

Rebuilding the Ruins: A Series in Nehemiah

Rebuilding By Repopulating (Nehemiah 11:1-12:26)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on April 21, 2024

Introduction

- ❖ We're almost done with our series through the book of Nehemiah. We're nearing the final stretch. I think you'd agree that we've been able to cover some relevant passages that are so rich in content. But, at the same time, we've come across some passages that are fairly dense. This morning's text falls in that category.
 - **These are considered flyover chapters.** We've already come across a few in Nehemiah. I'm talking about chapters filled with list upon list of unpronounceable names. I'm so proud of all our Scripture readers. It's a tongue twister getting through these sections. But we do so – we don't skip any chapter – because we believe that all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching (2 Tim 3:16).
 - But when dealing with passages like this – in this context of corporate worship – I don't think it's beneficial to study these verses in depth. You can do that in a Bible study. **But in a sermon, it's best to tackle a passage like this by making larger observations and to try to glean more generalized principles.** I think what serves us best is to set our text within its context. To see how this passage fits in light of the unfolding story in Nehemiah. And then in light of the unfolding story of the OT and the biblical canon as a whole.
- ❖ By the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, we're at that stage in biblical history where God's people have returned from the Babylonian Exile. You can read about that event at the end of 2 Kings (or 2 Chronicles). And while in Exile, the prophets of old prophesied of a future day when God's chosen people will return to God's chosen land. And the city upon which the Lord has chosen to set his name – the city of Jerusalem – will be restored to its former glory.
 - For example, the prophet Isaiah prophesied in **Isaiah 44:28** that a future pagan king named Cyrus would allow the exiles to return home. The LORD *“who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose’; saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’ and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’”*
- ❖ Now if you go on to read through the second half of Isaiah, you'll notice that his prophetic promises are grand and lofty. **When you get to Isaiah 60, it paints this picture of a glorious restoration of the kingdom and of Jerusalem (Zion).** It speaks of a Redeemer who will come to Zion (Isa 59:20). And the glory of the LORD will arise and shine forth from Jerusalem the holy city and the nations will be drawn to its light.
 - And by the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, those prophetic promises are beginning to come to fruition. The prophesied Cyrus ends up being King Cyrus of Persia – who allowed the Israelites to return and authorized the rebuilding of the temple and the city proper. Good things are starting to happen.
- ❖ **But the good is still far from great. Those promises are far from completion.** There's still a long way to go. Nehemiah drops hints of that throughout his book. Turn back with me to chapter 7:4. Prior verses tell us of the completion of the wall around Jerusalem. It's a proper city again! But then listen to chapter 7:4, *“The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt.”* That's still a long way off from Isaiah 60.

- ❖ Or turn to chapter 9:36. Prior verses record this amazing prayer to the LORD expressing praise and gratitude for his covenant faithfulness and for their return to the Promised Land. But listen to the note of realism in the way the prayer ends in chapter 9:36, “*Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves.*”
 - **The point I’m trying to make is that, in this book, we already see hints to the fact that God’s prophetic promises for Israel won’t be fulfilled in a mere literal or physical sense.** Sure, they’ve got a proper city again with big walls and thick gates. But what they really need is a holy people to reside in it. Sure, they’re no longer in exile. They’re back in their own land. Living in their own homes. But they’re still not free. They’re living as slaves while *in* the Promised Land.

- ❖ What this means is that – when the prophets spoke of a holy city restored – they had in view something beyond a literal rebuilding of a city proper. **The prophecies were ultimately about God establishing a set apart, holy people.** And when the prophets spoke of chains being broken and God’s people being free – they were pointing to a reality greater than being back in your own home on your own land. **You may not have chains on your ankles, but you’re still not free.** Your bondage runs deeper than that.

- ❖ If we return to our passage, we can see how it fits along this trajectory in Scripture – **where talk of a holy city is more or less replaced with emphasis on a holy people.** God is establishing a holy people – a prophetic promise ultimately fulfilled in the Church, the body of Christ. You can see how this emphasis in Nehemiah 11 on needing more people to repopulate this city takes us one step further in this direction.
 - So as we take a high level look at this passage, I want us to see three things about God’s people. We see (1) a people willing to be God’s holy city; (2) a people willing to sacrifice their comfort; and (3) a people willing to serve together as one.

A People Willing to Be God’s Holy City

- ❖ So the first thing we see in Nehemiah 11 is the willingness on the part of God’s people to be the holy city. A willingness – not just to live in the city – but to function as a set apart people that thereby makes the city holy. But as we read in chapter 7, the city was wide and large but the people within it were few.
 - **Most people don’t realize how undesirable it was to live in Jerusalem in the days of Nehemiah.** We largely have an idyllic image of Jerusalem in our heads. But don’t forget how badly it was destroyed by the Babylonians. The city was completely pillaged and razed to the ground. For seventy years, it laid in waste. It was a wasteland when the first returnees arrived.

- ❖ Yes, it’s been years since Cyrus authorized their return. Yes, the temple has been restored. Yes, the walls and gates have been rebuilt. And yes, the returnees were eager and willing to do their part in the entire restoration process. But just put yourself in their shoes.

- ❖ I'm sure they're thinking, "I'll do my part. I'll put in my share of sweat, blood, and tears to rebuild Jerusalem. But no one said anything about me having to live there." **You have to understand that, for a Jew in Nehemiah's day, it was far more appealing to live out in the surrounding towns and villages.** And to merely commute into Jerusalem for occasional feast days or to help with any further reconstruction projects.
 - Why was it more attractive to live outside of the city? Many today would prefer to live in the city where it's closer to where we work and play. There's more to do in the city. Outside the city is a bunch of farm land. But that's the point. In an agrarian society, land ownership meant so much more. Moving into the city would mean giving up that agricultural income and abandoning ancestral lands. It was asking a lot.

- ❖ And again, it's not like they were moving into a bustling city – a safe and clean city with well-designed urban planning. **No, at this point, much of Jerusalem was still demolished, especially the residential portions.** And it was far from safe. Don't forget how, over the centuries, this city had always been a hotspot for conflict. It still is.
 - When put it that way, the prospect of living in Jerusalem is far less attractive. Just imagine what a Ukrainian from Kyiv would do when the war is over. Let's say you ask them, after the fighting is done, if they want to move back to Kyiv after years of heavy artillery bombardment? Or would you prefer to live in a nearby town that avoided that? I'm not surprised if they'd prefer to settle back down in another town.

- ❖ The same factors were in play here in Jerusalem. But even so. Even with so many sensible reasons *not* to move back to the city, they all knew that it was necessary. They had to repopulate it. Why? **Why did Jerusalem need to be populated once again?**
 - Because the city of Jerusalem had a responsibility on the world's stage. It had a duty directed towards the nations. **According to God, Jerusalem was meant to be a model city.** A representation of the kingdom of heaven here on earth.
 - That's why it's described in v1 as a "*holy city*." It was set apart from every other city on earth. Because, here in Jerusalem, you come to the temple to be in the presence of God. And, here in Jerusalem, you live by the Law to be under God's righteous rule. This is what makes Jerusalem special. Holy.

- ❖ This was the original city set on a hill. This was the original light on a lamp stand. **The watching world was to come and see the glory of God emanating from the city of Jerusalem.** If you want to know what it looks like to live under God's blessing – to live according to God's Word – then go to Zion. Go to Jerusalem and see for yourself.
 - **But ultimately, the glory of God was found – not in the beauty of the city's architecture – but in the goodness of its people.** In the beauty of their communal life together. It was never ultimately about temples and altars or walls and gates. It was always about hearts and hands. It's about being a people committed to love one another and to serve one another. To give the world a glimpse of the kingdom come. To represent heaven here on earth. That's what the people in Nehemiah's day were asked to commit to. Not just to live in the holy city – but to *be* a holy people.

- ❖ **In the same way today, the people of God are being asked to commit ourselves to one another.** Not just to go to church – but to *be* the church. Church buildings are important. Buildings make a difference when it comes to the scale and scope of a church’s ministry. That’s why we’re committed to renovating that big building next door. But a massive, brand new building, with state-of-the-art technology is far from holy if there are no people in it. People committed to living holy lives in holy communion with each other. That comes first.
- ❖ Friends, in the weeks and months to come, you’re going to hear a lot about our building plans. And you’ll be challenged to commit yourself financially to make all of that a reality. **But the first step is for us to commit ourselves to being a holy people – to living life together as the New Jerusalem.**
 - Let’s commit ourselves to the task of turning HCC into a holy city within the greater city of Houston. **A city in a city – where our non-Christian neighbors can see a contrasting yet compelling way to live in community.** And again, that’s going to have less to do with the beauty of our new building and everything to do with the beauty and goodness of our life together.
- ❖ So how do you commit yourself in this way? **The easiest way is to formally join the church.** To become a church member. To put words behind your commitment as you make a public vow and bind yourselves to others in a covenant relationship. Consider attending our next round of membership classes in May.
 - Now that’s the easiest way to express commitment. **What’s significantly harder is to live out that commitment on a regular basis.** Here’s a challenge that won’t be easy but, at the same time, is totally doable for every one of us.
- ❖ **Commit yourself, starting today, that every Sunday you’re at church, you will meet one new person you’ve never talked to.** Just introduce yourself. It could be the briefest of conversations. With the size of our congregation, I know there’s someone here you’ve never met. So this is doable every week. But the truth is, for many of us, we can go weeks or months without talking with anyone new at church. Let’s change things up starting today.
 - Then, take it up a notch. **Consider inviting one of those individuals or couples you meet – out for coffee; or out for lunch; or even over to your house for dinner.** And challenge yourselves to do that once a month or at least once a quarter. Imagine the impact that would make to our witness as a holy city in the city of Houston – if all of our members committed themselves to each other in that way.

A People Willing to Sacrifice Their Comfort

- ❖ I know what you’re thinking. That’s asking a lot of me. A lot of my time and energy. **That’s going to force me out of my comfort zone.** Well, that’s to be expected. Especially when we consider what was asked of the people of God in Nehemiah’s day. This leads to our second observation. We see a people willing to sacrifice their comfort.

- ❖ And it began with the leaders of Israel. They led by example. By being the first to inhabit the city. That's what we're told in v1. *"Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem."* **They were already committed to living in the city – despite it being the less comfortable, less convenient path.** But more inhabitants were needed.
 - So v1 goes on to say that they cast lots to determine who else would join the leaders. *"And the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem the holy city, while nine out of ten remained in the other towns."*

- ❖ In case you're not familiar, **the casting of lots** was a common practice in the ancient world and throughout the OT. **It was treated as a means of divination – of determining God's will.** We're not exactly sure how it worked or what they used. Sticks or stones or some kind of ancient dice? The closest modern equivalent would be flipping a coin. But the OT people of God didn't see it as leaving a decision up to pure chance. They saw the result as determinative of God's will. Listen to Proverbs 16:33, *"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD."*
 - **So, however it worked, the lot fell on a tenth of the people.** One out of every ten were chosen by lot to join their leaders in repopulating the city, and the rest could remain in the surrounding towns to make a living off of their ancestral lands. And v2 goes on to say, *"And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem."* I know it sounds like this must be another group of men – besides those chosen by lot – who actually volunteered to live in the city. But most commentators think v2 is referring to those chosen by lot, and it's just affirming that these men willingly accepted the decision to relocate themselves and their families to Jerusalem.

- ❖ I think it's significant that the Hebrew word for *"willingly offered"* is the same verb used to describe the freewill offerings that were given earlier for the reconstruction of the temple (Ezra 1:6; 2:68). **So it's totally fitting to describe what's going on here as the people of God voluntarily offering themselves as a living tithe to the LORD.**
 - At the end of chapter 10, the people promised not to neglect the house of our God. Which, on one hand, meant tithing whatever they produced from the ground. Taking a tenth of their crops and bringing it into the holy temple. But in chapter 11 the clear message is that to "not neglect the house of our God" means supplying more than just your monetary resources. **It means supplying your whole life as a living tithe.** Where you bring your whole self into the holy city.

- ❖ Think about what this means for the people of God today. **For some of us, giving a tithe of our annual income is still a foreign concept.** But we see how automatic it was for the OT people of God. If those living under the old covenant responded in worship and gratitude to God with a tithe of the ground (which ultimately came from his hand), then how much more should we – the recipients of a better covenant with greater promises secured in Christ – **how much more should we give a tithe or more to the Lord?** In the end, we would just be giving back to him a portion of what he ultimately gave to us. So if you're not yet giving a tithe of your annual income, I challenge you to challenge yourself to do just that this year.

- ❖ But I'm sure there are many of you here who do tithe. That's not an issue for you. You're comfortable with that practice. **But if you're being honest, what makes you uncomfortable is the idea of offering yourself up as a living tithe – a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God** (Rom 12:1).
 - Writing a check is much easier for you than giving up all claims to self-rule. It's much easier than laying down your ambitious plans and lifelong dreams at the altar of God. **For some of you, a monetary tithe is far less costly than the precious time and energy you'll have to sacrifice if you want to invest deeply in the lives of your fellow church members.** Serving each other. Caring for each other. Bearing each other's burdens. That's not the path of comfort and convenience.

- ❖ **But if HCC is going to become a holy city in the city of Houston, then we need to push back against a truncated gospel that merely focuses on your personal salvation and your personal walk.** The gospel is definitely not *less* than that. It's not the gospel if it doesn't include the good news that Jesus died for *you* personally – to forgive your sins and to have a personal relationship with you. The gospel is not *less* than that but it's certainly *more*.
 - **The good news is that Jesus came to save – not just individuals – but a body of believers.** He was sent to redeem the Church. No one is converted with the mere goal of living a good life, avoiding as much sin as possible, and giving a requisite amount of time and money to a church on Sundays. That's far too individualistic.

- ❖ **The reality is that, if you're a Christian, you've been redeemed into the body of Christ.** You've been given a corporate identity. You're now a vital part of the body essential for the health of the church. **I've heard it said before that there's no appendix in the body of Christ.** There's no such thing as a useless Christian who just hangs around the rest of the body with no clear purpose or function. No, every Christian has a God-given role to play in the body of Christ. So what's yours? How are you serving?

A People Willing to Serve Together as One

- ❖ That leads to our third observation. We see, in this text, a people willing to serve together as one. That's the general picture given. **If you read through this chapter carefully you'll notice that all the people worked together.** There was no distinction between clergy and laypeople. The priests and Levites could be found in both Jerusalem and the surrounding towns. They lived and served together with laypeople from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

- ❖ **If you take a closer look, you'll notice how – in the holy city – everyone had a role.** There were valiant men defending the city (vv6, 8, 14). There were those taking care of the work of the house of God (v12). And there were those taking care of the outside work of the house of God (v16). The temple grounds. Then there was a descendant of Asaph who was the leader of the praise (v17). The worship leader. There were also men who were in charge of singing (vv22-23). And then there was Pethahiah who essentially functioned as ambassador for the Persian king (v24). **So there were a variety of roles, and it seems like everyone residing in the city played a part. They all served together as one.**

- ❖ Church, the same principle applies to us. **All who reside in the new Jerusalem – who are members of the church – have a role to play.** We're called to serve together as the one. So think about this practically. Think of a gift or skill or talent that you've been given by God. How can you use that to serve one another? To help bear each other's burdens?
 - **Let's say you're a good cook.** Use that talent to serve others. Participate in a MealTrain for someone at church who's going through a hard season. Maybe they just had a baby or they're recovering from illness or surgery. They would be so blessed by a home cooked meal. And don't just do it for someone you're already close to at church, but choose to serve someone at church you don't know as well. Because now you have a readymade excuse to meet them when you drop off that meal.
 - **Or let's say you're handy around the house or under the hood of a car.** There are members in our church who would be so blessed if you were to lend your skills on their behalf. Elderly members in our church. Single mothers among us. Or husbands like me who are pretty much useless when it come to home repairs or car repairs. Imagine how many you could bless and how many opportunities you'd have to deepen connections with others at church.

- ❖ **Imagine if we were a holy, set apart people that loved and served and supported each other in meaningful, significant ways.** I'm not talking about giving each other a little bit of our free time. I'm talking about getting out of our comfort zones and being inconvenienced by each other. **Imagine if we served together as one to ensure that no one among us suffers alone.** No one among us grieves alone. No one among us bears a burden alone. In this way, the watching world will see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven.

- ❖ Now there's one more observation I want to make. **Notice how in chapter 12:1-26, there's a particular emphasis on one particular role among all the holy people – and that's the role of the priest and Levites.** In these verses, we're given a genealogical list of the names of those men who served since the days of Zerubbabel. It's a long list, and I won't spend our time in the weeds. I just want to ask one high-level question: **Why is there a particular emphasis on listing out all these priests and high priests?**
 - On one hand, I think it's because there's a double honor reserved for those who teach God's people his Law. Who lead God's people in worship. Who mediate the blessing of forgiveness through the sacrifices they offer on behalf of God's people.

- ❖ But the bigger reason why tracing the lineage of priests and high priests is so crucial – is **because, as the Scriptures unfold, there's a shift of emphasis from a holy city; to a holy people; to a holy Servant.** A Suffering Servant who bears the iniquity of an unholy people.
 - That's why there was such a priority on the priesthood. Because even as all the roles of all the people of God were vital and important – it's the priesthood that points us to Jesus, our Great High Priest. **Who offered himself as a sacrifice on behalf of God's people.** And in so doing, he redeemed us for God. He purchased our true freedom. So that we're no longer slaves but a holy, set apart people dedicated to the Lord. This is Jesus who redeemed us to be his people, his church, his city in a city.