

# The City of God

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] will you pray with me Lord we ask you this morning that by your grace Lord you would help us to hear and obey your word Lord may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight oh Lord our rock and our redeemer Lord would you make us all have soft hearts and ears that are alert Lord help us to be those who listen and are changed by your word oh Jesus be with us this morning we pray in Jesus name

Amen are we good Stephanie okay I can do this if you'd rather yeah let's do that all right is this better all right good so question I want to ask you this morning is what do you celebrate and what does it look like it was with great joy that I watched the U.S.

women's national soccer team celebrate their world cup championship though not all of it was perhaps the most God glorifying there was wonderful celebration of their hard work and dedication and their victory in New York City with a ticker tape parade and great celebration crowds and throngs of people came to celebrate in this past month we celebrated the 4th of July the founding of our country and the joy of living in a country that does have all of the blessings that we have in this country it's also July is a big celebration month in my family there are celebrations of birthdays my daughter turned 9 this past month as well as other family members and I know there have been a few weddings around here as well and those are fun celebrations just to think about all the different kinds of celebrations we have big or small there are things that are common to them all people gather and there is joy often with singing and dancing and good food we celebrate together and declare that something is praiseworthy something is good and worthy of lifting up and corporately recognizing and that's what a celebration is now there are some of us who may struggle to celebrate some of us for whom today or maybe more broadly that the pain of our lives are so great that even the best things have dark hues that hang on our heart sometimes we struggle to celebrate because we don't even see the goodness of the things that are worthy of celebrating maybe in our cynicism we assume that there must be something wrong with it and therefore are robbed of the ability to celebrate it and sometimes honestly we're just plain too self-centered to celebrate anything else that isn't about ourselves what do you celebrate this morning we're going to look at a passage in scripture where we see the people of God celebrating a final act of God rebuilding his people if you've been coming here for a while you know we're preaching through the book of Nehemiah and if you want to turn there you can turn with me to here

I'll look it up for us we're going to turn to page where is it page 378 Nehemiah we're going to be looking at chapters 11 and 12 and as you're looking there let me remind you of where Ezra and Nehemiah fit in the bigger story of the Bible and where we are in these books in the story of the Old Testament we see that after establishing God's people in his kingdom they forsook God and worshipped other gods in their sin and after patiently pursuing them and warning them finally God brought them in judgment and took the people of God away in exile the king was dethroned the city of Jerusalem the capital was destroyed the temple where God's presence was among his people and where they worshipped God was raised and the people of God were scattered the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are the story of God rebuilding his people after that

God gathering his people from the nations and bringing them back to the promised land of Judah God rebuilding the altar and the temple where they worshipped God God rebuilding the walls of the city God restoring his people to holiness and his submission to the word of God as he taught them and instructed them again as how to live as God's people and as we've come through the book of Ezra and through the book of Nehemiah we're almost at the end we have seen in Nehemiah chapter 6 verse 16 that the wall was finished so the city finally had a wall again which was common in those days that you needed a wall around the city to protect it it created safety and security and it was an important part of what it meant to be a city so they built the wall and then in Nehemiah

chapter 7 verse 4 we read this the city was wide and large but the people within it were few and no houses had been rebuilt and so though

[ 6 : 45 ] God had brought his people back and God had done all this rebuilding there was yet a little more work to be done as God finishes his work of rebuilding we're going to look at how God did that we're going to look at the celebration of God doing that we're going to look at how he did that in Nehemiah's day we're going to look at what it is that they celebrated in God's larger work in the world and then we're going to look at what that means for us today so we start in Nehemiah chapter 11 now here's a heads up Nehemiah chapter 11 verse 3 all the way through to Nehemiah chapter 12 verse 26 is a list of names I'm not going to read them I will describe to you what there is but I'm not going to read it so I'm going to read verses 1 and 2 of chapter 11 and then I'm going to skip ahead and read in chapter 12 verse 27 and following when we get to that section so that's what we're going to do as we look at what God was doing in Nehemiah's day so look with me at Nehemiah 11 verses 1 and 2 now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem and the rest of the people cast lots to bring 1 out of 10 to live in Jerusalem the holy city while 9 out of 10 remained in the other towns and the people blessed all the men who were willing who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem so the final movement of God rebuilding his people is actually populating the city now the walls are up the gates are in place but the city has been empty that's what we saw in chapter 7 verse 4 there wasn't enough people there and so God moved the people the leaders had already committed and moved to be there they had already moved into the city to commit to being there but there was a need for more people and so there was a lottery and 1 out of 10 people were called to move from the surrounding area to move into the city and you notice as you look ahead in verses 3 through 24 that the people who came in were from all the active peoples of God who are still there all the tribes the tribes of Benjamin and the tribes of Judah and the priests and the Levites all the people who were actively engaged in this rebuilding project 1 out of 10 of them moved into the city and you have to recognize that this was a big deal this was a costly move for them because living in a city in those days was actually dangerous it's like you were putting a target on your back for marauding armies if you were an invading army you're not going to march through the countryside and attack random farmhouses here and there you're going to go to the city and you're going to raise it that's how you conquer another country and so to move to the city was to put yourself in greater danger not only was it costly for that reason but it was also costly because you were leaving farmland that either had to be tilled by someone else on your behalf or you were leaving it and having to find another means of providing for yourself while you lived in the city and so we see that in verse 6 and verse 8 and verse 14 those who moved to the city were called valiant or those with valor they had courage to take this step and to move into Jerusalem one commentator said that these people who moved were those who were willing to put God's program over their

individual desires and security and so what we see in the rest of this chapter is in verses 3 through 24 we see an account of the people who moved to Jerusalem and who lived in the cities and then we see in chapter 11 verses 25 through 36 we hear an accounting of the people who lived around Jerusalem in the surrounding areas in what had been the land of Judah and Benjamin in the past and then in the beginning of verse 12 you have an account of the priests and the Levites again those who served in the temple many of them lived in the city but many of them did not there was a rotation for the Levites where they would come to the city for two weeks to serve in the temple but most of the time they would be out living in the villages and living somewhere else the Levites would come together would come in to do the service that they were supposed to do in the temple in the worship to serve the rebuilt nation and part of what

I want you to see in this long section that's mostly feeling like it's administration is that as God was rebuilding his people it was not a superficial thing that he was doing in their lives but that it was asking them to orient their lives around worshiping him and being a part of what he was doing such that some people had to actually uproot their lives and move somewhere else not because of their own personal desires but for the sake of the kingdom and for the sake of the rebuilding of God's people this leads us then to chapter 12 verse 27 and following which I'm going to read and if you want to read along with me that would be great Nehemiah chapter 12 verse 27 and at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites in all their places to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness with thanksgivings and with singing with cymbals harps and lyres and the sons of the singers gathered together from the districts surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Nido-Faithites and from Beth Gilgal and from

the region of Geba and from Asmaveth from the singers for the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem and the priests and the Levites purified themselves and they purified the people and the gates and the wall then I brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall and appointed two great choirs that gave thanks one went to the south on the wall to the dung gate after them went Hoshiah and half of the leaders of Judah and Azariah

Ezra Meshallam Judah Benjamin Shemiah and Jeremiah and certain of the priest's sons with trumpets Zechariah the son of Jonathan son of Shemiah son of Mataniah son of Micaiah son of Zechur son of Asaph and his relatives Shemiah Ezra Melali Gilali Ma'ai Nathanael Judah and Hanani and with the musical instruments of David the man of God and Ezra the scribe went with them at the fountain gate they went up straight before them by the stairs of the city of David at the ascent of the wall above the house of David to the water gate on the east and the other choir of those who gave thanks went to the north and I followed them with half the people on the wall above the tower of the ovens to the broad wall and above the gate of Ephraim and by the gate of Yashana by the fish gate and the tower of Hananel and the tower of the hundred to the sheep gate and they came to a halt at the gate of the guard so both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God and I and half of the officials with me and the priests

Eliakim Maaseah Miniamen Micaiah Eliohani Zechariah and Hananiah with trumpets and Maaseah Shemaiah Eleazar Uzi Jehohanan Malkijah Elam and Ezer and the singers sang with Jezreiah Jezreiah as their leader and they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced for God had made them rejoice with great joy the women and children also rejoiced and the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away so we didn't escape the lists did we whoo not only did the people orient their lives around the rebuilding to the point where they would move but then they gathered they gathered to have a celebration of joy and you see that remember the Levites and priests lived out town so Nehemiah called the Levites and the priests to come in from the surrounding cities called the singers to come in to be a part of this grand celebration he called the people to gather together because the wall was finished and he purified the people and the priests and the Levites and even the space even the place the walls and the gates they purified themselves to set themselves apart to worship God and to give him thanks and he divided the two people in the choirs and it would be like if you gathered here and we split you up into the left and the right and half of you walked down

[17:07] State Street and then walked down Chapel Street all the way across town to say Howe Street and then you walked up to Elm Street and walked back and the other half would take Grove Street and walk down and would go down to Elm Street and would walk back and they met in the middle at the house of God in the plaza outside the temple and they sang songs and they didn't just sing songs but they brought instruments and they had a great celebration and did you notice verse 43 if you made it through all those names did you notice verse 43 they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced for God had made them rejoice with great joy and the women and the children also rejoiced this is like the second time in the whole two books that the women and children are mentioned and the writer makes sure to make sure the whole people gathered to rejoice in what God had done and this joy was so great that the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away what did they sing when they gathered well we don't know for sure but it's possible that they sang

Psalms 48 as a part of it and I just want to read a part of this psalm the whole psalm is a rejoicing about Zion Jerusalem but I'm just going to read verses 9 through 14 this might have been part of what they sang as they gathered we have thought of your steadfast love oh God in the midst of your temple as your name oh God so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth your right hand is filled with righteousness let Mount Zion be glad let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments walk around Zion go around her number her towers consider well her ramparts go through her citadels that you may tell the next generation that this is God our God forever and ever he will guide us forever this was perhaps one of the songs that they sang rejoicing in what God had done rejoicing in his faithfulness to rebuild his people and to rebuild this city and the joy resounded I was trying to think when in our modern world has joy resounded like this throughout the world the best example I could think of is if you were alive in 1989 if you were aware of what was going on as with the fall of communism and particularly in the city of Berlin as the Berlin Wall fell there was a celebration and a joy in the freedom and the breaking down of what had been a horrible breaking of the community there that there was a restoration of the nation and of the city that rang out not just there but reverberated throughout the world there are probably others but in Jerusalem they were

rejoicing not just the rebuilding of a nation not just the rebuilding of a city but they were rejoicing in the rebuilding of a people and the restoration of God's purposes centered here in this time in God's redemptive history in the city of Jerusalem and they rejoiced with great joy and what I want to do next in the next few minutes is to spend a little bit of time answering the question why was rebuilding

Jerusalem such a big deal for the people of God I'm going to look at the Bible to talk a little bit about the significance of Jerusalem we're going to go back in its history leading up to this point in Nehemiah and then we're going to look ahead and see what God has to say about the theology of Jerusalem and its significance in God's plan as we do so we're going to be flipping through the Bible I don't necessarily expect you to keep up because we're going to be looking at a lot of verses but if you just want to write down the references I'll try to repeat them so you can write them down and look them up later if you want to so the first place that we see Jerusalem becoming really significant apart from back in Genesis where Abraham meets a guy who's the king of Salem which is Jerusalem Melchizedek but that's a whole other story so that you kind of have a there's something there but the first time you really see the city begin to take a big place is in 2 Samuel chapter 5 verses 6 through 10 where David the newly risen the newly appointed king of the people of Israel after the failure of Saul's kingship as David is ascending to his throne as he is consolidating the people and as he is establishing the kingdom of Israel in a profound way in verses 6 through 10 he conquers the city of Jerusalem which the Jebusites said he could never do and he said the city was they said the city was so strong that the lame and the blind could protect them and David would have no chance well

God was with David and in fact they did conquer Jerusalem that day and they settled it as a capital city and David made Jerusalem the seat where the king sat and ruled over God's people and then you see further on in the story in 2 Chronicles chapter 7 you see that not only was it the seat of the king was established but then in Jerusalem as Solomon David's son built the temple there they had been using a tabernacle portable worship service type of thing and God said no now Solomon was going to build the temple where there would be a permanent place where God would dwell with his people and so we read in 2 Chronicles 7 3 when all the people of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the Lord on the temple they bowed down with their faces to the ground on the pavement and worshipped and gave thanks to the Lord saying for he is good and his steadfast love endures forever for in that temple

[ 24 : 16 ] God manifested his glory on the earth he said I will come and dwell in the midst of my people in a unique way by manifesting his glory in the temple and so not only was Jerusalem the place where the king reigned but it was also the place where God lived among and with his people and yet as we recounted earlier that kingdom did not last that kingdom failed the people failed and ultimately God raised allowed the city to be destroyed in judgment and so Ezra and Nehemiah were seeing God rebuilding that and restoring that and all the hopes of the people of Israel were in this restoration and we read a little bit in the prophet Isaiah it's fascinating reading the book of Isaiah through the lens of what is God doing in Jerusalem that's an assignment for extra credit if you want to read Isaiah through the lens of Jerusalem it's a fascinating read but what you see at the end of Isaiah is that he began to talk of Jerusalem not just as the physical city but he began to cast a vision for what it might be in the future and so in Isaiah 62 10 through 12

Jerusalem is not just the place where God's people gather but it's a place where God's people not just the nation of Israel but from all nations gather not bounded but expanding to include peoples from all the world and so Isaiah 62 verses 10 through 12 say this go through go through the gates prepare the way for the people build up build up the highway clear it of the stones lift up a signal over the peoples behold the Lord has proclaimed to the ends of the earth say to the daughters of Zion behold your salvation comes behold his reward is with him and his recompense before him and they shall be called the holy people the redeemed of the Lord and you shall be called sought out a city not forsaken now if you're wondering where

Jerusalem was in that sentence or in those verses recognize that Zion is a synonym for Jerusalem in the Old Testament when the Old Testament talks about Zion they're talking about Jerusalem this place this city on a hill that God has established to be the center of his work in the Old Testament and Isaiah then a few chapters later in Isaiah 65 continues to expand his vision for what Jerusalem is as he speaks the words of the Lord to his people for behold I create new heavens and a new earth and the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind but be glad and rejoice

forever in that which I create for behold I create Jerusalem to be a joy and her people to be a gladness I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress and this was the message of hope that Isaiah was bringing during the end of the kingdom right on the brink of the exile he was saying

God will not abandon his people but there is a Jerusalem yet to come that is going to be even greater than this one that you are seeing being destroyed Isaiah began to see that Jerusalem wasn't just a town and a geopolitical entity but it was also an idea it was a symbol it was a picture of what God was doing in building his kingdom and so then we read in the history Ezra and Nehemiah and the rebuilding of this physical place and this reestablishment of this physical kingdom and reestablishing of the worship in a physical temple and yet and yet it seems that the New Testament or the Old Testament has pointed us to something greater and that's exactly what we see in the New Testament without it being a major theme all of Jesus significant redemptive work his birth his death his resurrection all happen in Jerusalem it is there that God does his work of redeeming people from sin through the death of his very son and what we see flowing out of that in the hope of the gospel in the people of God that is created by faith in Jesus as God is gathering a people as God is expanding his people is that they recognize that their citizenship is no longer in a nation here or there but their primary and ultimate citizenship is to be a part of the people of God their citizenship is in heaven and as we read earlier in Hebrews 11 their hope was to be a part of a heavenly kingdom that God would establish and so

Hebrews picks up this theme richly Hebrews 11 16 as we read earlier but as it is they desire a better country that is a heavenly one therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God for he has prepared for them a city and we see then in Hebrews 12 as Jeff read some earlier 18 through 24 that the kingdom of God established in Christ the new people of God that we are joined to by faith have come to a new Jerusalem a new city a new citizenship a new place where we live he casts a vision for a Jerusalem that is a heavenly and a future creation where we will enter into the fullness of joy and enjoy the fullness of the fruit of Christ's death and resurrection for us finally we turn to the very end of the

[ 30 : 59 ] Bible Revelation 21 gives us a vision as the apostle John received it a vision of the God's future work that will echo and establish what Isaiah had foretold so in Revelation 21 verses 1 through 3 we see this then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more and I saw the holy city new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying behold the dwelling place of God is with man he will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God apostle

John goes on and describes the city he describes its perfect proportions he describes it as a city adorned with a beauty that is greater than the most precious of metals and gemstones that its glory is an unimaginable beauty and then he writes this at the end starting in verse 22 chapter 21 and I saw no temple in the city for the temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb and the city had no need of sun or moon to shine on it for the glory of God gives it light and its lamp is the Lamb by its light will the nations walk and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it and its gates will never be shut by day and there will be no night there and they will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations you see friends the city of Jerusalem in the

Old Testament where the king sat and reigned where the presence of God was manifested among the people of God where the nations were called to come and to know this God and to worship him all of those themes then accomplished through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ will find their fulfillment in a heavenly Jerusalem where God will reign where God will live with his people and his people will live with him and there will be no more temple because God himself will be the temple but the nations will come and they will give him glory and they will worship him the future of God's redemptive people is not a return to the garden of paradise but it is a future in a city with God that will be more beautiful and more glorious than we can even imagine so Jerusalem is a place where God's redemptive purposes are worked out where his people are gathered to celebrate and worship him and this is why the people in the time of

Ezra and Nehemiah celebrated the building of the wall because this was the step in redemptive history that they were at to rebuild this place and yet as we sit here now we see that God was doing so much more than just rebuilding that place so what about us how do we apply this for us today a couple of quick thoughts first of all the Jerusalem that we are looking for in this age is not the

Jerusalem of this world though we may honor the Jerusalem that sits in Israel and Palestine today we may remember that it was the location where God worked faithfully in years past it is not that city that we have put our hope in for God's kingdom is no longer a political one a social one a physical one but God's kingdom is a transnational community spread throughout the world of people from every tribe and tongue and nation who are gathered solely by their faith in Jesus

Christ as their savior and king God's people in the new testament is not a nation state to be rebuilt but it is a people of God that is built through the proclamation the preaching of the good news of Jesus throughout the world this leads us to the second application if we're not looking for that what are we looking for friends it is the church that is the instrument of God's redemptive purposes in this age as we await the heavenly Jerusalem that is to come we gather here and celebrate God's faithfulness in Jesus Christ to his people and the work that he is doing we come to see that God is building a people throughout the world not just here in New Haven or not just here in America but throughout the world he is building his church and it is church is the place where

[ 36 : 51 ] God's reign is being established and lived out in this world it is in the church where God's presence through the Holy Spirit is dwelling among his people and it is in the church where we worship and celebrate this God as we live as exiles and strangers in this world longing for the heavenly kingdom that is yet to come if this is true friends let me ask you some questions do you believe that what's going on in the church is more important than anything that the New York Times would put on its headlines as we gather here as one little expression of the broad church of God do you treasure it do you look forward to coming and being a part of God's people week in and week out or has it become a casual option for you depending on how nice the weather is do you see your participation in the church and in its mission in the world as a part of this grand theme of

God redeeming a people for himself with this great future where he will dwell with us and we will dwell with him how are you engaged in that mission how are you seeking to live under God's rule how are you seeking to overflow to those around you with the love and the grace of Jesus Christ so that others may know and come and join in this heavenly celebration how are you loving a fallen and broken world that doesn't know where to put their hope and doesn't know what to celebrate when you have the best thing in the world to celebrate and one note about this as we continue in this local church as we begin a building project Lord willing in a month we want to keep saying this over and over again that building when it's built we will celebrate it because it will be a sign of God's faithfulness and God's provision for our church but that is not the church that is an instrument it will be a place whereby we might continue to do the mission that God has called us to of lifting up Jesus Christ in this city and in this world so as God is rebuilding his church as God is building his people in this age the physical structure is not the end the physical structure is just a means to something greater finally friends let us bring let me bring you back to where we started which is celebration the singing the praise the rejoicing that we gather have you ever thought about why we do it have you ever thought about how weird it is that we gather together and sing corporately on Sunday morning it's because

God has given us something worth celebrating God has called us to be his people and to know his salvation God has called us to respond to all that he has done with worship worship that controls all of our lives worship that flows from the Holy Spirit that lives in all who have faith in Christ worship that honors God as our King and our Savior worship that reminds us that the world that we live in as we go out from this gathering every Sunday is not the end and it's not the place where we put our hope or find our ultimate joy but it's when we come here that we're reminded of the heavenly kingdom and the Jerusalem that is to come that we will be a part of forever do do you come every Sunday morning anticipating the joy of worshiping together in line with the people of God in the past who celebrated his faithfulness and his building of his kingdom throughout the ages in light of the future hope when we will gather around his throne forever and we will sing of his praises friends in light of this let's pray together Lord we thank you we thank you for a heavenly Jerusalem that is yet to come and we thank you for Christ who is the light of it and who is the redeemer of it and is the one who will establish it Lord thank you for this gathering this morning we pray that you might fill our worship with the joy that you filled these Old Testament saints with Lord as you filled them with joy the rebuilding of that

[ 42 : 22 ] Jerusalem Lord fill us with joy of the Jerusalem that you are building and that awaits us in heaven we pray this in Jesus name amen well there's no more fitting way to respond to this passage than to stand and to sing together how firm a foundation to sing of the foundation of the

work that God is doing so let's stand and sing love to god to the people see the gallery