

March 24, 2024

COMING INTO JERUSALEM  
Nehemiah 11-12  
*(8 of 9 in a series through Ezra-Nehemiah)*

There's an interesting scene in Revelation 6. As the fifth seal is opened, there's a vision of the souls of the martyrs under the altar in heaven. Specifically these individuals are said to have "been slain for the Word of the God and for the witness they had borne" (6:9). In other words, they'd given their lives in faithful obedience and witness to Jesus. And they cried out to the Lord, asking how long before he'll "judge and avenge [their] blood on those who dwell on the earth" (6:10). That is, how long until the Lord returns and judges his enemies, especially in light of their persecution of his people? And these martyrs were told to rest a little longer "until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been" (6:11).

Now, that's an interesting response, isn't it? Jesus' answer isn't to imply that he's not coming to judge and avenge their blood. Still less does he indicate that he doesn't know what the holdup is. But nor does he even express empathy with what has happened to these individuals who have lost their lives because of their allegiance to him. Rather, his response is to say that there are even more believers who have been appointed to be martyred on his behalf, and when that number is completed, then judgment will come. In other words, Jesus—without any sense of blushing—makes clear that our lives are to be spent (however he intends to spend them) for his glory, even to the point of shedding our blood.

And the rest of the Bible bears witness to this truth. When the Lord calls Saul on the road to Damascus to himself, he does more than express that he has the authority to change his name to Paul. Jesus tells him that he has been appointed to suffer much on his behalf (Acts 9:16). Therefore, the call to follow Christ is a call to take up one's cross, realizing that following Jesus may well cost us everything—even the shedding of our blood.

It would seem, then, that as we seek to make disciples, teaching one another to obey all that Christ commands, that this would be our starting point, right? The basic message that we need to make sure we all understand is that following Jesus may cost us everything in this life. Now, it's utterly worth it, for even as we lay our lives down, we'll take them up again. Death will not be the last word for us. And we'll be blessed by our Father in heaven. But to follow Christ is to acknowledge right off the bat that we are willing to give up everything—even our lives—for him.

But this expectation to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of our Lord isn't simply found in the pages of the New Testament. In fact, one of the places we see it most clearly in the Old Testament is in this text we've been studying: Ezra-Nehemiah. And we especially see it this morning as we look at Nehemiah 11-12. But here we not only see the call to sacrifice but we also see here a note of the kindness and grace and glory of God.

Before we see this, let's once more set the scene for these chapters. The issue that these chapters address actually goes back to the start of chapter 7. At the beginning of chapter 7 we were told that "the city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt" (7:4). So, many of those who'd rebuilt the walls probably went back to Persia, only making the trip for the fifty-two day rebuild of the walls. Others had homes and lands outside of the city, so that they didn't live within the walls of the city itself. So, Nehemiah raised this issue in chapter 7, but before addressing the repopulating of the city, they had to establish the centrality of the Word. That's why instead of diving right into the issue of repopulation, we had Nehemiah 8-10 focus on the establishment of the centrality of Scripture in the lives of the people.

Now that the Word has been addressed, however, we find ourselves coming back to address the issue of the city needing inhabitants. That's where chapter 11 picks up, noting that though the leaders lived in the city, not many others did. Therefore, as we go through these chapters, we're going to see what solution they came up with to repopulate the city and then how they dedicated the wall to the Lord and made sure all was provided for worship in the temple. But I want to walk through the chapters seeing a few realities, and the first of these is that we should be prepared to sacrifice for the purposes of God.

### **We should be prepared to sacrifice for the purposes of God**

Again, this makes sense in light of the clear reality that Jesus' sets forth that our lives are to be spent for his glory. But let me show it to you in our text. As chapter 11 begins, we're reminded once more that few people live within those walls that were just rebuilt. They need to repopulate the city. So what do they do? Well, we're told in verses 1-2. "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."

Their solution to repopulate the city was to cast lots. This is kind of like flipping a coin or drawing straws, except there was a clear understanding that this wasn't chance. They were doing this to discern those whom God providentially wanted to live there. This approach doesn't seem to carry over after Pentecost in our day, as we're told in Romans 12:1-2 that the main manner in which we discern the Lord's will is by renewing our minds to the Scripture and allowing that to guide us. But I don't want to focus on the *manner* in which they discerned the Lord's will as much as what they were doing.

By making this decision to cast lots and see which ten percent would leave their homes and move into Jerusalem, each of them was saying, "I'm willing to go if the lot falls on me." Verse 2 could then possibly refer to the ten percent on whom the lot fell, since (again) all would have been willing to go if the lot had fallen on them. But my guess is that there were some who just said, "I'll go," before the lots were even cast. And the people were thankful and blessed them.

Now, the whole way this reads suggests that this was a sacrifice. Otherwise, the people wouldn't bless those who volunteered to go, and they wouldn't cast lots for the one in ten to move. Everyone would have been eager to do so. If I were offering a free vacation to Hawaii for everyone this morning who was willing to accept it, I doubt we'd have to institute a draft system. I'd have more than enough people eager to go. But if we were looking for people to weed the mulched areas around the building, we might have to draw straws, and any who volunteered, we'd bless. That's more like what is going on here. Moving into Jerusalem was a sacrifice. But it was a sacrifice that needed to be made.

You see, Jerusalem was the appointed city in which God had chosen for his name to dwell. That's why verse 1 refers to it as "the holy city." Part of God's plan was to have this city in which his temple stood and his people would dwell that would stand as a glorious picture of what is to come. It was a foreshadowing of how one day all of us will inhabit the New Jerusalem—a new heavens and earth—at the return of Christ. But in order for that foreshadowing to work, again, people had to live there in Nehemiah's day. There had to be sacrifice from the people of God in order to fulfill the purposes of God.

But we not only see the sacrifice of people picking up and moving into the city. We also see the sacrifice of them giving of their goods for the purpose of worship at the temple. Our text begins with the sacrifice of people moving, and it ends with their gifts to the temple. In 12:44-47 we're told of how Nehemiah appointed men to manage the storerooms, contributions, firstfruits, and tithes that come in from the people for the priests and Levites to minister at the temple. The last verse of chapter 12 reads: "And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers; and they set apart that which was for the Levites; and the Levites set apart that which was for the sons of Aaron" (12:47).

Simply in order for there to be singers committed to worshiping the Lord at the temple required contribution from the people. In other words, these people were willing to sacrifice of what they had to live on simply in order to make sure the Lord was worshiped and praised as he deserved. And in light of the fact that it wasn't too long ago that the people felt they didn't have enough food to survive, my guess is that they weren't giving from a base of great wealth. This was a sacrifice. Thus, our text begins and ends with the people of God making sacrifices in order that the Lord's purposes of being worshiped in the holy city of Jerusalem might be fulfilled.

And this is a reality that has not changed. To be a follower of Christ means that we must have a heart that is willing to sacrifice of ourselves for the good of fulfilling God's purposes. This means that we are willing to pick up our lives and move to other areas in order to make disciples there, as we've seen with church planters we've sent out. It means that we're willing to go into churches at times and work to revitalize them, knowing it will be hard, as others have gone out to do. It also means that we volunteer to serve in the nursery because we want others to be able to worship the Lord and hear his Word without distraction. It means that our musicians get here early every Sunday in order to practice so that we can sing praises to the Lord. And it

means that we give offering in order to pay to have lights, air conditioning, parking lot repairs, and pay the salaries of those who labor in the Word and prayer over us. And we could go on.

And my bet is that the world would find this utterly ridiculous. Why would we give our time, money, and even uproot our lives for the purpose of seeking to know Jesus and make him known? It's because we believe that sacrificing for the honor and glory of our Lord is worth it. We believe that the Lord and his purposes are worth you giving your time, your sweat, your money, and your life. Jesus isn't ashamed to tell us that he is worth the sacrifice of our very lives. So, like those in Nehemiah's day, let's make sure we have the mindset that says, "Following Christ means being willing to sacrifice for his sake, and he is worth every sacrifice we make."

But there's a second reality we see in this text as well, namely, that we should honor those whom we see sacrificing for the Lord's sake.

### **We should honor those whom we see sacrificing for the Lord's sake**

We've already seen this in 11:2 as the people blessed those who voluntarily moved into Jerusalem. But then notice what Nehemiah does starting in verse 3. He gives you a list of names of those who lived in Jerusalem. In 11:4 we read, "And in Jerusalem lived certain of the sons of Judah and of the sons of Benjamin." And then he lists them by name. Even those whom he lists who did not live in Jerusalem proper are named to show people who uprooted their lives in Persia to come to this town of ruins and make sure the temple was rebuilt, the walls rebuilt, and the worship of the temple able to be carried out. He mentions, Levites, priests, gatekeepers, and more—all necessary for the worship of the Lord in Jerusalem to be fulfilled.

Now why would the Spirit inspire the authors of these books (Ezra-Nehemiah) to keep mentioning by name those who sacrificed in order to fulfill the Lord's purposes? I mean, he does it again and again, even listing those in Ezra 2 again in Nehemiah 7. I think one reason is because we're to honor those whom we see sacrifice for the Lord's sake. They're not doing it in order to be honored. But the Lord wants us to recognize their sacrifice and honor them. You can feel Nehemiah's desire to honor these men as he speaks of them as "valiant men" (11:6), "men of valor" (11:8), and "mighty men of valor" (11:14).

Honoring those who sacrifice for the Lord isn't something the Lord wanted to happen in Nehemiah's day only. When the Philippians sent Epaphroditus to Paul in prison to deliver their gift to him, Paul sent him back to them, saying, "Receive him in the Lord with all joy, and *honor such men*, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me" (Phil 2:29-30). Paul will even tell us in Romans 12:10, "Love one another with brotherly affection. *Outdo one another in showing honor.*"

It is the Lord's heart that we sacrifice ourselves for the good of his name, and it is also the Lord's heart that we honor one another for that sacrifice. In fact, the Lord tells us to get competitive

with this and see if we can outdo one another in honoring one another, for such brothers and sisters deserve to be honored.

Now, I wish I could spend the rest of our time just naming people by name and speaking of how they've sacrificed for the good of the church. You know some of them because we pray for them regularly, having sent them out. But there are so many others whom you might not know and whose sacrifice you might not see. My only hesitation is that it would embarrass them. But I don't mind embarrassing and deacons, for one, and they deserve honor. Jon Putt has led our music on Sunday morning without payment for eighteen years, showing up as much as an hour-and-a-half early to practice, cutting vacations short to get back on Sunday morning, so that we might be able to sing praises to the Lord. David Matlock drives a great distance to get here every Sunday—and has done so for years—sacrificing greatly his own comforts in order to keep up safe on Sunday mornings. It's easily overlooked that Tim Ellsworth gathers and counts the money, missing out on fellowshiping each Sunday, or counts those in attendance so that we'll know how to handle overflow seating, or manages our storehouse account, and more. Jeremy Rasnic gets texts nearly every Sunday morning, letting him know that something has gone wrong with our sound or video that he has to address, even coming up here throughout the week to make sure all is good for Sunday. And Ryne Cali allows himself much distraction on Sunday mornings to make sure that we're comfortable with the temperature or pipes are unclogged or vomit is cleaned up somewhere. And I've just mentioned our deacons and not even all that they do.

You surely know that I could name those who man the nursery counter, serve in the nursery, the other musicians, those who operate the sound board and video, who serve security, who greet and hand out bulletins, who teach Sunday school, who make sure we can enjoy church picnics, who prepare and clean up communion each Sunday, who visit our shut-ins, who lead our small groups, who lock up the building each week, who give a great percentage of their income to the church, and who do the number of other sacrificial tasks that I've missed. I was greatly tempted to give you a list of names of people and what I see them do, but I think it might embarrass some, and I certainly don't want to do that—except with the deacons, of course! But, brothers and sisters, as we see people sacrifice for our good and the honor of our Lord, let's honor them. And outdo one another in showing honor, even as we see here in Nehemiah. Think of this. The Holy Spirit inspired the biblical authors to tell us to honor one another, especially those who sacrifice for God's purposes, because the Lord desires that we are honored in service to him. Let's do that. Third, we should give thanks and praise to God all things.

### **We should give thanks and praise to God for all things**

I don't want you to get the idea that praise and thanksgiving should terminate with our fellow brothers and sisters. The Bible recognizes that even those who sacrifice are themselves gifts from the Lord, for every good thing we have is from him. Therefore, we praise him. So, after honoring with this list those who contributed to the rebuilding of the temple, the rebuilding of the wall, the inhabiting of Jerusalem, and the worship of the Lord, the people ultimately praise and thank God himself for all good things.

In 12:27-43 we are given a picture where Nehemiah organizes the dedication of the wall. We read, “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.” Nehemiah appoints two large choirs, who each play, sing, and give thanks to God. It’s mentioned multiple times that in their singing, the choirs give thanks to God (12:27, 31, 40), as is fitting.

Here’s what’s happening. There are two separate choirs, each accompanied with song leaders and officials, and they march around the city in opposite directions, praising and thanking the Lord until they meet up. As a summary Nehemiah tells us, “And the singers sang with Jezrahiah as their leaders. 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” (12:42-43). This was the joy of thanking and praising God for his good gifts.

This is ultimately what we must do as well. The reason we are willing to sacrifice our lives is because God is worthy of our lives, and one way we demonstrate this is in our worship, praise, and thanksgiving. The reason we thank and praise him even as we honor the sacrifice of one another is because we know that every good and perfect gift comes from him, even when his grace toward us is shown in the sacrifices of one another. And so we sacrifice for his honor. We honor one another for those sacrifices. And we thank and praise God for all things.

Nehemiah 11-12 opens with people coming into Jerusalem and ends with praise to the Lord. But this wasn’t the last important moment someone would come into Jerusalem in the Bible’s storyline. Years later our Lord would come riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, with the people praising him as was fitting. And he would sacrifice much more than those in Nehemiah’s day, laying down his life at the end of that week by being crucified on a cross so that we might have the forgiveness of sins. But his death wasn’t the last word. On the third day, he rose from the dead, and his people have gathered on this first day of the week ever since, sacrificing whatever is necessary, in order to praise our risen Lord for who he is and what he has done for us. We’ve oriented our whole lives to giving this day to the worship of our Lord. And if the world thinks it’s foolish, it’s only because their eyes haven’t been opened to how worthy our Lord is of our praise—and our very lives. So let’s praise and thank him now as we come to the table. Amen.