

The Return from Exile

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[0 : 00] If you please turn with me now to Nehemiah chapter 11, and reading at the beginning there, Nehemiah chapter 11, we'll read the first two verses.

Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem, 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. And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem. The final sentence of the previous chapter really summarizes for us the situation here in which we find Nehemiah and those that he was leader of here as they sought to rebuild the temple and the worship, the cause of God, you might say, in Jerusalem.

As you know, Ezra and Nehemiah, as books of the Bible, deal particularly with that return from the exile that God's people Israel, Judah, had actually been in exile, a large body of the people gone into exile 70 years prior to their return, as the prophets had prophesied, as God had set before them during the days of Isaiah and Jeremiah and other prophets as well.

And as you know, that itself was in regard to their neglect and to their disobedience against God and against God calling them back to obedience, where he brought on them all that he had threatened by way of their exile.

[1 : 46] And now that they're back, and now that they're under Nehemiah and also with Ezra alongside him and through the prophesying of the likes of Zechariah, the community, the cause of God, the temple itself, the worship of God, all of these things are being rebuilt or in the process of being rebuilt, or some of them by this stage are already more or less completed.

But in all of this we find a lot of important truths, a lot of important principles, and also matters of practice, which are very important to ourselves in regard to our contribution to our serving of God in our day.

Nothing in the Old Testament is irrelevant for our needs today. We've seen that so often from all that we've already looked at from Old Testament Scriptures. And there's always something in these Old Testament books that is absolutely relevant and up-to-date for the church of today, for you and I as we seek to serve God in the gospel.

And this passage itself is no exception. There are two things that we're going to just look at by way of headings. First of all, here is one community serving God.

One community serving God. And here also, secondly, are four considerations. Four matters for our consideration in our serving of God.

[3 : 20] Look at this community then, first of all, serving God. And the matter of community itself is of such vital importance in not only this context, but in the teaching of the Bible at large.

The first step that you notice here in coming to repopulate Jerusalem was by way of casting lots so that a tenth of those who lived outside of the city came back to live within the city precincts.

Of course, the city had been neglected. The walls had come to be in a state of ruin when Nehemiah found them. And everything connected with that, as we see the devastation that these years of neglect had left, is now coming under consideration of Nehemiah and his people, the people under him, as they seek to rebuild.

And in all of that, you can see that the aim of Nehemiah, the aim of the work that's going on, is the rebuilding of this community.

It's not simply a matter of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. It's not simply a rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem. It's not simply rebuilding those structures and those rituals and all the things that have to do with the temple and with the people as they serve in the temple.

[4 : 44] It's to rebuild that community that lives in obedience to God and in covenant faith. As God has brought them back, as God has brought them to apply themselves to these issues, what we

see is that this really is the crux of the matter for them.

They are putting all of those things together regarding the temple and not neglecting the house of God. And all of that shows you that they are really concerned under Nehemiah to be again a community of God and for God here in Jerusalem.

Now, community is a very important matter for ourselves today. We speak of community in different nuances of meaning.

And community, even in the more ordinary use of it, is a very important concept. We value things to do with community when we live as a people, when we need to give others our support or need to receive support for others.

You find still, thankfully, in this town and this island, by and large, that when there are times of trauma, times of bereavement in families, that then you see community as it should be.

[6 : 08] You see community defined as people really together, as one giving of themselves or receiving from others the help and the support that's necessary for us all.

And indeed, that's in the terms of redemption and in terms of the church. That is essentially what God is doing, what God has been doing down through the generations.

We've looked for some time now in the mornings at God's creation of the world of the universe and how we've seen in that a preparation for human beings to come to be set in the environment of this world, particularly to begin with in the Garden of Eden.

And that really itself has to do with community. It wasn't just a single individual. It was a couple. It was a couple with a particular relationship to each other, who then, as they multiplied, set about building a community.

A community, as we'll see later on, that's important in terms of the family. But that's really what the church is about. That's what God is doing. That's what grace builds, what sin has destroyed, what sin has disintegrated, what sin has actually brought us the walls and the community and the observances in Jerusalem as that came to be so fragmented and lying in disuse.

[7 : 42] That's what sin has done to us human beings. We were made for community life. We were not made to exist in isolation as individuals.

That's what sin has actually distorted. That's where you get individualism from. It doesn't come from your Bible. Where do you find in the Bible anything to do with a person who comes to be converted and then God puts them on their own?

It doesn't happen that way. God actually brings people to know himself and he brings people to know himself so that he places them, if they're not there already, in the community of his church, in the community of his believing people, amongst those that value his covenant promises.

That's what we are and should be and must seek to show forth as a congregation that we are, in fact, in the biblical sense, a community.

A people who value each other. A people who actually know that God has put us in this earth not to live isolated lives, but to live in community life.

[8 : 52] And that is what the gospel restores. That's what the gospel restores. That's what God's blessing through the gospel brings about. It changes us from an individualistic approach to life into one that sees the benefit and the value of community in a spiritual sense, as in other senses too.

That's why the gospel tonight is love's provision, God's provision, for those tonight in this town who are damaged in their lives, who live in isolation, who are lonely, who are discouraged because they don't see many people, if anyone from day to day, whose own families may not be in a position to help them out, who may be caught up with various kinds of addiction, who feel so vulnerable. The gospel brings hope and good news and provision in emphasizing here is community life for you.

Here is something where we will be glad to actually incorporate you into the life of the church. When you go out there to deal with people in an outreaching situation.

And every one of us can do that practically, if not spiritually. What street do you and I live on tonight? Do we know our streets? Do we know who's living in our street?

[10 : 27] Do we know who's living next door? Do we know those people in our street who don't see people from week to week? Do we know who would value just dropping in and saying a word to them?

You know, there are words for that personally in our own experience as individuals are just huge. It just happened this week to visit a couple of the care homes where we have some of the

congregation now living there.

And in one of them, I noticed this book that we've been giving out, this book about the queen and her faith, the king she serves.

And there it was sitting on the little table in front of her and she was just sitting there looking at nothing in particular. She suffers from dementia.

Her memory's gone. She doesn't recognize who it is. Not even family. But I just opened the book and I'm not saying this to commend myself. Please don't think that.

[11 : 32] I just opened the book and she suddenly took note when I said, there's the queen. This was a photo of the queen in her youth. And then she began reading through the columns as I held the page.

And as she finished one page, she herself then moved it over to the next page. And she began meaningfully interacting with the photographs, with the things that she was actually reading for herself.

She took her time just reading out the words, but she read them perfectly. And she obviously understood and benefited from and received something of a way of comfort and interest from what she was reading.

That didn't take an awful lot of effort on my part. And indeed, in many ways, it wasn't something I deliberately set out to do, knowing that this would be the result.

But it's just a tiny example of the kind of thing that you can do as an individual in order just to make somebody who feels lonely and left out feel more incorporated and more with a sense of belonging than they were before.

[12 : 41] This is a community being built at Jerusalem for community life. This is a community. We are to be a community. We are to be there in a way that looks out for each other, that seeks to help each other, that makes provision, and is also glad to receive because one of the problems we have in the way that sin has affected our minds and has brought us into a selfish, individualistic outlook is that sometimes we are far more ready to think of giving help to others than we are to receive it from them when we need it.

Community has to work both ways where there is a giving and receiving as far as we can possibly reach out and receive. But secondly, you notice in this one community serving God what we can call God's will and the people's willingness because they cast lots, first of all, to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem.

That's really all it says, but you can see from that that they didn't go about this, they didn't go about rebuilding this community in Jerusalem again without seeking the will of God, without seeking God's guidance.

they could have just immediately decided, well, you can go and you can go and you can go and eventually we'll work out there's roughly a tenth of the total living outside the walls and in these communities outside we'll bring them into the community in the city and around the temple.

But first of all, they cast lots and they were well familiar and sure with the likes of Proverbs 16, 33 where you read that the lot is cast into the lap, but the outcome is of the Lord.

[14 : 23] That's very often in the Old Testament what you find. They cast lots. It may have been done in different ways. But the essence of it is they were not prepared to do things without seeking the mind of God.

And you seek the mind of God. We seek the mind of God together. That's why we have prayer meetings. That's why we have Bibles. That's why we have the Scripture to guide us and the Holy Spirit to appeal to and to guide us and to live in us.

And you can see the people's willingness along with that. They came and all the people and the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem.

Now that doesn't seem all that much as you look at it. But remember that these people had been settled for years outside the walls of Jerusalem.

they had actually settled families and their way of life and their working of the ground perhaps outside the walls of Jerusalem. This was asking them now to disrupt that.

[15 : 29] It was asking them to give up part of that. Asking them to change from that to live in the city. And that was no small demand. That was no small change.

But yet they came willingly. They actually blessed the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem.

When you become a servant of the Lord and all of the Lord's people who live in trust and in faith and in following him they're all his servants.

We are all his servants together in that sense. But we're not conscripts. We're not forced into his service. We don't take it up as something that we're reluctant to do.

That's why we value the great truths that were established again or re-established at the Reformation which we find through our very important catechisms and confessions of faith which sadly perhaps we neglect so much in our day.

[16:38] But they emphasize such things as how do we come willingly to give ourselves to the Lord and to his servants? Well, through God making us willing. Isn't that what it is?

When you come to realize your need of God and you seek after him how does God actually apply to us redemption and salvation?

He makes us willing. It's part of our effectual calling as the doctrines were formulated. This is one of the great terms.

Effectual calling whereby God in addition to other things renews our will. And that's what we all need.

A renewed will. Not just something that happens outwardly. It's something that happens inwardly in the very core of our being where God makes us willing.

[17:39] And that's what you should pray for and I must pray for. To be willing to follow the Lord where he directs us. To be willing to share in to do our part of the work of the kingdom.

And whatever demands are made upon us I know that's easy to say but nevertheless from the scripture it's something we have to say. Because when you look at people ordinarily in life they go to extraordinary lengths sometimes to actually carry out certain things for themselves for their children for their families.

They don't seem ever to think of these things as being put out even if they have to travel miles or whatever to engage in certain activities. They don't regard that as putting themselves out at all. But ask them to do something for the Lord. That's a great inconvenience. Nothing we do for the Lord should be an inconvenience.

And if the Lord is adding to the work that he will give you and I to do in his kingdom we must never cede as an inconvenience. Ask the Lord to give you the will to make you willing to actually give you the relish of the appetite willingly to do your part in the work of the kingdom.

[18:56] So there's one community serving God. The emphasis on community itself and the oneness of that community which we'll see also in a moment is tied up with cooperation.

But secondly you have God's will being sought and the people's willingness emphasizing as it is how willing they were to do this work. Just as you read earlier as well that Nehemiah mentions that when they set about to call people to repair the walls that the matter progressed despite the fact that they were faced with so much opposition.

Nevertheless he says the people had a mind to work. The people had a mind to work. What a great statement that is.

To what extent is that through of ourselves. I'm not saying it isn't. Please don't think that. But to whatever extent it is in my life or yours or in our life together as a congregation it can actually be increased.

It's something that ought never to be seen as static. To have a mind to work for the Lord. Look at how much there is to be done in this needy town itself.

[20:17] All the areas of human life that need the gospel that need gospel teaching and instruction and guidance that need practical demonstration of Christian love.

We pray to the Lord to give us that mind that we will be a willing people made willing by himself by his spirit. That's the first thing.

One community serving God. Secondly four considerations just going to mention them briefly in turn. Four considerations in our serving of God.

First of all the holiness of his cause. Notice how this is described here as the holy city there in verse 1. The rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem.

The holy city. Now if you examine the Old Testament it's not very often that you'll find Jerusalem described as the holy city. It's quite a rare description and that for its significance that you find it here described as the holy city.

[21 : 21] Because really all the way through from chapter 8 especially 9 and 10 and now into chapter 11 you have a build up of things that are described and regarded as holy.

The priests are holy. The Levites are holy. The days are holy. Certain days are holy. The sacrifices are holy. Until you've come now to the point where the city is holy.

It's a build up you see of forming this community so that they come to be a holy community committed to God in this holy city. And that's how it should be with our thinking as well.

As the previous verse puts it we will not neglect the house of our God. Now let's not confine that to church buildings. It was for them in the Old Testament the building of the tabernacle firstly then the temple and then the rebuilding of the temple.

But as we know from Christ's day onwards though we use buildings the temple of God is a spiritual temple. The temple of God is his people in the midst of which he dwells.

[22 : 33] So that when you think of neglecting the house of our God yes indeed it does to an extent take in buildings but that's not a primary emphasis. The house of God is really in a sense the whole cause of God.

The church of God. The gospel of God. The things that are attached to all of these matters. And all of that is holy.

The work of the kingdom is holy. And it's to be regarded as holy not so that we will stay away from it or shy back from doing it. But so that when we do engage in it we will recognize it for what it is.

That it belongs to God. That it reflects his holiness. That it's a holy work. That it's sacred.

That we look after it carefully. That we do it to his honor and to his glory. The holy city. holy work of the kingdom of Christ.

[23 : 42] And that means that individually as well as collectively we have to be holy. Holy as people. A holy people. Because it's perfectly possible to have a holy setting and yet not be personally holy.

And to be in a holy setting such as in church or in the work of the kingdom being surrounded by or part over all of that. you can have a holy setting. You can be in a holy setting for the whole of your life.

But that itself does not mean that you are holy. A holy setting will not save an unholy man or woman. Our holy setting in church and the kingdom and the work of God's kingdom is so that we will not neglect our own personal holiness.

be holy as God says because I am holy or for I am holy. And that's really indeed another reason why we have the advantage of the gospel and the spirit of God as the Holy Spirit because he's the great sanctifier.

The one who makes us holy. The one who works holiness in us. the one who begins his work in our hearts and whose work appears in our outward life as a holy life.

[25 : 11] Now you mustn't think that the most eminently holy people who ever lived were the most useless practically. It doesn't work that way. We're not talking about holiness just now.

That's the kind of thing you find in people maybe confined to a small cell for the whole of their life. We're not talking about Indian gurus that are regarded as holy men although the world gives them that title.

We're talking about people who are faithful to Christ who follow Christ whose trust is in Christ who realize that without being justified by faith in Christ they are lost.

Who want to honor Christ in their lives. and the holiest people that I've ever met a lot holier practically than I certainly am but they were always the most effective evangelists.

They carried about with them possibly unconsciously to themselves the very reality of God and of what it means to live in communion with God.

[26 : 22] and it didn't make them anything less than hugely effective in the way they lived. That's what you and I must remember too.

Holiness is not an impractical quality. It has in its own nature an outflowing and a witnessing that touches people's lives they were engaged in a holy work and they had to be a holy people.

Secondly the next consideration is the need for cooperation because as you read through Nehemiah as well as other parts of the Bible Nehemiah especially has a series of lists of names and sometimes well we didn't read through the list of names at the beginning of chapter 10 okay honestly it's a bit of a challenge isn't it reading through that especially publicly because you have all of these Hebrew names to try and pronounce and yet that's scripture that's the word of God it's not

there for no reason you have the same back in chapter 3 where you find about the repairing of the walls that Nehemiah is giving us an account there in repairing the walls a list a long list of the people who actually were engaged in that and all the people were engaged in apart from a few nobles who refused to lower themselves to such a work that's how he puts it why is that why do we have these lists of names why is it important to regard them seriously and with a reasoned thought as to what on earth they're doing in these passages and isn't it all right just to skip over them without thinking too much about them well they're there for good reason and among many others is this it shows you especially the likes of chapter three the variety of skills that God brought together in the work of building up his cause in Jerusalem because as you read chapter three and I'll leave it to you to read chapter three when you get home when you have a moment read through it and just go through it slowly never mind the pronunciation of the words but just look at what you find there and the different types of people that are described not just the names because you find the types of people and you find them listed by families and you find a beginning at a certain point in the wall and then it goes right round the wall and then by the time you finish the chapter you're back where you started and the whole wall has been embraced in the naming of those families and individuals you have people who are skilled craftsmen you have people who are just people holding shovels people who just clear up the rubble you have people who's not really important in terms of names you have people that you refer to are not named at all but the point is this they all do their bit in the rebuilding of the walls don't ever think you have nothing to contribute to the cause of Christ there are many people in the Bible who are unnamed and yet whose contribution to the gospel was invaluable it's not how prominent we are that counts it's how faithful we are how true to God we are how true to our calling we are how willing we are to do our part in the work of the kingdom and that's what that cooperation really is about the leaders of the people the rest of the people the chiefs of the province that's what you find in this chapter go back to chapter three as we said read through that list that's what they're all about it tells you the variety of skills that are used in the work of the kingdom of God look at this building tonight look at this congregation tonight just imagine going through each and every individual here asking what do you do what are your skills even if you say I'm not very skilled what is it that you can do what are your talents because God hasn't left us without talents and we have to put them to work together as one community in the work of the kingdom which means if you're not saved that's the first thing to attend to if you're not converted we looked at a series on

[30 : 53] Bible conversions very recently and the whole point of that was not just to fill our minds intellectually with what conversion is about but so that you and I will be indeed people people changed by the grace of God people committed to the serving of God people fitted by him into his church doing whatever it is we can do for his cause practically spiritually whatever it is what what are you doing tonight for Christ what's your share in the kingdom work are you putting your talent to use are you hiding your light under a bushel are you afraid to let it show we all have something and we must use it the cause of Christ needs us I don't mean that in the absolute sense

I mean it in the sense in which in this world we have to be in the business of calling people through the gospel to dedicate their lives to Christ and to his service whatever it might be may never be in a seminary or in a college in a teaching position but remember in chapter three there were those who just simply cleared up the rubble so that the craftsman could move in and you might say well that's all I can do that's fine God needs you in your own place as well as others the need for cooperation thirdly the third consideration is the priority of worship I'm not going to spend long on that just mentioning it really in passing though of course it's worthy of much more than that the priority of worship if you go to Ezra you'll find it indicated there perhaps a bit more clearly than Nehemiah two books belong together you have to take them together and keep them together but as the people came back from their captivity in Babylon as they set about rebuilding in Jerusalem you'll notice from Ezra that the first thing they gave attention to was not their own homes it was the altar of God they set about rebuilding the altar and then afterwards the temple because the things to do with the worship of God had priority in their community that's what they had to put first they had to in the words of Jesus himself to seek first the kingdom of God and all other things shall be added to us is the promise but as you find that priority given to worship they were to be a God worshipping God honouring community they were built if you like around the altar of God the worship of God with God himself as the central feature of their lives if we can use the word respectfully often firstly and finally you have the importance of the family now that again is worthy of

much wider study than we can give it this evening you notice how often through Nehemiah and this chapter as well you find the sons of so and so are mentioned and you find in chapter 3 as we said that there are various families mentioned the family of so and so and beside them the family of so and so and there were no gaps on the wall between those families they were all shoulder to shoulder if you like in it but they were engaged in it as families and the place of the family the place of parentage and of family life and of generations in the lineage of faith are so important in the teaching of the Bible I know we don't come to be converted just because we're related to fathers or grandfathers who had office in the church but it's a massive advantage to be brought up under the gospel and the teaching of the gospel in our homes and our families in church because this too is a family as the church in the wider sense is and that too belongs to the whole idea of community because if you like the family is a miniature community in miniature compared to the church and compared to the wider community community and that's where matters are so critical in the world in which we live because the care spiritually and morally and physically and the security that family life ought to give to children is so sadly lacking throughout our land and if you look at the statistics you can see that there's been a shocking disintegration in family life in how people regard the family and even define the family and of course it's been added to by redefinition of marriage other than what the

Bible itself said as marriage between a man and a woman and that's where the church needs to lead the recovery process we don't leave it to social workers we're not in any way criticizing social workers by saying that but it's a huge privilege and a huge challenge to the church to the people of God to regard the disintegration of our society as something for which the gospel is so fitted something for which the gospel's teaching on family life is so appropriate and that's why it takes more than just bringing people to church services that's why we need the associated activities that you have in the likes of road to recovery and discipleship explored or our own caber faith or other means by which we teach such things as what is a family what is a biblical family what is family life defined by the bible why is it important to have a father and a mother as far as possible how do children come to have a sense of being secure it's not through lawlessness it's not through being left just to find their own way in life but it's to be given not in a legalistic way but lovingly to be given the boundaries for what is right and what is wrong what is good and what is harmful what is beneficial and what is not friends we have huge opportunity we have a mission field even in terms of this alone in family life and family outreach and family evangelism and that's what you see here in [38 : 14] Nehemiah the importance as the rest of the bible the importance of families again and again in the new testament we find the same all the way through families that gathered to listen to the word of god we are here together said ezra with our little ones to listen to god and to the law of god that's what it is like in the environment of the bible and the more you displace the bible from public life as well as private life the more inevitable it is that you'll come to where we are today and who's going to lead the recovery if not the church of god if not the people of the gospel if not the likes of this congregation and others who know what it is to come to the bible and find these considerations are so important in our serving of god may he bless his word to us let's pray lord our gracious god and our father in heaven we thank you that you are the one who defines for us what is important and what is to be prioritized in our lives that you are the one who distinguishes for us so clearly between right and wrong and good and evil we pray that you would use us oh lord and make us willing to be used in the service of your kingdom and enable us to count it our joy when we are called to be your people in this world help us we pray to discern the need of the times the need of our own localities help us we pray to support every other agency too that has like concern for people in our day grant that we may use the opportunities you bring us for we truly can say that the fields are already white unto the harvest receive our thanks in this service of worship and all we ask is for jesus sake amen well our final psalm of praise this evening is psalm 51 psalm 51 from the sing psalms that's on page 68 psalm 51 on page 68 verses 10 to 19 we perhaps think when we think of psalm 51 almost exclusively of it being a prayer of repentance by david seeking forgiveness of his sin and god again to reestablish him personally and cleanse him and so it is but it's so important that we see how he comes to conclude the psalm that as a restored man his concern is to teach others and reach to their lives with this great this great message of this god and so we'll sing from verse 10 lord create a pure heart in me and a steadfast mind renew do not take your spirit from me cast me not away from you give me back the joy i had keep my willing spirit glad then i'll teach your way to sinners rebels will turn back to you and so on verses 10 through to the end of the psalm let's stand to sing for fear the pure heart in me and the steadfast mind renew do not

take your spirit from me cast me not away from you give me like the joy i love keep my willing spirit
glad then i'll teach your ways to sinners rebels will turn back to you free me from the guilt my savior
god most merciful and true then i'll praise you righteousness teach my love your name to bless
sacrifice does not delight you as my tribute i would bring nor do you take any pleasure partnership i
breathe in colomb ocolom

Sacrifice You, O God, will not despise Let your blessing rest on Zion Build Jerusalem's walls again
Sacrifices that will please you Who's upon your altar slain All praise made for your delight Truly
righteous in your sight Now may grace, mercy and peace From God the Father, the Son and the
Holy Spirit

Be with us now and evermore Amen I'll go to the main door again this evening ■ PM I'll go to 8-30
a.m.

Since his first day of Mark He can stream infrastructure D I want to go out To the line of Mark The
first day of Mark I saw a song The last day of Mark His second day of Mark Was on ■■■ You, I was
a beautiful When you can't toil