

The City of God

Nehemiah 11:1-36

Over the past few weeks, we've been looking at the special events that took place during the appointed festivals of the seventh month in Israel, beginning the festival of trumpets, then the day of atonement, and finally the festival of tabernacles. In Nehemiah 8 the law was read, beginning on the first of that month, and the holy days were observed with great joy and faithfulness. We saw how the people of Israel assembled to confess their sins at the conclusion of those holy days, dressing themselves in sackcloth and fasting as outward demonstrations of their contrition and repentance. That was Nehemiah 9. Then, as we studied last Sunday in chapter 10, the people entered into that great covenant commitment with their God, entering into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, to do all his commandments and ordinances and statutes.

Now what? Well, let's get back to normal, if I can speak in those terms. We return to the situation of Nehemiah chapter 7.

7:1 "Then it was, when the wall was built and I had hung the doors, when the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, 2 that I gave the charge of Jerusalem to my brother Hanani, and Hananiah the leader of the citadel, for he was a faithful man and feared God more than many.³ And I said to them, "Do not let the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot; and while they stand guard, let them shut and bar the doors; and appoint guards from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, one at his watch station and another in front of his own house." 4 Now the city was large and spacious, but the people in it were few, and the houses were not rebuilt.}

The city was built, but not many people lived there yet. That's what Nehemiah was observing in the city of Jerusalem. In

Nehemiah 11, people finally start moving into the city. Life was beginning to return to normal.

The festivals of Israel were great experiences, and they were to be the focal point of the lives of the people of Israel each year, but there was also to be the normal affairs of daily life. And the normal affairs meant trying to get settled into a new location. A new city. A new house. Remember, Nehemiah was written after the exile. The people are returning to the lands where they had been driven out years before. They had to rebuild the temple. They had to rebuild the city wall. And then they had to rebuild their own houses. The city is Jerusalem. And it is called, the holy city, for it is,

I. THE HOLY CITY OF GOD'S PEOPLE.

v.1

I want to do a bit of a topical study today on the holy city, beginning with this literal city of Jerusalem. It was holy because God set it apart as the place where his people would dwell, and they would dwell there because God himself would meet with them there. We'll see the NT fulfillment of that holy city in just a moment, but first let's look at,

A. The holy city of the Old Testament.

It was a real city. Real buildings. Real houses. Real people. And the city Jerusalem represented the holy nation. It represented the holy nation of God's people. The nation of Israel.

It is of great importance that you realize that God's people are always identified as a people, and individuals are always defined in relation to the larger group to which they belong. There was no such thing as an isolated and solitary existence for one of God's people. They were part of a greater nation. The people of God

always refers to a group, a collection, a body. In the OT, that group manifested itself as a nation. A political and civil entity that was the place on earth in which God lived and dwelt. In the OT economy, the government of that city was the government of the church, they were one and the same. We call that a theocracy. The throne of the earthly king and the throne of God were one and the same.

God's presence was what made the city holy. God's affection, God's headship, God's rule over the city is what defined its holiness. God is the one who set the city apart. And these days of Nehemiah were prophesied by the great prophet,

Zech.8:1 "Again the word of the LORD of hosts came, saying, 2 "Thus says the LORD of hosts: I am zealous for Zion with great zeal; With great fervor I am zealous for her.' 3 "Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion, And dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Jerusalem shall be called the City of Truth, The Mountain of the LORD of hosts, The Holy Mountain.' 4 "Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit In the streets of Jerusalem, Each one with his staff in his hand Because of great age. 5 The streets of the city Shall be full of boys and girls Playing in its streets.' 6 "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'If it is marvelous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in these days, Will it also be marvelous in My eyes?' Says the LORD of hosts. 7 "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Behold, I will save My people from the land of the east And from the land of the west; 8 I will bring them back, And they shall dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. They shall be My people And I will be their God, In truth and righteousness.'"

The point is, it was a real city, made special by the very real presence of God. It was the place where God lived with his people. And its very existence serves as a great type and illustration of,

B. The holy city of this present age.

In this age, the NT age, the last days between Jesus first coming and his second coming, we also read of Jerusalem, the city of God. But it is not an earthly city, it is not an earthly Jerusalem. The Holy City of the Old Testament does not foreshadow the present day earthly city which is the focal of the disputes between the Jews and Palestinians. Instead, the OT holy city represents the true city of God today, which is spiritual. It is the city Abraham looked forward to,

Heb.11:10 "...for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

It is the city we read about in,

Heb.12:22 "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, 24 to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel."

Today, the city of God is the church of Jesus Christ! Or perhaps a little more thoroughly, the city of God today is the kingdom of Jesus Christ which is made visible in our age through the church of Jesus Christ. We are the heavenly Jerusalem, we who are gathered together as a church! Consider,

Eph.2:19 "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit."

That's Jerusalem! That's Israel. We are Israel. We are the Israel of God. We are the nation of Israel. We are the descendants of Abraham. We are the city of Jerusalem, the city of God. And God dwells among us.

Now, having said that, I hope that everything we have studied in Nehemiah takes on a whole new dimension. For everything that we've read about in the restoration of Jerusalem applies to the restoration of the church today, and I've tried to make those applications as we've gone through. We have a glorious identity. We are the people of God!

But there is more, and I suspect some of you are already one step ahead of me. There is a future Jerusalem. A future city of God.

C. The holy city of the age to come.

Rev.21:1 "Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. 2 Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God."

There is the future expectation of the church, made perfect in glory! Then also,

Rev.3:12 "He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name."

And that New Jerusalem, that perfect Jerusalem, was also prophesied in the Old Testament age, for as the OT prophets looked to the future age in which we are now living, they also looked even further to this eternal age, when the New Jerusalem would be the paradise of God. One such prophecy is,

Joel 3:16 "The LORD also will roar from Zion, And utter His voice from Jerusalem; The heavens and earth will shake; But the LORD will be a shelter for His people, And the strength of the children of Israel. 17 "So you shall know that I am the LORD your God, Dwelling in Zion My holy mountain. Then Jerusalem shall be holy, And no aliens shall ever pass through her again." 18 And it will come to pass in that day That the mountains shall drip with new wine, The hills shall flow with milk, And all the brooks of Judah shall be flooded with water; A fountain shall flow from the house of the LORD And water the Valley of Acacias. 19 "Egypt shall be a desolation, And Edom a desolate wilderness, Because of violence against the people of Judah, For they have shed innocent blood in their land. 20 But Judah shall abide forever, And Jerusalem from generation to generation. 21 For I will acquit them of the guilt of bloodshed, whom I had not acquitted; For the LORD dwells in Zion."

That's the language of paradise, the language of heaven. So the greatest glory of Jerusalem will be this eternal city of God, the holy city in the age to come, the age of eternity.

Now, all of that is more of a Bible study than a sermon, but I do want to give you the encouragement of your citizenship in that great city of God, you who believe in Jesus Christ and trust in him alone for salvation. And knowing of that citizenship in the new Jerusalem should change the way that you live your life now, in the present expression of the city of God.

Phil. 3:13 "Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are

behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus....20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.”

Our citizenship, even now, is in heaven. In the city of God. May you live as such citizens! Let’s return back to our text in Nehemiah 11, and look a bit more closely at the descriptions we find there, first, of,

II. GOD’S PEOPLE IN THE HOLY CITY.

As we saw from Nehemiah 7, not many people were living there yet. And the obvious question, I suppose, is, “Why not?”

Nehemiah 7 tells us that few houses were built, even though the city was large and spacious. Though that wasn’t the reason why few people lived there, simply the consequence of it. Few people, even among those who returned from the exile, would choose to live in Jerusalem. And we find something else a bit strange in the description given in,

v.1 “Now the leaders of the people dwelt at Jerusalem; the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to dwell in Jerusalem, the holy city, and nine-tenths were to dwell in other cities.”

They cast lots, which was an OT means of determining the Lord’s will. They sought special revelation from the Lord in order to assign just one out of ten to dwell in the holy city. The reasons why the people didn’t immediately choose to live in the city aren’t mentioned, but they seem to be implied by the description from chapter 7 of guards barring the doors of the city. Evidently, it was

dangerous, or at least had that reputation. It would have been this city which was most hated by the enemies of Israel. And Jerusalem at this point certainly would have offered no opportunities for commerce and trading, no money to be earned there as there would be in the country through farming of corn and cattle. So the people would naturally go to where the money was. Out in the country.

In our day, it’s just about the opposite. People flock to the cities, because that is where the money is. That is where the jobs are. It was the same dynamic then, when Jerusalem was being restored, though the destination was the country not the city. But some did return to the city. Willingly, without the compulsion of the Lord’s revealed will in the casting of lots. The leaders.

v.1a “Now the leaders of the people dwelt at Jerusalem.”

The leaders did what leaders are supposed to do!

A. Leaders should provide a noble example.

They certainly did here.

v.1-3

Certainly those living there would invite and encourage others to follow, surely their zeal would inspire many. They willingly gave up the security and opportunities for personal financial advancement that existed in the country to set the pattern of living in God’s holy city. Their goal was not focused upon their earthly status, but upon heavenly and spiritual values. They would live in God’s city.

I could say many things, though I’ll be brief in application. Leaders are called to such a worthy example today. Indeed, as Peter writes,

1 Peter 5:1 “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: 2 Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; 3 nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

Not lording it over you, but being examples for you. That’s leadership, as God defines and honors it. And such leadership is necessary because,

B. God’s people often fail in their courage and faith.

And again, they certainly did here. Only by the casting of lots could 10% of the people be compelled to live in the city, and the blessed and praised those men who offered willingly to live there.

They failed in courage and faith! In God’s providence, there were leaders to give them strength. May it be so today! May it be so in this church! May God raise up such leaders, men willing to consider the good of the church to be a higher consideration than their own personal good. Jesus calls that self-denial. He spoke to his own disciples with these words,

Mat. 20:26 “Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. 27 And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave — 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

That’s leadership, according to Jesus’ example. Finally, let’s look through this list of people who were,

III. WORKERS IN THE HOLY CITY.

I’ll list the general groups for you, not taking too much time to

look at each name individually. First there were the laymen, the heads of the provinces and others. They are listed in verses 3-9. The list of priests is found in verses 10-14. Then the broader tribe of Levites, in verses 15-18. And other groups are specified in verses 19-24.

After all that, there is a listing of the cities and villages in which the people lived in the country, mostly from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Those villages are listed in verses 25-36. Let me emphasize just a couple things from those lists. First,

A. God appointed servants to attend to the external work needed to maintain the temple.

The building itself, the outward appearance. It is described in, v.16

I believe the reference is to the so-called secular concerns of God’s house, things that were subservient to its spiritual concerns, but still necessary and important. This would include things like the collecting of the contributions and tithes and the providing of materials for the temple service, lest the inward business would have been starved and have stood still. “The outside work of the house of God” is still a concept we would recognize today. It might have reference to our parking lot, or the upkeep of our grass.

In the early church described in the book of Acts, there was the inward, spiritual work of prayer and the ministry of the word. And there was the outward, physical work of making sure all the widows were properly and equally cared for. Both aspects of ministry are essential for a healthy church, and both sorts of things seemed to be taken care of in Jerusalem in Nehemiah 11.

There were servants who “had the oversight of the business

outside of the house of God.” And there were servants inside the house of God.

B. God set in place servants to direct the worship offered by God’s people.

v.17 “...the leader who began the thanksgiving with prayer.”

What did he do? He led the singing of the psalm. I should note that in the the OT that was a priestly duty. It wasn’t a choir director or a performance of special music, but one from the tribe of the Levites, a priest, offering a sacrifice on behalf of the people. And then the full range of temple servants.

v.22 “Also the overseer of the Levites at Jerusalem was Uzzi the son of Bani, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micha, of the sons of Asaph, the singers in charge of the service of the house of God. 23 For it was the king’s command concerning them that a certain portion should be for the singers, a quota day by day.”

Again, let me note that the temple singers were priests, offering a priestly sacrifice. Therefore, the direct NT carryover of this principle would be the joyful singing of the whole congregation, for we are all now priests, offering to God our sacrifice of praise.

There are still servants to direct the worship offered by God’s people today in the NT temple, but they are not priests. There is no one who stands between you and God in order to offer a sacrifice on your behalf. Specifically, I am not your priest. I do not stand between you and God. I stand in the gap, as it were, with the authority vested in me by the laying on of the hands of the presbytery, to proclaim and pronounce to you the word of God. But I am not a priest. I am not an intercessor. Rather, simply a minister of the gospel, a minister of Jesus.

You and I both have one and the same great high priest, the one and only one intercessor, and his name is Jesus. That is the great advancement from OT worship to NT worship. Jesus is the one who offers your sacrifice to God, and renders that sacrifice acceptable. Jesus is the one who intercedes for you in the presence of God.

And never is that more obvious and evident than when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. It is my right and responsibility to administer this sacrament as a minister of the gospel, with our Session. But as I do that each week, let me emphasize two things that you will be able to witness and observe. Two outward things that represent great inward truths.

First, I will stand behind the table. I offer the sacrament to you. I distribute the elements to you. I am God’s servant to administer the supper to you. But take great note of the fact that I do not stand between you and the bread and juice. I do not stand between you and Christ. I will stand behind the table.

And, secondly, I receive those elements myself, as one of you. I, too, am served. That’s why we do this song and dance up here, because it’s important. It’s important for me to receive the elements from one of my fellow elders. For I am not your priest. Before God, I stand in exactly the same place as you. And I partake of the elements just as you do. I feed upon Christ as he is offered in the sacrament, not through the priesthood of any man. And not upon any authority I would have as a priest. I feed upon Christ by faith, as a sinner saved by grace, proclaiming the Lord’s death for my sins, until he comes.

So it is that all of our worship, all that we do together in worship, is a foretaste of what it will be in the new Jerusalem. Every time we come to worship together, we come to a holy city,

the city of God. And we come with the great encouragement of knowing that,

Phil.3:20 “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.”