

The Sound of Rejoicing

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 7th of November 2004.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled The Sound of Rejoicing and is based on Nehemiah chapter 12 verses 27 to 47.

Heavenly Father, speak to us now from your word from Nehemiah that we may not only understand it but live lives appropriately in response to it, lives of thankfulness and joy and we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

For a few shekels you can still walk around most of the walls of Jerusalem with two exceptions. One is the part of the wall of Jerusalem that is adjacent to what's called the Temple Mount where these days there is a mosque, the Dome of the Rock and that area because of its high security it's forbidden to walk around the wall around that part of Jerusalem.

And the other bit is just a small bit over one of the gates, the Jaffa Gate. It used to be a wall that would continue all the way around but because 140 years ago a fairly arrogant German emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm, wanted to arrive in Jerusalem on his horse without having to bend his head to go under the gate, they took off the top of it.

[1 : 33] So now if you want to walk around the walls you have to get down at Jaffa Gate, cross the road and then get back up on the other side. But for the rest, for a few shekels, you can walk around the walls of Jerusalem.

But they're not Nehemiah's walls that are dedicated here in chapter 12 of Nehemiah. The walls of today are constructed less than 500 years ago by the Ottoman emperor Suleiman the Magnificent which is a great name I think.

As I said at 8 o'clock, if I ever have a cat I will call my cat Suleiman the Magnificent because I think it's a great name for a cat. I'm not sure whether it's a great name for an Ottoman emperor but nonetheless that was his name.

Maybe he called himself Magnificent. I'm not really sure who called him Magnificent to be honest. Now ancient cities had walls. They were basic for security. They were there to protect from the invading other cities down the road and so on.

And people would live inside the city, inside the walls, maybe actually in the walls in some cases and during the day they might go out of the city gates and look after their crops and their animals on the outside of the city.

[2 : 39] But come nightfall into the city they would come, the gates would shut, there'd be guards around and a city would be protected. A wall for a city like Jerusalem was certainly no luxury.

The context of the book of Nehemiah is this. Jerusalem had been destroyed about 120 years before Nehemiah in 587 by the Babylonians.

We've heard of Solomon in recent weeks. 400 years after Solomon, Jerusalem was destroyed, its temple walls smashed to the ground. For 70 years, Jerusalem was left fairly unoccupied and the leaders of Jerusalem were taken into exile to Babylon.

It was the Babylonians' turn to be defeated 70 years later by the Persians and the Persians allowed people like the Jews to go back to their homeland. And so some of them did. Fairly dispirited, fairly disheartened on the whole, they came back from 538 BC in dribs and drabs.

Some never returned. After 20 years, under provocation from the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the temple was rebuilt. But another 60 years later it took until Nehemiah went back to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

[3 : 56] That shows the spiritual and physical lethargy of the people as they returned from exile. Building the wall was not just a feat of construction.

It's more symbolic and significant than that. It really climaxes the restoration of the people of God to God in some sense.

Now they've reclaimed the land, the city, rebuilt the temple and in the rebuilding of the wall symbolised the security of God's people, not just because of a wall of stone and mortar but because God himself is their strength and refuge.

And that's in a sense the restoration of the people of God back to God that is being celebrated in this passage in chapter 12 today.

It's significant that in the book of Nehemiah the dedication of the wall does not come immediately after the wall has been finished being built. That happens in chapter 6.

[4 : 59] What happens in subsequent chapters before we get to this chapter is in effect the moral restoration of the people to God.

They hear the word or the law of God being read, they pledge themselves to submit to it and now comes the ceremony of dedication, not just of the wall but in effect of the people being restored back to God under the rule of God and in the city of God protected by God.

So that's in a sense the context of what's going on in this chapter. The first paragraph details the preparation and the purification of the people ready for celebrating these things.

The Levites, that is the tribe of priests, are brought in from their towns scattered around the land. The tribe of Levi did not have a geographically distinct land.

The other tribes did but the Levites as priests lived amongst the other tribes and ministered as priests and mediators within the midst of the other tribes.

[6 : 05] For this celebration they are brought in from their tribal towns or villages to celebrate and lead the celebrations. Verse 28, sorry, verse 27 at the beginning of this passage tells us that they're brought to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with rejoicing and with thanksgivings, with singing, cymbals, harps and lyres.

Probably not a harp that we might expect a harpist to play, one of those big things that you sit by and you pluck all its strings or whatever you do to it because this would be a smaller harp because they would be played and sung to in procession around the walls of Jerusalem.

So, probably here a harp is a smaller strings instrument that could be carried and played at the same time. We're told in verse 30 that they were purified before this celebration.

Whenever people are purified in the Old Testament it symbolises that they are in the presence of God. We're not told here what they did to purify themselves and others but reading other passages where purification occurs, the sorts of things would be things like fasting, praying, ritual washing, maybe submerged into some ritual bath or like an adult baptistry in a sense.

There are archaeological remains of those in Israel today. Probably also some of the purification would have been refraining from sexual activity for some days, a special washing of clothes, the offering of sacrifices and so on.

[7 : 44] Israel purified itself when it was at Mount Sinai before receiving the law hundreds of years before. It would purify itself before battle because God fought in its midst. They would purify themselves when they came to the temple to offer their sacrifices and make their offerings and so on.

So, here the stress in verse 30 on purification suggests to us a clear understanding that as they celebrate the building of the wall they are really celebrating that the fact that they are in the presence of God in the midst of the city of God, a holy city indeed as it is called in chapter 11.

Now, in the bulk of this passage that was read for us by Nancy, the different names and so on, it's hard to quite picture or imagine what's going on, although it's relatively straightforward.

The people gather at the city wall on the opposite side from the temple in the south-west corner and there they form two large groups. One group, the first that's described, will turn right at the top of the city wall and head anti-clockwise around it.

The other group will turn left and head clockwise and they'll meet on the far side by the temple where they'll come off the city wall into the temple itself to complete the act of dedication and celebration.

[9 : 07] Each of the two groups is large but similarly constructed. We're told for each that there was a great company or a company of singers or a company of thanksgiving or in some translations a choir.

Literally, the word is two great thanksgivings but it's describing the people, not the act. So, there is a group of people here, a company of thanksgiving and a group of people here, a company of thanksgiving and it reminds us that at the heart of this conglomeration of people who are singing that thanksgiving lies behind what they're doing.

The first group is led by Hoshia, one of the significant leaders of the people. The other group, the second group, is led by Nehemiah himself who was writing this account.

Each group has seven priests as part of its leadership and each group also has eight musicians.

The first group led by a musician called Zechariah, the second group led by Jezreha.

And the first group has Ezra the scribe heading off that group as it goes anti-clockwise around the wall. We're not told what they sang and what music they played whilst they went around the wall.

[10:28] But it would be a fair bet to say that a bulk of what they would have sung and played would have been from the book of Psalms. That's because these Psalms were written well before this time, mostly in the time of David and Solomon.

The Psalms are in a sense the hymn book of the Israelites in the Old Testament period after they've settled in the land. And some of the Psalms in particular would have fitted this context.

Think of Psalm 147. Praise the Lord. How good it is to sing praises to our God for He is gracious and a song of praise is fitting. The Lord builds up Jerusalem.

He gathers the outcasts of Israel. Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem. Praise your God, O Zion. For He strengthens the bars of your gates. He blesses your children within you.

Or perhaps it was Psalm 68. Words again that are appropriate for such an occasion. Your solemn processions are seen, O God, the processions of my God, my King, into the sanctuary.

[11:37] The singers in front, the musicians last, between them girls playing tambourines. Bless God in the great congregation, the Lord, O you who are of Israel's fountain.

Or maybe instead from Psalm 48. Walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers, consider well its ramparts, go through its citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God, forever and ever.

He will be our guide forever. That's slightly speculative, exactly what they would have sung and read and played.

But I've little doubt that the Psalms would have formed the bulk of it, especially because the end of the chapter points to the continuation of line of song leaders going all the way back to the time of David and his key song leader, Asaph.

So, no doubt some of the Psalms of, say, Asaph, who wrote Psalms 73 to 83 and other Psalms from the book of Psalms were sung as praise of God for him being their strength and refuge in the city of Zion, Jerusalem.

[12:50] And as these two groups came together on the far side, on the northeastern side of Jerusalem by the temple and got off the wall and came into the temple precincts, as verse 40 tells us, the climax of their celebration comes, verse 43.

They offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy.

The women and children also rejoiced. The joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.

In that one verse, five times comes the word rejoice or joy, related words clearly. They offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy.

The women and children also rejoiced. The joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. Notice in that verse, that though it was the work of their hands that rebuilt the walls, it is God in whom they're rejoicing.

And notice in that verse that God made them rejoice. You see, joy is not just a feeling that wells up in our heart from time to time. Joy is a spiritual fruit from God.

[14:02] A fruit of the Spirit in Galatians chapter 5. Joy. Christian joy is God's gift to His people. A fruit of His Spirit in our minds and lives and hearts.

And that is what the people are expressing and celebrating here. Not just some normal human emotion welling up, but deep abiding joy in the goodness, grace and provision of God.

He'd enabled them to build the wall in the face of much provocation and opposition as this letter has, as this book has made clear. And they are expressing their joy to God as a result.

An unbounded joy. A joy that could be heard far away across the hills of the wilderness of Judea. A joy not just because there's a wall and they might be secure, but because God is their strength and refuge, their help in times of trouble, as Psalm 46 says.

Their joy because the promises of God still stand despite and beyond the exile. And though the city had been destroyed and though the people had been evacuated to exile, though the temple had gone, now again a temple, the land reclaimed, the city rebuilt, the walls rebuilt, God's promises still stand, still valid for God's people in 450 BC roughly in the time of Nehemiah.

[15 : 32] Too often probably, Christians lack this spiritual fruit of joy. In some sense that's not surprising because our society seeks to deprive us of joy.

You see, our society seeks to tell us time and time again, we don't have all that we need. Every advertisement does that. On television, on radio, in the newspapers, books and magazines and so on.

It seeks to undermine joy by saying how much we need. But Christians ought to know that we are people of joy because we actually have all that we need given to us by a gracious and providing Heavenly Father.

Joy ought to be ours in abundance. And that doesn't mean just a sort of a light-hearted, smiley face day by day, but it means a deep within our hearts joy because of what God has done for us that no one can deny us and no one can take away from us.

Joy that is eternal. And it's a joy that stands despite circumstances on earth, despite illness or bereavement or frailty or old age, despite loneliness or unemployment, despite depression or anxiety or illness or whatever.

[16 : 56] Joy is ours because of the greatest things that God has given to us. the restoration we have with God through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote to the Philippians in chapter 4 that we're to rejoice in the Lord always, whether we feel like it or not, whether we've had a nice day or not.

The things that God has given to us stand regardless and are greater than any of our earthly, worldly concerns. When C.S. Lewis, the great English professor and writer and thinker, became a Christian, he called his book of his conversion surprised by joy.

He hadn't expected that joy would be such a mark of being a Christian. And he found that it was and told that story in his book surprised by joy.

But elsewhere, he makes a very profound comment about joy. There is, in a sense, an individual joy that we have as being Christian. But in the end, a joy that is shared is full joy.

[18 : 13] If I can illustrate as I think he means, on my long service leave, some of the time I was away with a friend on holidays in Scandinavia.

And it was great to be able to share the joy of seeing extraordinary, beautifully, beautiful sights. Look at that. Isn't that beautiful? Etc. Towards the end of my long service leave, for a short time, I was by myself in New York without anyone to sort of share, wow, you know, what a sight and what a place.

There was still joy, but it was an incomplete joy. Joy that is shared is a completed joy. And what we see here in Nehemiah is a joy that is shared by the people of God together, gathered together, celebrating together their joy at being restored to God.

And that ought to be fundamental for Christians as well. That our joy is not just an individualistic and lonely joy, but we are joyful together, brought together by God's restoration to himself and therefore to each other.

And so, it ought to be a regular, frequent mark of our lives as Christians that together we express our joy as the people of God were doing here in Nehemiah.

[19 : 36] Theirs was real joy at the restoration God had brought and God had brought them to himself and to his city. Ours is greater. We have more reason to be joyful than they did for we live after the time of the gift of God's Son.

We understand even better the restoration to God that comes through that one sacrifice on Calvary 2,000 years ago. We have more reason to celebrate with joy our restoration for we have direct access to the very throne of grace by means of the blood of Jesus our great high priest.

The New Testament gives us abundant reasons for joy. Our first Bible reading summarised those from Ephesians chapter 1. If the people of Nehemiah's day had reason for joy we have more and ought to express it more as well.

But finally this passage doesn't just leave us in a rebuilt Jerusalem. It actually looks forward to the new Jerusalem. The final city of God that God himself builds and sends down from heaven for his people to dwell in forever.

A city with a wall yes but gates flung open wide for the nations to stream in to worship God. A new Jerusalem that will stand forever but without a temple in its midst because even better than a temple is the very imminent direct presence of God himself.

[21 : 09] And the mark of that place as we see time and again in the final book of the Bible the book of Revelation is a mark of joy as the people of God of every tongue and tribe and race and nation gather around the throne of God and the throne of the Lamb and sing with joy songs of thanksgiving and praise and worship to God who restores people to himself and to his Lamb the means by which that restoration is accomplished.

Let us be motivated not only by this picture in Nehemiah but by the abundant blessings that are ours in Christ to live lives of spiritual joy each day and expressing that regularly together singing the praise of God and of the Lamb Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen.