

Dedicated to God's Ongoing Work!

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[0 : 0 0] So we're going to read from Nehemiah, chapters 11 and 12 this morning. And like last week, there's a lot of names involved. So we're going to selectively pick out parts of the passage.

So we're going to read from chapter 11, verses 1 to 4, and then chapter 12, verses 27 to 47. So this is the new residents of Jerusalem.

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. These are the provincial leaders who settled in Jerusalem. Now some Israelites, priests, Levites, temple servants, and descendants of Solomon's servants, lived in the towns of Judah, each on their own property in the various towns, while other people from both Judah and Benjamin lived in Jerusalem.

And we have there, reading on the descendants of Judah, Benjamin, priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, various musicians. And that takes us to the end of chapter 11 and going into chapter 12 too.

[1 : 1 8] And then we resume our reading where there has been lots of names of people who had repopulated the city into chapter 12, which is 27 onwards. The dedication of the wall of Jerusalem.

At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, hearts, and lyres.

The musicians also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem, from the villages of the Netophathites, from Beth Gilgal, and from the area of Jiva and Asmaveth.

For the musicians had built villages for themselves around Jerusalem. When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.

I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks. One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right towards the dung gate.

[2 : 2 3] Hoshiah and half of the leaders of Judah followed them along with various names there in verse 33 and 34. As well as some priests with trumpets and also Zechariah, son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah.

And these names down through verse 36. And Hanani with musical instruments prescribed by David, the man of God. Esra, the teacher of the law, led the procession.

At the fountain gate, they continued directly up the steps of the city of David on the ascent to the wall and passed above the site of David's palace to the water gate on the east.

The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. I followed them on top of the wall together with half the people past the tower of the Obans to the broad wall, over the gate of Ephraim, the Jeshana gate, the fish gate, the tower of Hananel, and the tower of the hundred as far as the sheep gate.

At the gate of the garden they stopped. The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God. So did I, together with half the officials as well as the priests.

[3 : 33] They are mentioned in verse 41 with their trumpets. And also, these names mentioned, the choirs sang under the direction of Jezreha. And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy.

The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away. At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, first fruits and tithes.

From the fields around the towns they were to bring into the storerooms the portions required by the law for the priests and the Levites. For Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites.

They performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did also the musicians and gatekeepers according to the commands of David and his son Solomon.

For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the musicians and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the musicians and the gatekeepers.

[4 : 40] They also set aside the portion for the other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Heron. Amen. And may God add his blessing to the reading of his holy and inspired word.

Lord, in that load of names, but we believe that all of God's word is inspired and God breathed, and we pray that God would bless our time together. So many of you will know, at the beginning of 2022, Highland Council approved plans for 93 new homes in Invergordon.

We're seeing them being built currently around, or at least the ground being prepared, in Cromlett and Gordon Terrace. And these houses are a mix of one to five bedroom houses.

There's flats, there's bungalows, there's self-build plots. And as we've seen with the reduction in the speed limit, there's been an active encouragement from the council to reduce the driving speeds across the board.

That's why they've been in place for these new houses. There also will be electric vehicle charging points, and that's seen to be future-proofing the development and to keep the streets clear.

[5 : 52] There will also be some off-street parking at every home, and there'll be court-side parking at the flats. And we're also going to see a number of matured trees that are protected in the area as well, so that will be able to be protected, and will be affected, rather.

So that's happening in Invergordon. We've got some new houses being built, and it's great to see, and we look forward to the ongoing development. And then the nearest city to us, Inverness, half an hour away, in 2021, the Scottish Cities Alliance, don't ask me how I found out this, named it, I've been on the Scottish Cities Alliance website a lot this week, but it named it, Inverness, the fastest-growing city in Scotland, and actually in one of the fastest-growing cities in Europe, and maybe some of us know that already.

And apparently Inverness's population has increased by 15% in the last 20 years. That's quite a lot, 15%. But maybe you'll be surprised to discover, like myself, that the population of the city centre of Inverness has decreased in the last decade by 6.6%.

So the whole city has increased by 15%, the city centre decreasing. Other Scottish cities in comparison, Dundee, Inver, of course, city centre thriving, booming, it's growing.

But Inverness, it's out with the area, two to three miles out within the area. That's where there's a lot of growth. But in the city centre itself, there's maybe more office redevelopment rather than houses and flats being led.

[7 : 31] And so the housing chairman, the former housing chairman, said that they're setting out to stop the population falling further and get it growing again through making more central flats available.

And that could be a huge boost for the city centre, both economically and socially. So we're not at a Highland Council planning meeting. Why am I telling you this? Well, I'm telling you this because it has a lot to do with today's passage.

Because we find ourselves on the back of last week where we thought of Nehemiah chapters 9 and 10. We hear this remarkable prayer of repentance, which leads into this scriptural retelling of history, God's story, which is the people of God's story, how God worked through his people, how he led them out of Egypt and into the promised land, how God's people had been unfaithful, God restored them, he'd been faithful, God's people had been unfaithful, he'd restored them, he'd been faithful, and so on.

There was a scriptural retelling of story, but it ended with a godly hope and this desire for spiritual renewal. And now the people of God, at the end of chapter 10, are left asking this question, is revival on the horizon?

We're preparing ourselves, we're preparing our hearts. There's been a time of joy in chapter 8 and the recovery of the word of God and the importance and the primacy of the scriptures in the life of the people of God.

[8 : 50] Chapter 9 has been repentance of how God's people had failed God and they bring that to God as a sacrificial offering. In chapter 10, they're telling their story and they're saying, God, we know we've failed you, but we've known that you're a covenant-keeping God who keeps his promises, will you restore us again?

And now they're thinking, is it time for revival? Is God going to bring about a huge revival? Because as it stands, the city of Jerusalem is sparsely populated. The walls have been rebuilt, we've got to that point.

The walls have been rebuilt, but the city is pretty empty. Like Inverness, the population has decreased, not by 6.6%, but by a lot. Apparently there was, at the end of chapter 7, where we see the people come again, there's about 30,000 people that come back and there's another 3,000 that come in this chapter here, chapters 11 and 12.

And what we find at the end of chapter 10, we read last week, it ends with this hinge point. We will not neglect the house of our God. That was what the people of God were saying.

We will not neglect the house of our God. And it seems to look good on the outside. They're dedicating themselves to God and they want God to revive them. But there's also things bubbling up from inside.

[10 : 02] There's warning signs in the midst of that within the people of God. Because within their rebuilding, within their, all they're saying and putting their mouth out there and saying, we will not neglect the house of our God.

When it came to the practice, it was more about the rules that were enforced through the law of God rather than the mission of God's people, which was to be a distinctive people and to look outwards and to care for those around them.

So it had the, the warning signs were there. They were looking inwardly rather than saying to look up and to look, to look up to God and to look out to what he was doing. And so this leads us to chapter 11, the repopulation of Jerusalem.

It's a large project. It's a big project. It's a much more Inverness-scale sized project. It's the walls have been rebuilt and then the people would need to rebuild themselves.

And this is a day too for us over 2,000 years later where we're seeing a rebuilding taking place in the church, a reshaping, a reshaping of our structures within the Church of Scotland specifically, but also a reshaping of how we do church as a whole in the United Kingdom.

[11 : 12] Because what we're finding is we've held onto a way in the past that says God has blessed that, God has revived that, and we're going to take that formula and we're going to say that's going to be imported into how we do church always.

And even though God might have blessed that back in the day, say for instance the Lewis revival of 49 to 52, God blessed that and what an amazing outpouring of God's Spirit in Barvis and in the island of Lewis and Paris and in the Western Isles.

But let's look at some of the context there. They were exclusive psalm singing. They were AV, authorized version. That was some of the context. And sometimes what would happen was 50 years on from that revival in Barvis, they're still singing exclusive psalmity.

They're still reading from the authorized version. But the context had changed. The world has changed. Music has come into the church. Fresh versions through scholarship and through new scrolls and through fresh translations of the Bible have come in.

The English Standard Version, the New International Version. Contexts have changed. Cities and regions have changed. But churches remain there saying, no, God has blessed it like that. So God's always surely going to bless it like that.

[12 : 31] But that's not the case. And so God is rebuilding his church now here in 2023. And though we find ourselves now in the place where we have fewer numbers, perhaps fewer resources in some ways, the time is at hand to try new things and to not say we're going to completely ditch the old.

We're not saying that at all. We're going to honour the old. We're going to honour our heritage because it's part of who we are. We're always going to have that. We're always going to have psalm singing. We sang a psalm this morning. We're always going to honour the Bible verses as we've had in the past but we're not going to stick to that rigidly.

We're going to say, God, what are you doing in this new day? How are we going to engage with people in our community who have no scope of any church language or churchianity or know how to do church speak?

How are we going to engage with people? Now there is more opportunity than ever before to take that risk. And one Christian writer used to say that faith is spelled R-I-S-K, taking a risk.

And so this is what we want to seek God's hand and see in this passage today that God's rebuilding work begins in us and that we might see his kingdom advance not simply sticking to the ways of old.

[13 : 39] We cling to the promises of old but we look to what God is doing now, here and now and that we might have the faith of a child to just go for it in our day and recover the things that matter to God for this moment and this time.

And so we find that in chapter 11 it tells us that more and more people were needed to repopulate the city of Jerusalem and it's not an unorganised mess where they're saying I'll take you, you, you, you I'll do, sort it.

It's very organised. It's what's called a practice, the practice of redistributing populations. Chapter 7 tells us the city was large and spacious, there were few people in it and the houses had not yet been rebuilt.

So the houses are now being rebuilt and they need to repopulate the area the leaders Nehemiah, Ezra and other leaders the Levites and gatekeepers the ones we read about they're already in the capital but now an urbanisation project was underway to refill this barren capital.

And so we can say as a whole it's not a day to despise the small beginnings. It's a day where there will be seeds of hope and shoots small shoots leaping from the ground saying God's at work here but you just might not see it yet.

[14 : 53] God's at work over here but you just might not notice it yet. Or God is at work but you've taken your eye off that and let's bring it together. And if chapter 10 ends with the words we will not neglect the house of our God this is the next step then for the people of God in their eyes and what they believe God is telling them to resettle the city of Jerusalem.

This is the way of demonstrating that God is blessing them and is with them. So we're not told exactly why it's the case but it seems to be that the practice of casting lots which we see at the beginning of chapter 11 is how they come to decide that one out of every ten people would live in Jerusalem.

Proverbs 16 33 says this the lot is cast into the lap but it's every decision is from the Lord. So perhaps the mindful of that practice in those words from Solomon in his day and the words that he wrote.

Whatever the reasoning one thing we know that this is a people who are conscious of their roots that they would be for God a kingdom of priests and a holy nation that there would be an establishing of a new order albeit with great uncertainty and great challenges in front of them.

And so here's what they have on their side they have on their side a distinct awareness that God is already present with them because what we see in verse 1 and then in verse 18 of chapter 11 that Jerusalem is called the holy city.

[16 : 20] One out of every ten of them are to live in Jerusalem the holy city and then in verse 18 the Levites in the holy city totaled 284 the holy city that's the two times we see that be mentioned in Nehemiah and what we might well think in regards to Jerusalem being the holy city we might think of the book of Revelation where it's specifically mentioned the new Jerusalem God's holy city where we'll all dwell there one day we might also think of Ezekiel chapter 48 where we read this in the final verse of Ezekiel in the final chapter and the name of the city from that time on will be the Lord is there Jehovah Shammah the Lord is there well where we might be reading the book of Ezekiel we might think and be tempted to think that it ends in chapter 46 the temple was to be restored for the worship of God and that's where we might link in with Nehemiah the temple's been restored the worship of God that's it we're done and dusted actually Ezekiel 47 and 48 goes on saying that the blessing of God and the glory of God extends to the whole city that there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God the holy place where the most high dwells and so that's where we can link in

Ezekiel with Nehemiah here that Jerusalem is a holy city Jehovah Shammah the Lord is there it's not a day to despise small beginnings it's a day where God's people would be moving back into the city and that was seen to be them taking a risk for God it was a step of faith it was the will of God for them to move so that they would be a distinctive set apart people God's own they were to live and move as if God's holiness could be seen through the way they lived their lives and this is what God is asking us to do in this day to take that step of faith with him not apart from him but with him and I'm reminded that the Matt Redmond song it's an old Matt Redmond song from the 90s it's called Send Revival Start With Me and the lines one of the lines says this we're looking to your promises of old that if we pray and humble ourselves you will come and heal our land you will come and so God's people they're looking to the promises of old they would rely on the promises of old and we need to do that as well but with this qualifier attached to it that he who is in us is greater than he who is in the world we have Jesus the people there in the old covenant in the day of Nehemiah

Jesus wasn't yet yet come in the flesh in human flesh they were people of the living God the one God but now we have Jesus as people who live on the other side of the cross and what Jesus did for us and on Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out on all people so that the blessing of God would go out to all nations he who is in us who lives in us is greater than he who is in the world and who might be against us and so Jesus has come and he is building his kingdom he's building his kingdom in Scotland though we might not see it there are seeds of hope there are shoots of growth in Scotland and the question is this whether we'll will we choose to believe it and the answer to that whether we'll choose to believe it or not could be part of our destiny because rather than thinking the answers to our problems as a church are simply forget to get people in the doors on a Sunday morning what if we need to recognise afresh the ways that God is at work in this church from week to week what about instead of seeing it from a Sunday morning 11am a Sunday evening 6.30pm we see all week what is God doing what is God doing in the mountain ladder what is God doing in the super lunches what is God doing through the community opportunities we're receiving and people who've been getting in touch with us looking to use our space and things that are soon to come what is God doing through the young people in the games nights what is God doing through the youth lunch clubs what is God doing through little buddies and we might not see the little buddies mums walking through the door just yet but that's not the end of the answer the answer is how are people meeting and experiencing the unconditional love through our lives through what they experience through meeting us and through coming to this building how are people experiencing with no strings attached the unconditional love of God now I'm going to be sharing one of my experiences from the

Sleeping Giant conference this evening and again I encourage you to come because it was really inspirational I please encourage you to come not from the religious no you have to come to church but please if you're able to I would encourage you but let me give you one quote from the Barber's Revival Worthies as a taster one of them said this too many people are standing on the premises of the church when they should be standing on the promises of God and I love that too many people standing on the premises of the church that it's about church and don't get me wrong Christ will build his church this is his beloved bride and he's the bridegroom but the starting point for us from this chapter is not to despise the days of small beginnings but to stand on the promises of God to see how God is at work in the premises of God in the grounds and in the community and to look from there to look up and to look out not to see merely on a Sunday morning but to see what God is already doing and what he's yet to do and so the people of God as we look on to chapter 12 how they dedicated the city there's a sense of joyful celebration there was the preparation the people who had purified themselves ceremonially there was all that purification that that comes back from the old order of Moses the Levitical order and that's just them following the laws of God and that's them revering the word of God and then there's the assembled groups there's lots of music there's joyful music and I tell you what being at the

Sleeping Giant conference at the weekend I was able to blast out on the drums and it was just great but you know actually having said that what I found were the most powerful times of corporate worship is when I just took my earplugs out my earplugs out and I heard the singing and we started singing last night Psalm 100 all people out on earth to dwell we started the conference with singing I stand amazed acapella and there's a beauty in that and we might want to think that that's how it was here that they're standing on the promises of God and that they're singing they're giving thanks there were choirs there were choirs we see in verse 31 one goes to the left in verse 38 the other goes to the right verse 40 they come together and there's this big joyful celebration they're literally singing on the rooftops God's name and they're looking to the promises of old and they're rejoicing in God's glory and how God has set them free and how God has delivered them it was in a time of extended thanksgiving I wonder if we know that worship and our singing and you don't have to be a singer but I wonder if we know that worship is a weapon it's a weapon that we can use in prayer in our intercessions to God and if we want to see God move then we can know that our singing has a purpose and that we can sing yes before the throne of God above

[23 : 39] I have a strong and perfect plea a great high priest whose name is love he loved me whoever lives and pleads for me that's what he's doing he's praying for me right now worship is a weapon God's people restoring God's honour and God's worship and God's house and God's glory had been extended God's blessing had been extended to the whole city of God and today for us we can say that God's glory resides in us just as we spoke with the young people with the kids that the glory of God has returned to the temple through the passion of Jesus and the spirit now lives in us and we're called through the empowering of the spirit to be witnesses for Jesus we're to be witnesses to his perfect life and we do believe that Jesus lived a perfect life he was fully man so he's able to fully empathise with all our struggles all our frailties all our weaknesses but he's also fully God because he needed to accomplish God's mission and if we believe Jesus to be real we need to believe that he's fully God and fully man and we believe that Jesus died a sacrificial death on the cross he died as a penalty for our sins and that penalty being that God hates sin and that we're all sinners but Jesus stood in the place and he paid the penalty for us and he was crushed he was wounded for our transgressions he was bruised for our iniquities and by his stripes we're healed and we know that we're saved forever and we know that through his glorious resurrection we're raised to life with Christ and we know through his magnificent ascension that he has ascended to the throne of the Father where he ever lives and pleads for me and you and he promises when he comes again healing all things new but we've got a choice to make whether we want to follow that Jesus or not and there's a choice for the people of God here to look to the promises of old to look to the living God to look up and to look out to the mission of God to look up to the promises of the living God to look out to the mission of God and so there's a sense here from verses 27 to 43 where we see the the rhythms of a spiritual life what does it look like and what does that mean for us well we need the the Holy Spirit who lives in us to illuminate the word of God

I mean we're we're Presbyte we're Scottish Presbyterians we're known to be people of the book the Holy Bible and we need to recover that sense of the authority of the Bible that's what will keep us going in these days where there's where there's no authority in the culture that we live in where everyone can say what they like and everyone has their way of truth but it's if you look to the promises of old they'll know that they're found in God's word we need the power of prayer corporately we need to think about coming to a prayer meeting on a Thursday night because it's not it's not really woo it's it's lovely we have lovely times of prayer it's not intimidating I promise you that we need to recover the power of prayer individually corporately if we want to see God's kingdom established in this place we need to offer God a sacrificial offering of praise we need to give that to him we need to give it to you we read at the end of chapter 11 the sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away far away the worship of God was restored to his city it's a chance for fresh starts it's a chance to make the ways of the living God known it's a chance for the people to be his witnesses and to attest to the wonders of his ways and i wonder is it time for us today to rededicate ourselves to the promises of old but look to what god is doing now here through jesus and his purposes is this a moment in time that we would dedicate our lives dedicate this work of god that's going on here and say god it's yours is this a time where we might need to lay down one or two things that we're part of in the church is this a time we might need a season of rest to come away and to recalibrate our what we've got this is a time where we might need to say that our things in the church we might not need to put down in the coming season in order to reshape it's a chance for fresh starts we're in a season of potential and so this offering of worship here is a sacrificial offering given it's okay you can go if you like it's fine um it's a sacrificial offering of praise to god and i think i can maybe close with one final story of how this connects with our lives thank you if this connects with our life and my life personally let me take you back to 2011 where i was studying music and i was back in stormy for the summer holidays and i was just about to go back to uni for my fourth year i was going to do my my dissertation um and i was going to do it on contemporary worship music and i ended up doing that and i remember going in for a um just to see tommy and donna mcneil before i went and tommy said i'll say a wee prayer for you brian and you know god bless you before you go off to uni and as he was praying he said i think i've got a verse for you that i want you to hold on to for the coming year romans 12 verse 1 and 2 romans 12 and that's all about offering our lives as a living sacrifice that which is acceptable and pleasing to god and in view of his mercy toward us i thought thank you that's that's a lovely verse i'll hang on to that i'll take a note of that so then i arrived down in edinburgh and i went to the midweek church meeting our life groups where we had in the church in edinburgh i was and the minister i am mcdonald's there said okay we're going to focus on a verse today uh it's going to be romans chapter 12 verses 1 and 2 okay all right okay uh god i'm taking note of that um and then uh in my daily readings a few days later what came up romans 12 1 and 2 okay all right okay i'm starting to catch on there's something at work here um you know one preacher said that god should only have to tell us once but sometimes he tells us a second time and if he tells us a third time well we better be listening so that got my attention three times had romans 12 uh coming into my attention

and so what what did that mean for me in my final year of uni i really wanted to make it count i really wanted to offer god my all i wanted a first class honors degree not just to to look good on paper i wanted to do it for god's glory i wanted it to be a sacrificial offering to god um i wanted to glorify him through the work that i'd offered him and so as i had been given permission to to um write a dissertation about church uh thank you church worship music and contemporary worship music and about playing drums in church that's what i did at a website called the church drummer and there's some videos on youtube it was a great chance to be able to share my faith with other students um and the course director at the end he was kind of my uh my go-to guy for for meetings uh and his name is graham weir he used to play trumpet in the band orchestral maneuvers in the dark anyone remembers omd uh but he said to me at the end he said well we've had some christians here over the years but um you take it seriously you live it out uh and i'm not saying that to boast in any way but i just look back to that verse in romans 12 chapters 1 and 2 romans chapter 12 verses 1 and 2 i thought god has been faithful he keeps promises in view of god's mercy offer your life offer your bodies as a living sacrifice that which is holy and pleasing to god this is your true and proper worship this is what the people of god in nehemiah's day were looking to do they were giving their whole lives to god afresh that they were seeking to honor and glorify god now when i look to my time there in naker uni in a in a world with creative musicians people who travel and drinking drugs and all the rest of stuff and you know i was a christian i didn't do that stuff you know i never did that stuff but i recognized that i had a calling to be a christian to represent jesus wherever i went and i wonder if today for some of us we we need to sacrifice something to jesus today i wonder if there are some of us who are on the fringes who can come into church maybe for for a long time but we need to to take up that offering to god in view of his mercy toward us in view of what he has done maybe we need to recover that first love for god by setting aside more space for him to speak into our hearts maybe we need corporately to recover the greatness of our god and the strength that he gives us so that when we offer our lives to him we do so completely without holding anything back and for us today maybe know that the empowerment of the holy spirit has been given to us so that we might be witnesses from jesus for for jesus we need power we need courage and that doesn't mean that automatically we'll have no fear it means that when there's the fee fear we'll push on and we'll we'll share jesus through the way we live through our words through everything that our lives might contain those rivers of living water that flow and gush out that we might say to god will you not revive us again so that your people will rejoice in you that we'll never settle for a trickle of god's blessing but we'll be aware of the reality that along with the psalmist we'll we'll see we're not glass half empty we're not even glass full we are my cup run over sort of people we that's the kind of blessing that god promises for us and god is doing something fresh in our time in our day and may he breathe on us with his blessing call us onward upward that we would look up to him look out to the world and give our lives to him give him room in our lives worship him and do so with joyful awe and wonder for our love in our stories pter of his ulcer amen you