

Sowing in Tears...Reaping in Joy

Nehemiah 12:1-47

“Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy,” declares the Psalmist. As for myself, I have known several such experiences in my life, times when the most painful tears of sorrow have brought about the great shouts of joy. And God often works that way in our lives, doesn’t he? I suspect that you can think of many examples yourself, too. Indeed, the tears of labor and struggle and even sorrow do produce the sweetest experiences of joy. “Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy.” And that is all the more true when you have an eternal perspective to that joyful reaping.

That pattern was certainly evident when the people of Israel returned to Jerusalem from exile, and finally finished building the wall around the city under Nehemiah’s leadership. Our text this afternoon is the dedication ceremony that was held for that great wall, a ceremony in which the whole city, the holy city which we studied last week, was dedicated and devoted to God as an act of corporate worship. That is really what Psalm 126 is all about.

Ps.126:1 “When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, We were like those who dream. 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter, And our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.” 3 The LORD has done great things for us, And we are glad. 4 Bring back our captivity, O LORD, As the streams in the South. 5 Those who sow in tears Shall reap in joy. 6 He who continually goes forth weeping, Bearing seed for sowing, Shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, Bringing his sheaves with him.”

Those words certainly describe the occasion of Nehemiah 12. The people who had sown in tears, who had returned to their barren land and rebuilt their destroyed city despite the opposition

of their enemies, reaped in joy as the work was finished. It was such a delightful occasion, and the delightful sweetness of their joy must have been magnified and intensified as they remembered the tears with which they had labored.

This dedication ceremony was, first and foremost, a worship service, and as we study this chapter, our subject will be worship. We will be studying a historical event, but one that gives us not only an appreciation of history but also a understanding of worship that abides today. Let me begin with a look at,

I. THE ESSENCE OF WORSHIP.

What is worship? What is the definition of worship? I’ve studied many answers to that question over the years. This afternoon, we’ll define worship by example. We’ll identify the essence of worship by the description of what actually takes place.

v.27

Let me take just a phrase out of that verse, which, I believe, is the essence of worship: “to celebrate the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings and singing.” Literally, it is just to “keep the dedication.” And I’m not opposed to the word celebration, but I fear that word is over-used today to emphasize our own personal experiences. Celebration often focuses upon my experiences and what I get out of it. It is usually used in a man-centered sort of way. “I” celebrate! But worship is focused not upon what I do or experience, but what I do FOR GOD. God is the object. And so the celebration of the dedication was an act of diligent and devout commitment to God. It was, in the experiences of the people of Israel when their city wall was finished and their holy city restored,

A. A sacrifice of dedication.

A sacrifice of dedication to God.

We ought to recognize that it wasn't just a wall being dedicated to God. The application of this verse isn't to encourage us to have dedication ceremonies when you put up a fence around your yard. It's not that you invite the minister over to your house for a formal ceremony to dedicate your kitchen after it has been remodeled, as I remember a friend once doing with very sincere motives.

This dedication isn't merely the commissioning of an earthly building. It is the ceremony which recognizes the restoration of the whole city, the restoration of the city of Jerusalem as the holy city of God. And the present application of this text would not be so much the dedication of a new church building, but rather the glorious celebration of the inauguration of a new church.

The Hebrew word for "dedication" has that idea of inauguration, of initiation, of beginning anew or initiating something glorious. In this case, the holy city was again brought back to its place as the holy city, the dwelling place of the people of God and the dwelling place of God.

I should note that you all know this Hebrew word, or at least have heard it. It's the word "Hannukah," which is still the name of the Jewish festival that began during the four centuries between the Old and New Testaments, a festival whose origin was the reestablishment of worship in the temple after the abominable blasphemies of Antiochus Epiphanes. That Jewish feast is mentioned in,

John 10:22 "Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter."

Such a dedication was also celebrated when Solomon's

temple was complete, and worship inaugurated there. That ceremony lasted for seven days.

2 Chron.7:8 "At that time Solomon kept the feast seven days, and all Israel with him, a very great assembly from the entrance of Hamath to the Brook of Egypt. 9 And on the eighth day they held a sacred assembly, for they observed the dedication of the altar seven days, and the feast seven days. 10 On the twenty-third day of the seventh month he sent the people away to their tents, joyful and glad of heart for the good that the LORD had done for David, for Solomon, and for His people Israel."

On that occasion, we learn specifically of the significance of the dedication ceremony, for the temple then, as it would be in Nehemiah's time, would be the place where God would dwell with his people.

2 Chron. 7:11 "Thus Solomon finished the house of the LORD and the king's house; and Solomon successfully accomplished all that came into his heart to make in the house of the LORD and in his own house. 12 Then the LORD appeared to Solomon by night, and said to him: "I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for Myself as a house of sacrifice. 13 When I shut up heaven and there is no rain, or command the locusts to devour the land, or send pestilence among My people, 14 if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. 15 Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to prayer made in this place. 16 For now I have chosen and sanctified this house, that My name may be there forever; and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually."

That presence of God, in the OT, was so magnificently evident.

2 Chron. 7:1 "When Solomon had finished praying, fire came

down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. 2 And the priests could not enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD had filled the LORD's house. 3 When all the children of Israel saw how the fire came down, and the glory of the LORD on the temple, they bowed their faces to the ground on the pavement, and worshiped and praised the LORD, saying: "For He is good, For His mercy endures forever." 4 Then the king and all the people offered sacrifices before the LORD."

So all of that went into this ceremony in Nehemiah 12. God's people were reestablished, as God's people. God's holy nation, his holy city, was again set apart to God's own glory. And to a certain degree, that should be our focus every time we assemble ourselves to worship. It's not that God's presence is limited to a physical building or that he lives in buildings made by men, but that this building, at this time, by our own commitment, is set aside as a sanctuary. And in this place, we are assembling ourselves in a visible and outward manner as God's holy city. And so without the trappings of the OT ceremonial and sacrificial regulations, we, too, as a church, celebrate a dedication as often as we gather to worship.

Thus we would rightly ask that the glory of the Lord fill this holy place, that he would dwell with us as we gather to offer our NT sacrifices of worship to him. That's the essence of worship--a sacrifice of dedication. And,

B. A sacrifice of faithfulness.

They "kept the charge," verse 45. They came together to "celebrate the dedication." The ESV put it, "they performed the service of their God." The NASB translates it, "They performed the worship of their God." Literally, it's something like, "They kept their obligation." And we would rightly view our worship service

as a worship obligation. Not a mere duty, as if outward performances of external rituals was what God seeks, but nonetheless with our focus upon God, we must see our worship as the very definition of that which God requires of us. A joyful obligation, but an obligation nonetheless. It is our chief end, and primary purpose in life, to ascribe glory and honor to God. It IS our duty, our solemn obligation, and our acceptable service which we are called upon to perform. And our worship is to be such a service to God, such a sacrifice of faithfulness to God.

It's not something we do for ourselves. It's something we do for God. That's the very essence of what worship is!

But before we move on to examine the inward attitude that must prompt that outward service and sacrifice of worship, let's look more closely at what, exactly, the people did. What are,

II. THE ELEMENTS OF WORSHIP.

In other words, what things make worship, worship. The description we are given isn't exhaustive, that is, there are other elements of worship that we won't be identifying tonight, particularly prayer and the ministry of the word, reading and preaching. Those aren't mentioned here. But what is mentioned, and what is given as the obvious focus of the ceremony of dedication here is,

A. Singing.

Notice how often reference is made to singing, and how great an emphasis is given to the singing of God's praise.

v.27-28

Now, the "thanksgivings" were "songs of thanksgiving." They were hymns of thanksgiving, specifically addressed to God as an expression of thankfulness for the mercies which God had shown

to his people. And the appropriate means of expressing thanksgiving was singing thanks.

There are so many good examples in the Psalter of such songs of thanksgiving, though none so obvious and thorough as, Ps.136:1 “Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever. 2 Oh, give thanks to the God of gods! For His mercy endures forever. 3 Oh, give thanks to the Lord of lords! For His mercy endures forever: 4 To Him who alone does great wonders, For His mercy endures forever.”

That Psalm continues, giving a litany of specific things that God has done, specific ways in which has acted to redeem and protect his people. Each item in the history of the nation of Israel is mentioned and then God is thanked with the words, “for his mercy endures forever.” And so,
v.27

They worshipped with hymns of thanksgiving, and with singing. It was a sacrifice of thanks, a thank-offering, and that is to be an element of our worship as well. The singing of praise, and done so as a body, as a congregation. In the OT, however, that corporate song was offered by the body of priests on behalf of the people. The Levites were brought to the dedication ceremony, we read in verse 27. And the singers mentioned in verse 28 were the Levitical, priestly band of singers.

We see further reference to that singing in,
v.31, 38

Again, those choirs were choirs of priests. We read further in,
v.40-42

It is a great advantage for us in the New Covenant that we are

all called priests. I emphasized that last week with reference to the administration of the Lord’s Supper, noting that I stand behind the table because I am not your priest who stands between you and Christ. I proclaim the truth of Christ to you, but not in any priestly sense whatsoever. And I administer the Sacrament simply as an administrator, granted that authority in the church of Jesus Christ by the laying on of hands by the elders. And when I receive the elements myself, I do so as one of the congregation, and with a visible impression, I wish you to realize that Christ feeds each one of us himself, as our one great High Priest. I am not your priest. I offer nothing as a mediator for you. I may intercede for you, and ought to, and you ought to do so for one another, but intercession is not assuming the role of a mediator. And since there is only “one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus,” and since he is now come, the distinct role of the priesthood has ended. And we all are priests.

We need to think about that when we think about singing, for ultimately, and essentially, singing is not something that others ought to do for us, especially when it becomes merely an expression of entertainment for our enjoyment to which we give our applause. Listening to a good performance is not worship, for singing is something that we ought to to ourselves. And be encouraged to do. Regardless of the level of musical ability that you think you might or might not have! We are to sing to God.

As a musician, I have played in many musical groups, usually symphony orchestras, and began playing in a group in Winston-Salem two years ago. I play the French horn. I play for the enjoyment of it, but I have also played semi-professionally in years past, which is to say, I have gotten paid. I enjoy playing for people in a performance. I enjoy playing in concerts, as I will be doing in just a couple weeks with the Salem Community Orchestra. But I don’t want to ever confuse a musical concert

performance and a sacrifice of worship. They are two very different things.

The point I want to emphasize here is that we all need to be eager singers. Some obviously have more ability and talent, some have more volume, and some have more training and familiarity. But we all need to develop that great eagerness to sing praise and thanksgiving to God, “for his smercy endures forever.” Another element of worship listed in this text is,

B. Collecting of tithes and offerings.

v.44

v.46-47

There is a real simplicity to the work of God’s house. There is a real simple system of economics! The prophet Malachi identifies it as clearly as can be,

Mal. 3:1 “Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, That there may be food in My house, And try Me now in this,” Says the LORD of hosts, “If I will not open for you the windows of heaven And pour out for you such blessing That there will not be room enough to receive it.”

“Bring all the tithes into the storehouse.” Nothing is said about bake sales and rummage sales. Nothing said about spaghetti suppers or professional fund-raisers. I think one of the great plagues on the church today is her reliance upon worldly means of raising money. Professional fund-raisers ought not to be at work in God’s house.

“Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house.” That language is so plain, and so plainly ignored in many places. It wasn’t ignored here, in Nehemiah 12. All the specified portions were brought in. And the priests and Levites

were well taken care of. And note that great expression at the end of verse 44, “Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered.”

That really is as it ought to be, isn’t it? And thankfully, thankfully, we have had a taste of that as a church body. Yet one commentator notes that “some scholars call this text idealistic and not true of any time in Jewish history,” and it’s sad that history often drives people to such cynicism. Indeed, some churches today, and some ministers, have little or no experience of this dynamic, and that is sad. For is such a good thing. And a sign of God’s blessing upon his people.

Let there be a joy in God’s people as we bring all the tithes into the storehouse. And may God give to us “such blessing That there will not be room enough to receive it.”

I have no interest in seeing the checks that are given to the church nor making note of the actual amount that anyone gives, the bottom line for us right does seem to be a testimony that many people do tithe! And those gifts are an element of your worship. They are not dues that you pay to belong to a club, or tips you give at a restaurant. They are not a tax comparable to what the government takes involuntarily from your paycheck. They are an offering presented to God as an act of worship, and that is the reason we pass the offering plates corporately. That’s why we give you the opportunity to give in public worship, not wishing to place any external obligation on you, but so that as a church, as a body, we might our sacrifices of worship together as one.

But we’re not just after your money, nor is God. And as an old friend of mine used to say so well, “If God doesn’t have your heart, he doesn’t want your money. And if he has your heart, he already has your money.” And that leads me to my third point,

which ties all of this together, and that is the internal part of worship.

III. THE ATTITUDE OF WORSHIP.

External form is important. Defining the elements is important. And necessary. And we shouldn't be careless about it. But external form, by itself, is empty and vain. External form has to correspond to internal attitude. And the attitude is so obviously defined here. First,

A. Joy and gladness.

Back to, v.27

They celebrated the dedication with gladness. They kept their obligation, with gladness. That gladness was the gladness of joy, the inward, internal delight that develops in the heart of those who love God! Nothing I've said this afternoon has any lasting value if it isn't connected with this character of gladness. Joy in the Lord.

Skip to, v.43

This is where it gets a little difficult to speak specific applications or exhortations, because it's hard to merely say, "Be joyful." I can't just say, "Be happy." Because you need to know that joy is something far deeper than the surface level emotion usually meant by the word happy. You have to understand what joy is first, before any exhortation to be joyful makes sense.

Joy is the internal delight in God and in his goodness that overflows from your heart to your actions. Joy is a delight in God's goodness, a delight in his mercy, a delight in his lovingkindness that is new every morning.

Now, if you struggle with a lack of that joy, or just a shortage,

the way to stimulate it is to consider those things of God. Consider and remember the good things he has done. Consider and remember his saving work in your own life. Consider and remember what he has done to care for you and provide for you and guide you. Think deeply of your own sin, so that you can think deeply of his mercy to cleanse of your sin. Meditate upon his wonderful deeds. And join in the congregation of the saints as they worship!

Sometimes, it is as you faithful perform that act of worship with true love, that God will restore the fullness of your joy.

But be careful. And in many ways be warned. Be warned if the outward forms become something less than a joyful expression of your heart. Be warned if you find church something that is boring or disinteresting, something you simply endure out of duty. Because if so, then that is a symptom of a disease in your soul. A disease that needs to be treated lest it cause greater damage.

Let the means which God has ordained be used to increase your joy--the means of prayer, the means of the word of God as it is read and preached, the means of public and corporate singing, the means of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Let all those things nourish your joy, so that your cup might overflow. That leads to the second specific attitude necessary for worship,

B. Thanksgiving.

v.27

Simply put, the people were thankful to God for what he had done for them.

And, v.46

So we read,

Col. 3:16 “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Finally, the attitude of,

C. Praise.
v.46

These things are all related, and intimately joined together, but I wanted to define them separately so that you can see HOW they fit together. Thanksgiving is gratitude for a specific act of God. Praise is more general. It is an ascription of glory and honor to God in himself. It's more than thanking him for doing something. It is honoring him for being God. It is acknowledging the glory of his divine nature, and understanding the fullness of his character, and marveling with astonishment and delight at the greatness of his being.

And we ought not to content ourselves by saying, “I praise you, God, for who you are.” Rather, that should be just the beginning. We should praise God for the specific knowledge that you have of his being and character. You should praise him for his glorious justice. You should praise him for his unfathomable eternity, as we studied this morning. You should praise him for his incomparable infinity, his omniscience and omnipresence. We should marvel at the compassion of his love, the perfection of his faithfulness, the unhesitating and unceasing fullness of his mercy and lovingkindness.

In short, you ought to study the doctrine of God, the person and work of God, so that you can more fully understand his glory, and therefore more earnestly ascribe to the Lord the glory that is due his name.

Let me end with such a song of praise,

Ps.29:1 “Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones, Give unto the LORD glory and strength. 2 Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name; Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness. 3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters; The God of glory thunders; The LORD is over many waters. 4 The voice of the LORD is powerful; The voice of the LORD is full of majesty. 5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars, Yes, the LORD splinters the cedars of Lebanon. 6 He makes them also skip like a calf, Lebanon and Sirion like a young wild ox. 7 The voice of the LORD divides the flames of fire. 8 The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; The LORD shakes the Wilderness of Kadesh. 9 The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth, And strips the forests bare; And in His temple everyone says, “Glory!” 10 The LORD sat enthroned at the Flood, And the LORD sits as King forever. 11 The LORD will give strength to His people; The LORD will bless His people with peace.”