



“What to do with an Empty City?”

Read: Nehemiah 7 (esp. 1-7)

“Now the city was large and great: but the people were few therein” (Neh. 7:4). By God’s grace, Jerusalem had been rebuilt. The tactics of the enemy had failed. There stood the city, refurbished, fortified ... but empty.

Was Nehemiah’s task finished? Had it all been about stones and mortar? No, God’s cause is about people. It is about God’s image-bearer being restored to God’s habitation to live under His gaze for a witness to His world.

A God-fearing Leadership

The first thing Nehemiah did was appoint leaders. He didn’t fill the city and then elect a leadership; he realized that God always raises up leaders to lead His people. The principle of godly leadership runs through the whole Scriptures. When God was to make Abraham a great nation, He called him to lead. He was to “*command his children and his household after him*” (Gen. 18:19). When God was to redeem a people from slavery and bring them to Himself, He raised up Moses and made him to lead the people with his rod. When God was to bring His people into the land of Canaan, God charged Joshua to lead the people. God fulfills His purposes through leaders whom He appoints. As leaders, they must serve Him, execute His directives, and lead others to walk in all holiness and righteousness. Simply put, they must fear God.

The fear of God is that grace worked by the Spirit of God that makes a man to see God for who He is, and to see man for who he is. When it comes to leadership, the great benefit of the fear of the Lord is that it frees man from public opinion, which is fickle and often wrong.

Nehemiah selected trustworthy and especially God-fearing men to positions of leadership (Neh. 7:2). He had not rebuilt this city and withstood all these attacks simply to hand the city to men who lacked the fear of God. The wall had been built in the fear of God; it would be enjoyed and maintained in the fear of God.

After Christ purchased a church for Himself through His bloody sweat and death on the cross, He appointed God-fearing apostles to rule the church of God. Still today, ministers and elders are leaders appointed by the ascended Christ over His Zion. They are to watch over her as men who must give account for their leadership (Heb. 13:17).

A Careful Vigilance

After the re-building was completed, Nehemiah did not let down his guard over the city. Though the city was practically empty, he did not want to lose anything of what he had gained. He knew the enemy would take advantage of any gap in vigilance. This proved true later, when Nehemiah was gone. Tobiah managed even to take up residence in one of the storerooms of the temple (Neh. 13:7).

When we have won a number of battles, or achieved some important accomplishments, we tend to relax our guard. We can grow overly confident, believing that success is somehow on our side. But what do we imagine? Do we think that our enemies will simply slink away when they lose a few skirmishes? Do we think that our strength will simply grow and increase without abating at all? Ananias and Sapphira were serious reminders that our enemies are inventive, persistent, and

inveterate. Any respite in a battle is usually a run-up to another great conflict. The church should use any perceived “respite” to check and strengthen its defenses and prepare for the next assault.

The modern church growth movement tells us our defenses are up too high. This movement believes we should admit members even if they don’t know who they are or what they believe. To Nehemiah, this would have been folly and sin. He maintained great vigilance as he populated Zion.

A Holy City

Nehemiah had a desire to see Jerusalem inhabited. Its vacant lots and empty streets were a sad reminder of the Babylonian captivity of the church. At one time, the city of Jerusalem was crowded with people. The city of God had been a center of pilgrimage; people lived close to the sacrifices, and prophets and priests instructed the people there. Of course, there had also been much unholiness, compromise, and presumption in this city, as well. Their sins were what brought the judgment of God down upon the city. But an empty city was not the end goal either.

Behind Nehemiah, the Lord was at work. The text says: *“God put into mine heart”* to re-populate the city (Neh. 7:5). God had built the city and set up the fortresses, and now He would also bring back His people to inhabit it. He would bring them back into the city called after His own name. He would make this city a *“holy city”* (see Neh. 11:1).

Who were to inhabit this city? Nehemiah consulted the genealogy drawn up at the first return (Neh. 7:5). This recorded the names of all the people who had come up out of the nations to build the house of the Lord (Ezra 2:1). These people were not content to live in the world. Like Abraham, they heeded God’s call and settled on the terrain of the promise, near the visible ordinances, the sacrifices, and ceremonies, and made this their habitation. They wished to raise their children in the view of the altar of burnt-offering. They would eat whatever the rugged terrain around Jerusalem would produce. What mattered more than land and food were the amiable tabernacles of God. You could call these people a chosen generation, a holy people, called to show forth the praises of Him who had called them (1 Pet. 2:9).

In Nehemiah 11, we read the exact process that Nehemiah undertook to populate the city (Neh. 11:1-2). Prior to this, there would be the reformation under Ezra (chapters 8-10). The Word of God had to be at the center of all they did (Neh. 8). The people needed to be taught to pray and be led in prayer (Neh. 9). And the people’s lives had to be consecrated. This city would not be an unholy city. No, it would be a holy one.

We can’t be sure if Nehemiah knew Isaiah, but if he did, he would have understood the significance of what we read in Isaiah 26:1-2; *“We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in.”*

Zion is still to be a holy city. In His death and resurrection, Christ, the foundation stone, erected a new city. By His Word and Spirit, He is gathering from out of the whole human race a people for Himself. He is drawing captives back to God. He makes them a chosen generation, a holy people. And when He returns, His house shall be full, not empty (Luke 14:23).

Questions:

1. The formerly Christian West has left in its wake a trail of empty churches. Why have they emptied out? Is it at all connected to the judgment of God, as it was in the case of Jerusalem?
2. What can just one man or woman who fears God do?
3. What is the fear of God? Why is it so important, especially for leadership (e.g., in the home or church)?
4. What place does vigilance and carefulness have in the Christian life? Why do many neglect or even look down on these attitudes?

5. What should we do with an empty church?
6. What does it mean that God put something into the heart of Nehemiah (v. 5)? When Christ looked over Jerusalem, what did He show was in His heart (Luke 13:34)?

GM Bilkes

© 2017

www.christianstudylibrary.org