



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Nehemiah 12:26-47

Topic

Nehemiah appoints two choirs to sing advancing toward one another in a processional on top of the wall surrounding Jerusalem

Title

*“Celebrate! Celebrate!
Advance to the Music”*

The character coming out of retirement to resume his or her exploits is a common occurrence in film:

- In the *Star Wars* original trilogy, who knew old Ben Kenobi was retired Jedi Master Obi-wan Kenobi.

- In the first *Cars*, Doc Hudson comes out of retirement to help Lightning McQueen in his quest to win the coveted Piston Cup.
- Speaking of Paul Newman... As Henry Gondorff, he was coaxed back for one last *Sting*.

I want to suggest to you that the Israelites “retired” for seventy years in Babylon from something very dear to them. You’re told what in Psalm 137.

Psa 137:1 By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down, yea, we wept When we remembered Zion.

Psa 137:2 We hung our harps Upon the willows in the midst of it.

Psa 137:3 For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song, And those who plundered us *requested* mirth, *Saying*, "Sing us *one* of the songs of Zion!"

Psa 137:4 How shall we sing the LORD's song In a foreign land?

Known for joyous choruses of praise, their Babylonian captors asked and expected them to sing. They would not; they could not - **not** while in Babylon, with their city, its walls, and its Temple in ruin. They “hung their harps in the willows,” which I take to represent all their instruments.

They hung it up... *Until the dedication ceremony marking the completion of the wall.* Jerusalem was protected; it was being repopulated; the Second Temple was open for spiritual business. They would come out of worship ‘retirement’ in a big way as two choirs advanced toward one another atop the wall.

Something seems to stick out in the text. In the NKJV, the choirs are called “thanksgiving choir[s]” in verses thirty-one, thirty-eight, and forty.

In his very good commentary on Nehemiah, Derek Kidner points out that the phrase

“thanksgiving choir[s]” is a single word in Hebrew. It is the word “thanksgivings.” While there were indeed two large choirs singing, they were to be seen and heard as “thanksgivings,” as if they embodied the very quality itself.

If you embody someone, you put him or her “in-body” - like when an actor gives a complete and compelling representation of a character. Before he was Iron Man, Robert Downey, Jr., gave a critically acclaimed, Academy Award winning performance of Charlie Chaplin. He embodied the character.

You can also use embody to describe character traits you see in a person, like, “He embodies truth,” or, “She is the embodiment of hospitality.”

We’re going to talk about Christians **embodying thanksgivings**. About giving a concrete form to; expressing, personifying, or exemplifying... thanksgivings.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Waiting Encourages You To Advance In Thanksgivings, and #2 Worship Encourages You To Advance In Thanksgivings.

#1 Waiting Encourages You To Advance In Thanksgivings

(v27-30)

Billy Graham wrote,

Are you thankful no matter what? Perhaps you have lost your job recently. Or you may have lost your health, or a loved one. Such circumstances can be **tremendously difficult**. But even so, we all have much to be thankful for. Thanksgiving... should be one of the most distinctive marks of the believer in Jesus Christ.

The sentence that sticks out to me is, "such circumstances can be tremendously difficult."
Amen to that!

Our tremendously difficult circumstances are where we can *retreat* or *advance* in thanksgivings. As wisened old preachers used to say in cliché, “You can grow *bitter*; or you can grow *better*.”

If it was easy; if it came naturally; if all we needed was a positive attitude; then thanksgivings would be devoid of any supernatural quality. We wouldn't need God, and His superabundant grace.

You remember the Geico caveman commercials. To roughly apply their slogan, “If thanksgivings were easy, even a nonbeliever could embody them.” We're talking about a deep, settled gratitude toward God - no matter what.

It isn't a matter of counting my blessings - because sooner or later, my list of bummers will exceed it. It's a supernatural matter of reckoning God is good and embodying gratitude.

The first few verses describe the gathering of the participants for the thanksgivings.

Neh 12:27 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.

Seventy years held captive by the rivers of Babylon, where they sat down, and hung up their worship. After Cyrus' decree giving the Israelites permission to return and rebuild, many more decades ensued before the Second Temple was completed. More time elapsed before the wall was finished.

Those were the circumstances the Israelites endured. For a people who were identified with Jerusalem and the Temple, to say this was "tremendously difficult" would be a tremendous understatement.

They offered “thanksgivings and singings.” They embodied thanksgivings in their singing.

You already know that Thanksgiving 101 is to live above your circumstances, trusting in the mercy of God - even if it is a severe mercy.

Stripped of everything else, you remain saved, for eternity. You can at the very least always embody the hope of eternal life.

If that’s not thanksgiving-worthy, I don’t know what is. Job once said, “though He slay me, yet will I trust Him.” Job’s theology of exactly what was happening to him was uninformed; God wasn’t trying to kill him. But his declaration that God is to be trusted was spot-on.

Job would also declare, “I know that my Redeemer lives.” He does indeed. It’s Jesus, risen from the dead, with the promise of eternal life.

That promise is guaranteed by the down-payment gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Aren't you feeling thanksgivings-ish now?

Neh 12:28 And the sons of the singers gathered together from the countryside around Jerusalem, from the villages of the Netophathites,

Neh 12:29 from the house of Gilgal, and from the fields of Geba and Azmaveth; for the singers had built themselves villages all around Jerusalem.

The “singers” were a class of servants that served in the Temple. Again, remembering how much time had passed since Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed Solomon’s Temple, it’s amazing there were Temple singers all over Israel.

Levites were born into their calling. It was hereditary. Not so singers.

With no need for them in Babylon, they nevertheless continued, and were ready thanksgivings.

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

Likely this means animals were sacrificed, and according to the Law of Moses, their blood sprinkled by the Levites on themselves and the rest.

Here is the parallel for us:

- The Israelites had been in tremendous difficulties in the world, but in the end they gathered in Jerusalem, embodying thanksgivings.
- We will be in tremendous difficulties in the world, but in the end we will be resurrected or

raptured, gathered in the heavenly city New Jerusalem, embodying thanksgivings.

You might argue that the Israelites did not embody thanksgivings while in captivity, awaiting their physical return to the Temple. Maybe not. But we are not in captivity. We have been set free from the power of sin, and from Satan, and from death. We *are* the Temple as we journey homeward to our city.

If I set my affections on things above, and remember I am already seated with Jesus in the heavenlies, and allow my heart to be thrilled at the joy of my salvation - past, present and future - I can embody thanksgivings, no matter how great the tribulation I endure in the world.

In one sense, our entire time on earth is to be spent advancing through suffering in thanksgivings in the light of our future hope, our future home.

#2 Worship Encourages You To Advance In Thanksgivings

(v31-47)

Candlelight. It's a Christmas tradition at *Disneyland* that is as old as the park itself. Choirs from High Schools all over Southern California proceed caroling down Main Street carrying candles. They fill-up the choir stands set up at the Train Station, joining a full orchestra. They perform traditional Christmas hymns and carols, while a guest celebrity reads the story of the birth of Jesus Christ from the Gospel of Luke. So cool.

So much cooler was Nehemiah's dedication of the wall:

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.

12 of 22
Nehemiah 12:27-47
*"Celebrate! Celebrate!
Advance to the Music"*

Might wanna rename that gate - just for the festivities. “You guys head toward the Refuse Gate; I mean, the Redemption Gate.”

One group went clockwise on the wall, the other counter-clockwise, advancing toward each other while singing with musical accompaniment.

I’m guessing they did some rehearsing. Too many moving parts to simply wing it. Some people feel that spontaneity is inherently more spiritual. Usually it isn’t. God is mostly a planner, isn’t He? Do you wake up each day thinking God is just gonna wing it in your life?

Neh 12:32 After them went Hoshaiah and half of the leaders of Judah,

Neh 12:33 and Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam,

Neh 12:34 Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah,

Neh 12:35 and some of the priests' sons with trumpets - Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son

13 of 22

Nehemiah 12:27-47

*“Celebrate! Celebrate!
Advance to the Music”*

of Michaiiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph,

Neh 12:36 and his brethren, 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.

The mention of David is pause-worthy. Before David, there had been no mention of the use of musical instruments in worship. Five hundred years after Moses received the Law, God commanded King David to use musical instruments when he brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. God instructed David to establish worship with “the musical instruments of God” (First Chronicles 16:42). Some scholars believe David invented several instruments to praise the LORD. Add ‘luthier’ to his resume.

When Solomon dedicated the First Temple, the Levites worshiped with “instruments of the music of the LORD, which King David made to praise the LORD” (Second Chronicles 7:6).

The point in Nehemiah mentioning David here is only to emphasize that they were back to worshipping God as He had prescribed for them, in His Temple. It wasn't a prescription for future worship.

Temple worship practices are just that - **for the Jews in their Temple**. We worship God in Spirit and in truth, having great and gracious freedom with regards to styles, songs, and instrumentation.

Hey, they sacrificed animals. We don't. So why would we be bound to their style of praise? We're not.

Neh 12:37 By the Fountain Gate, in front of them, they went up the stairs of the City of

15 of 22

Nehemiah 12:27-47

*“Celebrate! Celebrate!
Advance to the Music”*

David, on the stairway of the wall, beyond the house of David, as far as the Water Gate eastward.

Neh 12:38 The other thanksgiving choir went the opposite way, and I was behind them with half of the people on the wall, going past the Tower of the Ovens as far as the Broad Wall,

Neh 12:39 and above the Gate of Ephraim, above the Old Gate, above the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel, the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate; and they stopped by the Gate of the Prison.

You can picture the scene for yourself. It would have been magnificent, for sure. It was primitive, but powerful, surround sound.

Neh 12:40 So the two thanksgiving choirs stood in the house of God, likewise I and the half of the rulers with me;

Neh 12:41 and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Minjamin, Michaiiah, Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets;

Neh 12:42 also Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. The singers sang loudly with Jezrahiah the director.

It reads like a program. As we'll hear momentarily, it had a "director." This was a highly organized, carefully executed, praise-a-thon.

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.

Family worship is a good thing. We do it here on Wednesday evenings, and it's worth attending just to hear the kids sing and pray.

Advancing on the wall, singing with the worship band, they could be heard "afar off."

The apostle Paul founded a church in Thessalonica. He was only there a short while - twenty-one days best scholarly guess. Writing to them, he noted, “For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything” (First Thessalonians 1:8).

Something “sounds forth” from every church. Sadly, sometimes the sounds are somewhat weird or worldly, even sinful, as Christians falter and fail.

We should strive to have “sound forth” from us “the Word of God.” Not just that we are teaching the Word; that should be a given. That we are under its authority, and can be trusted to be worshippers of God in Spirit and in truth. To be a safe place, spiritually speaking, not lording over others. A place where a person can hear the Gospel and be saved; then grow in their walk. A place to discover your gift or gifts; to serve, and be served.

Not just the noise of singing was heard coming from Jerusalem; **joy** was heard afar off.

Again, it was a kind of embodiment. The Gentiles who heard the singing wouldn't have understood Hebrew. But they could sense the joy of the participants.

Some of this hearing from afar was supernatural. God was, and is, always reaching out to save. He thus amplified their praise to be heard, and the Holy Spirit presented it to lost souls as a joy they lacked.

The chapter closes with a description of the after-worship activities and assignments.

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.

Neh 12:45 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.

Neh 12:46 For in the days of David and Asaph of old *there were* chiefs of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving to God.

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.

Day-to-day responsibilities are less exciting. Like tending to the storehouse, and distributing stuff. Every week wasn't a wall-walking worship service. The dedication of the wall, the culmination of the restoration project, deserved its own day.

The Israelites had the weekly Sabbath... the seven annual feasts... the Sabbath year every seventh year... and Jubilee every fiftieth year.

If you attend a church, there is a calendar of worship opportunities. Whichever one or ones you are led to attend, I'd like to believe they advance your worship of Jesus and thereby lead you into greater thanksgivings for Who He is, and for what He has done.

Habakkuk was a believer who embodied thanksgivings. God revealed to him that Israel faced tremendous difficulties. They would be overrun and taken captive by Babylon. Habakkuk responded, saying, "I will take my position and be on watch, placing myself on my tower, looking out to see what he will say to me, and what answer he will give to my protest" (2:1 BBE).

He retreated, to wait. You might say he retired.

His retirement was short-lived. Waiting, he advanced to worship, exclaiming,

Hab 3:17 Though the fig tree may not blossom,
Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labor of the
olive may fail, And the fields yield no food;
Though the flock may be cut off from the fold,
And there be no herd in the stalls -

Hab 3:18 Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy
in the God of my salvation.

Hab 3:19 The LORD God is my strength; He will
make my feet like deer's *feet*, And He will make
me walk on my high hills. To the Chief Musician.
With my stringed instruments.

There were no blessings to count - except the
LORD and His promises. It was enough for
Habakkuk to embody thanksgivings.

It is for us, too.