

Nehemiah 13:4-31 (ESV)

⁴ Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah, ⁵ prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests.

⁶ While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king. And after some time I asked leave of the king ⁷ and came to Jerusalem, and I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. ⁸ And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. ⁹ Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chambers, and I brought back there the vessels of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense. ¹⁰ I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field. ¹¹ So I confronted the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. ¹² Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. ¹³ And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and as their assistant Hanan the son of Zaccur, son of Mattaniah, for they were considered reliable, and their duty was to distribute to their brothers. ¹⁴ Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service.

¹⁵ In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them on the day when they sold food. ¹⁶ Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah, in Jerusalem itself! ¹⁷ Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? ¹⁸ Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath." ¹⁹ As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath. And I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day. ²⁰ Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. ²¹ But I warned them and said to them, "Why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you." From that time on they did not come on the Sabbath.

²² Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.

²³ In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. ²⁴ And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but the language of each people. ²⁵ And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take oath in the name of God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.

²⁶ Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin.

²⁷ Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?"

²⁸ And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite.

Therefore I chased him from me. ²⁹ Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. ³⁰ Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; ³¹ and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

Nehemiah is a book with insights for us into restoration, renewal, leadership, and God's faithfulness.

Read Nehemiah 12:1—13:3

32. Who were the Levites and what roles did they perform within the community?

33. This is a “dedication” of the Wall (vs 27) – what “elements” went into preparing and staging this ceremony? What is purification (vs 30) and why? Visualize the ceremonies in your mind – the sights and sounds – what should be the role of music in worship? How great was the joy?

34. Tithing is the subject of Vss 44-47. How does it answer the three basic questions concerning tithing: “What” is to be given? “To whom?” and “where”?

Nehemiah 12:1-26 is another of those long lists of Names found in Ezra-Nehemiah – This time a list of 22 households of Priests from the days of Jeshua, the High Priest when the first return in 538 BC, narrated in Ezra 1-6, took place (vss 1-11) A corresponding list of households of the “next” generation (Joiakim's) follows in verse 12-21. Some have kept their household names, some did not. Fifteen of these are mentioned in Nehemiah's list in Neh 10:2-8. Vss 22-26 lists the heads of the Levitical families. Vs 26 is a summary. The list is relevant to the prominent appearance of the Levites in chapter 11, and even more so, their role in the Service for Dedicating the Wall to follow in Nehemiah 12. The list indicates continuity of the God's work and people.

When Joshua led the Israelites into the land of Canaan, the Levites were the only tribe that received cities but were not allowed to be landowners “because the Lord the God of Israel himself is their inheritance” (Deuteronomy 18:2). Thus they were scattered among the tribes to keep alive the knowledge and service of God. The Tribe of Levi served particular religious duties for the Israelites both in the Tabernacle and, later, the Temple. Only a small number had returned with Zerubbabel - Ezra had to deal with a shortage of Levites when he came as well. (Ezra 8:15ff) That Nehemiah plugged them into a variety of positions both in the city and the region is interesting. The priests were drawn from the sons of Aaron, whose father was one of Levi's three sons. The rest of the Levites were servants of the priesthood and often worship officiants and teachers (as we see elsewhere in Nehemiah), and had political responsibilities as well. The gatekeepers were drawn from the Levites and had charge over the storerooms (vs 25).

The Levites were the “professional” musicians of returned Judah. They were musicians and singers – leading in songs of thanksgiving – Vss 8-9 and 24 indicate an antiphonal style of worship dating back to David and Solomon (cf vss 43-46). Many lived outside of Jerusalem, they needed to be sought out and brought to Jerusalem for the dedication of the Wall, as they were scattered among the people. (12:27-29)

The completion of a project was observed with an inauguration of the structure, an event appropriately accompanied by sacrifice and joy. Rites of inauguration have their place. The spectacle of the Dedication Service for the Wall could easily have been staged by Cecil B. DeMille. More than anything else – Joyful rejoicing is the theme of this chapter.

Two processions were formed, one with Ezra and Hoshaiah (a prominent layman) proceeded around the East Wall to the Watergate, the other with Nehemiah around the West to the Sheep Gate. The processions included a choir, half the leaders, seven priests with trumpets, and nine instrumentalists playing cymbals, harps and lyres, and singers. Starting perhaps at the Valley gate, the two groups marched on top of the wall in opposite directions, singing songs of thanks giving, accompanied by the instruments and trumpets, then joining together at the Temple for an elaborate ceremony. There were great sacrifices offered, and offerings for the Levites. Vs 47 summarizes again the continuity between the days of Zerubbabel and those of Nehemiah.

In marching around the city, on the walls – we see allusions to Joshua marching around Jericho, and Nehemiah's late night survey of the fallen walls condition in Neh. 2. For those marching on the walls were also many personal memories of the work they had put into them as they were rebuilt. Much more so, the providential Good Hand of God that had restored His Holy City. Psalm 48:12-14

The chapter ends with discussion of the organization and administration of the contributions and tithes given to support the ministry of the priests and Levites. The Mosaic Law answers three basic questions concerning tithing ... What is to be given? Lev 17:30-34, To whom? Num 18:21-32 and Where? Deut 12:1-14 and 14:22-29. These offerings were meant to come out of joyful worship and to serve the community - both those in service to God and the poor and the needy (Deut 14:29).