Nehemiah12: 27–47: Set apart for worship draft 4 Ecubluns June 7, 2015

You know sometimes I can feel overwhelmed by life.
Is that how it is for you?
Let's think about what goes into our lives.
Think about work, leisure, church, health and technology – the list goes on and on.
The complexity and busyness can feel overwhelming, can't it?
What value and place should these things have in my life?

What about you?
As you think about all of this, what goes through your mind?
Again, what value and place should these things have in your life as a Christian?

As a Christian, do you ever struggle to strike a balance with these things?
Have you ever found a good thing like money or work, which are good gifts from God becoming a bad thing?
Bad, because they can take over or have an unhelpful place in our lives.
It's true isn't it in this busy and complex thing called life?
We can take a good thing turn it into a God thing and that's a bad thing.

What has Nehemiah 12 got to do with any of this?
What have choirs and walls got to do with our lives as Christians and worship?
Can I encourage you to listen for the next few minutes and hopefully we'll find out.

But before we get to Nehemiah 12 – some background.
The whole story of the bible is the story of God.
It's the story of his holiness, love justice.
But, it's also the story of God's dealings with humanity.
But sadly, this story, our story is mostly one of failure.
God created the world and people for worship.
But the world worshipped created things.
That is they took good things and turned them into God things and that's a bad thing.
As the bible story unfolds, we see failure.
Adam and Eve failed - they did not worship God.
Israel rescued from Egypt failed.
Israel's Kings failed.
Even when they were in the land, they focused on external things.
They focused on created things but not God.
We have the land, temple and the law.
But there was no love for God from the heart.
There was no justice, faithfulness or righteousness.
They failed – they did not worship God.

God warned, warned, and warned them through the prophets.
And God forgave, and forgave and forgave but they didn't worship him.
And so God took them into exile.
But he never stopped loving them.
And now, because of his promises and mercy they're back in the land.

The temple was rebuilt and now the wall has been rebuilt.
They're standing on it.

Just imagine, what they were thinking as they thought about their history.
God had been so faithful and merciful.
It was Lionel Richie, who sang, 'Oh what a feeling when you're dancing on the ceiling'.
Perhaps they might have sung, 'Oh we feel 10 feet tall walking on God's wall'.

What a celebration, not quite a Jewish rave party but more like a Disney parade.
It was joyful and memorable.
It was memorable because it was celebrating Israel's past and present.
It was memorable because there was hope for the future.

Just imagine the sights, sounds and the celebration.
Imagine if you worked for the CNN/BBC reporting this event.
Describing it, you say: 'Listen friends, this is not the wailing sound of people dying but the sound of worship.
It's not the metallic sound of swords clashing but symbols employed in blessing'.
And like any good Journo, sorry aussies add 'o' to many words, garbo and musso, – like any journo your looking for a pithy way to to wrap it up.
You finish by saying: 'here we are in Jerusalem on this great day of celebration and from v43 you say, **'a day of great sacrifice and a day of great joy'. Repeat.**

Now we come to chapter 12 - the climax - the dedication of the wall and a service of worship to God in the temple.
What's it got to say to us as Christians?
What's it telling us about our priorities and the place of worship?

So, Nehemiah 12 - Set apart for worship: A city and a people
Read v27,30.
To dedicate something is to set it apart for a particular purpose.
So, a Rugby ball is fit for Rugby not Soccer – that's its purpose.
But in Nehemiah, it wasn't just the wall: everything was set apart for a purpose.
What was that?
It was worship: a city and a people set apart for worship of the one true God.
A holy city and a holy people set apart to worship a holy God.

What do we notice about their worship?
Firstly, they're set apart for worship, they worshipped thankfully, joyfully and sacrificially.
They came in from the countryside to sing songs with joy and thanksgiving.
Remember the scoffers from the early chapters.
They said, 'what wall, if a fox jumped on it, it would collapse'.
Now two huge choirs were walking on the wall.
Walking in opposite directions singing songs of thanksgiving and praise to God.

Their thankfulness and joy flowed from their understanding of God.
God had brought them back into the land.
God had protected them whilst the wall was being built.

Yes it had been hard and painful.
Yet they understood that it was an act of worship.
They were thankful and joyful.
The focus was not on their achievement but on God's enabling.
There was no 'look at us or look at me'.
The focus was on giving God his worth and them praising him for it.

Now you may be thinking, that's fine, but there are times when I don't feel joyful and I'm not thankful.
That's ok - we all struggle at times.
We all go through challenges – no denying that.
Sometimes, our struggles can feel a bit like a plane going through turbulence.
We can't go around it or over it or under it, we've just got to go through it.
It's the same with our struggles.

I remember being in a grump one time.
We were running late: Claire Livo say's I'm catasthrophiser – that's my struggle.
As I got in the car, I realized, I'd forgotten something.
'Great, we're going to been even later' – back to the house.
As I came back, I was approaching the car when a bird above me dropped a bundle of you know what - bird poop all over the front of my face and my shirt.

My wife and two young children laughed and laughed.
I went inside without saying a word, and when I got back in the car, the boys had made up a song about birds pooping over Dad.

Claire didn't say a word and then we both laughed – I'm sorry.
I think God's trying to teach me something – it's not don't look up when your outside.
Our joy and thankfulness is not tied to how we feel but God's character.
We can cultivate thankfulness each day by reminding ourselves who God is.

I think that was what happening on the wall that day in Nehemiah.
A thankful and joyful people, set apart for worship, reminding one another about the character of God.
We can learn from them.
As we grow in thankfulness because of God is, our motivation for worship grows.

One of the great things about Claire, my wife, is that she constantly fills her heart with good things.
She reminds herself about God's character and counts her blessings.
As a result she's naturally thankful.
She sees things that I don't see because I'm not naturally thankful.
But she points them out and then I can see them and learn to praise God also.
If we cultivate this joy and thankfulness each day it'll certainly influence how we see worship each week.

In Nehemiah 12 their worship was thankful and joyful.
But, it was also sacrificial. **Read v43a**.
They offered great sacrifices.

Read on we see a series of tithes and first fruits offered for those organizing and leading temple worship.
People gave sacrificially, generously and joyfully.
The overall issue is not how much they had but their attitude to what they had.
Being set apart for worship involves financial sacrifices.

But it will also influence what we do with our time and our preferences.
Throughout Nehemiah, we see the people of God taking obedience seriously.
They read the word of God and confessed their sins.
They were supposed to build a wall and they did it.
And now they were being set apart for God with the dedication of the wall they did it.
They didn't say I won't go to the dedication I've got other priorities.

We live in a world where we're bombarded with choice.
Because we're set apart for worship, can I encourage you to make it a priority to meet with God's people regularly.
Great sacrifice touches not just our finances but also our preferences.
They worshipped thankfully, joyfully and sacrificially and so should we.

Secondly, set apart for worship: they persevered in worship
Then in v44f there are details that relate to organization. **Rd v44.**
It seems anti-climatic – it's not how I would have ended the chapter.
But, if everyone was out in the fields they weren't organizing the worship.
They weren't teaching God's word.
To support temple worship people gave food and offerings.
Perhaps there is a lesson here.
Sometimes, a little structure and organization can go along way.
Being involved in serving the body on a Sunday, or a small group or meeting with another Christian can play a key role in us persevering in worship.

Indeed the history of renewal movements suggest it's those who put in a bit of structure and organisation, that have the longest and most lasting influence.

But sadly, that's not what happened here.
By the time we get to Nehemiah 13, there is immediate failure.
They're already struggling to persevere in worship.
Their hearts were not new.
You might be able to take the people out of Babylon, but's it's hard to take Babylon out of the people.
They may be physically in the land, but spiritually they're still in exile.

What's needed is a new exodus.
From one who can save his people?
This is what Jesus has done.
He was truly set apart for God.
He always worshipped God: joyfully, thankfully and sacrificially.
He always persevered in worship.
In his life, death and resurrection he shows us grace.

He calls us follow him.
He sacrificed himself for us.
But now he's calling us to sacrifice ourselves for him.
Now he's calling us to be set apart for him.
Paul say's something similar in Romans 12, 'In view of God's mercy …. '

So, what's the Christian life about?
It's about being set apart for worship.
The reason the world exists and reason we exist is for worship.
That's what we've been set apart for and that's what we're to be dedicated too.
We now exist to give God his worth in everything – that's our priority.
So, there cannot be a part of our life that's God's not interested in.
There is no sacred/secular distinction because to God everything is sacred.
So in all the business of life that I spoke about at the start God wants us to give him his worth.

So, worship is not just about gathering and singing songs, the NT makes it clear it's about service and sacrifice.
Because, we're saved to serve.
We gather each week to get fed from God's word.
We gather to be reminded of his love and grace, and then we go out into the world to make it happen.
We make it a priority to go out into the world to express that love and grace.
We make it a priority to go out into the world to love God and others through acts of service and sacrifice.

Ok, so what?
Friends, we need to see all of life as worship.
In everyway and in everything we've been set apart to give God his worth.

Firstly, some questions?
Is that how we see our lives as set apart for worship?
Are we seeking to give God his worth in everything?
If the answer is no – what are the blockages?
What are the tension points? Where is the heat?
What are the things that might prevent us from giving God his worth?

We're made for worship – but if we have no time for God something has gone wrong.
Think of all the good things in your life: food, money, family, people, work and leisure, nature, skiing, and hiking are all good things but if we find ourselves taking these good things and turning them into God things that's a bad thing.

What's the tipping point for you?
When do these things go from being goods thing to a God thing?
How do we tell when it's turning from one to other?

It might be your thought life for example.
When something occupies your thoughts a lot – perhaps too much.
In fact, so much, it's become an obsession.

Someone once said, ‘you’re not what you think you are, but what you think you are’.
The question to ask is what need is it meeting?
If this precious thing, which occupies your thoughts, were taken from you how would you react?
When your challenged about it how do you react?
Talking to God, mature Christians and Christian friends can be helpful.
How might God be encouraging and challenging us to respond or change?

Secondly, You may be still be thinking, so what?
You may be still be wondering what does this look like?
What does it look like for me to be set apart for worship?
What does it look like for me to give God his worth?
I don’t have a formula for you.
I don’t have a prescription because we’re all different.
The shape of God’s grace will look different in our lives.
I don’t have a formula, but can I describe it.

So here are some stories.
Story one.
We need to give God his worth out in there in the community as the church scattered.
What does that look like?

Tim Winton is an Australian author.
He’s a Christian.
He tells the story of how a Christian came into his family’s life when he was boy.
Tim’s father was badly injured in a motor accident.
He was a policeman.
He was a big man.
When he came home he was a shell of a man.
He was too big for Tim’s mum to move.
People heard about the problem.
Then a bloke called Len from the local church turned up.
He said, ‘I heard your husband’s crook (sick).
And I’m here to help.
He carried Winton’s father to the bath and washed him for months.

Some where along the way someone share Jesus with Tim Winton.
At some point they must have spoken about who Jesus was and what he’s done.
But it was this sacrificial act, this act of caring – a Christian shining like a light - that pointed Tim Winton to Christ.

What was Len doing - he was worshipping God.
He understood that God had set him apart for such a thing.
This care, kindness and service was how Len was giving God his worth.

Set apart for worship.
What does it mean to give God his worth as the church scattered?
It should mean we’re concerned for the needy.

We're concerned for the stranger, the alien and the outcast.
We are looking to give God his worth through sacrificial acts of love and service.

Story two.
We need to give God his worth as church gathered.
We can be involved in all sorts of ways: rosters and children, youth and small group ministry but above all we need to model God's grace through our acceptance, welcome and hospitality.

What does that look like?
I recently heard a story about a medical student, Bill.
Bill was different.
He'd worn the same pair of jeans everyday for four years.
He had three t-shirts, never wore shoes and had crazy hair.
He'd been a Christian for two weeks when he thought he should go to Church.
So he did – a traditional church.
In walks, Bill – late – looing like something the cat dragged in.
Not seeing a seat he walked up the front and sat on the floor – people were upset.
Then a very old and frail church member, one of the elders, began walking down the front slowly with his walking stick.
People were thinking, 'Good, someone will tell this young man how to behave'.
He finally gets behind Bill, who's sitting on the floor.
The church is tense, waiting to see what will happen.
The man took his walking stick and dropped it on the floor, and very painfully sat down next to Bill, and worshipped with him for an hour.
Many shed tears.

What was the elder doing - he was worshipping God.
Yes, as the church gathered, he was worshipping with other Christians.
But in reaching out to this stranger, he was showing what God's acceptance, welcome and hospitality looks like in practice.
He understood that God had set him apart for such a thing.

Story number 3.
Giving God his worth at work: The church scattered.
Christians should not be ruthless and self – serving at work.
They should have a reputation for being fair, caring, and committed to others.
I heard about one young woman who was stopped going out of church.
She was obviously a visitor.
She said, she wasn't a Christian at this point, but she was exploring it.
She was asked what brought her along.
She told this story.
She worked for a company and she'd make a big mistake.
She thought it would definitely cost her the job.
But she was shocked when her boss went into his superior and took responsibility for what she'd done.
As a result, he lost some prestige and an ability to maneuver within the organization.

She was amazed.
She told him that she'd had often had bosses who took credit for her work, but never the blame for something she'd done wrong.

She wanted to know why?
He was modest and deflected her questions but she insisted.
Finally, he said to her, 'I'm a Christian, that means among other things that God accepts me because Jesus took the blame for the things I did wrong.
He did it on the cross.
That's why I have the desire and sometimes the ability to take the blame for others.

What was that boss doing - he was worshipping God.
Because his character had been shaped by his experience God's grace, he understood that God had set him apart to act in this way.
Do you see - this was how he could give God his worth, by behaving in ways that were strikingly different from others?
This lack of self-interest by the boss was eventually life transforming for this women.

Being set apart for worship means that God should never be an after thought.
He wants us worship him 24/7 with everything and in everyway.
When we do, this it will be very visible and noticeable.
Nehemiah understood this.
Everything was dedicated and purified: the walls, the people and the city.
Why, because everything belongs to God.

Wouldn't it be great if everyone understood that we're set apart for worship**?**
Wouldn't it be amazing if our corporate worship was so joyful and boisterous –
Martin and the elders got letters saying – isn't it getting out of hand.
Wouldn't it be amazing if our lives were different from those around us because we're passionate about Jesus – passionate about acts of service and sacrifice.

As the church scattered we've been set apart for worship.
How are we going to worship God and give him his worth.
How are we going to do it - Think about it now.
Whoever we are, wherever we are we're set apart for worship.
What will it look like for us this week? What ever it is, may God's grace be sufficient.