

SERMON TEXT: **NEHEMIAH 12, 13**

COMPANION TEXT: **JAMES 2:14-24**

Opening Question

- What was your first concert, or, what musical experience (either as a participant or audience member) had the greatest impact on you?

Purpose of This Week’s Study

A renewed appreciation for and practical engagement in worshiping God in expansive ways.

INTRODUCTION TO THIS WEEK’S STUDY

Under Nehemiah’s leadership, the Israelites have rebuilt the wall around the city and resettled within, returned to studying the Scriptures and observing festivals, confessed their sins, and made vows to obey God moving forward. Jerusalem and the temple have been restored — it’s time to celebrate!

A ceremony to dedicate the wall was planned, with parades of leaders and musicians walking on top of the wall around the city and joining together at the temple along with all the women and children to sing, give thanks, and celebrate. It’s said that “The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away” (Nehemiah 12:43).

Worshiping together is an important tradition among the people of God. The book of Psalms is a collection of hymns and prayers that the followers of God have been using for many centuries to influence and direct worship, and today we will be looking more closely at a psalm focused on praising and celebrating God together, even as the people of Nehemiah’s time did at the dedication of the wall.

Nehemiah 13

V	NIV	MSG
1	On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God,	Also on that same day there was a reading from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people. It was found written there that no Ammonite or Moabite was permitted to enter the congregation of God, because they hadn’t welcomed the People of Israel with food and drink; they even hired Balaam to work against them by cursing them, but our God turned the curse into a blessing. When they heard the reading of The Revelation, they excluded all foreigners from Israel.
2	because they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them. (Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing.)	
3	When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent.	
4	Before this, Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah,	Some time before this, Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of The Temple of God. He was close to Tobiah and had made available to him a large storeroom that had been used to store Grain-Offerings, incense, worship vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and
5	and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings	

V	NIV	MSG
	and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and olive oil prescribed for the Levites, musicians and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests.	oil for the Levites, singers, and security guards, and the offerings for the priests.
6	But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission	When this was going on I wasn't there in Jerusalem; in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon, I had traveled back to the king. But later I asked for his permission to leave again. I arrived in Jerusalem and learned of the wrong that Eliashib had done in turning over to him a room in the courts of The Temple of God. I was angry, really angry, and threw everything in the room out into the street, all of Tobiah's stuff. Then I ordered that they ceremonially cleanse the room. Only then did I put back the worship vessels of The Temple of God, along with the Grain-Offerings and the incense.
7	and came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God	
8	I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room.	
9	9 I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense.	
10	I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and musicians responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields.	And then I learned that the Levites hadn't been given their regular food allotments. So the Levites and singers who led the services of worship had all left and gone back to their farms. I called the officials on the carpet, "Why has The Temple of God been abandoned?" I got everyone back again and put them back on their jobs so that all Judah was again bringing in the tithe of grain, wine, and oil to the storerooms. I put Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and a Levite named Pedaiah in charge of the storerooms. I made Hanan son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah, their right-hand man. These men had a reputation for honesty and hard work. They were responsible for distributing the rations to their brothers.
11	So I rebuked the officials and asked them, "Why is the house of God neglected?" Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.	
12	All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine and olive oil into the storerooms.	
13	I put Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and a Levite named Pedaiah in charge of the storerooms and made Hanan son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah, their assistant, because they were considered trustworthy. They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their fellow Levites.	
14	Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services.	Remember me, O my God, for this. Don't ever forget the devoted work I have done for The Temple of God and its worship.
15	In those days I saw people in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into	During those days, while back in Judah, I also noticed that people treading wine presses, brought in sacks of grain, and loaded up their donkeys on the Sabbath. They brought wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of stuff to sell on the

V	NIV	MSG
	Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day.	Sabbath. So I spoke up and warned them about selling food on that day. Tyrians living there brought in fish and whatever else, selling it to
16	People from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah.	Judeans—in Jerusalem, mind you!—on the Sabbath.
17	I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day?”	I confronted the leaders of Judah: “What’s going on here? This evil! Profaning the Sabbath! Isn’t this exactly what your ancestors did? And
18	Didn’t your ancestors do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity on us and on this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath.”	because of it didn’t God bring down on us and this city all this misery? And here you are adding to it—accumulating more wrath on Jerusalem by profaning the Sabbath.”
19	When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day.	As the gates of Jerusalem were darkened by the shadows of the approaching Sabbath, I ordered the doors shut and not to be opened until the Sabbath was over. I placed some of my servants at the gates to make sure that nothing to be sold would get in on the Sabbath day.
20	Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem.	Traders and dealers in various goods camped outside the gates once or twice. But I took them to task. I said, “You have no business camping out here by the wall. If I find you here again, I’ll use force to drive you off.”
21	But I warned them and said, “Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will arrest you.” From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath.	And that did it; they didn’t come back on the Sabbath.
22	Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember me for this also, my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love.	Then I directed the Levites to ceremonially cleanse themselves and take over as guards at the gates to keep the sanctity of the Sabbath day. Remember me also for this, my God. Treat me with mercy according to your great and steadfast love.
23	Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab.	Also in those days I saw Jews who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. Half the children couldn’t even speak the language of Judah; all they knew was the language of Ashdod or some other tongue. So I took those men to task, gave them a piece of my mind, even slapped some of them and jerked them by the hair. I made them swear to God: “Don’t marry your daughters to their sons; and don’t let their daughters marry your sons—and don’t you yourselves marry them! Didn’t Solomon the king of Israel sin because of women just like these?”
24	Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah.	
25	I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God’s name and said: “You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons,	

V	NIV	MSG
	nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves.	Even though there was no king quite like him, and God loved him and made him king over all Israel, foreign women were his downfall. Do you call this obedience—engaging in this extensive evil, showing yourselves faithless to God by marrying foreign wives?”
26	Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women.	
27	Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?”	
28	One of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite. And I drove him away from me.	One of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite; I drove him out of my presence.
29	Remember them, my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites.	Remember them, O my God, how they defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priests and Levites.
30	So I purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign, and assigned them duties, each to his own task.	All in all I cleansed them from everything foreign. I organized the orders of service for the priests and Levites so that each man knew his job. I arranged for a regular supply of altar wood at the appointed times and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.
31	I also made provision for contributions of wood at designated times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me with favor, my God.	

JAMES 2:14-24

V	NIV	MSG
14	What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?	Dear friends, do you think you’ll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, “Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!” and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?
15	Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food.	
16	If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?	
17	In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.	
18	But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”	I can already hear one of you agreeing by saying, “Sounds good. You take care of the faith department, I’ll handle the works department.”

V	NIV	MSG
	Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.	Not so fast. You can no more show me your works apart from your faith than I can show you my faith apart from my works. Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove.
19	You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.	Do I hear you professing to believe in the one and only God, but then observe you complacently sitting back as if you had done something wonderful? That’s just great. Demons do that, but what good does it do them? Use your heads! Do you suppose for a minute that you can cut faith and works in two and not end up with a corpse on your hands?
20	You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?	
21	Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?	Wasn’t our ancestor Abraham “made right with God by works” when he placed his son Isaac on the sacrificial altar? Isn’t it obvious that faith and works are yoked partners, that faith expresses itself in works? That the works are “works of faith”? The full meaning of “believe” in the Scripture sentence, “Abraham believed God and was set right with God,” includes his action. It’s that weave of believing and acting that got Abraham named “God’s friend.” Is it not evident that a person is made right with God not by a barren faith but by faith fruitful in works?
22	You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.	
23	And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend.	
24	You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.	

For Reflection & Discussion

- When you read the description of worship in **Nehemiah 12:27-47**...
 - What stands out to you?
 - What excites you about this?
 - What would make you anxious, or hesitant about joining in?
- The OT has many worship songs in its books. The primary collection of worship songs is the Psalms.
 - What are some of the psalms that help you worship?
- As an example take **Psalms 96**
 - What is the psalmist asking hearers of this passage to do?
 - Who (or what) is this request directed to?
 - What case does the psalmist make for why they should do this?
 - This Psalm invites “all you families of nations” and “all the earth” to come together to praise and worship God together.
How has your experience worshipping together with others impacted your faith and relationship with God?
 - How do you think it affects those outside of our church community to see people coming together to joyfully interact with God in this way?
 - As the variety of psalms attest, there are many, many ways to worship.
What are some of the ways mentioned in this passage?
 - Verse 9 says to “Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.” The word tremble here is a translation of the Hebrew word *ḥhûl*, which can also be translated to mean to dance, to twirl, to whirl about.
How does this alternate translation change your understanding of this psalm and the attitude we are to come to worship with?
- Part 2 of Sunday’s message on Sabbath, **Nehemiah 13:15-31**.
 - What were the people doing that upset Nehemiah? Why?
- Old Testament Theologian Walter Brueggemann, wrote in *“Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now”*, “People who keep Sabbath live all seven days differently.”
 - In what way do you think this might be?
 - What benefit comes from practicing Sabbath?
- God created us for the rhythm of life, which includes work and rest (both stopping and delighting).
- Types of “Sabbath”
 - Make sure some time is completely **unplanned**.
This means having a day in which you can do whatever comes into your mind and heart to do at the moment. It is like the Sabbath year in which the land was given “rest” — it was not planted with anything, and you could eat whatever happened to grow from it. (Leviticus 25:1-7) We need this kind of complete cessation from activity occasionally or even our supposed time off will just be another form of tiring exertion.
 - Take some **avocational** time.
An avocation is something that is pleasurable for you, but that takes some skill and expertise. Usually it is something that others do for a living. This could be a sport, but it also could be anything from carpentry to music. This is somewhat analogous to planting a

different crop in a field one year in order to replenish nutrients and make the land more fertile for its ordinary produce.

- Take some **contemplative** time.
The Bible tells us to observe the Sabbath day with gathered worship, but that is not all we should do. Prayer, solitude, journaling, reading and reflection are all crucial ways that we replenish our inward resting in Christ and his work alone for our salvation. Hebrews 4:1-10 draws a remarkable analogy between the gospel of free grace and the Sabbath. The writer says, “there remains, then, a rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work just as God rested from his.” (v.9) When we find salvation through Christ and grace, we rest from the most debilitating work of all — the work of establishing our own worth through our efforts, the work of earning our own salvation.
 - Take some **aesthetic** time.
The Genesis account indicates that God rested from his work at least partly in order to enjoy his creation. Throughout Genesis 1 and 2 we see God viewing all that he has made and saying, “It is good!” “It is good!” We also need to take time to simply enjoy the beauty of God’s world. The main thing to do with beautiful landscapes or great music or some other form of the arts is to take it in and say, “That is so good.” This refreshes and energizes in unique ways that the other forms of resting do not.
 - Take time to **nurture** relationships.
This is time with your family and friends, time set aside to pay full attention to the most important people in your life. Again we see that this kind of time replenishes and nourishes you in ways that the others cannot. We are irreducibly relational creatures, made in God’s image. Even strong introverts need both the affirmation and sense of being known that comes from close bonds and relational ties.
 - Inject Sabbath into your **work**.
Some people are so given to overwork that even regular time off doesn’t seem to keep them from being totally exhausted by the intensity of their workweek. Associated with the Sabbath laws were the gleaning laws, in which the owners of fields were not allowed to harvest out to the edges of their fields. They had to leave a percentage of grain in the field for the poor to come and take. Some people have used this as an inspiration for deliberately setting fewer goals for themselves in a given day and week, not harvesting out to the edges, not trying to squeeze productivity out of every single second of every day.
- Two important questions to ask about practicing Sabbath:
 - What is something that you can do that would fill you soul with deep joy?
 - What is something that you do that really helps you feel connected with God?
 - How do you practice or plan on practicing Sabbath?
 - What excites you about doing this?
 - What causes you some anxiety about doing this?
 - Some people say that Sabbath is not a New Testament practice.
 - What are some passages that indicate that practicing Sabbath is important.
 - In **Mark 2:23-28** when the Pharisees were upset about the disciples doing work (picking grain as they walked through a field) Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”