

# Nehemiah 12:27-13:3

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] As I've looked at this text this week, that our collective voice in praise has this rolling effect into the neighborhood and into the city and into the world that sees us.

I was thinking even in terms of Ephesians. And there is a moment in the New Testament church where God's people are gathering together.

And in verse 19, it says that we are to be addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

So as we're sequestered in our own isolation, how are you doing on Thanksgiving? How are you buoyed through song?

Are you able even in your prayers to continue to give God the praise that is due his name? Joy is the derivative of thanksgiving.

[ 1 : 2 2 ] Thanksgiving comes through the avenue of song. Your praise is a pathway to his presence.

And so this is the road we are walking when we're not able to gather with one another. I was thinking of Psalm 48, which almost mirrors this image that was taking place on that day in Nehemiah's time.

Psalm 48 opens, Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. And then verse 12, And so as Israel convened for the purpose of thanksgiving and lifted their voice through choir and song, it brought great joy to them and to their hearts and was a testimony to the world around them.

Indeed, it was heard, it says, far away. What a difference from where Nehemiah started. Do you remember chapter one? When Nehemiah came upon the city of Jerusalem and saw its gates burned and charred and fallen and the stone in seemingly disrepair.

In chapter one, it says that he fell down and wept. And he wept over the state of the church, over God's people.

[ 3 : 1 6 ] And here at the close, his tears have now turned to joy. And his cries have now turned to choirs that give praise.

What is God teaching us today? Let me ask you. I've been asking myself, what is the state of the church? What is the state of our soul? What was the state of Jerusalem when Jesus came upon her?

In one week's time, we'll be considering Palm Sunday, where he walks through the gate into the city. With palm branches being placed down before him.

And in our text, we are centuries before and we're on Nehemiah's wall. And here the choirs are singing praises. But in Luke chapter 19, it says that when Jesus came into that city at that time, he wept.

When he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, Oh, that you, even you, had known this day the things that make for peace.

[ 4 : 25 ] He says you did not know the time of your visitation. This is one of the things I think God is still teaching us. The reason we're not walking around the city in joyful song with celebratory notes of culmination is he is continuing to limit our reach by way of preparation that our hearts might be filled with an ever Christ-centered view of the church.

There's a hymn written by Jonathan Edwards' grandson, I believe. Great-grandson, perhaps, Timothy Dwight.

And it says, I love thy church, O God. Her walls before thee stand. For her, my tears shall fall. For her, my prayers ascend.

To her, my cares and toils be given. Till toils and cares shall end. This strange moment in our life where we are yet in tears on our own before we are convened together in thanksgiving to God.

On the day that Israel stood on Jerusalem's walls, they stood literally, as one person has written, as a songbird guards a twig, its only weapon, a song.

[ 5 : 56 ] And so I'm just going to encourage you in these days, on your own, to lift up your voice in tearful, joyful, intercessory prayer for the body of Christ that on the day that we do convene, it would be a day of marked thanksgiving.

Lesson number one. Simply this, we're to be thankful. He would have us be joyful. He would have us praise his name.

He would make you happy through song. The next two paragraphs are intriguing and interesting in regard to other lessons to be learned in a season before we convene together.

Look at verses 44 through 47. Following on the heels of a celebration of song in the house of God, we have the set-aparting, a setting apart of those who would lead the worship for God.

So celebration in God's house through song is followed by a setting apart of those who will lead worship in God's very household.

[ 7 : 19 ] Verse 44. On that day, men were appointed over the storerooms, the contributions, the first fruits, the tithes, to gather them in, portions required by the law.

It will move even to the Levites who are offering the sacrifices. It will include the singers with an appeal back to David's day.

It will also include in this section gatekeepers who were the ones who were protecting the household of God. And so these servants of the Lord, these gatekeepers who protect the church, these Levites who offer sacrifices that she may be pure.

These singers who convene God's people in holy praise, they are all provided for on that day. This is really interesting to me.

If the first movement is that you ought to be thankful, this movement is that you ought to be charitable. They gave their first fruits.

[ 8 : 26 ] If you're to be glad, you're to be generous. If you're to be happy, you're to be open-handed.

If you want to praise God, you are to provide for the household of God. All of these things are wrapped up in verses 44 through 47.

And when I consider what our Lord has done, how this text can move forward to Jesus himself, who is not only the gatekeeper of God's people, but the gate itself, John 10.

The one in whom we find our protection. The Levitical priesthood done away with because his sacrifice is done once for all.

Then our generosity, our giving, our charitable nature, our first fruits, our convictions that will necessitate financial provision for what will be Christ Church Chicago, it's all given to the Lord.

[ 9 : 34 ] It's not given to an organization or a body or even to what will become a building program. We are having in Christ the fullness of all things that bring us into his presence.

And what he wants from us before we reconvene is not just a thankful heart, but an open-handed life. Not just a sense of joyfulness, but of generosity.

And it is all to the Lord. Everything would be given to our Savior. So just as I asked, how are you doing on gratitude and thankfulness?

How are you doing on generosity and gratefulness? Particularly at a time when we're not sure any one of us in our own homes how he will continue to provide for us, let alone the complete people of God around the world.

And yet, this people at this time on that day when the surrounding culture felt overwhelming to their sustainability, they were people who gave of their tithes, gave of their offerings, out of the generosity of the heart, they provided for all things that the household of God would continue to be nourished and strengthened.

[ 11 : 04 ] Third, and finally, verses 1 to 3 in chapter 13 follow on the heels of what we've already looked at. So if verses 31 to 43, the lesson learned is that there ought to be a celebration of song through a heart of thankfulness when we return to God's house.

And there ought to be a setting apart of those who lead the worship of God's house and a securing of all things necessary for the future of God's house.

Then in these three verses we see not only a setting apart for the household, but a setting apart of those who remain outside God's household.

Setting apart for something verses 44 to 47. Setting ourselves apart from something chapter 13 verse 1 to 3.

This is a difficult text. It says they read from the book of Moses. That would have been Deuteronomy 23 given what comes next about Ammonites and Moabites not assembling in the household of God.

[ 12 : 16 ] And then it actually indicates in verse 3 as soon as that the people heard the law they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent. I mean at a first glance or at a cursory reading this is a text almost like ready for indictment.

an unobservant reader would begin to think that what you have in the scriptures is an indication of racism or is an indication of ethnic particularism of the most vulgar of sorts this separation.

And is that really what's going on here? Is there a movement that someone could speak against Judaism or against Christianity which comes forth from the Old Testament scriptures from a text like this?

I don't think so. Let me just say a couple of things. We're not free to cherry pick particular verses and set them at odds with other texts in the scriptures.

In fact the reason for the separating from isn't racial or ethnic. It's listed right there in verse 2 for not for they were a different sort of people but for they did not meet the people of Israel with bread and water but hired Balaam against them to curse them.

[ 13 : 43 ] You might recall that back in Deuteronomy 2 or in Numbers as God's people left Egypt the Moabites the descendants of Lot were opposed to their movement and the king over the Ammonites would not even allow them to go through the land.

In other words they rejected what God was doing with Israel in history and that's the reason for which they are separated here.

They're not to be in the assembly of God if they've actually rejected what God is doing redemptively through his people. Also just think of Ruth.

I mean Ruth is a Moabite. Ruth is someone who enters into God's family as a foreigner through faith in the very promises.

The reading itself that this was drawn from in Deuteronomy 23 by verse 15 actually indicates how foreigners and slaves of other countries actually become a part of God's family.

[ 14 : 53 ] One only needs to go all the way back to the Passover and there is provision already made that a mixed multitude comes out of Egypt and there are indications of how a foreigner attaches themselves to the promises of God and therefore becomes God's people.

One only needs to think of Jesus himself who says go and make disciples of all the nations that the Christian teaching isn't separation on the basis of race or ethnic particularity that is rooted in an ungodly pattern.

That's not what is going on here. So what is going on here? What is he doing when the people of God are separating themselves from those who have rejected the promises and therefore shouldn't be part of the family?

It might be helpful just to turn back to Deuteronomy 23 which is the chapter where this separation emerges from and in verse 14 you see the answer you separate yourself because the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you therefore your camp must be holy so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you why does the Christian community refrain from an open membership where regardless of your belief Christian or not you are welcome in the assembly the reason is simple because our Lord walks in our midst we separate our self from some because our Lord walks among us in other words it's holiness the call of the chapter and the lesson that we are to learn isn't only that when we reconvene it ought to be in the happiness of thanksgiving or that when we reconvene it is with an open handedness of generosity but when we reconvene and we live our lives together we commit ourselves to holiness we commit ourselves to an understanding that our

Lord Jesus Christ walks in the midst of the isles of Christ Church Chicago this is the way it's put in Revelation the lampstands and the Lord and the congregation and how does he walk in the midst of the congregations he walks with both grace and judgment he walks in our midst informing how we're to live our lives and all the seven churches in Revelation are singled out for the things that they are to separate themselves from if you've got time this afternoon you can even look at the church in Pergamom which actually is alluded to in our text both by Balaam's presence and by sexual immorality and the call for us is to holiness the call for us is not just to be glad or charitable but to be godly these are the lessons that

[ 18 : 23 ] I think God has for you while you sit in your living room this morning these three activities that take place in the text in God's house are to be the affections that would mark us as God's household he has put us on the shelf for a season the length of which we do not know and there are lessons to be learned there are instructions from above while we are isolated below and these are the lessons that this text would have us learn before we reconvene before we find our way back together he would have us become a thankful people he would have us become a charitable people he would have us become a faithful people he would have us open our hands lift our hands and refrain from staining our hands that he would after all help us to establish the work of our hands let me pray our heavenly father as we prepare now to return to life being lived in isolation may these lessons be learned and help us

Lord but that by the time we meet we would be thankful charitable! Faithful!

That we would be a happy people an open handed people a holy people that we would be men and women who know how to praise you know how to provide for you your work that is and rightly know how to exercise godly piety before you Lord we commit ourselves to learning these things so that when we stand in one another's presence we may be as these choirs walking around the place that you provided with thanksgiving with first fruits in hand with a song to be sung with a word to be adhered to Lord help us to separate ourselves each one from anything and anyone that would mar your name by the time we convene together in

Christ's name we pray amen