

The Weight of Worship

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Human beings are inherently faithful people. Each time we sit down in a chair, we are trusting its builder. Aren't we? We trust that it won't collapse underneath us. The same is true whenever we drive across a bridge or ride in an elevator or travel in an airplane. In each of these instances, we are trusting those who have designed or engineered it—and, with the plane, those who are flying it too.

Once when I was a teenager, I was swinging in a swing next to a girl I liked. We were just talking, and I'm sure I was trying to make her think I was way cooler than I really was. But, at some point during our conversation, the seat of my swing snapped in half, and I went flying head-over-heals to the pavement.

I trusted that swing to hold me. But, I got a rude awakening!

In today's passage, the Israelites are going to trust in the builder of their wall. We're going to see them parade two very large choirs across it in order to sing praises to the Lord. For, while they have built it, God is why it stands. He's the *true* builder. He's the *true* engineer. He's the *ultimate* provider. (Think back to the jeers of Tobiah as the Israelites were just beginning to rebuild the wall: "What they are building—even a [little] fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!" (4:3). Nevertheless, the people trusted God and rebuilt. And, now two large choirs parade upon it and worship the God who sustains that wall...as well as everything else.

Let's take in this scene and see what the Lord has to teach us from it.

Nehemiah 12:27-47

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. ²⁸ The musicians also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem.... ³⁰ When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.

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....

³⁸ The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. I followed them on top of the wall, together with half the people....

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

⁴⁴ At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, firstfruits and tithes. From the fields around the towns they were to bring into the storerooms the portions required by the Law for the priests and the Levites, for Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites. ⁴⁵ They performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did also the musicians and gatekeepers, according to the commands of David and his son Solomon. ⁴⁶ For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the musicians and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. ⁴⁷ So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the musicians and the gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron.

So, we get a glimpse of this ancient worship service. What does it teach us about God? What does it teach us about worship? I believe it teaches us two things. (1st) God is the Giver of joy. There is no such thing as true joy apart from the Lord. (2nd) God is the Giver of order. When we think about worshiping and serving him, he sets the boundaries. When we think about being faithful, only he can tell us how. So, let's look at each of these in its turn.

1. God is the Giver of joy (vv. 27-43).

This is a celebratory worship gathering. The people gather to praise the Lord. They have instruments and choirs. They willingly and exuberantly come to worship. There were doubtlessly practices leading up to this event. Some of them had to travel into Jerusalem for the festivities. Maybe family members who lived in the villages were being reunited with family members who now lived in Jerusalem—think eating and drinking and laughing; think young cousins sleeping one right next to another

on the floor whispering and giggling through the night; think joking and reminiscing and praying with loved ones.

There is great joy in Jerusalem! There is great happiness!

The text highlights this joyfulness over and over again.

- The Levites are gathered from surrounding areas to “celebrate joyfully... with songs of thanksgiving” (v. 27).
- Nehemiah organizes and assigns “two large choirs to give thanks” (v. 31).
- In fact, the celebration and the joy was so great that “rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard [from] far away” (v. 43).

I recall when Missouri finally beat Nebraska in football (after 25 straight years of extremely painful losing!) that you could hear the M-I-Z...Z-O-U chants echoing from as far as two or three miles away from the stadium. That’s how intense the joy of the Mizzou faithful was that day. And, that’s how intense the author of Nehemiah tells us that these people joyfully worshipped God during the dedication of the walls. Friends, this is some serious joy!

When we gather for worship on an Easter morning, our joy should be like this. When we sing praises on Christmas Eve, our joy should echo out into the city streets around the church. Even as we congregate around computers and in small numbers on a cool and windy November morning in the midst of a lingering global pandemic, our joy should be like this—because we have a certain and glorious, eternal future through faith in Jesus Christ. First Free’s rejoicing should be heard from far away. And, it should be seen in how we live each day. No enemy, no tragedy, no epidemic should be able to snatch away our rejoicing in Christ.

Yet, here we must pause, since it would be easy to make this point about joy in Christ something that’s up to us. It would be easy to make it something we foster or create in ourselves. It would be easy to make having such joy a work. But it’s not. It’s not something we can do on our own. Look at what the passage says about joy. Listen to what makes these people shout for joy.

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 (v. 43).

These people—men, women, and children—are celebrating the Lord’s grace and mercy to them. Just consider the scope of their experience of his grace.

- They were scattered but now are regathered as a people.
- They were vulnerable but now have a wall of protection in Jerusalem.
- They, in their sins, were on the wrong side of God but now have confessed and are forgiven and loved by God.

The people are zealously rejoicing because they have experienced the mercies of God. They feel keenly his kindness towards them. He is the provider of their joy. He is the one who has regathered them. He is the one who has provided for this wall. God is the one who has forgiven and loved them. These people are like the woman who approached Jesus while he was the guest of Simon the Pharisee.

The woman comes in and anoints Jesus’s head with a very expensive perfume. This is an extravagant show of thankfulness. She humbly weeps at Jesus’s feet—washing them in tears and kissing them. You see, she’s a notoriously sinful woman. And, Simon knows this and silently judges Jesus for allowing her to do these things. “If this Jesus were truly a prophet, he wouldn’t associate with such a sinful woman,” Simon self-righteously thinks to himself. Yet, precisely because Jesus is a prophet, he knows what Simon is thinking. So, Jesus tells him a little story about two debtors who couldn’t repay their debts. One owed a little bit and the other owed a huge sum. But, since neither could repay their debts, the moneylender forgave both of the debts. Finally, Jesus asks Simon—“Which of them will love him more?” Simon answers—“I suppose the one who had the bigger debt.”

That’s the right answer. Except, it all has to do with the debtor’s perspective; doesn’t it? Jesus told him neither could repay their debt. So, it doesn’t really matter if it was a large or small sum. What matters is the heart of the one who is forgiven. If you see that you’ve been saved, you will rejoice. If you don’t see it, if you take it for granted, you won’t rejoice. The one who knows what God has given him or her

will sing and praise and shout for joy the loudest—because, friends, God is the Giver of their joy, of their salvation, of their hope.

And, that's where the Israelites are at. They see clearly the Lord's saving hand. They feel his mercy deeply. They keenly recognize his grace for them as a people. So, they celebrate and sing for joy to the Lord.

First Free, may we be a people who see, feel, and recognize his grace like this!

2. God is the Giver of order (vv. 44-47).

When my kids were small, they would often come to me and Natalie asking to play a game. So, we'd get out an age appropriate board game to play with them—Sorry or Chutes & Ladders or Candyland. (The kinds of games which are often fun for kids and simultaneously excruciatingly painful for adults. There's nothing worse than having your four-year-old on the verge of winning a seemingly endless game of Chutes & Ladders only for them to be sent sliding down an especially long chute to begin their climb all over again. It sends you immediately into prayers for relief and salvation. How long, oh Lord?!)

Now, for a period when Silas was very small and would ask us to play a game, it was different. You would begin to play a game with him and find out that the rules of the game—the rules which were put in place by the designers of the board game—no longer applied. There were new rules. Rules designed by Silas. Ones that changed whenever he decided they should change. Rules that usually led to a decisive victory for him. (By the way, after the torturous games of Chutes & Ladders and Candyland, I rather preferred his rules which brought me a quick demise.)

Friends, many times we play at Christianity like Silas played at board games. We think we get to make up our own rules when it comes to the worship of the Lord. However, this simply isn't how it works. This isn't how following after Jesus works. Only God gets to determine the rules. Only he is the Giver of order. And, we see this in today's passage. Look at the last few verses with me.

At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, firstfruits and tithes. From the fields around the towns they were to bring into the storerooms the portions required by the Law for the priests and the Levites, for Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites. They performed the service of their God and the service of

purification, as did also the musicians and gatekeepers, according to the commands of David and his son Solomon. For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the musicians and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the musicians and the gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron (vv. 44-47).

What do we see here? We see the people organizing the structures of worship. They are institutionalizing what will support those who minister—both the Levites and the priests as well as the musicians and gatekeepers. This is all for the sustenance of the worship of God. Yet, notice that they aren't simply making up their own rules on how to do this. They aren't just choosing what suits them. They aren't choosing what's convenient. Instead, they look to the Lord for direction.

- How much is to be brought in from the surrounding areas for the support of the priests and Levites? Just “the portions required by the Law” (v. 44).
- What service would the priests and Levites perform? What would they do? And, what would the musicians and gatekeepers be doing in their duties? Not whatever they want. Each of them work “according to the commands” of the Lord which were given through “David and Solomon” (v. 45).
- What's this “service of purification” they perform (v. 45). It's nothing new. It's what God commanded them to do when he brought them out of slavery in Egypt. It's detailed in Leviticus chapters eleven through fifteen.

First Free, I know you may think that I'm belaboring this—making more of it than I should. You may think this sounds like a minor point. But, I want you to know that it is not minor at all. It's deadly serious. It's a lordship question.

Who is God? Is it you? Will you play at god? Or, will you let God be God?

Even as Israel submits to God's ordering of things here, we must also submit. When it comes to our thoughts and our actions, we must stand under the authority of the Lord. And, this is why the ministry of the Word—the ministry of the Bible—is so very important. Without it, we couldn't and wouldn't know who our Creator is *or* who we are *or* how we should relate to him and serve him by serving others.

Friends, please don't take the Word for granted! We are always being tempted, by the voices around us, to do so. Like the very first temptation, those voices whisper in our ear: *Did God really say...? Did Jesus really say that I need to love my enemy? Do I really need to forgive those who've injured me? Did he really say...?*

God's Word gives us direction and purpose. It's not a burden but a blessing. His Word is the way of life, not the way of death.

As we close, listen to the wisdom of the psalmist, who writes this.

Blessed is the one

who does not walk in step with the wicked

or stand in the way that sinners take

or sit in the company of mockers,

but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,

and who meditates on his law day and night.

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,

which yields its fruit in season

and whose leaf does not wither—

whatever they do prospers (Psalm 1:1-3).