

As it goes in the City, So it goes in the Nation

Free to Build

Nehemiah 12:27-43

Open your bibles to Nehemiah. He is Worthy...what a song. That's becoming one of my favorite songs. I love it when we sing that as a congregation. This morning, we're going to finish the book of Nehemiah, and next week we're going to turn our attention to the holiday season called Christmas. It is not a holiday for us; it's a holy day for us in the church of Jesus Christ. So this morning, we're going to finish our series on Ezra/Nehemiah called Free to Build. We're going to be reading from Nehemiah 12:27 and we're going to read through verse 43. If this is your first Sunday at Hardin or you haven't been in a little while, we're actually going to be speaking from the 11th, 12th, and 13th chapter of Nehemiah. We are just reading the text we are reading to give you the sense of what is going on in this section of Scripture. It will not be a verse by verse exegesis as we normally do when we're teaching through a New Testament book, so this is just for us to get the sense of the text. If I were to title the sermon this morning, if there was one thought I want you to go home with when you read chapters 11, 12, and 13, it is "as it goes in the city, so it goes in the nation."

Scripture

"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, Elioenai, 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.”

(Prayer)

Father, thank You for this awesome morning. We get to begin the first day of a brand new week in Your house with Your people again as Your people.

It's just absolutely phenomenal to know that You have a week ordained for us that we don't even know about yet. Yet this morning, You're going to get us ready through the worship, through the message, through just our interaction with one another for whatever it is You have ready for us. Father, we don't want to look back on this week and have missed an opportunity to be used of You. We want to grab opportunity head on. So Father, now let us focus in on what You have to say to us as You are using the book of Nehemiah and Ezra to remind us that just as You set the children of Israel free You have set us free, and You have a purpose for our redemption. That is for us to be builders, builders of Your house, and builders of a wall that our society so desperately needs. Father, please press upon our minds and our hearts and don't let us forget this. If we don't put this together as well as it should be put together, please don't let anyone miss the thought that as it goes in the city, so it goes in the nation. Father, help us understand the need to build a strong city. Empower us now to hear, but not just be hearers only, but be doers of Your Word. Father, I never want to be a speaker only, I don't want to be a preacher who doesn't practice what I preach; I want to practice in my life every principle of truth that You have taught me from Your Word that I get to teach to Your people. So Father, humbly, I ask You to anoint me now too. It's in Your precious Son's name we pray, amen.

Before we see this religious parade, just like we might watch the Macy's Day Thanksgiving parade, or the Disney parade on Christmas morning, or the Rose Bowl parade on New Year's Day, let's remember that our story this morning actually begins in chapter 11. But chapter 11, verses 1 and 2 actually connects to chapter 7, verses 4 and 5 because when the wall of Jerusalem was finished in fifty-two days on the 25th day of Elul, the Bible says the city was large, it was spacious, but there was hardly anyone living in the city. So Nehemiah gets ready by genealogy to register all of the exiles because he knows the city needs to be populated because he knows as it goes in the city, so it goes in the nation. When we begin our story in the 11th chapter, verses 1 and 2, here is what the Bible is going to teach, "Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem. And the rest of the

people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem the holy city, while nine out of ten remained in the other towns. And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem." As a biblical leader, Nehemiah gets ready to repopulate the city and the method that he uses is the casting of lots. He decides about one out of every ten people who are living outside of Jerusalem need to move from the small towns in the countryside where they're living into the capital city of Jerusalem. The method he's going to use is casting of lots. How many of you if you were living in a small town or out in the country, probably wouldn't want to move into a big city? Can you imagine what all of these people who love Nehemiah are beginning to think? To show the people that Nehemiah is not partial toward anyone, he doesn't choose the people he has them cast lots. To us in America, casting lots sounds kind of like drawing straws or flipping a coin, and we're going to think someone is lucky or unlucky. That is not how the Hebrew people view casting lots. As a matter of fact, if you go to the wisdom literature in the Old Testament, the book of Proverbs 16:33 clearly teaches that when the lot is cast, even though a man cast the lot in his lap, it's God who makes the choice of which way the lot turns up. Does everybody get that? So as all of the nation gathers together and the lot is going to be cast, here is what everybody is waiting to see. Who does God will to leave where they're at and move into the city? If you run the math of the names of the men that are recorded and you add up the numbers, then you add the women and children, there are probably about ten thousand people who the lot falls to. If this is one out of ten, that means the population in the land of exiles was about one hundred thousand people, and now about ten thousand people are going to move into the city. Get this picture. The lot falls to you. Ever since, your grandad and your dad has moved from Babylon, free to build, went back home, built your farm back, built you house back, built your business back, and now the lot falls to you and you realize God doesn't want me doing what I've been doing; God now wants me to move into the city. That's why in verse 2 when it says "and the people blessed those who willingly offered to move into the city"...See, to some English-speaking people, this sounds like there are two things going on here. There's a group of people who the lot fell to and they moved into the city, but there was another group who

graciously volunteer. That's not what this is saying. In the Hebrew language, these two thoughts are put together. Here's a group of people who come before God, cast the lot, and they believe if the lot falls to them it is God's will to move from where they are into the city, and when the lot falls to them, they willfully, willingly want to leave where they were because they believe it's God's will for them to be there. So do you know what the people do? They bless those who the lot falls to go back to the city to repopulate it. Why is the population of Jerusalem so important? It is because here is what Nehemiah knows, and he knows this from the history of his people and he knows this going forward-as it goes in the city, so it goes in the nation. Many of us pride ourselves with being country folk, but let's be honest, it is not the country that influences the nation that we live in; it's the cities. As a matter of fact, I can say this politically, without a doubt, as it goes in the city, so it goes in the nation. As it goes in the city of Washington DC, so it goes in the nation. As a matter of fact, there was a time during the cold war era that if you turned on the news and the news people were going to talk about America, they didn't even mention the United States of America, they didn't mention Russia or the Soviet Union, they just mentioned Moscow and Washington. You knew that those two cities represented the whole of the nation. Is there any doubt in any of our minds that as it goes in the city of Hollywood, so it goes in the nation? When I was in college, we had to debate whether or not Hollywood reflected American values or influenced American values. I think we're past that debate now. As it goes in Hollywood, so it goes in the nation. Did you know in 2014 that 54% of the world's population lived in cities? By the year 2050, it will swell to almost 70%. In 1990, there were only ten megacities that had a population of over ten million people. In 2014, it had swollen to twenty-eight. In the year 2030, there will be forty-one megacities in the world with a population exceeding ten million people. Listen to me. We had better get a grip on this. As it goes in the city, so it goes in the nation.

Now, what do we draw from this as a New Testament people of God? Because this is written about the nation of Israel, we know their capital city was Jerusalem, but we're living in America. First of all, let me say this is not talking about America. It talks about the city of God, the city we can't make a New Testament correlation that this is Washington. No. as a matter

of fact, if you were with me last week, you know what I'm going to say next. When we look at the last book of the Bible, the last picture we have of the church is not the church as a temple, but the church as the bride of Christ. In Revelation 19, Jesus Christ is coming back for His bride, the church, and there she is with her wedding dress on, she's beautiful, she's glorious, she's ready to consummate the wedding, and spend an eternity with Christ forever and ever and ever in the marriage supper of the Lamb. Then the angel wants John to see the bride. So in the last two chapters, the angel takes John upon a high mountain and says I'm going to show you the bride. You expect to look over that mountaintop and see the church in her wedding dress coming down one of those valleys by the river up to meet God under a tree, possibly. No, when he gets to the top of the mountain, what does he see? He sees a city. Whoa! For years, you and I have taken the book of Revelation and taught that New Jerusalem is a place, yet the Bible says it's not a place it's a people. It's the church, a fifteen hundred mile square city. Tell me you're with me. Do you know who the city of God is? It's the church.

Can I just bring this home quickly? As it goes in the city of God, so it goes in the nation. Wow! What we see in our nation is just a reflection of what's really going on in the city of God. Do you see why Nehemiah spends so much time building a wall around the city? If you'll get this picture, you'll see why you and I today are called to build a wall of morality and a wall of ethics around the very people of God so that we can be what we need to be for this society, and that's salt and light because as it goes with us, it goes them. Get this picture. There was a group of people, by divine providence, who left where they were to go into a place where there was no one. I don't want to get too far out on a limb with interpretation, but I am so thankful today that God still, by His Holy Spirit, calls men and women to leave where they are to go where others are who do not know the name of Jesus. They leave their home, everything they've got, their families. Do you know what you and I ought to do to those people? We should bless them. So here we are, the city of God, and as the city of God it is on us to take the message of Jesus because the way God populates His city, the way God grows His church is through the church taking the good news of the gospel to those who do not know Christ.

They finally built the wall. People begin to go back to the city, and now Nehemiah can dedicate the wall. Nehemiah has kind of been absent, he's been in the background, we haven't heard much about him, and when we start the 12th chapter, Nehemiah is going to pick up the story because he's going to tell us about this religious parade that far out exceeds Macy's, Disney's, and the Rose Bowl parade. This is a religious parade. I don't know about you, but our family loves parades. One of our traditions is during the holidays we watch the parade, and if we can't watch it, we tape it and watch it later. We love parades. Get this picture. The Levites had not been living in the city, only the leaders of Jerusalem have been living in the city. The Levites lived out in the suburbs of Jerusalem, so to speak. They're the professionals. So to make this parade be what it ought to be, they send for the Levites in the land to come, and when they come, they come to celebrate the dedication of the wall. The Bible says they are going to celebrate it with joy or gladness, thanksgiving, and with singing. Before they actually gather together with their musical instruments, Nehemiah says the priests purify themselves and the Levites, and then they purify the people, then the gates, and then the wall. I want you to catch this. We're getting ready to dedicate that wall that surrounds the city. That's the city's salvation, the city's strength, the city's security. Before they set it apart and dedicate it, they purify themselves, the professionals, the church staff, so to speak. Old Testament purification for priests meant that you stripped your clothes and you washed them, and then washed your body. You then took a razor and shaved your hair. Depending on how many days the purification process was going to take place, you abstain from food and sexual relations with your spouse because you focused on being pure for the dedication, because what we're dedicating, we're dedicating to God who is holy, holy, holy, so you had to be pure. The priests and Levites purified themselves, and then purify the people, then the gates, and then the wall.

You ask how you can purify a wall...here is what they did in the Old Testament. They would take two birds and kill one, drain the blood in a basin of water, and keep one bird alive. They would take cedar, hyssop, and an herb and put in the mixture. They would dip the hand into it and then throw it on the wall. While they were throwing it on the wall, they

would set the other bird free. That said the sacrifice this bird made cleansed the wall, and the bird they released flew, signifying that atonement had been made for the wall.

People are now pure, and Nehemiah now divides the Levites into two choirs. These choirs are going to celebrate with gladness. The word, gladness, in the Hebrew literally means 'from the liver.' "Alright guys, we're going to celebrate from the liver this morning! Amen!" Does anyone like liver? Yuck! In the Hebrew culture, the emotions attitudes came from within, so the attitude of joy, the emotion of joy came from the liver. The emotion of love came from the gut. So the first time you told your girlfriend or boyfriend you loved them, you might say, "I love you with my small intestine." But when you got ready to ask them to marry you, you would say, "I love you with my large intestine. Will you marry me?" But joy came from the liver; it came from within. This is an emotion that doesn't express what's happening to you based on something outside, but what has already happened to you on the inside because of a relationship with God; there is joy!

So when we come to celebrate, we're going to celebrate with joy, with thanksgiving. We're going to be thankful to God that the wall is built, and it was built in fifty-two days. We're going to dedicate it to our salvation, our security, to our strength, and with singing, with cymbals, the harp, and the lyre! We're going to find out there are seven priests who will be in the choir, and they will have trumpets. They're going to read about people who follow in the parade. You might could say it is like a marching parade. That first group is the choir, but the choir is divided into two. One of the choirs goes one way around the wall, the other goes around the other, and half the leaders followed Ezra, and the other half followed Nehemiah. Behind them are priests who are blowing trumpets. Behind them are other priests with musical instruments that David said we needed to worship God with. Does anyone see the irony in this? The wall of Jerusalem was about nine feet wide. There was a paved walkway all the way around the wall until you come to the gates. Get this picture. In Nehemiah 4 when Sanballat saw the children of Israel starting to rebuild the wall, what did he mock and say? He said, hey, if a fox walks around the top of your walls, the

stone wall will fall! Do you remember that? Now the stone wall is built, and Nehemiah doesn't run a fox around the top of the wall; he takes half the people and puts them on top of this wall that's a mile and a half around the city! They start on the west marching to the sun, and on the eastside, there is the temple of God, and when they get to the temple, they come down those stairs and sacrifice at the temple. No matter where you start out in serving God, you always want to end and be in the presence of God! You want the Son of God to rise in your life and make sacrifices with joy. God causes them to be joyous. They're singing with you. They're praising with joy. The Bible says the women and the children have joy. The joy of Jerusalem is so great that the Hebrew said it is literally heard miles away!

Can we pause here for a second? Why would Nehemiah take the pains and go to so much trouble to hire professional people to come and lead the people in dedicating the wall with singing? One of the songs that Israel had in their hymnbook called the Book of Psalms was this psalm that said when they got to Babylon they hung their harps on the branches of the willows by the Babylonian River. It said when the Babylonian people said why don't you sing to us one of your songs about your God from Jerusalem? They said all we could do was hang our head. Please tell me you get this. The Book of Psalms paints the picture that when God's people are in bondage, they can't sing. But once they've been set free, they sing from the liver! They sing with joy! It's a celebration to God of the good hand of God on them that they are free to build! I don't get to do this very often when we're singing here, but occasionally, I get to look around at you from up here, or just turn around from over there, and I've just got to ask this question to us as a group. Why do you not sing when we sing? Why is there no joy? Isn't the truth that most of us come in here saddled by the burdens and bondage, and therefore in our heart of hearts, we are not free to even sing with the people of God? If you can't even sing with the people of God, are you really going to tell me you are going to build with the people of God? I'm not talking about anybody individually; I'm talking about us as a group. Let's let the world know we're free because God has given the church a song: "Is He Worthy?" He is! He is! He is! Amen!

Before I run out of time, we've got a biblical principle about a leader. Biblical leaders are used of God to not only inform and transform His people, but also to reform his people so that His people will not be conformed to the world. Can I say that again? Biblical leaders are used of God to not only inform and transform His people, but also to reform his people so that His people will not conform to the people of the world. When we get to the 13th chapter of Nehemiah, all of our bibles and study bibles are going to say "the reforms of Nehemiah." You're going to see a picture of this guy you didn't see earlier because you're going to get a window into his soul, a window into his heart. See, he had to go back home to Babylon. He served twelve years as governor, and in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, Artaxerxes called him back home. He went back home and while he was gone, here's what happened. Eliashib, not the high priest, but another priest with that same name, was kin to Tobiah and he let Tobiah move into the temple. Tobiah is an Ammonite. That's not supposed to happen. So they take out the storehouses where they held the grain, tithes, and contributions, and they let Tobiah move in, so the enemy is now within. Nehemiah comes back home to Jerusalem, and when he sees Tobiah in the temple he got angry, and he had all of Tobiah's furniture thrown outside in the street. He told the people not to ever let that man in this house of God again. Wow!

Can we pause here for a New Testament application? Be careful what you let into your life because you always have to make room for what you let in. So when you let something in, you had better check out what you turned out. You have a holy space, and that holy space should belong to God. Be careful what you let into that space because you will not be able to retain that other when you let the new in. Got it? Got it.

Now because Tobiah has been living in the temple and there wasn't enough room for the tithes, offering, and contributions, those were going to the priests. Guess what the priests, the Levites, had to do. They had to go back out into the fields and work, and it made Nehemiah angry. See, this is a group of people earlier who said we will not neglect the house of God. But now they've made room for somebody else in the temple, so they no longer brought the first fruits, the tithes, the offerings, the

contributions, the sacrifices to the temple. Then he sees the farmers are treading the winepresses on the Sabbath. They're loading their mules and donkeys down and bringing stuff to be transported to market. He sees some Tyrrhenians who have stuff that they want to sell, and they just march right into the city of Jerusalem and set up their little booth inside the city on the Sabbath! It made Nehemiah so mad that he said I almost laid my hands on them! Let's be real...we know what it means to lay hands on someone. He said this is why we went into captivity for seventy years, because we didn't set a holy day aside for God! See, in the first reform, you have a holy place, and in the second reform, you have a holy time--one day of seven.

Then he got so mad...can I just set this up? Have any of you ever been in a situation where you said, "Man, that would make a preacher curse!" I've heard that before. I told you the story about Thomas Lovett, my Methodist neighbor. Years ago, we were working on the farm building a pole barn for the cattle. I was in the corner, and I had a sledgehammer and something wasn't going. I drew the sledgehammer back (I was about 21 or 22 years old) and hit it with all of my might. When I hit it, I didn't hit what I was going to hit, I hit the wall here, and it ricocheted off the wall there and hit me right in the head! I was laying on the floor tossing and turning, and I look around and Thomas Lovett comes over there and looks at me and saw I was ok, then he said, "Go ahead Bro Ricky, curse. It's ok...that would make a preacher curse!" Well, I didn't. Then a few hours later, Thomas came back to me and said, "I just want you to know that when I told you that, I knew you wouldn't because it had to be in you in order for you to do it, and I knew it wasn't in you so I knew I could tell you that."

Nehemiah got so upset over men letting their sons marry foreign ladies and daughters marry foreign men, and that they weren't even teaching the language of Judah, they were only learning the foreign language, he cursed at them. He beat some of them, he said. He grabbed some of them by the hair of the head and pulled their hair out of their head! Can I just ask you this question? If sin in the people caused a man of God to do that, how do you think it hurts our Father, who is holy, holy, holy? Can I tell you how bad it hurts Him? The only way He could deal with it, with you and

with me, was to put His Son on a tree and take all that we have done and put it on Him, then pour His wrath down on Him, and Him face our eternal separation! He turned His back on Him so He could turn His face toward us to bring us into His family. Nehemiah prays at the end, "Remember me, O my God, for good." May that be our prayer as we close Nehemiah and we contemplate this truth...why did God set us free from sin? It is to build His temple and build His walls, and as the city of God, He has called us to populate the cities of the world because as it goes in the city, so it goes in the nation.