



How is it that two couples can go through a similar, heart wrenching experience like Fred and Janet, but come out on the other side in a much different place? There have been countless people over the years who have experienced the pain of losing a loved one to cancer and that loss has left them angry, bitter and questioning not only God, but their own existence. Yet for Fred and Janet, by God's grace, they were able to not only deal with the tragedy, but they have come out on the other side as a "Wounded Healer," to steal a phrase from the late Henri Nouwen. The difference I believe has to do with their understanding of worship. Like the video said, everybody worships something or somebody. Whatever you place at the center of your lives to make you happy is what you worship.

Self-help, religion, and what many people believe today is when circumstances in my life go wrong, I become angry at God or myself, since I believe that anyone who is good deserves a comfortable life. The question from this group of people is often, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" They worship self, security, comfort and happiness. But the Gospel of Jesus Christ says, when circumstances in my life go wrong I struggle, but I know all my punishment fell on Jesus and that while he may allow the hardship for my training, he will exercise his Fatherly love within my trial. Like Job, when all seems to be taken away, these people have the faith to say, "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth." That's the heart of worship.

As we come to chapter 12 of Nehemiah, what we see is a radical change of perspective in the people of God. Like Fred and Janet, they are looking back on all their years of heartache and they can see God's sovereign hand. The situation hasn't changed much, but their hearts have. They had just experienced a genuine revival. Their minds were transformed. Their hearts were set on fire for God. And their wills were fully submitted to Him. Nehemiah and the people of God were able to complete the wall, revitalize a city, and face opposition because of the work God had done in their lives. Without the strength, protection and revival God provided, they would have never been able to celebrate and worship like they do in this chapter.

Today, if you find yourself in short supply of joy, if you are struggling to understand why God is allowing you to go through whatever it is that you are going through, then Nehemiah is going to encourage us all to do one thing—worship God with

joy. What we are going to see in these verses is an incredible celebration taking place and I think we can learn a great deal about God, about his desires for our joy, and learn much about ourselves along the way. Let's read Nehemiah 12:27–28a,

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. The musicians also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem...

Nehemiah Gathers the Right Leaders

For 160 years, the beloved city of Jerusalem had laid abandoned and desolate. But now the wall is finished. The gates are all hung. The city is starting to function again with a newly appointed mayor and chief of police. And the people of God are ready to celebrate. God had provided the leadership and strength to rebuild the wall in an astounding 52 days. God protected them from all the haters and trolls who wanted to stop the work. God then moved in peoples' hearts to repopulate the city. And most importantly, God initiated a great spiritual awakening in Israel. Now it was time to get everyone together and dedicate the wall to the Lord and have a party!

So, what is a dedication? It comes from a Latin verb meaning "to offer" or "to give." So in a dedication the object being dedicated is in a sense given to the Lord for his control and use. That's what happens when we dedicate children. With their parents we are saying to the Lord, "These kids are yours God, use them as you will." We do the same today with church buildings. You better bet the day we get our own church building, we will dedicate it to the Lord and celebrate for everyone to hear! God willing, that day will come. Personally, for my family, every home my wife and I have lived in, we take time to pray over the house and dedicate it to the Lord for his work and use.

In this dedication, Nehemiah sends an email to all the Levites (those who serve in the Temple) and the musicians from the surrounding towns, to all gather together to "celebrate joyfully" the dedication. It's interesting that Nehemiah didn't pick just anyone to lead the celebration. He recruited and brought in by the busload the right people for the party. Nehemiah took this celebration seriously. It was an important day for the people of God and he wanted it done well.

For us living on the Peninsula, this is something hard for us to do. We value efficiency, hard work, and productivity more than anything. We work, we plan, and we complete our tasks and move on. Only the Giants and the Warriors have time to celebrate! The same is sometimes true in the church and the things God is calling us to do. We move to the next project, the next challenge and move on. Often times we move on without stopping to celebrate what God has done and what he has accomplished through us. That's a mistake. We need to celebrate more. That is why every single year we celebrate our campus anniversary in January. Why? Because 90% of churches in America have plateaued or are dying. By God's grace, we are growing, lives are being changed, people are being disciplined, marriages are being strengthened, single people are finding friends, addicts are getting into recovery, kids are learning to trust Jesus, men are learning to be godly, women are studying the Bible deeply, young moms are being encouraged, the Gospel is being preached, the community is being loved, worship music is ringing out to the heavens, the poor are being cared for, and the spiritually dead are being raised to new life in Jesus' name. Shouldn't we, of all people, be in the business of celebration and joy?

But, before there is celebration there needs to be consecration. The people of God needed to first cleanse themselves. Look what they did in verse 30,

When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.

The Leaders and the People Purify Themselves

Before anything had happened. Before anyone sang a song. Before anyone strummed a note. Before the first shout of joy was allowed to go up to God. Before anyone dared to dance, the people of God cleansed themselves first. They purified themselves. This too was an act of worship. We are not told what they did to purify themselves, but from the rest of the Bible we can guess they ceremonially washed themselves and their clothes. They might have even fasted from food and sexual relations. They probably offered sin offerings and sacrifices to the Lord as well. I also think that the order they did this in is also worth note. The leaders of the dedication—the Levites and the priests—are the ones who purified themselves first. Next, those leaders purified the people. The people most likely washed themselves and their clothing too. They might have even abstained from sexual relations as well. And finally, they purified the gates and the wall. To do that, they would have used a hyssop branch to sprinkle them with the blood from animal sacrifices and with water.

What does any of this mean for us today? A lot. In order for them to enjoy and celebrate God's work and blessing, their hearts had to be clean. King David prayed, *"Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me"* (Psalm 51:10). Truth is, every one of us has tried to fake a clean heart and failed. When

we play around with sin and half heartily repent, we are playing a deadly game. Chuck Swindoll wrote, "Holiness precedes happiness." You want to be happy? Work on your holiness. That means our first responsibility is to come before God with a broken and contrite heart, confessing our sins, and throwing ourselves on his mercy and grace. If you are not a follower of Jesus, the Bible says that only he can cleanse you from sin once and for all. If you are a follower of Jesus, part of the process of holiness, of Jesus making you more like him, is going back to God time and again and asking him to cleanse your hearts. It's both a one-time act and a continual one.

Some of you might be thinking, "Rob, I am so bad, so messed up from my life and the things I've done that I could never become clean." That is a lie from the pit of hell. Corrie ten Boom once said, "There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still." Apostle John wrote, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9). If you can't forgive yourself you have a God complex because he is willing to! Right here, right now, you can ask God for forgiveness and for a clean heart and he will do it. Is your heart clean this morning?

So, the right people are gathered. They purify themselves in preparation for the celebration. Let's read what happens next (just so you know, I'm not going to read all these verses, just the three important ones),

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.

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,

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 (verses 31, 38, 43).

Everyone Rejoices on the Wall

Picture with me all that is happening here. Two massive choirs are put together. One is sent along with the musicians to the right on top of the wall, led by Ezra, the teacher of the law. The other group is sent the opposite direction, to the left, on top of the wall, followed by Nehemiah. At the Gate of the Guard they all stopped. At that point, the choirs and the musicians gave thanks, sang songs, and were so loud they could be heard miles away. After that, they continued the celebration inside the Temple. Can you imagine what it must have been like to hear hundreds of singers, countless instruments, celebration and dancing for who knows how long? Gosh, if we go over 5 minutes in a service or

go over 5 decibels in sound, folks start walking out! Not that day in Jerusalem.

I want us to read again verse 43, because I believe this is the key verse in this chapter, *“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.”* A couple of things stick out to me here about their worship. First, worship is a sacrifice, “on that day they offered great sacrifices.” Today we don’t offer animals to God as a sacrifice obviously, but the Bible says that we are to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, this is your true and proper worship (Romans 12:1). Worship is a sacrifice of our time, talent and treasures. It’s an act of us giving up something valuable for the sake of something even more valuable. We give up our time to spend it together with the body of Christ. Many of you serve in a ministry here or somewhere else and that too is an act of worship. If you give financially to our church and to other ministries, that is an act of worship. Worship is a sacrifice.

Second, worship is about joy. The Hebrew word for joy and rejoicing occurs numerous times throughout this chapter. Why? Because in God’s presence, joy is inevitable. Here it says that God is the one who gave them great joy. That tells me joy is something that can’t be faked. It’s a gift from the Lord. A fruit of the Holy Spirit. Their joy wasn’t just a feeling, it was spiritual; it went deeper. Even the women and children had this joy, they too were rejoicing. This was a family celebration of joy in Jerusalem.

Why is it so hard for Christians to be like that today? I know there are many of you who struggle with anxiety and depression and have some hard things going on in your life. For you, joy seems impossible. I get that. There are seasons in the valley or in the storm. But, for many people outside these walls, being a Christian is viewed like the little girl who saw a mule for the first time. She looked at it and said, “I don’t know what you are, but you must be a Christian because my grandfather is a Christian and you look exactly like he does.” Our culture views being a Christian as dull and unexciting. It’s a boring religion because it has so many rules and you can never have any fun.

A dull and boring life is **not** the life Jesus wants you to live. Jesus wants us to live the John 10:10 life, *“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”* A relationship with Jesus is meant to be a joyful adventure of faith. But, so many of us are not living that kind of life because we are so focused on our little lives. We think that if we only had a better job, a nicer house, a newer car, then we would be more happy. Then we would live the abundant life. According to this line of thinking, we who live in America should be the most happiest people on the earth. We have more wealth, better education, better medical care, more food and freedom than any other country in the world. But, a

2012 Gallup Poll ranked the United States thirty-third in the world on a happiness scale. Most poor Latin American countries are much more happier than us. What does this mean? Having more doesn’t increase our happiness. Why? Because true and lasting joy comes from worshipping Jesus.

Worship is a sacrifice, worship is about joy, and finally, worship is about mission. What I love about the dedication service is that the rejoicing of the entire city “could be heard far away.” The people of God were throwing such a party that people from miles away were saying, “Man, what’s happening over there? I thought they were those rag tag sad looking Hebrews?” It was exactly the kind of thing Apostle Paul commanded the church in Philippi to do, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

Have you ever met a Christian that always seemed to be filled with joy? I think of Mona Jew, one of our deacons. She is one of the most joyful and sweet people I know. It’s hard to be around her and not smile. Every time I interact with Mona, I feel better about myself. Her joy is contagious. That’s what was happening in Jerusalem that day. The surrounding nations were watching what was happening in Jerusalem and it was attractive. Most of the world back then did not celebrate their gods like the Hebrews did. Even today, Christians sing at funerals! Worship is both the words we say and the lives we live. When we sing to God and when we live our lives for Jesus, people will be attracted to him.

Once the festivities are over, in verses 44–47 provisions are made for the Temple to operate again. The priests and the Levites are provided for by the people of God and they are able to keep at the center of the Holy City a thriving place for worship.

This passage reminds us to be a people who celebrate, worship, sing, and rejoice. Why? Because of the goodness and grace of our God, how could we not? I think one of the reasons we have a hard time worshipping like this is because we get in the way of what God wants to do. Our pride gets in the way of our worship. It could be that we truly don’t understand the goodness and grace of God and so worship just seems boring. Maybe we just don’t like to sing, so we come a little late to miss most of that part. Or we think the songs are not very good. For some, our struggle with sin holds us back from true worship. The feelings of shame and guilt can get in the way of God’s work in our lives. There are all sorts of reasons why we don’t worship God with the kind of joy we read about today.

It reminds me of a story I read this week about Steve Kerr. Long before becoming the coach for the Warriors, Steve Kerr was a point guard for the Chicago Bulls. One year he hit a buzzer winning three point shot during an NBA Final game. The following year in the finals, the Bulls found themselves in a similar situation and Kerr relates the story, he said, “As we called timeout and came to the bench, I told the coach that it would be a great time

for me to take a three point shot. He told me to shut-up, that I was to take the ball and give it to Michael Jordan and then get out of the way. So, that is what I did. But for what it's worth, I think that I did a great job of getting out of the way!"

Maybe that's exactly what some of you need to do this morning—get out of God's way. Set aside self and allow God to give you his joy.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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