



Almost ten years ago I went to Africa for the first time. To be honest, I didn't really want to go on the trip but my wife really wanted to visit Africa and our church was sending a missions team there. When we arrived I met a family who might have been the least likely family to impact me. They weren't pastors. They hadn't been missionaries their whole life. They never even went to Bible college!

One fall Larry Wolters went on a mission trip to Africa with his church. Being from New York, the trip rocked his world. He saw the poverty. He saw the lack of food. But more importantly he saw how badly people needed Jesus. The following year he went back and brought his wife and two children. This was a yearly thing for about three years. Then Larry went from going with the teams to leading the teams. After taking multiple trips to Burkina, Larry began a conversation with his pastor about how he felt God was leading him to move his family to serve there full-time. After lots of prayer and many conversations, they packed their things in a Con-ex box and moved across the world.

What prompts a person to do something like this? What compels someone to leave the security of their job, the comfort of their neighborhood and the community of their church to serve God in another location? Today in the story of Nehemiah we're going to see how a group of people made a similar decision.

If you're just joining us, let me quickly catch us up on the life of Nehemiah. Nehemiah had received his brother's report about Jerusalem while he was living in Susa. King Artaxerxes granted Nehemiah permission to travel to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. It only took 52 days to rebuild the wall. From the time he first heard about the problem when he was in Susa until the wall was completed was only nine months. Nehemiah's job wasn't to just rebuild the wall, but to establish the people of God as a mature community of people living within the walls of Jerusalem. Basically he was called to Urban Renewal.

At this point in the book the walls have been rebuilt and the Temple is starting to function again. The wall needed to be rebuilt to provide safety and security to the Holy City of Jerusalem. A city without a wall wasn't even considered a bonafide city. The book of Nehemiah is all about God's glory revealed in His city through His people. So, now we find Nehemiah with an even greater task—the rebuilding of the people of God. And yet again, he faces another major problem: no one is living in Jerusalem. The once glorious city of Jerusalem is a heap of rubble and looks

more like Detroit than Dubai. The city needs to be inhabited in order for the center of God's activity to thrive. But, how will Nehemiah, how will God, get the people to move back in?

Godly Leaders

This is where we will pick up the story this morning. I need to warn you, on the surface this is perhaps one the most boring chapters in all the Bible. This is the kind of chapter you skip over because you can't even pronounce any of the names you come across. But it's a huge miss to skip it. As we reflect on this chapter, we'll begin to see what it teaches us about how much God cares about people.

After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers, the musicians and the Levites were appointed. I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do (Neh. 7:1–2).

The key word here is "appoint." Nehemiah has to appoint some key leaders to make sure the city is run well. So far as Jerusalem was concerned, Nehemiah was now prepared to work through two chief operating officers. His brother Hanani would be the civic leader. This would be our modern day equivalent of mayor. The second was Hananiah who would be the military leader, or our modern day equivalent of chief of police.

Look at the criteria Nehemiah used for choosing these men: "men of integrity who feared God more than most people do." Nehemiah chose men who had proved their faithfulness to the Lord. Empowering men like this to lead would ensure Godly leadership. Theodore Roosevelt, a remarkable American president, once said to a group of leaders, "The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it." Sounds like what Nehemiah did.

Now that Nehemiah has men he can trust in the leadership roles, he gives them directions to keep the gates shut.

I said to them, "The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses" (v. 3).

I find it significant that he puts such an emphasis on keeping the gates shut and having men there to guard them. It's almost like Nehemiah has just established the first neighborhood watch program. His actions reveal that Nehemiah was still concerned about Jerusalem. There was still a possibility of invasion from the enemy who opposed the rebuilding of the wall. There was another invasion he is concerned about also, a more subtle invasion. This was the invasion of thoughts and ideas coming through the gates that could undermine the work of God.

Let me ask you a few questions. Are you guarding the gates around your own life? Do you have things you just won't let in? Sure, you lock your doors to keep your home safe at night. You lock your car so no one steals it. But do you have gates on your phone to protect your walk with the Lord? Do you have gates on your conversations at work with people of the opposite gender to protect your marriage from adultery? Do you have gates to prevent yourself from falling into addiction? The reason we don't put up gates is because it's hard work!

Let me get personal on the need for gates in our lives. You might know that I have an addictive personality. I started drinking alcohol at the age of 13. I've been arrested multiple times for alcohol-related instances, the first being when I was 17 years old. When I was 20 I surrendered my life to the Lord and made a commitment to follow Him. I knew that meant I needed to give up alcohol, I needed to put up a gate in my life to keep alcohol out because I am not the kind of person who can have just one drink. This has been a gate I've had to reinforce, lock shut and fight to keep in place. There have been many times that I wanted to have just one sip but I know, if I start drinking again, sooner or later I'm going to end up back in jail. I've kept this gate up for 15 years now and have to fight daily to keep it in place because it's still a struggle for me. I have other gates up too, gates to keep porn out, gates to stay away from gambling, gates to avoid overspending because I've seen how destructive these temptations have been for me. When talking about gates in our lives, I'm not saying we shut ourselves off from the world, but we do guard ourselves from the impurity of the world.

God's People

The first step in urban renewal was for Jerusalem to establish Godly leadership after the wall was erected. As the chapter continues we are going to see a minor problem: God's city is walled, has Godly leadership, but no one wants to live there!

Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt (v. 4).

How come the city looks like a ghost town? Historically we know it's been about 160 years since the Babylonians destroyed the city. They almost decimated the entire population of Jerusalem and carried off those they didn't kill. The people who returned

with the first group of exiles went to settle in their original towns outside the city of Jerusalem. Since the city was in shambles and defenseless it wasn't the ideal location.

Knowing this historical information let's think about this in our context, in our time period. What are some reasons people would rather live in the suburbs or the countryside as opposed to the city? The most obvious reason is cities are crowded. The crime rate is much higher. The cost of living can be greater. A few weeks ago I was talking with a friend who is working on lofts in the city that rent for \$3000 a month. There is also limited parking. If you have children, the schools can be perceived as not as good. To be more graphic, you might have prostitutes and drug dealers on your block. And there is increased amounts of violence. I'm not discouraging city living; I'm merely bringing out reasons why people, not just Christians, avoid the city.

Nehemiah needed to establish a plan for urban renewal so he gathered the Jewish leaders together to see who was available to populate the city.

So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return. This is what I found written there: (v. 5).

The largest part of chapter 7 is the extract from the archives, meaning Nehemiah grabbed a dusty old book, written some 70 years earlier by Ezra the priest, to see who was available to live within the walls of Jerusalem. They were people who could trace their ancestry back to Abraham. Now they couldn't just jump on ancestry.com, they had to do it the old fashioned way. Why would it be important to gather the leaders and examine the genealogical records? Nehemiah had to know who was available to populate the city. Only those who were listed in the genealogical records were qualified to live in God's Holy City. These were the names of people who had sacrificed a great deal to establish Israel after 70 years of exile.

The document contained nine categories of people. I'm not going to read the entire chapter but I want to break it down. Staring in verse 7 we see the original leaders. In verses 8-38 we have a list of Jewish people and their original towns. Keep going in the chapter and verses 39-60 we have the original priests, Levites and temple servants. In verses 61-65 we have a list of people who couldn't prove their Jewish ancestry. Then we move on to getting a total number of people and animals who returned. The chapter ends with a record of those who gave generously to rebuild the Temple of God.

So what does this genealogy have to do with us? At first glance this is just a big long list of names that you could never pronounce. If you're honest, you would probably skim it when you came to it while reading the Bible. Maybe, just maybe, if you're expecting a child you might go here to find a baby name. It would

have been an honor to have your name listed here, but there is a better book to have your name written in. Did you know for us to enter heaven we are going to have a spiritual genealogy that connects us to Jesus Christ? Did you know there is a book written for that very purpose?

Throughout Scripture we get glimpses of what is known as the book of life. Jesus tells us to rejoice because our names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20). Paul speaks to his fellow workers whose "names are in the book of life" (Philippians 4:3). It all comes to a climax in Revelation when we see only those whose names are written in the book of life will be allowed to enter. *"Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life"* (Rev. 21:27). Is your name written in the book of life? All of this seemingly meaningless genealogy points us to Jesus Christ and the book of life. Without having their name written in the book the Jews couldn't live in the city. Without having our name in the book of life, we can't enjoy heaven with God.

God's City

With the genealogy established it was time to begin populating God's city. Turn to Nehemiah chapter 11. We're not skipping chapters 8-10; we will pick them up as the series continues, but for today we want to keep with the flow of urban renewal and moving to chapter 11 is the natural progression of the text since it involves populating God's city with God's people.

Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem. The rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten of them to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns. The people commended all who volunteered to live in Jerusalem (11:1-2).

The leaders are the first to settle in the city. What a great example! It was the leaders who caught the vision to restore God's holy city and led the way in populating it. They knew if they weren't the first to sacrifice and settle there, the people would never make the sacrifice.

After the leaders, there are two factors that brought people in the city. First, the leaders cast lots to bring one out of every ten people from the countryside into the city. It was something like the military draft during the Vietnam war. When a man's number came up, he went.

The second way the city was populated is of greater interest to us. Nehemiah tells us there was a group of people who "volunteered" to live in Jerusalem. This word volunteer points to an inner sense of compulsion. There are the nine-tenths who are living outside the city walls and God stirs in a number of them to move to the city. In other words, deep down inside these volunteers were compelled by God. These people left their school

district, left their home in the county and came to live in God's holy city so it wouldn't continue to be desolate.

Did you know that the new Jerusalem will be a big city? In Revelation 21 we see detailed plans of what heaven will be like. In Revelation 21:16 John tells us heaven will be a city. It's going to be a big city, 1400 square miles to be exact. Let me put into perspective how big 1400 square miles is. The Peninsula, where we live, is 50 miles long. From the top of California to the bottom is almost 800 miles. The size of the new Heaven is almost double the length of the state of California.

Earlier we talked about reasons to not live in the city but these people ignored all the reasons. We are all aware of the accelerating urbanization of the world. At the time of Jesus there were only about 250 million people in the world. That number is less than the current population of the United States today. Two thousand years later that number skyrocketed to 6 billion people on planet earth. By 2100, that number is projected to reach 11 billion people on planet earth. The vast majority of these new people are anticipated to live in cities.

Let's put this in comparison. Two hundred years ago only 2.5 percent of the world's population lived in cities, the rest lived in small towns and villages. The figure jumped to 30 percent by 1950. Today the UN reports 54 percent of people live in large cities. You might be wondering, "How do these global statistics compare in America and what does this have to do with me?" Let me answer those for you. Over 80 percent of the American population lives in a metropolitan area. New York City is our largest metropolitan area with over 18 million people and of course Los Angeles is next in line with over 12 million people. Compare some of this to the entire state of Wyoming with a population of just 500,000 people.

What does all this information on cities mean for us today? It seems that God is a big fan of cities. He wants Jerusalem repopulated and heaven is a huge city. If people are going to be living in cities, where is the most strategic place for us to be the light of the world? The most strategic place for you to be a light for Jesus is right where you are living. If you are living in the city, keep being a light to your neighbors. If you are living around the corner, keep being a light to your neighbors. We live in an extremely strategic part of the world. I actually think what happens here influences the entire world because of technology, bioscience and much more.

About three years ago my wife and I were praying for where God would lead us next. We sensed our time at our last church was done and were waiting for God to open another door. As we prayed I specifically sensed God saying, "I'm going to lead you to a city where you will have a global impact." At that time we were interviewing at a church in the Los Angeles area and I was convinced He was speaking about that church, until we visited

CPC. After visiting here I really sensed this was where God would lead us and sure enough He did. There is a main thing we've been learning this morning and I want to summarize it like this: God's people live in God's location for God's glory.

Everything we've talked about has brought us to this point. Please don't pass this statement off by thinking something like, "Well, you're a pastor, that's easy for you to say." We all need to think about the real reason why we're living where we're living. You might need to do some serious evaluating in your life by asking questions like: "Do I live in my neighborhood because it has the best school?" "Do I live on my block because it's convenient?" These are hard questions to ask but they can begin the process of great conversations about where He wants you to live to bring Him glory.

So the rest of the chapter is another long list of names. This time it's not a dusty old book they pull out but a new book they are writing! It's a book of all the names of the people who end up moving into Jerusalem. Something catches my attention in this list of names: it's the amount of people who are dedicated to God. There are almost 1200 priests and close to 300 Levites. These men had dedicated their entire life to serving the Lord. When we add up all the names of the people it is estimated there are close to 10,000 who are occupying the city that was almost empty when we started this morning in chapter 7.

We just covered 135 verses of what you might have initially thought was going to be super boring. Nehemiah's job wasn't to just rebuild the wall, but to establish the people of God as

a mature community of people living within the walls of Jerusalem. There are really two ways I see us applying this text to our lives. The first is for those who have placed their faith and trust in Christ Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Live where God has called you. Really live where God has called you for His glory. Your name is already written in the book of life. You have a great opportunity to help others get their name written in the book. Keep using your gifts and talents to invest in the Kingdom of God for His glory! Keep seeking opportunities to rebuild our broken world and build God's Kingdom.

The second application is for those who have yet to put their faith in Jesus Christ. Is your name written in the book of life? The genealogical list of Israelite names was an exclusive list. The only way to get on the list was birth. Meaning that inclusion was completely out of the control of a person.

Jesus has a book too but it operates differently. Jesus' book is the Lamb's Book of Life. It is exclusive because only those whose name is in the book will be granted entrance into God's heavenly city. However, by placing their faith in Jesus Christ, anyone can get their name written into this book. If you believe in your heart that Christ died for your sins and that God raised Him from the dead you will be saved. If you simply place your trust in Him, you will also find your name in the book of life. Making this decision, in my opinion, is the best choice you could ever make.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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