

NEHEMIAH 7

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Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ:

Introduction. We continue listening to God's Word in the book of Nehemiah, and we now come to an important point: the wall of Jerusalem has been rebuilt, the gates have been installed, and it appears that Nehemiah's work is nigh well finished. However, in this chapter, and in the following also, we learn that Nehemiah's work has only just begun. As I already briefly indicated last week, phase one has been completed, and now follows phase two. It is not any more a matter of rebuilding the physical premises, but a restoring of Jerusalem as the city of God and His people, where He dwells in their midst.

The most important part has yet to be done: Jerusalem must become again a place of central significance in the midst of Israel; it must resume its true function. To say it differently: this ruined city must again become Zion, the city of God, which identifies and unites Israel as the people of the LORD. From a mere city of man, rising from the ashes of history, it must become a *holy* city, and so foreshadow something of the beauty of the great Messiah who will gather out of all peoples His holy, catholic church. Also in chapter 7, God is preparing

the day of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. And so the theme in this chapter is:

The LORD restores Jerusalem as Zion, the city of God and of Jesus Christ, His great King.

And we will see three aspects.

The city is restored:

- 1. as place of *refuge* for the people of the LORD.**
- 2. as place of *unity* for the people of the LORD.**
- 3. as place of *worship* for the people of the LORD.**

1. For a moment I thought that it would be best just to skip this chapter, because of the long list of names and numbers. I mean: what is the sense of taking precious time to read all this stuff? What can it possibly mean for us? But that thought lasted only for a moment, for I am convinced that we should not skip any portion of God's Word, and especially not these lists of names and numbers. They contain treasures of information concerning God's work of redemption.

When we look at this chapter in its entirety, we notice that it speaks about three groups or categories of people. There are also three important matters that demand Nehemiah's attention. The wall and the gates have been finished (verse 1), but the city proper is still in a dismal state, a pile of ruins really, and very few people live there. Also, the temple service is not being conducted as it should be. And what is a city with walls and gates that doesn't function properly? As it stands, this city is still weak and defenceless and it can hardly be described in the terms of the Psalms; for example, Psalm 87 ("her gates of splendour bathed in heavenly light"), or Psalm 48 ("joy and pride of all the earth").

Nehemiah must take further measures. These are not cosmetic or superficial, but essential and radical. The church never really benefits much from cosmetic changes if these are not based on and evident in deep and radical renewal. What is a wall if there's no life behind that wall, no people with an identity and a purpose? Nehemiah focuses therefore on three crucial matters: the defense of the city (the

watchmen), the citizens of the city, and the priests who will serve in the city (or in the temple). All this is directed to one goal: that Jerusalem indeed becomes again *Zion*, the mountain where God dwells, where He offers refuge and unites His people in holy worship.

These elements are still crucial today. The church must be a place (a body) where God dwells, where He gives life and hope, where people live in the unity of true faith and are involved in a common liturgy. Otherwise you may have a nice building with all the trappings, a very proper structure, but you have no living church.

In the verses 1 – 3 Nehemiah describes the measures he took to organize a proper defence of the city. He writes: “After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed.” Some explainers suggest that the “singers and Levites” really do not belong here and must be a later addition, for Nehemiah’s first purpose is obviously to secure the defense of the city and he later gets around to appointing people who will function in the temple. Let’s not worry about that, for Nehemiah may well have made additional appointments at this time, but he indeed in these verses is first of all concerned with the proper defense of the city.

He appoints gatekeepers. We might also translate “watchmen.” These men were posted in and around the gates and in strategic positions on the wall. Their purpose was to keep a close surveillance on whoever entered (and perhaps left) the city. This was an important task, for the gates were the most obvious and most vulnerable areas of the city. The area around the gates was always busy, bustling with people. It was the place where most transactions were conducted and from where most initiatives were undertaken.

These gatekeepers’ first task was to be alert in order to detect as early as possible any threat to the city. In that case they would immediately sound the alarm, see to it that the gates were properly locked and secured, and prepare the first line of defense. It could very well be that “singers and Levites” who had a part-time task in the temple also functioned as additional security guards, and are therefore mentioned here as well.

This appointment shows that the walls and the gates as such are not an adequate defense. They must be manned by responsible men. Any structure or system is only as good as the people who operate it. This also shows us that Nehemiah is not, by the very fact of completing the wall with gates, lulled into a false sense of security. He knows that the city is still vulnerable, and that a wall in itself is not enough. The enemies are many, and if there is a lax attitude in the city it will cost the people of Israel dearly. Before you know it, the enemy is inside the gate! Yes, Nehemiah trusts in the LORD, we know him now well enough to say this, but trust in God does not do away with our responsibility to be vigilant and watchful.

Nehemiah also makes two other specific appointments at this time. In verse 2 we read: "I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah, the commander of the citadel . . ." We already heard about Hanani in chapter 1; he was one of the men who visited Nehemiah in the capital, Susa. We are not sure whether Hanani was literally Nehemiah's brother (I tend to think so) or whether this is a word indicating a close spiritual fellowship. In any case the two men Nehemiah and Hanani are very close confidants and fully trust one another. The same is said of the second fellow, Hananiah: ". . . he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do."

Hananiah was already "the commander of the citadel," and now he and Hanani receive the task to be directly responsible for the security of Jerusalem. Nehemiah needs these tested and trusted men, for as we all know, there were many traitors even among the ranks of the Jews living in Jerusalem. Many of them were in cahoots with Sanballat and Tobiah, and Nehemiah must have faithful lieutenants who truly fear the LORD.

These appointments show us again something of the wisdom which God displays in and through Nehemiah. He cannot do the work on his own. There are still trusted men who can take responsible decisions, men with a proven track record and local recognition. This has always been the rule in Christ's church: men are chosen for special tasks when they have proven themselves faithful in fearing the LORD and seeking what is good for God's people. These two men are then the military commanders, directly responsible for Jerusalem's security.

Nehemiah follows this up with very specific directives (verse 3): “I said to them, ‘The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and others near their own houses.’” The gates may be opened only when it is full day; not at dusk, night, or dawn. Then an enemy attack was most probable. Special sentries are posted everywhere, some even near their own houses so that they may be extra vigilant

Nehemiah sees no security in a mere wall with gates. He needs responsible people who will perform their task faithfully with love for Jerusalem. For again: trusting in God does not mean neglecting to take proper measures. It pleases God to use faithful men for the preservation of His church.

Why all these measures? The reason is: Jerusalem must again become a safe city, a place of true refuge for God’s children. Those who dwell there must dwell in security. The enemy shall not have an opportunity to attack from the outside, nor will the traitors within have the opportunity to deliver the city into enemy hands. This is not merely a political or military exercise. Jerusalem must be a safe haven of peace because the *God who dwells there* is Israel’s refuge. Whoever needs protection, who wishes to live in security, must be able to find that refuge in Jerusalem, which is again to be the city of God!

Again, the situation is different today. We do not live in a city behind walls with special guards and security supervisors. The battle is much more spiritual. We have no Hanani or Hananiah to keep an eye on things. Therefore the New Testament stresses more the personal responsibility of each member to put on the full armour of God! We all must be vigilant and watchful. But also today God gives to His church men who fear him and are tried, tested and true, to keep watch with Christ over the flock. Soon again we will be called to elect new office bearers; they come to us not by special appointment, but through congregational involvement. Yet the criterion remains the same: we need men of integrity who have shown that they truly fear the LORD, by whose work the church will be well-protected.

For like the Jerusalem of old, the church today also must be a place of refuge, where we find rest and hope in Christ, where we are encouraged and strengthened, and protected from the attacks of Satan. This is the task of the communion of saints, but it is especially the work of the office bearers who are called to equip the saints in the spiritual struggle of the day. If the church – the Jerusalem of God – does not offer this important service to you, who will? If you do not find protection and encouragement in the bosom of Christ's church, the body of which He is the Head, where will you find it? God must also today be our refuge, and we experience this in and through the ministry of Christ's church. Let the watchmen then also today be alert in guiding and keeping the flock of Christ in His strength and wisdom.

2. Now Nehemiah faced another problem as well, besides the security of the city. In the verse 4 we read that the city was "large and spacious" but that there were "few people in it." The place was a mess, indeed, with few houses, for the Babylonians had destroyed the entire city with its infrastructure. Many of the returned exiles therefore preferred to live outside Jerusalem. It was dangerous to live in Jerusalem, that doomed city, and there were not many suitable homes. We now have a city with proper walls and a functioning security system, but no citizens. So Nehemiah's next concern is to find people who are willing to live in the city so that it may again be a living and bustling metropolis.

Where to find the people, the right people? I say that because Nehemiah understands quite well that not just anybody can be asked to live in Jerusalem. There must be a certain *commitment*, a sense of knowing oneself called and privileged. Besides, the citizens of Jerusalem must also reflect the unity and diversity of Israel, for in a sense Jerusalem with its dedicated citizens is to be representative of all Israel.

As Nehemiah is pondering this matter, wondering perhaps how to deal with it, we read again of God's specific guidance. Verse 5: "So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials, and the common people for registration by families." Nehemiah concludes that

the best way is to conduct a “census” of sorts, to find out how many Israelites are living in Canaan, and to make a selection from them.

The problem here is, however, that through the years it has in many instances become unclear who are really of the lineage of Abraham, who are the originally returned exiles and their families. It is clear to Nehemiah that the city must be repopulated by people who from the beginning have longed and worked for the restoration of Jerusalem and Israel, who have the proper antecedents and credentials.

And it is at this point that Nehemiah finds the “genealogical record” of those who had been the first to return. This is most likely the list compiled earlier by Ezra, and kept maybe in the temple, a list which now proves to be invaluable. And then follows the list in the chapter, all those names and numbers, with the idea that out of these families people shall be chosen who will dwell in the rebuilt city of Jerusalem.

There are more genealogical records in the Bible. We may not like to read them, because of their difficulty and length, but the LORD keeps lists. He has books with names. He does work through the faithful generations, for He is a God who makes and keeps a covenant with believers and their seed. He does not forget past faithfulness nor does He overlook past disobedience. What one generation does has consequences for the next. God works in the covenant way, and we do wise not to forget this in an age of individualism.

Only people from this list will be chosen, people who have the right “pedigree,” so to speak. The structure of the listing shows the place that each person or family has, with a focus especially (verse 39) on the priests, the Levites, and the helpers (gatekeepers) of the priests. The list therefore emphasizes the importance of the priesthood and the temple, a clear indication that the citizens of Jerusalem are symbolic of the fact that Israel is a holy nation, a sanctified people. The list also places some focus on the descendants of the servants of Solomon (verse 57), indicating that Jerusalem is indeed the royal city of David. Solomon was the last king to reign over a united nation, and we learn from this list therefore also that Israel is a royal priesthood, a people under God and His chosen king.

The list has a clear *messianic* character. This is the people that was called by God out of the world, set apart and sanctified by the blood of the covenant, to be unto God a holy and royal priesthood out of whom would come the great Messiah. It is this reality that truly binds Israel together, and this unity becomes most visible in Jerusalem, where kings and priests serve together, each in their own office, under God for the day of the great priest-king. Going back to Ezra's list shows that the LORD has not abandoned His messianic purpose and that He seeks for Jerusalem only those people who are committed to this purpose with heart and soul. For Jerusalem shall show forth in all its citizens the unity of God's people joined together in one faith and striving for the day of the great Messiah.

We therefore read later, in Nehemiah 11, that from this list one person out of everyone ten is chosen by lot to dwell in Jerusalem. The LORD chose His own citizens out of His faithful children. The rest inhabited the village and towns, but everyone was *represented* in Jerusalem. Everyone, so to speak, had "family" there! Every Israelite had a personal stake in that city. Jerusalem shows forth the unity of God's people in a wondrous fashion. No wonder that it says in Nehemiah 11 : 2 that the people commended all the men who volunteered (after being chosen) to live there. They were chosen, yes but they also then volunteered. They wanted what God wanted – and this is the essence of what it means to be church of Christ, to be one in doing God's will and seeking God's kingdom.

Anyone who did not have an "authentic" background in this respect was by that fact excluded from dwelling in Jerusalem. Now to us this may seem rather elitist and even a form of discrimination. One commentator uses the term "ethnic cleansing." For people (especially priests, see verses 64 and 65) who cannot produce proper documentation proving their ancestry are immediately excluded until God recognizes them by the Urim and Thummin. Indeed, the ethnic cleansing continues later, when further marriages with "foreign" (non-Israelite) women are forbidden.

Some may say: it is a good thing that today things are different, that there is none of this racial stuff, nothing about family pedigrees or

whether you have the right name or not. Today it is not a matter of physical descent but of spiritual commitment; not the colour of your skin counts but the state of your heart. Otherwise the church would be determined by race and culture, an exclusivistic group.

And, indeed, it is a good thing. But let us not overlook the principles involved. God wants dedicated and committed people. He builds His church through faithful generations. His covenant is with believers and their seed. Also today, even more now that the final sacrifice has been made and the Spirit of God had been poured out, there must be a true and deep spiritual unity that binds us together in the church. We are to be of one mind and purpose. Those who are not “authentic” and sincere in this respect, cannot help to build the Jerusalem of today.

3. When the LORD restores Jerusalem as Zion, the city where He dwells, and it becomes clear that He there seeks the unity of Israel, we also learn that this unity becomes most evident in worship. Jerusalem with its walls and gates, its bona fide watchmen and citizens, is the place where God will be worshipped by all Israel.

Nehemiah must indeed take care that only lawful priests serve in the temple. The Levitical priesthood was determined under the old covenant by both physical descent and spiritual commitment. For the worship of God, the ministry of reconciliation, must be restored in a proper, a holy manner. Here beats the heart of the nation.

Therefore, Nehemiah must take special measures regarding the priests and Levites. Only those with proper credentials may serve; those whose credentials are unclear must first be approved by God. It says in verse 65 that they could not even eat from the “most sacred food” (the privilege of true priests in Israel) until there should be a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummin. We will not get into a discourse now about the Urim and Thummin; read the book by Dr. van Dam. The text means simply: God Himself had to authenticate those whose credentials were missing or unclear. So that the worship, the ministry of reconciliation remains pure and true. When Jerusalem is

restored, it is as place for the true and holy worship of God's people! Everything is geared there towards that goal.

Is it really any different today? Are there new rules in place? What is the church? Is it not the body of Christ that may in its membership be diverse, different people from different backgrounds, doing different tasks, and living in their own places, and yet united in one faith and worship?

With this list Nehemiah wasn't living in the past, trying to revive the good old days, bound to ancient traditions. He was simply following the work of God through faithful generations and showing that the church, God's covenant people, must always be united in the true worship of God's Name, there where He calls them under the faithful administration of the means of grace. This work of restoration is only true and beneficial if it meets the norms and standards of the LORD Himself.

At the beginning of this chapter we have a city with walls and gates, but it is almost a ghost-town, ruined and empty, lifeless. But God's work of restoration makes this city into a place where faithful, committed people live and work, people with names and faces, a place where all Israel can safely gather in the true ministry of reconciliation, a living city, where God's blessing is granted, and life forevermore. That is and remains the beauty of the church of Christ in all ages.

It pleases God to live and dwell in such a city. It is His Zion, His resting place. This is the safe haven for His people.

Indeed, Jerusalem, the hills surround her, it stands unmoved and will not tremble.

Those who trust in the LORD resemble Mount Zion, firm and sure, which ever will endure.

AMEN.