

V-DAY!

NEHEMIAH 12:27-43 | And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres.²⁸ And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages³⁰ And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall.³¹ Then I brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall and appointed two great thanksgiving choirs. One went to the south on the wall to the Dung Gate.³⁶ ... And Ezra the scribe went before them.³⁸ The other thanksgiving choir went to the north, and I followed them with half of the people, on the wall....⁴⁰ So both thanksgiving choirs stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me....⁴² ...And the singers sang with Jezrahiah as their leader.⁴³ 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. ESV ADAPTED

The dedication of the wall is the climax of the entire Ezra-Nehemiah narrative. To have celebrated before all the soul-searching, confessing, and repenting of Nehemiah 8-10 would have made a spectacle of hype and hypocrisy. But now they have something to celebrate.

Once again, the community takes the lead, as they have been doing since the beginning of the Water Gate Revival in Nehemiah 8. They summon the Levites, singers, and musicians from all around Jerusalem (12:27). But this is not a concert. It's a consecration. The priests purify themselves, the people, the walls, and the gates.

Two choirs march around the wall in opposite directions. If Tobiah is watching, he has to eat his words (4:3). The Hebrew word for *choir* in this chapter literally means *thanksgiving*. This is an appreciation ceremony. Not for Nehemiah and

Ezra, although they deserve it. But for God who has done great things for Israel. Ingratitude was one of the sins that had triggered the exile (DEUT 28:48; Isaiah 1:2-9; EZE 16:22; HOS 2:5-13). Israel now makes amends.

Appropriately, the two processions are led by two of the greatest reformers in Israel's history. Ezra leads the first (:36). Nehemiah 'leads' the second—from behind (:38). Both choirs meet in the temple for the grand finale. V-Day at last! This momentous convergence in the house of God not only marks the climax of the Ezra-Nehemiah mission. It also highlights the reason for Jerusalem's existence and the point of her restoration: worship! Ancient Jerusalem, as many have observed, was not a city with a temple. It was a temple with a city around it. *I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go into the house of the LORD!'* (PS 122:1 KJV).

And the singers sang (NEH 12:42). Singing is a beautiful and biblical expression of worship. Christianity is uniquely a singing faith. Will Covid-19 have the last word? Never! We shall sing again, unmasked, and forever. As the next verse reminds us, however, the essence of worship is not singing. It's sacrifice: And they offered great sacrifices that day (:43). You can worship without singing. And you can sing without worshipping. But you can't worship without sacrifice (ROM 12:1-2). *Is your all on the altar of sacrifice laid?*

WALL OF DUTY

■ Celebrate! Nehemiah and company were not just celebrating the completion of the wall. They were also celebrating what the wall stood for and made possible: the reformation of the Remnant through the Word of God, confession of sin, repentance, and covenant renewal. We also have reason to celebrate, despite the plague. *Earthly loss often means our heavenly gain* (IGW). Consider your church family. What are some milestones worth celebrating since the start of the pandemic? Recall the moments and the lessons learned. Pause and pray. Make each milestone a stone of remembrance. Piece together a story for God's glory. Journal. Celebrate!

■ Give thanks! It is good for our spiritual and mental well-being. Ingratitude dishonours God. Chronic ingratitude impairs our capacity to reason and darkens our hearts: *For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened* (ROM 1:21). Gratitude is a sacred duty: *Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you* (1 THESS 5:18). We can never thank God enough in First World Singapore. *It is only with gratitude that life becomes rich* (DIETRICH BONHOEFFER). Pause. Give thanks to God. Be specific, especially in light of the pandemic. May we navigate the storm with a great attitude of gratitude: For our good government. For safety measures that are both reasonable and effective. For a cooperative majority. Let our gratitude drown out the murmuring of the malcontents. May our gratitude translate into genuine empathy and sober responsibility for those at home and abroad who have been less fortunate than ourselves. *We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some of us are on super-yachts. Some have just the one oar* (DAMIAN BARR).

■ Sing! Even though Covid-19 is a kind of exile, we must never hang our harps on the willows (PS 137:4). Watch and pray: May we never get used to *not* singing! Whenever we are with family, and wherever we are in two's and three's, may we provoke one another to do as commanded: *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God* (COL 3:16). May we pray with hope for a hastening of V-Day when we can all gather again and sing aloud (PS 100). Unmasked!

■ Sacrifice! Act on the Word: *Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship* (ROM 12:1).