

**“The Holy City”**  
**Nehemiah 11-12**  
**October 25, 2020**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Twice in chapter 11, Jerusalem is referred to as the “holy city” (v. 1, 18). It is called “holy” because God had set it apart for the place where he would dwell with his people. The rebuilding of the walls of the city was an important part of putting this city back together again as a bona fide city. Whoever heard of a city without walls, at least in this day? But the construction of those walls has now been completed, and a new problem arises. For at least two reasons, people didn’t want to live in the city. First, it was dangerous to live there. Jerusalem was hated by many outside of Israel, and it would have been a likely target for any military attack. Additionally, the leaders and the treasures of the nation were located there, adding to its attractiveness as a military target. Second, wealth in this day was found primarily in one’s land. So to live in a city was to leave such wealth behind.

So Jerusalem needed to be repopulated. We saw this initially back in chapter 7. **“The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt”** (7:4). In the Bible, the holy city is a picture of heaven. John Bunyan makes extensive use of this metaphor in his classic *Pilgrim’s Progress*, in which Pilgrim is making his journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. God’s desire is to populate heaven with multitudes of worshipers from every tribe and nation. Every person who ends up there will have to make the journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. These chapters provide helpful insight on our journey and our destination.

**I. The City**

Why is Jerusalem such a focus of attention in the Bible? Everything that’s happened in the book of Nehemiah has been focused on this city. By the standards of the world of Nehemiah’s time, Jerusalem was not such an important or impressive city. It was a city way past its prime from the days of David and Solomon. It had been destroyed by the Babylonian army about one-hundred and fifty years prior to this time and was just now beginning to be restored. So why does it garner such attention in the Bible?

In order to answer that question, we have to take a step back and see the larger biblical story. Bunyan was being very biblical in featuring the two cities that he called “The City of Destruction” and “The Celestial City.” The Bible also describes two cities, but calls them by different names: Babylon and

Jerusalem. Babylon arises out of Babel, which is described in Genesis 11. It was the coming together of mankind in their rebellion against God, determined to make a great name for themselves. Because of his promise to Noah not to send a universal judgment again until the end of the world, God thwarts this effort in order to prevent the flourishing of mankind's rebellion. He confuses their languages, which leads to a division, although the city is left standing. Then God starts to build his own city. Have you ever noticed how in most stories of good and evil, the bad guys always get out to a fast start, while the good guys are much slower out of the gate? That happens here as well. God's efforts to build his city begin with the call of Abraham. But Abraham at first lives in tents and not a city. It would be centuries before his descendants finally come to the land God has promised to them. Even then, it would take a while longer before Jerusalem is designated as God's holy city. The thing that makes it God's holy city is that God takes up residence there. Jerusalem becomes the new Garden of Eden because the temple is located there. If you study the details of the tabernacle, which I will grant you is a tedious study, you find many depictions of Eden. There are images of plants such as one would find in a garden. The ark of the covenant is topped with a seat bracketed by two angels called cherubim. You may remember that God posted such an angel at the garden to keep mankind from returning. It was a guard to protect humanity from destruction by entering into God's holy place as sinners. Eden has moved to the temple. Some people today mistakenly think that Eden is a place that can be found. What makes Eden into a paradise isn't the excellence of the place, but the excellence of God's presence there.

God's temple in Jerusalem was located on a mountain called "Mt. Zion." Every city has skyscrapers. Babel had its tower, erected as a symbol of human greatness apart from God. Jerusalem has a different kind of skyscraper, a temple where God has graciously chosen to live with his people. Jerusalem was not erected to make a great name for humanity, but to make a great name for God.

In the rest of the Old Testament, the prophets speak of the future greatness of Jerusalem. For example, the prophet Zechariah says that a time will come when Jerusalem will be so expansive that stone walls cannot encircle it (2:4). But it will not need such walls for protection, for the glory of God will be its wall (2:5). Such prophecies were never fulfilled in an earthly Jerusalem, because they are meant to describe the heavenly Jerusalem. At the end of the Bible, heaven is described as the new Jerusalem. **"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'"** (21:2-3). The city of man, Babylon, also makes an appearance at the end of the Bible. **"Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, 'So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and**

**will be found no more”** (Rev. 18:21). God’s city may have been late out of the gate, but at the end it will be the only one left standing.

## **II. The Citizens of the City**

This chapter’s depiction of the citizens of the earthly Jerusalem has a great deal to teach us about the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. Everyone who has ever lived is a citizen either of Babylon, the city destined for destruction, or of the new Jerusalem, the city where death, sorrow and pain are banished forever. So there is no question more important than this citizenship question.

There are several parallels between citizenship in the earthly Jerusalem of Nehemiah’s day and citizenship in the heavenly Jerusalem. The first one I notice is that it is by God’s choice. The opening verse of chapter 11 says that the residents of Jerusalem were chosen by the casting of lots. A tenth of them were taken, a percentage that normally communicates the part due to God as an indication that all belongs to him. One out of every ten was selected by lot. The casting of lots was an Old Testament way of discerning God’s will. There were various methods of casting lots, but all were similar to what we do when we throw dice. Though the process has the appearance of being a matter of pure chance, the outcome is completely under God’s control. Think about the number of small factors that must be controlled to control which of six numbers will be facing up when the dice stop rolling. There’s the force of the throw, the resistance of the surface where the dice are rolled, and any object the dice may strike. God is in control of them all. The same is true of our lives. Anyone becoming a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem will do so because God has been in control of their lives, down to the smallest detail. The theological term for this is the sovereignty of God.

The very next verse says something that seems to contradict the first verse. **“And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem.”** Which is it? Did they move to Jerusalem because God selected them through the casting of lots, or did they move because they willingly volunteered to do so? It would seem to be both, and that is precisely what the Bible teaches about everyone who becomes a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem. Why are you a follower of Christ? Because God chose you and because you chose God. Both are true, although it should be pointed out that the only reason you chose God is that he first chose you.

The rest of this chapter and a large part of the next contain a long list of names of those living in Jerusalem, the vast majority of which are unknown to us. Why does the Bible spend so much of its precious real estate on such lists? It is because God cares for us at a personal level, and names are very personal. If you are attending a graduation ceremony of a loved one and you are handed a program that lists all the graduates to be awarded degrees that day, what is

the first thing you do? You look for the name of the friend or loved one you are there to see. What would you do if that person's name were missing? You would wonder, "Did something happen to prevent their graduation?" The presence of that person's name reassures you that they really do belong in that group of graduates. It required a great deal of effort on the part of someone to compile that list of graduates and make sure it was accurate. In the same way, Jesus compiles a list of names of all who are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. It is called the "book of life" (Rev. 20:12, 15). **"And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire"** (20:15).

How can you know if your name is in that book of life? Once again, the chapter gives us some clues. Three times in this chapter it is recorded that those choosing to live in this city were marked by courage. They are called "valiant men" (11:6), "men of valor" (11:8) and "mighty men of valor" (11:14). Courage was required in that they were willing to risk their necks for the kingdom of God. Doesn't Jesus say that this is what is required to be his follower? **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"** (Matt. 16:24-25). There was little practical benefit in moving to Jerusalem at this time. It would be a threat to a person's health and wealth. The same is true today. There is rarely worldly advantage to be gained by following Christ and joining oneself to his church. So it takes courage to do so.

It also takes faith to follow Christ. In the great faith chapter of the Bible, Hebrews 11, we read that Abraham obeyed God and lived as a nomad in the Promised Land because **"he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God"** (11:10). He gave up all because he believed God about a future city that would not collapse, one with solid foundations.

### **III. The Principal Activity of the City**

The last part of chapter 12 shows us the ultimate goal of the city and life within that city. It is the worship of God. Several months ago, I read of a poll that asked people if they would want to go to heaven if God wasn't there. Most answered that of course they would. Then someone finally asked, "But isn't it the presence of God that makes it heaven in the first place? How could it be heaven if God isn't there?" That's exactly right.

In 1989, Stephen Covey wrote a book that climbed all the way to number one on the bestseller list. It was titled *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and the second habit was "Begin with the end in mind." It's a very helpful principle. If you are building a home, you don't just go out and start

digging. You build the house completely on paper first, deciding every last detail before doing anything. The building of a life must do the same. But what is the end? Covey recommends thinking about one's funeral and what you would like to have said of you there. But that is not the end. The end is heaven, which the Bible describes as God's dwelling with man and man's joyful worship of God. Is that the end toward which all of your life is aimed?

I notice four elements of the worship of God in this passage. The first is purification. **“And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall”** (12:30). Sinners cannot stand before God without being purified. The defilement of sin must be removed, and only the blood of Jesus can do so. The second element of worship is music. Two great choirs were recruited, and each one stood on a part of the wall and sang songs of thanks to God (12:31). The singers were accompanied by musicians using the musical instruments of David (12:36). There are many occupations in this world that will not be needed in the new Jerusalem. Musician is not one of those. Perhaps we will all become musicians on that day, singing and playing with the attitude described in verse 43. **“God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.”**

Gratitude is the next element of their worship. God is honored when we are grateful to him. During the exile and in much of the early days of Israel's return to Jerusalem, there had been much weeping. But God had turned their weeping into joy, as he promises (Ps. 30:5). What a day that will be when all of our weeping is turned to joy, when God **“will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away”** (Rev. 21:4). The final element of worship is the giving of ourselves. Just as God has given to us all that we need, at the ultimate cost to himself, we give to him. The last part of chapter 12 records the details of this giving.

## **CONCLUSION:**

In his classic work, *The City of God*, Augustine contrasts the city of God and the city of man like this. “The humble City is the society of holy men and good angels; the proud city is the society of wicked men and evil angels. The one City began with the love of God; the other had its beginnings in the love of self.” Citizenship in God's city costs nothing and everything all at the same time. There is no entry fee, in money, connections or talents or looks. Any are allowed entry into this city. On the other hand, it will cost everything you have. Just as those entering Jerusalem back at the beginning of our passage had to leave their homes and lives to live there, so we will have to leave everything behind and follow Jesus. But no one doing so ever regrets it.

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Nehemiah 11-12**

1. Twice in our passage, Jerusalem is referred to as the “holy city” (11:1, 18). Heaven is described as the “new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:2). Based on what you know of cities, why do you think heaven is likened to a city?
2. Jerusalem was under-populated at this time because people didn’t want to live there (7:4; 11:1-2). What makes it difficult to be citizens of the kingdom today?
3. A tenth of the people were selected by the casting of lots to live in Jerusalem (11:1). This speaks of the sovereignty of God in even the small things of life. How have you seen God’s sovereignty in your life at work in bringing you to faith in Christ?
4. Note that the only way verses 1 and 2 can be reconciled is to assume that once they were chosen by lot to move to Jerusalem, God also changed their hearts to want to live there. How has God changed your heart over the years that you’ve been following Christ?
5. Most of these two chapters is simply a long list of names that are largely unknown to us. The Bible says that there is a “book of life” that contains the names of those who are citizens of heaven (Rev. 20:12, 15). What happens inside of you when you think about the existence of such a book? Any doubts? Any comforts?
6. Many of the names in these two chapters are family names, which shows the covenantal nature of God. That is, God works in families, bringing the children of believers to faith as well. Are there adult children you can think of now that need your prayers that they come to faith in Jesus? Spend some time praying for them.
7. The aim of everything that’s happened in Nehemiah is the worship of God. Stephen Covey encourages us to “Begin with the end in mind.” If the worship of God is to be the ultimate end and goal in life, are there changes that need to be made in your life now?