. They depended upon the tithe offerings of the people in order to live. Their storehouses needed to be replenished and the people responded.



Even in churches today, the work and ministry of the church is dependent upon the faithful financial supporters. Have you ever thought, if nine families tithed then they would be able to support one pastor?



Just as Israel demonstrated their trust in God and they gave, today we need to learn to trust God with our material needs and with our giving. Paul said in Philippians 4:19, “*and my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.*” We need to remember stewardship is a matter of grace, not the law. We walk by grace today. As God pours out His grace upon us, we respond by the power of that grace.

We need to realize we are stewards of what God has entrusted to us. We only hold it a brief time while on earth. A steward is someone that looks after someone else’s property or possession.



Strickland Gilliland wrote the following poem about being a good steward:

Steward I am, not possessor of the **wealth entrusted me.**
What, were God Himself the holder, would His disposition be?
Then I ask myself each morning, every noon and every night
As I view His gentle goodness with an ever-new delight,

Steward only, never owner, of the **time that He has lent,**
How, were He my life’s custodian, would my years on earth be spent?
Thus, I ask myself each hour as I plod my pilgrim way,
Steeped in gratefullest amazement in His mercy day by day.

Steward only, not possessor, of **the part of Him that's I**.
Clearer grows this truth and dearer as the years go slipping by.
May I softly go and humbly, head and heart in reverence bent,
That I may not fear to show Him how my stewardship was spent.

This poem reminds us that we are stewards – briefly entrusted with His possessions – wealth, time, and ourselves.

David Jeremiah asked this probing question: “How would God use my money, my time, and my possessions if it were His to spend? If God moved into your house, took over your checkbook, used your time as He wished, how would it be used differently than you are using it now? How would God live within our skin if He walked where we walked?”



The people of Nehemiah’s day praised God so loudly that they could be heard afar off. We need to live our lives so that people talk about us in the same manner.

May we learn to “Give Thanks with a grateful heart!”

LET US PRAY

Notes:

¹Mikey’s Funnies, An Expecting Funny, August 14, 2023

²Outline from David Jeremiah’s book on Nehemiah