

AUTHENTIC THANKSGIVING Nehemiah 12

INTRODUCTION:

I want to share with you this quote from a noted politician. He said, *“We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.”*

Do you know which politician made these provocative statements? It was Abraham Lincoln in 1863, written as part of his presidential proclamation for Thanksgiving Day. He went on to say this: *“It has seemed to me fit and proper that God should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people.”*

We’ve come a long way since 1863. In those 145 years, we’ve just about taken God out of Thanksgiving. And, in fact, we’ve about taken the “thanks” out of Thanksgiving, too. This holiday that Abraham Lincoln instituted in 1863 has been reduced to parades, football and gluttony. And if there is any giving of thanks, it is a mere formality before we dive into the turkey and all the trimmings.

In contrast to the emptiness of many Thanksgiving celebrations, I’m going to give you some tips for how to express authentic Thanksgiving. And for these tips, I’m going to turn to the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, chapter 12.

I hope you remember that Nehemiah had been a cupbearer to the Persian King, Artaxerxes. Artaxerxes commissioned Nehemiah to take a number of Jewish men from their captivity in Persia, back to Jerusalem, for the purpose of rebuilding the protective wall around the city.

When Nehemiah got to Jerusalem, he very carefully planned the rebuilding effort and then undertook the project and in a mere fifty-two days the task was completed. The people were joyful...and thankful...that the wall was completed.

As often happens, after a major building project is completed, the people gathered to dedicate what they had just built. In this case, they gathered to dedicate the wall of Jerusalem. If you will turn to Nehemiah 12 (that

begins on page 484 of the pew Bible in front of you), you will see the large part that thanksgiving played in the ceremony of dedicating the wall of Jerusalem. And as you notice that, you will notice the important keys to authentic thanksgiving.

I. GIVE THANKS INTENTIONALLY – 12:8, 24, 27, 31

Notice first these words in Nehemiah 12:8

⁸*The Levites were Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, and also Mattaniah, who, together with his associates, **was in charge of the songs of thanksgiving.***

And then these in Nehemiah 12:24

²⁴*The leaders of the Levites were Hashabiah, Sherebiah, Jeshua son of Kadmiel, and their associates, who **stood opposite them to give praise and thanksgiving, one section responding to the other, as prescribed by David the man of God.***

And then Nehemiah 12:27

²⁷*At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, **the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres.***

And finally, from Nehemiah 12:31

³¹*I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. **I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks.** One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right, toward the Dung Gate.*

.....

³⁸*The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. I followed them on top of the wall, together with half the people—past the Tower of the Ovens to the Broad Wall, ³⁹ over the Gate of Ephraim, the Jeshanah Gate, the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate. At the Gate of the Guard they stopped.*

⁴⁰*The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God; so did I, together with half the officials,*

In these texts:

- Mattaniah was asked to be worship leader. That is an indication of intention, an implication of planning. The thanksgiving of the Jewish people was on purpose, not just spontaneous.
- David wrote the order of service centuries before. That required planning. David's instructions had to be located and then applied.
- The Levites were the community choir. The people of the tribe of Levi had to be gathered from all around the region and that took planning.
- Jezrahiah was the choir director. Nehemiah had a dramatic plan for the music that was to be sung at the dedication of the wall around Jerusalem. He recruited a massive choir and had half of the choir go to the top of the wall and walk in one direction while the

other half of the choir went to the top of the wall and walked the other direction. They walked in opposite directions around the wall of the city until they met. At which point, the entire city was encircled by a mass choir. Then the choirs began to sing antiphonally. (A little like half singing “less filling” and the other half responding “tastes great.” But in this case, they were singing praises to God so it would have been more like: “Praise ye the Lord!” “Hallelujah!” “Praise ye the Lord!” “Hallelujah!”)

I wonder, how many hundreds of people did it take to encircle the city of Jerusalem with a choir standing on the walls? How many thousands? And how many community choir practices did it take for them to be able to get the choreography down and to get their antiphonal praises raised?

All of this implies careful planning and a determination to give thanks. We could learn from them. There is a place for spontaneous song but there is also a place for planned praise. If you really want to have an authentic thanksgiving this year, be intentional and plan the giving of thanks into your holiday celebration.

II. GIVE THANKS JOYFULLY – 12:27

Not only did Nehemiah plan for the people’s thanksgiving, he set the tone for it to be joyful. We’ve already looked at Nehemiah 12:27 but I want to look at it yet again.

*²⁷ At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem **to celebrate joyfully** the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres.*

Nehemiah intended that the thanksgiving of the Jewish people should be joyful, jubilant and exuberant.

If we would give thanks authentically, we must give thanks joyfully. To give thanks joyfully, I would suggest that you:

- Count your blessings! Not “number them” but “note them”. Take an inventory and recognize the ways in which God has blessed you.
- Practice an attitude of gratitude. Make it a point to say “thank you” when people do something for you. And make it a point to do something nice for others, as well.
- Make celebration a part of Thanksgiving. Whether together as a family or privately and individually, sing songs of thanksgiving to the Lord on Thursday.

If you do these simple things, you will find that it is amazing what praising can do.

III. GIVE THANKS SACRIFICIALLY – 12:43A

Nehemiah 12:43 begins with these words:

⁴³ *And on that day **they offered great sacrifices**, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.*

Think of it, these people had just given heavily of their time, their energy and their resources to rebuild the city wall around Jerusalem. Now, as they were dedicating that wall to the Lord, the text says they offered great sacrifices and they did it with rejoicing.

Many years earlier, the people of Israel had suffered under a great plague that was brought on because King David had disobeyed God. It was revealed to David that the plague would stop if David were to offer a burnt offering on an altar erected on the threshing floor of a man named Araunah. David determined that he would purchase the threshing floor so he could offer the burnt offering there. But because David was the king, Araunah wanted to give him the field, the oxen for the burnt offering and the wood for the fire. David, however, would not allow that. David knew he needed to pay a price for his praise if it was to be of any value. He said “*No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.*” (II Sam. 24:24)

We could learn a lesson from David. And from those Hebrews who held a thanksgiving service at the dedication of the wall of the city of Jerusalem. One of the most effective ways to express gratitude is through sacrifice. After all, half of “thanksgiving” is “giving”.

IV. GIVE THANKS LOUDLY – 12:43B

Another element of authentic thanksgiving that we can find in Nehemiah 12 is that authentic thanksgiving is expressed out loud.

⁴³ *And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. **The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.***

We sing a chorus that says, “Shout to the Lord all the earth let us sing.” Have you ever really shouted your thanksgiving to the Lord?

We sing a hymn that says, “Lord of all, to Thee we raise This our hymn of grateful praise.” Have you ever actually raised your voice in gratitude to the God of heaven and earth?

For the Christian, Thanksgiving is not silent. It can’t be. It must be expressed.

To celebrate an authentic thanksgiving, do not swallow your gratitude. If you do, it will upset your stomach, your heart and your soul. Someone

has said that the most miserable person is a grateful atheist: he is filled with gratitude but he has no one to thank.

CONCLUSION:

A group of geography students studied the Seven Wonders of the World. At the end of that section, the students were asked to list what they considered to be the Seven Wonders of the World. Though there was some disagreement, the following got the most votes:

1. Egypt's Great Pyramids
2. Taj Mahal
3. Grand Canyon
4. Panama Canal
5. Empire State Building
6. St. Peter's Basilica
7. China's Great Wall.

While gathering the votes, the teacher noted that one student, a quiet girl, hadn't turned in her paper yet. So she asked the girl if she was having trouble with her list.

The quiet girl replied, "Yes, a little. I couldn't quite make up my mind because there were so many."

The teacher said, "Well, tell us what you have, and maybe we can help."

The girl hesitated, then read, "I think the Seven Wonders of the World are:

1. to touch
2. to taste,
3. to see
4. to hear."

She hesitated a little, and then added,

5. "to run
6. to laugh
7. and to love."

You know, she was on to something. If you can touch, taste, see or hear; run, laugh or love – you have ample reason to give thanks. Make it a point to give thanks – do so intentionally. Do so joyfully. Give thanks sacrificially. And do so boldly, loudly and confidently.

Surely you can say, "To God be the glory. Great things He has done. And **great** is our rejoicing through Jesus, His Son!"

INVITATION: *#56 "To God Be The Glory"*