

Not a Sprint – a Marathon
Nehemiah 12:44-13:3

Have you ever felt you were on a spiritual mountaintop? Was there ever a time and a place where you felt especially close to God? I remember an ordinary chapel service during my time at Reformed Seminary when Dr. Derek Thomas was preaching and, somehow, God's grace and forgiveness became especially real for me. So what about you? Perhaps you remember a campmeeting or a special revival service when the gospel took on special meaning for you. Maybe you were at a youth camp or at a Cursillo retreat when Christ's love for you became undeniable and irresistible. Or maybe you were in a regular old weekly worship service hearing the word of God proclaimed when your heart felt strangely warmed, as John Wesley described his Aldersgate experience in May of 1738.

As we've been studying through the book of Nehemiah, we've seen this sort of experience taking place on a national scale. Yes, the first part of the book describes a lot of bold action, as Nehemiah came to the Promised Land from Persia and mobilized the people to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. But after the project was finished, something that can only be described as a genuine revival took place. In chapter 8, the people clamored for Ezra the scribe to read God's Word to them, and they came under genuine conviction of their sin. At the same time, they rejoiced because of God's great deliverance of them, celebrating His grace during the Feast of the Tabernacles. In chapter 10, they made solemn promises to live according to God's Word, and in chapter 12, they celebrated the completion of the walls around Jerusalem, rejoicing with such gusto that people could hear their songs and shouts for miles away.

Okay, so what comes next? What happens after the celebration is over? What happens after the evangelist strikes his tent and moves onto the next town? What happens after you come home from youth camp or campmeeting, after your spiritual mountaintop experience fades into memory, only to be replaced by the humdrum existence of daily life? What do you do then?

Well, some folks keep trying to climb back up the mountain. Lots of churches specialize in trying to recreate some sort of ecstatic spiritual experience, and lots of people gauge the quality of their worship based on how they feel afterwards. But that's not at all what we see in today's passage, is it? No, after completing their wall-building service for God, and after their life-changing revival experience, the people of Nehemiah's time devoted themselves to God in very practical, quite prosaic ways, quietly and methodically providing for the maintenance of God's worship and the observance of God's law.

And in doing this, they teach us an important spiritual lesson, even before we get into any of the details in the passage: the Christian life is not a sprint, but a marathon. Now, we know this to be true of any human relationship, right? Oh, sure, there are the mountain-top moments, the vacations, the birthday parties, the family reunions, the special meals which you document on Facebook. But relationships have a lot of the mundane everyday stuff as well: the laundry that has to be done and the kids that have to be shuttled to soccer practice and the little compromises that have to be made to keep everyone happy – all the day-to-day tasks that grease the wheels of all our interactions.

So, why should we think our relationship with Jesus is any different? I mean, you don't wash the dishes because it's an ecstatic experience – you do it for purely practical reasons: to keep the bugs out of the kitchen and to avoid getting sick from eating off of dirty plates. Just so, today's passage shows us

that there are a lot of practical, day-to-day things that need to be accomplished in order to maintain our relationship with God and with God's people.

And the first thing the people did makes that point abundantly clear: verse 44 says they made provisions for the firstfruits and the tithes, all the offerings that supported the work and worship of the Temple. These gifts made it possible for the priests to do their work of offering up the sacrifices for the forgiveness of the people's sins. These gifts supported the Levites, who served in the Temple in so many other ways. And in verse 47, we find that the people made sure that the singers and even the gatekeepers had what they needed in order to perform their tasks of leading worship and making sure everyone and everything in the Temple was safe. In short, the first everyday sort of way the people sought to maintain their relationship with God was to put Him first in their budgets.

Now, don't worry. Y'all know I'm not one of those preachers that loves to bang on about how everyone needs to give more money to the Church. And it's certainly the case that we New Testament Christians don't have to maintain a physical Temple and offer animal sacrifices anymore like the folks did back in Nehemiah's time. Now that Jesus has offered Himself on the cross for all of our sins, we certainly don't need to replicate that sacrifice on a regular basis.

But we do need to tell people about Jesus' sacrifice, don't we? And that means we need to support the work, not of priests and Levites and gatekeepers, but of missionaries and evangelists and pastors, right? If the people of Nehemiah's day needed to make sure their choirs could keep their focus on praising God, shouldn't we make similar provisions for the public worship of God, keeping up our worship spaces and supporting the work of our own musicians? And if the folks in today's passage all gave a tenth of their income to further the work and worship of one Temple in one location, should our world-wide mission require any less of us?

But there's something else the people did in order to maintain their day-to-day relationship with God – if they gave tithes and offerings to make their worship possible, they also appointed people to oversee those gifts. In fact, that's the very first thing mentioned in today's passage – they appointed people over the chambers where all the gifts were to be stored, to make sure that everything that the Law of Moses required was collected and put to good use. In other words, the people made sure not only that they gave enough to support the work and worship of the Temple – they appointed leaders to make sure their gifts would be used carefully and properly.

And we do the same thing today, don't we? For we not only have pastors and teachers and musicians that lead worship – we also have ruling elders that make sure those pastors love Jesus and know the truth about Him, elders who insure that the teaching ministry of the Church is carried out according to godly principles. We have deacons who not only challenge us to give our time and talent and treasure, but who are careful stewards of our gifts, making sure all our efforts are focused on our common mission of knowing Christ and making Him known to the world. We know it's not enough to just build a worship space or even to just put a bunch of money in the offering plate – our gifts need to be properly managed and strategically directed as well. So it's just as important for us to appoint elders and deacons as it was for the people of Nehemiah's time to appoint stewards of their gifts.

But our leaders are concerned with more than just what we can give to the Church. After all, our elders put a lot of effort into making sure that we have lots of opportunities to learn the truth about God's Word. Well, the people of Nehemiah's time put just as high a priority on the Scriptures, didn't

they? We already saw back in chapter 8 that it was careful study of the Law of Moses that kicked off their great revival, convicting them of their sin as well as convincing them of God's redeeming love. Well, chapter 13 verse 1 makes it plain that they continued their practice not only of studying the Bible but of making an honest effort to apply what it said to their everyday lives.

Now, as we've seen when we studied chapter 10, the particular application they made just isn't appropriate for us anymore. The Law of Moses forbade Ammonites and Moabites from becoming part of the people of God, but that was because back in those days, one's ethnic identity and one's religion were inextricably intertwined – it simply wasn't possible to separate one's culture from one's cult, which is another word for worship.

Now it is true that even in Old Testament times someone from another ethnic group could have a conversion experience and become one of God's people. As far back as the time of the Judges, Ruth the Moabite chose to go with Naomi the Israelite back to the Promised Land. But Ruth made it very clear that in doing so, she was rejecting not only her own people, but all of their gods as well. For all intents and purposes, she had thus ceased to be a Moabite.

But again, the important thing for us is not the particular part of the law of God that the people of Nehemiah's time realized they needed to put into practice. The critical point is that they honestly studied God's Word and were willing to subject every part of their lives to it – even important things like whom they would accept into their society, or whom they would marry. In other words, they understood that the logical follow-up to the revival that took place wasn't just to maintain the worship of God with their money, or even to put godly leaders in charge of the Church. No, in order to keep their relationship with God strong, they knew they needed to keep studying the Word of God and to keep applying it to every part of their daily lives.

And again, we understand this intuitively where it comes to purely human relationships, don't we? I mean, you wouldn't claim to have a close relationship with someone you never communicated with, right? And if you never listened to what someone had to say, or if you always discounted or dismissed someone's advice, well, you couldn't really claim to care very much about that person, could you? Just so, how can we say we love God if we just don't care very much about what He says, or if we don't want to learn any more about Him, or if we refuse to do what He asks us to do?

For remember – the Christian life is not a sprint but a marathon. It's not enough to build a Sanctuary – we also have to keep it painted and keep the utility bills paid. It's not enough to elect godly elders and deacons – we have to let them challenge us to be intentional and strategic about our giving. And it isn't enough just to know the basic truths of the gospel, the parts of the Apostles' Creed that we recite every week. We need to take advantage of every opportunity to learn more about God's Word so that we can apply all of it to our lives, allowing it to shine the pure light of truth even into the darkest corners of our hearts. And then we must respond to that truth not with complacency, but by rooting out every remnant of sin that remains within us.

So, even if we don't feel very much like we're up on a mountaintop, let's continue to turn away from sin and self, giving all that we are and all that we have to God. Let's put God first in our checkbooks, making sure that the work of the Kingdom gets done here and abroad. Let's put God first on our calendars, spending time in His Word and time serving others. And let's follow the leaders God has allowed us to choose, letting them challenge us to greater knowledge, greater giving, and greater

service. That's really what it means to run the race of repentance every day. And remember: it's not a sprint – it's a marathon.