

NEHEMIAH 12

The dedication of the wall of Jerusalem

Nehemiah 12 : 27-47

**Nehemiah's ministry completed:
the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem**

Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ:

Introduction. We continue with the book of Nehemiah and we fast-forward to Nehemiah 12 (the last part) because in chapter 11 and 12 (first part) we read more about the repopulation of Jerusalem, something which was dealt with already in chapter 7. Also, we call to mind that in chapter 6 the completion of the wall was mentioned.

What intrigues us now is why it takes so long (at least all the events described in the chapters 7-12) before we come from the completion of the wall to the dedication of the wall. Should the wall not have been dedicated right after its completion? Why is there so much time between the completion and the dedication?

The answer to this question is as obvious as it is important. The wall may have been completed much earlier, but Israel was not ready for its dedication. The finishing of a physical plant or facility does not mean that the people are in the right frame of mind to dedicate and use it. So, after the wall is finished, Nehemiah must first attend to the spiritual reformation of Israel as a covenant people, and only then does the dedication of the wall have any real meaning.

We have seen that this restoration of Israel involved a studying of the law, a confession of sin, a day of penance, and an affirmation of the covenant. Now when all this is done, and Israel is also spiritually ready for it, Nehemiah may come to the actual dedication of the wall. For now his work in Israel has drawn to a definite close, and the finishing touch, the grand finale will be the dedication of the wall by a people that has fully turned again to the LORD. And, as we can read in the next and last chapter, after the dedication of the wall Nehemiah's task is done, and he returns to the capital city, Susa, to serve the king as before.

The dedication of the wall, then, is the concluding act of Nehemiah's work in Jerusalem! I summarize the text as follows:

Nehemiah's ministry finds its completion in Israel's worship of God at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem.

We will see three elements:

- 1. the needful preparation for this worship**
- 2. the joyful participation in this worship**
- 3. the careful preservation of this worship**

1. This section begins with the words, "At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem . . . ," and we should note that the word "dedication" is a translation of the word *Hanukkah*. Today the word Hanukkah is connected with the Jewish New Year celebration, but of old it was always connected with the temple. In I Kings 8 we read of Solomon's dedication of the temple. In Ezra 6 we read how the rebuilt temple was again dedicated to the LORD. And now in this chapter we find another Hanukkah, a dedication of the wall, which also finds its highlight and conclusion in the temple. So the feast described here has to do with the wall that was built, but that wall finds its ultimate meaning only in the worship as it takes place in the temple.

The temple is always the focal point of any real Hanukkah, because Hanukkah is a celebration of God's presence in the midst of His people. The LORD dwells in Zion. That is the true meaning of Hanukkah, and

the people gather to worship Him. We note, in passing, that Hanukkah in essence speaks of God dwelling with His people in Christ, in the great Son of David, the Lord Jesus.

What strikes us again – as it has throughout this book – is that Nehemiah does not just plunge into things, but that he makes all kinds of necessary preparations. We can say on the one hand that a feast, a celebration, should be spontaneous. But we notice, on the other hand, that it also requires proper preparation. Everyone has to be fully aware of the meaning and importance of the event.

First we read that Nehemiah has the Levites from all the territory of Israel come to Jerusalem to get ready for the feast. The Levites were, of course, the temple servants who took turns in the service at the temple, and for this occasion they must all be gathered. Notice that they are to come with cymbals, harps, and lyres, musical instruments of rhythm (cymbals) and melody (harps and lyres). And not only the Levites are called, but also the singers are especially mentioned. These singers, probably also Levites, were most likely the members of the temple choirs who had settled mostly in and around Jerusalem. So this is going to be a very musical event.

We read that Nehemiah divides the Levites and singers into two large choirs (verse 31). It is conceivable that the choirs had to gather in order to practice what they were going to sing. The purpose of these choirs is not to give a performance – as choirs usually do nowadays – but to lead and accompany the people in their praise of God! The choirs never replaced the people, but assisted the people, leading the entire congregation in song. I mention this because sometimes the impression is given that in the Old Testament choirs sang for the people while in the New Testament the people themselves sing. This is a false dilemma: also in Israel choirs were meant to accompany and lead the people in singing, having much the same function as our organ today. The LORD always delighted in the song of His entire covenant people.

The Levites and singers, then, are gathered in Jerusalem to prepare for the great Hanukkah. It will be a festival filled with music. At this point, because the text emphasizes it, it is good that we note how in the verses 17 to 43 a reference is made to music and singing at least ten

times. The singing is an expression of great joy and thanksgiving (verse 27, verse 40, and verse 43). It is so exuberant and explosive that we read in verse 43: "The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away." What a testimony to all the people, especially non-Israelites who lived around the city. God's praise resounds from the walls, the city, and the temple into the entire region.

It is important that the Bible is filled with so many songs and with so many references to music. This is true not just for the Old Testament, but also for the New. The Book of Revelation, for example, contains a great number of hymns and songs. Music and song are an integral part of worship. The psalms from which we sing in this service indicate the same function of music and song.

Psalm 92: 'Tis good with jubilation / to sing and glorify. / With song and music blending, / I will thy praise recite!

Psalm 95: The LORD be praised; come, let us sing, / and let out voice with rapture ring!

Psalm 96: Sing praise to Him with jubilation!

Psalm 97: O Zion, lift your voice, / within your gates rejoice!

When you consider these Biblical commands (for that is what they are, commands) to sing with joy, you understand that God wishes to be worshipped in song and praise. Why? Because music and song are forms of expression given to us by God, which involve us fully. Martin Luther once wrote this about the function of music in worship: "I am persuaded that besides theology (the preaching) there is no art that can be placed on a level with music, for besides theology (preaching) it is the only art capable of affording peace and joy of the heart. . . ." And he added – typically Luther, "The devil flees before the sound of music almost as much as before the Word of God." And I add, when the music is a faithful expression of and response to the Word of God, the devil can indeed not bear it. The devil hates the psalms and hymns of the church of Christ, because they speak of the power of grace, the victory of Christ, the faithfulness of God. It is in our praise with song and music blending that our hearts, souls and minds are united before God. In that sense we may say that the Holy Spirit uses music and song

to unite us fully in the praise of God's Name. The liturgy must therefore always be carefully prepared, the proper psalms selected, for it must form a unity with the Word that is preached.

Of course, there must be more than just music and song. This passage also mentions in verse 30: "When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates, and the wall." An important aspect of the needful preparation is this purification. Now it is not specified exactly how this was done. Perhaps through sacrifices and the sprinkling with blood. Most likely through ritual washing (as described in Leviticus) and through fasting and abstinence. But some form of purification took place, for the priests and the people all realized that worship is a holy activity. Coming before the LORD, we must come purified, cleansed from sin and evil, with true and sincere hearts. Therefore there are these official acts of cleansing, so that everyone is spiritually prepared for the great feast of thanksgiving. For the song will be false if the hearts are not true.

So there is this extensive, needful, preparation for the great feast of Hanukkah, when the walls (and temple) will be dedicated again to God, when His presence is celebrated and His worship restored. Let me at this point ask all of us a question: how do we prepare for worship? Do we still actually prepare for it, or do we just plunge right in without much previous thought? When we gather, we come into the presence of God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. Do we realize what this means and demands? Is there a proper state of mind, a purified heart, a deep reverence, a desire to sing, pray and hear? To break out in jubilant praise with even greater reason than Israel did of old?

There are those who find our worship services boring. They would like to see them spruced up and decorated in whatever way. But there is another question that must be asked first: do you appreciate the character and content of worship as it is? Have you properly prepared for it? Even on Sunday morning, we are mostly in a rush to get ready and exhausted by the time we arrive in church. Some are not even dressed in fitting attire, in clothes that reflect the solemn and reverent character of the occasion. There are those who will wear suit and tie to work because this is required, but come to church in casual dress. We

are sometimes more afraid of company policy than appreciative of God's holiness. I am not setting any dress-code here, for that is already set; I am speaking about the fact that we more easily maintain secular standards than adhere to a Christian style.

In any case, those who come unprepared, without anticipation, will probably leave unfulfilled, without jubilation. If you have little or no expectation on Saturday evening or Sunday morning, you will most likely go home more empty than you came. Unless the LORD prevents it. But we shall come prepared to participate!

2. Indeed, participate! Notice how the Levites and singers make special preparations. But all the people have a function in this event. Nehemiah sets up an elaborate choreography, if I may use that word. If I understand it properly, people are divided into two groups. Each group consists of a choir with musicians, half of the leaders of the people, and half of the people themselves. So there were in fact two processions, each led by a choir. Then followed the leaders, Nehemiah leading one procession and Ezra the other, followed by the other leaders and the people.

Everyone has a proper place in this event. Notice also how Nehemiah determines exactly where the two processions shall march and meet. Someone who understands these things reconstructed the procedure as follows: one procession climbs the wall and goes clockwise around the city, while the other procession goes counter-clockwise. In this way they do not pass each other, but they do pass all the major points on the wall (notice the various gates mentioned specifically), and they then meet between the gates that are the closest to the temple! For the temple is and remains the focal point.

This going around the city is, of course, a ceremonial procession. What it means is that all Israel recognizes that each part of the wall, every inch and centimetre, is a gift of God. Human effort and achievement are not honoured here, but God's grace is recognized, for He Himself and He alone is the wall around His people! "Dedication" means: to recognize the Giver. Praise God from whom all blessings

flow! Dedication means also to commend the wall and the city into the special care of God. The Giver is the Defender and Protector. And it implies the pledge to use it only in the service of God. The Giver is the only LORD of the city. All the city, priests, leaders, and people are one in the service of the LORD.

And when they meet, they descend from the wall and gather in the temple area. For there the LORD God dwells in the midst of His people. We read in verse 40 that the two choirs took their places in the house of God. All the Levites and singers entered the temple in their proper places. Then followed Nehemiah with half of the officials and certain priests who are even mentioned by name. The choir director is also mentioned by name, verse 42: Jezrahiah. And then, as the praise of the choirs comes forth from God's courts, the sacrifices are brought. Great sacrifices, it says, meaning a great number. These were perhaps mostly thank offerings, since it was an occasion of thanksgiving. In verse 43 we read: "The women and children also rejoiced." It is again noteworthy how Nehemiah stresses the participation of all, with the women and children mentioned specifically.

Everyone participates, physically and spiritually. They sang with such joy and enthusiasm that the sound was heard from far away. Now this form of processional worship is typical of the old dispensation, which was much more determined by ceremony than our worship today. People then marched, danced, shouted, clapped their hands or raised them high. There was a lot of expressive action. This was especially the case when a major feast took place, such as at this Hanukkah. Often it was less exuberant than at this moment, but it was always more expressive than our worship services.

The worship that we have grown familiar with, our present liturgy, is much more quiet and reflexive. And that is okay – I am not pleading here for any liturgical changes – as long as we all realize that we do not come to church to be silent observers or mute hearers, but active participants. Worship means: giving God what He is worth, it is worship, the praise fitting to His name, and that means a very strong emphasis on the offering of praise and prayer and gifts.

We come to church every Sunday – and on special feast days – to be fed. Often the question is asked at home visits whether you are “fed” by the preaching or not, and then a discussion results on the pros and cons of the preaching. Are you being fed? The church is not a restaurant where we serve up your favourite dishes. Neither is it a barn where cattle congregate. That would suggest that the first purpose is that we get something out of the service; that we are inspired, moved, touched, whatever word you want. In many churches, worship has become entertainment, people come to be kept busy, to be amused, to see a show. They are watchers, not participants. It is then – in the observational mode – very easy to say: I didn't get anything out of it! I missed this or that in the sermon this morning. Sure, there's always something missing.

Now, do not misunderstand me, this element of “being fed” (shall we say) is important. We come to receive spiritual food; I am not knocking that at all. But a question less often asked is not what did you get out of it, but what did God receive through it? What did you give instead of get? Did you truly give Him all your attention during the preaching? Did you sing with your heart ablaze? Did you pray with true piety and passion? Did you communicate to the Lord how much you love Him, and did you give Him the praise and the glory He deserves? Did you offer to Him your whole life again as a thank offering? What did you give here? For it is a worship service, a gathering in which we all come and participate in glorifying God for His work of redemption in Christ. Worship is not something that we critically observe, it is something we joyfully do, for true worship is always of a participatory nature. Especially in the New Testament church where the Spirit has been poured out over all, where there is no distinction between clergy and laity, where the only High Priest is Christ, the worship is genuinely participatory in character. If you came to give, you will also get what you need.

3. Nehemiah may see his ministry in Israel concluded with this mighty service of worship wherein the LORD God truly receives the praise He deserves from all His children. Hear the trumpets, cymbals, and harps;

hear the voices of those trained to sing; hear all the others, men, women, and children join in. It is all to the glory of God. How Nehemiah's heart must have been filled with joyous emotion. Now he can go back to Susa and serve the king of Persia with peace, for the worship of God is restored in Jerusalem.

Is it a wonder, then, that we also read in this chapter, verse 44: "At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the store rooms . . ." and verse 47: "all Israel contributed the daily portions for the singers and gatekeepers . . ." Many explainers suggest that the verses 44 – 47 do not belong to the text but are a later addition by an editor, but they do belong. For at precisely that time everyone realized: we cannot ever again let this worship fall into neglect; we must today, on this Hanukkah, act to preserve the worship in Jerusalem. We may never see another Hanukkah like this again, but we must preserve the daily worship in the temple.

So they appointed men who would take care of the store rooms; that is, men in charge of gathering and managing the gifts of the people. These gifts were for the sustaining of those who worked in the temple, the priests, the Levites, the singers and the gatekeepers. From the most lofty position of the priest to the most humble position of the gatekeeper, everyone was cared for, so that the worship of God would be always preserved and continue day after day.

What better day to make such appointments than on Hanukkah! Worship may have its highlights, and it may have its special events to commemorate, but worship is an ongoing matter that needs to be carefully preserved and maintained on a daily basis by everyone. It is not without reason that Lord's Day 38, explaining the fourth commandment about the Sabbath, says: First that the ministry of the Word and the schools be maintained! It comes last in this chapter – the element of giving for worship – and it may be first in the catechism, as long as it is included somewhere.

They pledged on that day to support the priests and the Levites, as prescribed by God in His law through Moses, and the choir directors, the singers and the gatekeepers (verses 46, 47) as was prescribed by

David and Solomon, with Asaph the choir director of that time fittingly remembered in this passage. They did not initiate something new here – no innovations, please – but they simply went back to what had been done long ago and was since neglected. It was not a revolution but a true reformation.

Indeed, the needful preparation and the joyful participation also on that day led to measures for the careful preservation of the worship of the LORD. For Hanukkah is soon over, but worship never ends. They say: Nehemiah, you can return now in peace to the king in Susa; the service of the LORD, the worship of His Name, will not be neglected by us. Those who truly participated in the worship are also always willing to preserve and maintain it.

That's how it still is today. Those who love the Lord Jesus and give themselves fully in the worship services and all the life of the church usually have no problems maintaining their share of the financial obligations of the church. Of course not. They do not want the services to be discontinued; these must be continued until Christ comes again. All their daily work and life is geared towards the maintaining of the ministry and the schools; in this way they live for the LORD every day. Then all of life has become worship. All of life is liturgy and every day is filled with praise to God who Himself builds Jerusalem and protects her for the day of the great King. Then every Sunday, and all other days as well, we render to the LORD's great name the glory to which He lays claim.

Then the miracle happens: our whole life is *Hanukkah*: dedicated to the LORD! Hanukkah!

AMEN.