Series: Building Together

The Nation of God

Nehemiah 11, 12

One of the great slogans identified with our history is: No Creed but Christ, No Book but the Bible, No Name but the Divine. Nice slogan, but probably easier said than done.

Two men are standing on the front lawn of a church. The sign reads:

Oak Road
Hand Clapping, Foot Stomping, Hemlines Below The Knee, Tie Wearing, Blood Washed,
Coffee-And-Donuts-During-Sunday-School-Eating, Council of Nicea Appreciating,
Non-Denominational CHURCH

One man says, "When you don't believe in man-made creeds, you have to squeeze a lot into your name."

In the church, it is not realistic to think that all believers will find themselves crossing every "t" and dotting every "i" identically. Community is messier than that. But, wherever God's glory is the chief passion of His people, they will rise above their differences and pursue that end.

Chapters 11 & 12 of Nehemiah tell the story of the nation of God, as they repopulate the city of Jerusalem and dedicate its newly restored walls. Beneath the surface of the narrative, however, are principles that could enable modern communities of faith to live together in peace, bearing witness to the whole world of the glory of God and of the goodness of her Savior and King.

I. The Diversity of God's People (chapter 11:1-36)

A. An Earlier Observation Is Now Addressed verses 1, 2

Immediately after the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls, Nehemiah observed:

> Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt. – Nehemiah 7:4

In chapter 11, this need is addressed:

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

No capital city could credibly be a seat of national power if the population was so sparse that it could not defend itself. Jerusalem had four miles of brand new city walls. She needed bodies to defend those walls from her enemies. Whenever the Greeks established a province and a capital city, their remedy was to forcibly uproot people from their homes and compel them to populate the town. In Jesus' lifetime, Herod Antipas established the city of Tiberias on the western coast of the Sea of Galilee by plucking citizens from other communities in the region.

Jerusalem was repopulated in a similar way, but with an atypical attitude. The nobles already lived there. The rest of the people would now let God decide which one of every ten families from the countryside and villages would move there. There was no harsh compulsion for people to leave their homes. Rather, they all agreed to commit the decision to God by casting lots. We might wince at the idea of flipping a coin or tossing dice to seek the Lord's will in a matter, but the Jews had no such hang-up. This was a time-honored way of committing decisions to Him:

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD. – Proverbs 16:33

I'm not ready to endorse tossing coins to determine the Lord's will, but I wonder if it's any worse than the way we tend to over-process and over-think decisions.

Other individuals volunteered to move into the city. These people were lauded by their fellow Jews and rightfully so. They were not going to existing jobs and in many instances, houses had to be built. It was an adventuresome and patriotic sacrifice for these individuals.

B. The City and the Land Are Settled verses 3-35

The balance of Nehemiah 11 is another of those less than riveting lists of unpronounceable names and places. The families from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin that were selected to live in Jerusalem are listed. The priests and Levites that lived in the towns of Judah and the Levites that lived in the towns of Benjamin are named. Especially spellbinding are the names of the towns themselves. But, as I mentioned some chapters back, God knows every name listed. The fact that our own names are included in such a list, the Lamb's Book of Life, is a joyous reality.

C. The Church's Unified Variety Is Anticipated

The people who filled Jerusalem came from various places and experiences. This was true of the early church in which students of Paul, Peter and Apollos had to figure out how to coexist just as it is true of the church today that is made up of Christians from a variety of traditions. The new citizens of Jerusalem were gifted to fill various roles. This was true of the early church just as it is true of the church today. These people were diverse in their advantages and disadvantages. Some were nobles. Others had been through times so severe that they had spent years in servitude to pay off debts. One of the most remarkable aspects of the early church was how the rich and the poor (even slave and master) worshipped side by side. God expects nothing less of His church today.

Yet, in spite of the variety, Jerusalem was unified. They were a single race, all claiming Abraham as their father. The church is made up of many earthly races of humanity, but we are a single spiritual race by virtue of being united to one heavenly Father by the atoning work of one Savior and by the indwelling of one Spirit in each of us. Jerusalem was united in faith and life. The Law of God was their common ground. The church is united in faith and life, but the great common ground is Jesus Himself Who gives new life and Who calls us into conformity with Himself. Jerusalem was united in mutual love and loyalty. It is the will of God that mutual love and loyalty bind all believers together. Jerusalem was one in purpose. For the first time in centuries, they were God's light to the nations, just as the church has been called to be the light of the world.

II. The Delight of God's People (chapter 12:1-43)

A. The Roster of Qualified Servants verses 1-26

Chapter 12 commences with another tedious list of names, at least for our modern appetites. Verses 1-9 name the priests and Levites that returned to Jerusalem with the first group of repatriates at the order of the first Persian king, Cyrus. This was about eighty years before Nehemiah entered the scene. Zerubbabel was the governor of that first group that came back to rebuild Jerusalem. Jeshua was the high priest. He was succeeded by his son, Joiakim. Verses 10-26 list all the high priests and key Levites from Joiakim to the time of Nehemiah.

Again, such lists are hard for modern readers to appreciate, but it was imperative to the Jewish mindset that the purity of the priestly line be carefully documented. Otherwise, the value of the great time of worship and sacrifice that fills the balance of chapter 12 could be undermined.

B. The Dedication of the Walls of Jerusalem verses 27-43

Walls that lay in ruins for one and one-half centuries were restored. God's hand had clearly been present - from the awakening of a burden in a cupbearer's heart, to the receptiveness of a Persian king to release his servant to attend to the task, to the provisions for the materials, to the enthusiasm of the people, to the divine protection that guarded the laborers from their enemies. Only God could have brought this massive project to completion in a mere fifty-two days.

Nehemiah was not blinded by the successes God had granted him. He knew that even the mightiest of walls was useless unless God lent His strength to them. So, he planned a service of dedication. First, he summoned all the Levites in the surrounding villages to come and take part.

[27]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, harps and lyres. [28]The singers also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem … - Nehemiah 12:27, 28

This dedication service hearkened back to the great celebrations from the past. The Jews had been exposed to many new kinds of musical instruments during the captivity in Babylon, but for this occasion, they limited themselves to those instruments that were most closely identified with worship back in the days of David and Solomon; harps, lyres and cymbals.

The event began with a purification ceremony for the Levites, the priests as well as the wall and its many gates. Then, all the leaders climbed on top of the western wall somewhere at the midpoint. Nehemiah split the musicians and singers into two choirs. Ezra the priest led one group counter-clockwise around the southern end of the city. Nehemiah led the other group clockwise around the northern end of the city. The two choirs met on the eastern wall in the vicinity of the temple. They came down off the wall and "took their places in the house of God." (verse 40).

The choirs kept singing. Numerous sacrifices were offered. Men, women and children rejoiced. Nehemiah receives many accolades from those who write about leadership, but the real key to God's blessings upon his leadership are captured right here. The people were celebrating a great success. It was especially a great moment for Nehemiah himself. While other men might have engaged in congratulations and high-fives, Nehemiah remained grounded. God was the Author of their successes and their joy, and he wrote: "… God had given them great joy" (verse 43).

C. The Church's Joyful Worship Is Anticipated

Nehemiah kept the people mindful of their dependence on God. Walls fashioned by human hands could never really keep the city safe. In fact, if at any point the people forgot God or began to think of themselves as self-sufficient, they might find themselves on their own. As the church, it is our great privilege that we have been invited into the work that God is doing in the world. Of course, as is our human nature, we tend to look for people to blame when things are not going as we would prefer and to ourselves when things are clicking. Jesus spoke to His disciples words that were comforting while at the same time, potentially rebuking to their pride:

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. – John 15:5

The people of Jerusalem were at their finest when they were a thankful people. Nothing is different for the church. Thankfulness for divine salvation, provision, protection and guidance reminds us that we are a dependent people. When we rely on God most, He often shows Himself willing to do those things among us that we are incapable of doing by ourselves.

The joy that was so evident at that ancient temple was a community joy. Times of meaningful solitude are important to every New Testament saint, but ultimately, true joy for us today cannot always be solitary. Joy must for the most part be experienced in community, among believers of kindred heart and mind, true brothers and sisters because of the common fellowship of the Spirit. Buffalo Bills offensive lineman Glenn Parker was asked why NFL linemen are generally cheerful: "There are not a lot of well-paying jobs for 300-pounders." If an NFL lineman can so readily find a foundation for joy, how much more so should joy be a staple in the nation of God?

III. The Dedication of God's People (chapter 12:44-47)

44At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions,
firstfruits 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. 45They performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did
also the singers and gatekeepers, according to the commands of David and his son Solomon. 46For
long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the singers and for the songs of
praise and thanksgiving to God. 47So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel
contributed the daily portions for the singers and gatekeepers. They also set aside the portion for the
other Levites, and the Levites set aside the portion for the descendants of Aaron.

A. Mechanisms Were Put in Place to Honor an Earlier Oath

At the Water Gate, the people were confronted with just how estranged their lives had become from the revealed Law of God. A few weeks later, they put some promises to God in writing and swore to uphold them. Among these was a promise regarding the tithes, offerings, firstfruits and sacrifices that supported the house of God as well as the priests and Levites who served there.

They had made this promise to God because of a reborn desire to obey Him. Now, they found another incentive; worship was more joyous when everything was in place as God intended it to be; "… Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites …" (verse 44). So, learning that life was just better when God was worshipped as He desired to be worshipped, men were appointed to collect these gifts and offerings and to oversee the storehouses that held them.

As they set up these administrative processes, they also reorganized the temple singers. They followed the pattern of David and Asaph, David's worship leader. When we think of the glory days of Israel as a nation, all eyes turn to Solomon. He expanded Israel's borders to the widest point in the nation's history. This was the king who was world-renowned for his majesty, wisdom, wealth and power. Solomon was the architect and chief overseer of the elaborate temple that was never really duplicated by the Jews after they returned from captivity.

Nevertheless, when the glory days of worship were considered, it was not the regal Solomon who came to mind, but his father David, the shepherd/king and the man after God's own heart. That is where we learn the most about worship even today – not from those who are gifted in production and presentation, but from those whose hearts beat with passion and praise for God.

B. The Church's Commitment to Praise Is Anticipated

Randall F. West, in his series of one-liners, "Deep Spiritual Thought" shares: "I thought about signing up for short-term missions, but they didn't have anything in the two-hour range." Surely, our own commitment to the praise of God runs deeper. We are a nation of priests. We have access to God's throne. But as priests, we are responsible to live as priests. Our commitment to God's glory ought to be so authentic and thorough that we capture the attention of a lost and hurting world. Consider how Peter describes life together for a community of faith:

> 9But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light …
> 11Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 12Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. – 1 Peter 2:9, 11-12

An Observation on Need-Oriented Evangelism

God never commanded Israel to evangelize their pagan neighbors. In fact, He set Israel apart from them. So, as we explore the eight quality characteristics of church health, "Need-oriented Evangelism" does not leap forth from the story of *Nehemiah* as clearly as some others. But, the fact that Israel did not "preach" God to the heathen does not mean that she was not to "proclaim" Him. God did not separate Israel from the world so as to feed her national pride, but so that as a holy people fulfilled God's purposes, they might bring a blessing to the world. Many in Israel thought that God simply hated Gentiles, but the inspired Old Testament writers knew better:

> This people have I formed for myself; they shall show forth my praise. – Isaiah 43:21 (KJV)

> Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. – Psalm 96:3

One verse especially caught my eye as I read through this text in preparation:

> … Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced: for God had made them rejoice with great joy: the wives also and the children rejoiced: so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off. – Nehemiah 12:43

How much noise does the joyous praise of the modern church make? It has been said that the church's missions and evangelistic efforts exist only because her praise is imperfect. Israel could never impact the heathen towards righteousness because her praise was always sullied by her sin. This is why the New Testament teaches in so many ways that our lives in the presence of sinners may mean more in bringing them to God than our most clever evangelistic presentations.

We tell ourselves that we cannot be effective witnesses because we don't know many non-Christians. Instead, we must ask ourselves, "What do they see in us?" The fruit of our lives tells a story. Are our responses to fear, setbacks, crises and conflicts conspicuously different than normal worldly responses. Does our peace under fire surpass understanding? Others are most impacted by the gospel when they see that it actually can transform lives. The Gospel remedies man's fear of the unknown, satisfies his longing for truth, banishes his loneliness and applies the balm of healing to his deep-rooted hurts. No evangelistic speech can trump the power of transformed lives, the joy of which can be "heard even afar off."

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