

October 12

Nehemiah 12-13

The dedication of the completed wall was surely the high point of the whole career of Nehemiah. We have previously read about such tremendous celebrations in conjunction with the arrival of the ark into Jerusalem in King David's day, the dedication of the temple in Solomon's time, and also the dedication of Zerubbabel's temple in Ezra chapter 6. Later in the history of Israel the temple would be dedicated yet again by Judas Maccabeas in 165 BC after the Maccabean wars had ended and he had cleansed it from the abomination of desolation that was perpetrated by Antiochus Epiphanes). These were all mighty celebrations but so was the celebration in Zacharias' day when the wall was dedicated.

There were two great choirs -- one preceded in one direction along the top of the wall and the other went in the other direction, each followed by half of the leaders. Nehemiah sent Ezra with the first group and he went with the second group. There were all kinds of musical instruments being used -- cymbals, harps and lyres. It must have been some spectacle. People for miles around would certainly have heard it.

Before we move on it would be well for us to note that a certain amount of prominence is given in this account to the singers and gatekeepers. There were all kinds of jobs in the work of the kingdom just as there are all kinds of parts in the body of Christ. Every one of them is very important and every one of them carries high honor in the kingdom of God. God gives different gifts and different assignments to different people and there are no unimportant people and no unimportant tasks in His service.

I am very someone listening to this right now has concluded that they are insignificant, unimportant and totally expendable in the service of the Lord. That thought is wrong-headed; you need to be corrected in your thinking. It is like saying, "that liver is unimportant" or "I don't really need my cartilage". Try living without either for a day... and you'll be reminded just how important all parts are – how important you are!

Nehemiah had requested permission to return to Jerusalem to restore the city walls. Artaxerxes had appointed his cupbearer to be governor and he stayed a lot longer than it took to build the walls. In 445 BC Nehemiah had come to Jerusalem. Upon the completion of the walls, he stayed on to govern and his first term as governor lasted for 12 years. Then he was recalled to Susa and to the service of his Persian king. Chapter 13 tells us about Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem for a second term of office though we are not given exact dates. What he found did not please him at all.

First, he found that Eliashib the priest had provided Tobiah, Nehemiah's old enemy and an enemy of God's people with a large room that should have been used for the storing of tithes and offerings. Tobiah? Of all people? In the Temple? You have GOT to be kidding! The biggest jerk in the holiest place...

Nehemiah's response is so decisive and so violent that it strongly reminds us of Jesus' response as he cleansed the temple by driving out the merchants and the money changers. There is a place for righteous indignation in the kingdom and Nehemiah's response pictures that of Jesus Christ perfectly. As the governor, however, no one could challenge him.

His second discovery was that the allotted provisions for the Levites and singers were not being brought forward so the work of the temple had been abandoned and these men had returned to their fields to raise food for themselves and their families. Hello! This was a part of that pledge that they signed! So, the people get rebuked for that... And Nehemiah asks God to remember him for making that tough leadership call. – and he asks for his former deeds to not be forgotten.

Third, they had also forgotten their pledge regarding the Sabbath. At Nehemiah's orders the gates are closed against such Sabbath breakers and Nehemiah threatens a physical thrashing to those merchants who camped out beneath the walls. And Nehemiah asks God to remember him for that tough leadership call – and for mercy.

The last abuse that had been resurrected was absolutely predictable. Once again the practice of intermarriage between the sons of Judah and the daughters of Canaan had begun. Even one of Eliashib the high priest's sons, a priest named Joiada was guilty in this regard. He let his son – A PRIEST – marry the daughter of SANBALLAT the HORONITE! What was he thinking!? Nehemiah drove Joiada away from him. And he asks God to remember him for that tough leadership call – and he asks for favor.

Leaders have to make tough calls. They do what is right, not what is expedient. They punish people who do wrong and break promises. They keep the whole community on track. But it isn't easy. It feels lonely. You hate to be the bad guy. But that's what leaders do. And even if the people hate you, you ask God for favor, mercy and strength to keep on doing it... all for God's honor.