



“Celebrate”

Nehemiah 12:27-43

Idea: Christians should mark God’s special activity with festive celebration.

Intro: This morning Pastor Nick, Tiffany Blakeney, and six of our students woke up in New York City. They are in the Big Apple this week with World Changers, working with a church plant. Yesterday morning, as I was taking the team to the train station, I listened to them talk about what the city would be like. New York City is a little different than Powhatan. In many ways, it is the center of the world. And, as much as we love it here, I don’t think that can be said of Powhatan. New York is known as the city that never sleeps, but yesterday morning at 5am, we were pretty much the only people on the road in Powhatan.

Nehemiah had been the cupbearer to the Persian Emperor Artaxerxes. Persia was the leading empire of the world at that time (5th century B.C.). Not only was the palace in Susa luxurious, everything that mattered was happening there...bustling with activity...people everywhere. Susa was filled with crowds, action, and excitement.

Jerusalem, on the other hand, was nothing more than a broken down city on the edge of a border territory. The rubble around the city told the story of its defeat. The once great city of the Middle East was broken and lay in ruins. Nehemiah had left perhaps the most impressive palace in the ancient world for a broken down city without walls. But God was working there among the rubble. His activity gave Nehemiah and the Jews a reason to celebrate.

Inquiry: The walls of the city were rebuilt in just fifty-two days (6:15). It was a miracle. The only explanation for the walls being rebuilt was that God had done it (6:16). That, however, was not all the Lord had done for His people. A few days after the walls were completed, as the people gathered to read from God's Word, their sins were exposed (8:9). They worshiped (8:13-18), confessed their sin (9:1-37), and committed themselves afresh and anew to God (9:38-10:39). God's people had experienced a spiritual renewal. Their hearts had been revived. For that reason, there was cause to celebrate.

Read Nehemiah 12:27-43.

The Christian life ought to be marked by the worship of God. Worship is "worth-ship." The word describes those acts of the mind, heart, and will whereby we gratefully acknowledge the worth of our God. There can be no other human activity, which is so lofty and spiritually determinative as that of adoring God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism describes that the chief end of man "is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." Worship is more than just singing songs, praying, listening to preaching, and serving others. Worship involves the total submission of all that we have and are to everything we know of God.

With that said, there are special times in which the most appropriate thing to do is celebrate God and His goodness...to hold a festival, throw a party, march in the streets, and shout for God. We find the people of God celebrating God in chapter

12. From this party, I want us to learn five things about celebrating God.

1. Celebrate with joy.

The secret of acceptable worship is not simply in what we do but how we do it. We see here that the worship of these Jews was a radiantly joyous experience.

And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. – Neh 12:43

Our celebration of God should be filled with the joy of the Lord. Joy is different than happiness. One can have joy but not necessarily be happy. Joy is the ability to delight and rest in God despite circumstances. Happiness, on the other hand, is carried along the waves of our circumstances.

This opportunity to magnify God was a supremely joyous occasion. Whenever these people came together for worship, their hearts overflowed with true joy. It happened when the temple's foundation was laid and the building was completed (Ezra 3:12-13; 6:16). Under Nehemiah's leadership, after the people had gathered in the square to hear the reading of Scripture, they celebrated with "great rejoicing" (8:12). Then, as they participated in the Feast of Booths, "there was very great rejoicing" (8:17).

Worship should never be a doleful and drab experience. We are to come before the Lord with joyful songs and praise.

*Shout for joy in the Lord, O you righteous!
Praise befits the upright. – Psalm 33:1*

1 Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!
2 Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing! – Psalm 100:1-2

What a desperately poor witness it is to unbelievers when they come to our church services and find them dull and boring. May they never see somberness on our faces or hear us singing as if we're at a funeral. Instead, may they see and hear in our worship the joy of the Lord. May they experience an eternal delight in the goodness of God despite what our circumstances may be. More important than that, may our good God see our delight and joy in Him as we celebrate His goodness toward us.

2. Celebrate with variety.

God's creation is one of variety. Did you know that there are around 34,000 known species of fish? There are nearly 5,500 different species of mammals and around 10,000 species of birds. In addition to that there are thousands upon thousands of insect, reptile, and amphibian species in the world. Why did God create so much diversity and variety in the world? Could it be because in some way it reflects the complexity and variety in who He is?

God loves variety, and there was nothing stereotyped and monotonous about this celebration in Jerusalem. They used a wide range of musical gifts and participants to express their adoration and praise to the Lord. Worship is meant to be a shared experience to which a variety of participants bring their particular gifts.

On this day many people traveled to the city in order to sing and use their gifted voices to enrich the worship (12:28-29). They used different instruments (12:27). Priests blew trumpets (12:35, 41) and others

participated using the instruments prescribed by David (12:36). In this worship celebration, the blowing of trumpets and the crashing of cymbals were meshed with the soft tones of stringed instruments and choral voices. In all of this we are to see the beauty of their varied worship to God because He delights in the variety He has put in us.

We are one body made up of many diverse members. Therefore, our worship and celebration ought to reflect our diversity. Paul tells us to worship by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Col 3:16). Different types of songs mean there are also different types of instruments and singers involved. Variety is good and should be embraced in the church.

3. Celebrate with purity.

It is impossible to “pull the wool over God’s eyes.” Our kids can fool us, and we can sometimes fool others. But we can never fool God. He is sovereign and knows all things. For some reason we tend to forget this truth about Him, and we begin to think that our forms of worship overshadow our heart for worship. However skilled the instrumentalists and singers, Scripture emphasizes a quality which takes priority over musical ability and the eager participation of gifted people in worship. The hearts of the worshipers are of greater importance than their voices. The Lord is not moved by lofty words and captivating tunes if He discerns unworthy and unacceptable things in our lives.

As Nehemiah, the leaders, and singers prepared to dedicate the wall and celebrate the Lord’s activity they purified themselves before God (12:30).

3 Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? 4 He who has clean hands and

a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. – Psalm 24:3-4

How hypocritical would it be to sing to and celebrate God for His activity in our church without first receiving the blessing of His greatest act on our behalf...forgiveness of sin? Our celebration should be marked by purity...purity that comes only through the cleansing of the blood.

4. Celebrate with whole hearts.

The beauty of this passage is found in the superlatives that are used. It describes the vitality of something that was really well done, with every participant determined to offer his or her best and make the occasion one, which would always be recalled with joy. The Jews were passionate and enthusiastic as they celebrated the Lord. They celebrated with gladness (vs. 27). We see in verse 31 that these were not just choirs but “great choirs.” The priests offered “great sacrifices,” and they rejoiced because God had given them “great joy” (vs. 43). There is nothing half-hearted about their worship and celebration. This is the overflow of supremely grateful hearts that have personally experienced the lavish generosity of God and the incalculable and undeserved blessings, which have been showered upon them.

Church your worship should never be half-hearted. Did Jesus go to the cross half-heartedly for you? No, He fully embraced the will of the Father as He agonized in Gethsemane over what awaited Him on Golgotha. He went to the cross and died with a full heart for those whom He would redeem. Therefore, how dare we worship and celebrate Jesus with anything less than our whole heart!

5. Celebrate with unity.

Read Neh 12:27-28.

The celebration was an occasion that united not only the citizens of Jerusalem but people from the surrounding countryside as well. The urban and rural populations rubbed shoulders with one another as they celebrated the infinite mercy of God.

The worship of God is a miraculously unifying thing. Look around this room. What do you see? You see diversity...variety. We have homemakers and CEOs, schoolteachers and software developers, GEDs and doctorates, black and white, white color, blue collar, and no collar. We have people in our church from all walks of life. Yet in all our diversity, we are able to unify together in worship of the One True God.

Conclusion: Why are there so many stars in the sky? Wouldn't a few do? Why all the varieties of flowers? Why not just daisies or roses? Why the vast array of colors and shapes found in the fish under the sea – and some of them three miles deep? What's the point of that? Why the giraffe or the hippopotamus? Why skunks?

Creation is, in many respects, a perpetual celebration of God's wonder and magnificence. In all its variety and strangeness, beauty and extravagance, the created order worships God by exhibiting something of His nature. People, too, are meant for this purpose.

While worship encompasses all of life, there are times when we should gather with just one objective – to celebrate God and His goodness. We may not bring people in from all the villages, but family reunions, meals, holidays, and special days at church should be marked by this festive enjoyment of God.

How should you celebrate God today?