

An Identity Crisis for the People of God

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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Bible Text: Nehemiah 7:1-8:1
Preached on: Sunday, April 11, 2021

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Turn to the seventh chapter of Nehemiah, Nehemiah 7. We return to our exposition of the books Ezra/Nehemiah. Last week we took a Sunday to focus on the glory of the resurrection from the New Testament in Acts but we'll be this morning back in Nehemiah 7:1-8:1.

The title of the message this morning is "An Identity Crisis." An identity crisis. The passage deals with a real practical problem for the people of Judah in the fifth century BC, the days of Nehemiah in which we are reading, and the people need to be reminded of who they are and why are they here. Those are the questions of identity. "Who am I? Why am I here? What is your purpose? What is your reason for living?" This idea of identity is an area of profound confusion today in the culture; having become untethered from the concept of absolute truth, people are wandering about with no sense of clarity regarding who we are, what we're here for. We see it in the astonishing reality of recent years and even gender identity being something that people are wrestling with, and it's a product of the culture. We are all affected by these things and what we see is that identity, the Christian view of identity is that we don't find our identity ultimately from within. It's just one of the fundamental ideas that has led to the confusion in the culture. We find our identity from without, from God and his word. We don't find our identity as others are confused by placing their identity in society and societal values and what society tells you about yourself. But no, we find our identity in God and his word.

The answers to the questions who am I, why am I here, the only truly satisfying questions are found in holy Scripture, and it is yet easy for us, though we may have an idea of those things, to forget who we are and why we're here. And the Jewish people in the fifth century BC needed a reminder of who they are and why they were where they were. They have finished rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, our text picks up right after the completion of the wall. Nehemiah's purpose in returning had been to bring that part of God's plan to fruition. The wall is built, the gates have been hung. The city's defense is apparently restored yet there remains one huge problem, the city is almost entirely uninhabited. The people are all at home in their cities outside of Jerusalem. When they came back to Jerusalem, they returned to their ancestral lands and they built houses and they planted gardens. They're living in their cities and then they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. We're going to read in a moment the city is large and spacious, Nehemiah

says, but the people in it are few, and Nehemiah understands that for Jerusalem to be Jerusalem, for the worship of God to be protected, for the people of God to be restored, the city has to be inhabited with people, and so they are going to be asking, they're going to be asking, he's going to be asking for people to volunteer to move into the city of Jerusalem. That is going to be a big ask. He's asking people to consider leaving their homes in the smaller cities and villages, picking up their roots and replanting within the city walls of Jerusalem. In a sense, he's asking, trying to finish the work that he began by doing something of an urban renewal project. The houses are broken down. The walls are restored but the houses are not restored, and so he's asking people who are in intact homes to leave their intact homes and to go to Jerusalem to plant themselves in the city of God.

Now the application for us, this is not a call to do something physical like try to rebuild a city, we're not rebuilding walls, we're not repopulating a city. That's not what this passage is about, this passage for us, the application for us is spiritual, and the idea is that God is calling you and me to plant roots in the city of God, to plant our roots, our purpose for living firmly in the city of God, and the city of God, Jerusalem in the old covenant really means the kingdom of God and the church in the new. God wants you and I to put our lives in the center of the city of God. He wants us to invest our time, to spend our energy, to give the best years of our lives to the city of God. That's who you are and why you're here if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, and the problem is we forget that, we forget who we are and why we're here and therefore we don't invest ourselves, we don't really put our roots deep in the city of God, and if we don't, the work will suffer and the glory of God will not be made known, at least we will not have a part in that.

I want to read the first five verses, then we're going to read a little more after that, but Nehemiah 7:1,

1 Now when the wall was rebuilt and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed, 2 then I put Hanani my brother, and Hananiah the commander of the fortress, in charge of Jerusalem, for he was a faithful man and feared God more than many. 3 Then I said to them, "Do not let the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot, and while they are standing guard, let them shut and bolt the doors. Also appoint guards from the inhabitants of Jerusalem, each at his post, and each in front of his own house." 4 Now the city was large and spacious, but the people in it were few and the houses were not built. 5 Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogies. Then I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up first in which I found the following record:

Let's pray.

Our Father, we come this morning asking You because of nothing in ourselves but only that which is in Christ, to bless Your people. Lord, because of who Jesus is and what He

has done, pour out Your grace upon us through Your word by Your Spirit that we might live lives that are more worthy of so great a Savior. We pray in His name. Amen.

An identity crisis, knowing who we are and why we are here. What is really astonishing about this passage is that Nehemiah raises the problem in the first four verses here, the problem is that the city is rebuilt, the gates are hung, but he's arranging now for the daily opening of the gates and the closing of the gates and the guarding of the gates, there need to be people on duty, and as he is talking about that, he's reminded of the need for there to be people in the city. If there are not people in the city, then the work will have been in vain. And as he thinks about this, what's going to happen is he's not really going to pick this up again, he stops in verse 5 and he's going to pick it up again in chapter 11, and what's going to happen in between is the renewal of the covenant. But what really is astonishing is what happens in verse 6 because from Nehemiah 7, verse 6, all the way to the end of the chapter in verse 73, you basically have a recapitulation of an entire chapter that we've already read and studied, Ezra 2. It's almost word for word. It's apparently a separate record of the same genealogy, some differences here and there but essentially it's the same record. Scholars believe one was probably taken as they prepared to leave for Babylon and that's the one recorded in Ezra 2, and this one is one that came along later that Nehemiah had access to, and so it's not exactly the same but basically it's the same content.

Now think about that. Why? I mean, why genealogies in the first place? When you come to genealogies in the Bible, do you not find yourself tempted to, you know, "Oh no"? And isn't once enough? What's going on here? I mean, this is amazing, especially I've mentioned before but it bears repeating, the preciousness of paper in the time when the Scriptures were being written, scrolls were very costly things, every space, you didn't waste space, and so why do this again? Well, obviously God, all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable, and so the Lord has a good purpose in this. One of the things, I think, is that it shows, he's reminding them, what he's telling them is the names of the people. Now here we are in 445 BC, we're in 445 BC. They just finished the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah wants to get the people to plant in the city. He's thinking about that. He wants them to reconnect to their history which is, this is not one of the main points of this sermon but just an incidental important point, is you can't know who you are and why you are here without understanding your history. There seems to be a rush today to erase history. That is foolishness. That's the way of tyrants. Even where we have blemishes and ugly things in our history, we're not to erase them, we're to learn from them. He who forgets history is bound to repeat it. But here we see God and we see this in Scripture again and again, the Lord is constantly calling his people to look back to their spiritual roots, to understand themselves, where they are in time and space in relation to all that's gone before, to see yourself and your current circumstances in light of the history of God's dealing with his people.

It's so important and for the Christian, our history is not our family history that you can find on ancestry.com. That's not what's most important. It's not unimportant but it's not what this is talking about. It's not your ethnic history. It's not your national history. It is your spiritual history that matters. This tells you who you are by telling you where you

came from and this is what he's doing for them, he's reminding them where they came from, their spiritual ancestors, the people of God. So in a very real sense, if you belong to Jesus Christ, these are your people here in Ezra 7. These are your people more than your family is your people, more than your ethnicity is your people, more than your nationality is your people. The people of God in the pages of Scripture and the faithful of God throughout church history, those are my people, those are your people. That's how God sees it. Once you were not a people but now you are the people of God. Before we were the people of God, we were no people, irrelevant to God. All that is relevant is that we now are the people of God, a chosen race, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God. And so we see this here. For the people of God to be the people of God, they have to understand themselves and their times and their challenges in light of the history of God's dealing with his people, and so he is going to spend an extraordinary amount of time reminding them of their history.

Now the call and claim that this passage makes on our lives we need to keep before us, this calls us, in a sense, to move into the city of God. You and I are being called to move into the city of God. I mean, if you're really a Christian, you're living as you should, you're already there in the sense, but what happens is you have a residence there but you tend to live outside of it. And there is a sense in which, it's interesting, this idea of urban renewal. I've been just kind of thinking about that through this week. It's a lot more pleasant to live in the suburbs. Most of us probably are living in the suburbs. That's why you're here. We're in the suburbs, right? There's more open space. It's more comfortable. You can see the sky. You can see the stars at night better than you can in the city. You can see them even better if you go farther out.

But they were being called to move into the city of God and so we are being called to move into the city of God. The idea is uproot your life from everything else that makes you comfortable, that makes you feel spacious, and put all of your investment, all of your life into the people of God. That doesn't mean that you aren't doing other things. Of course, you have to make a living. You are to take care of your family. That's part of how we glorify God, but there's a sense in which this is calling for a fundamental alteration of the way that we think. If you belong to Christ, you become a part of his people. Make your home here in the community of faith. Give your time. Invest your energy. Spend yourselves in building up the saints. You do that when you gather with another believer for breakfast and you talk about life and you pray together. When one family gets together with another family and spends time encouraging one another and loving one another, this is building the city of God. Coming alongside those who are suffering among our brothers and sisters and walking with them through the pains and perplexities of life, that's building the city of God. And when you understand your true identity, this is who you are, this is why you are here, then you will do that.

I want to continue and gather our thoughts around two points this morning. The first is, they are both about the work we're called to do, the first is an unappealing work. An unappealing work. Three subpoints under number 1 that make it unappealing. First, it's hard work. I said that it's a big ask, Nehemiah asking them to uproot themselves and move into the city was a big ask because the houses aren't built so they're going to leave

homes that are built to move and take up building another house. They're going to go from a place where, you know, maybe they've got a home by a stream, to now they're in the city and they're going to have to walk to the cistern to get their water. It's hard work and building the people of God is hard work for us, applying this in our lives. To really invest in other people for the sake of the glory of God, to build the kingdom of God, to seek to produce holiness in ourselves and in one another is extremely hard work. It's not easy. People don't change overnight. I mean, when you get saved there's a change, a fundamental change that happens at an instant, yes, though often you don't know when it happened, you recognize it after it happened. The wind blows where it wills and you hear the sound of it, you see its effects, so is everyone who is born of the Spirit. But it is hard work to continue to grow in grace. Sanctification is a war and so we come alongside one another and we fight together, it's hard work.

So it's an unappealing work because it's hard work. Secondly, this is our first main point, 1B, it's an unappealing work because it's hard work, that was A, now it's unappealing because it's costly work. It's going to require great sacrifice. It's going to require a sacrifice in what we would rather have. Nobody wants to volunteer for this work in Nehemiah's day. The advantage is, there are no apparent advantages. And so sacrifice is what he's calling on the people to do, to lay down their preferences, to surrender them to God, and so in the same way to build, to get involved in the work, to plant yourself in the city of God is to be involved in a costly work. You're asked by Christ to lay down your life for your brothers, to spend your time, to give of the best of your energy, to pour out your life for others, to be there for them, to love them, to serve them. People who are just like us, they're unlovable, often ornery, difficult. That's what we all are and to love one another it's going to take sacrifice. To get involved in one another's lives is going to be costly.

It's an unappealing work because it's hard work, it's costly work, and it's also unimpressive work. It's not highly regarded work. The world does not value this work. You're discipling brothers in the body of Christ, it's something that very few people are going to be impressed by. There are better things to do with your time and when you really get down to it, when you're helping someone turn away from sexual sin, if you're helping another brother overcome same-sex desires or you're helping someone who's dealing with gender identity issues, the world is going to say what you are doing is evil because they call good evil. So the world looks at this work and it does not esteem it and, you know, when we look around ourselves, we look around at one another, it's not that impressive of a work either. I mean, think about that. The closer you get to people, it's always interesting. When you come to a church, a new church, the church always looks better at first. I always try to caution people. I don't do this as much as I need to, I need to do better about it but I will if I find somebody really and truly enthusiastic about our church. I'll try to temper the expectations. "No, this is not the place where we've got it all figured out. No, that place doesn't exist. And if you get closer to me, you're going to see my flaws, you're going to see my weaknesses, you're going to see the things that are ugly about me that are not yet like Christ. And if I get closer to you, I'm going to see the same thing about you."

So it's outwardly not that impressive a work that we're called to do. In fact, the times where we're really called to the work, it's almost always, if you really want to be involved in something, initially it always looks unimpressive, the best works do. And talking about how we look, I love the realism of the Scriptures. 1 Corinthians 1:26, Paul is dealing with people who are very proud, the Corinthian church, have a lot of divisions because of their pride and he's trying to humble them right off the bat and he says in verse 26 of chapter 1, 1 Corinthians 1:26, "For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble." He says, "Look around you. There aren't many of us that are wise or mighty or noble. There's not many, there's a few but if you look at the average one of us," he says, "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong," he's chosen "the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen," he has chosen "the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God." It is God's doing to choose the weak and the unimpressive. Remember how they thought about the apostles, I mean, the disciples? Remember, like Jesus and the Galileans, I mean, they're like looking at these fishermen and they can't believe this is the Messiah and this is his group, his entourage, really? We even heard that last week in Acts when they're saying, "Hey, these guys speaking in languages are from Galilee of all places." And all of his disciples were from Galilee. What was he thinking? He was thinking he'd like to choose the things of which are not so that he can confound the things which are.

So when you and I, then, are called to do the work here, we should not be surprised that it often will appear like it's unimpressive. It doesn't seem like it's that valuable to spend the time with this person in this circumstance. "I don't think they're going to change. I don't think they're going to..." Well, it doesn't matter what you think. God says that's the work and, in fact, you and I can expect that we will just almost 99% of the time misjudge the work if we're not thinking biblically. In our flesh, we will think that the things which are in the world are most likely to be the things that God is going to do, or the people that God is going to work in. We are to be faithful to minister to whoever's in front of us no matter how impressive they look, and the reality is whenever we find ourselves thinking that we're looking at someone who's unimpressive, we just need to remember that when you point your finger, three fingers are pointing back at you. You're unimpressive. That's 3 to 1, I'm unimpressive.

But it is an unappealing work. It was an unappealing work for them to rebuild, to move back into Jerusalem, to build their lives there, to leave what they would prefer to do, ease and comfort of the land that their families had been on for centuries before they had been sent to Babylon, to now to do this work. So it was an unappealing work, it was hard work, costly work, unimpressive work. The second main point is the work that we're called to do is a glorious work. The reality is it is a glorious work. If we can see as God sees, it is not an unappealing work, it's not an unattractive work, it's not anything less than the most glorious work in which we can be involved, in which a human being can be involved.

It is a glorious work. Four subpoints under this second point. It's glorious, first of all, because God values the work, of how much God values the work. He values the fact that people build his kingdom. He values the fact that people leave that which is more impressive outwardly, in a worldly sense, and choose that which is less impressive, in a worldly sense, but which he esteems and values. God loves that. He values it and we see it in the fact that he spends this time repeating all of these names. These are the people who left Babylon and Susa in the area in the east and came back to Jerusalem. These are the names of the people in the first return. Remember, Ezra/Nehemiah, there are three returns from captivity. The first return in 538 BC that this is talking about here, these verses 6 to 73, that Nehemiah is recounting. So the first return is 538 BC under Zerubbabel. The second return is 458 BC under Ezra. The third return is 445 BC under Nehemiah. And now as Nehemiah is ministering to the people, he then brings up to them the names of all the people who returned in the first return under the Zerubbabel and God, in a sense, puts these in the Bible twice.

The Lord greatly honors these people. You know, we read their names when we were going through Ezra 2 and we're going to read their names again right now because God wants us to read their names. Verse 6,

6 These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city, 7 who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum, Baanah. The number of men of the people of Israel: 8 the sons of Parosh, 2,172.

I meant to show you, just hold your place there and turn back to Ezra 2, just to show you this. This is what Ezra 2:1 says,

1 Now these are the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city. 2 These came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel: 3 the sons of Parosh, 2,172.

And it continues on and we're going to continue on now from verse 9. I just wanted to show you that and the end is the same too, and in between is mostly the same all the way, the names.

9 the sons of Shephatiah, 372; 10 the sons of Arah, 652; 11 the sons of Pahath-moab of the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2,818; 12 the sons of Elam, 1,254; 13 the sons of Zattu, 845; 14 the sons of Zaccai, 760; 15 the sons of Binnui, 648; 16 the sons of Bebai, 628; 17 the sons of Azgad, 2,322; 18 the sons of Adonikam, 667; 19 the sons of Bigvai, 2,067; 20 the sons of Adin, 655; 21 the sons of Ater, of Hezekiah, 98; 22 the sons of Hashum,

328; 23 the sons of Bezai, 324; 24 the sons of Hariiph, 112; 25 the sons of Gibeon, 95; 26 the men of Bethlehem and Netophah, 188; 27 the men of Anathoth, 128; 28 the men of Beth-azmaveth, 42; 29 the men of Kiriath-jearim, Chephirah and Beeroth, 743; 30 the men of Ramah and Geba, 621; 31 the men of Michmas, 122; 32 the men of Bethel and Ai, 123; 33 the men of the other Nebo, 52; 34 the sons of the other Elam, 1,254; 35 the sons of Harim, 320; 36 the men of Jericho, 345; 37 the sons of Lod, Hadid and Ono, 721; 38 the sons of Senaah, 3,930. [That's the people. Then he says] 39 The priests: the sons of Jedaiah of the house of Jeshua, 973; 40 the sons of Immer, 1,052; 41 the sons of Pashhur, 1,247; 42 the sons of Harim, 1,017. [Those are the priests.] 43 The Levites: the sons of Jeshua, of Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodevah, 74. 44 The singers: the sons of Asaph, 148. 45 The gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, 138. 46 The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth, 47 the sons of Keros, the sons of Sia, the sons of Padon, 48 the sons of Lebana, the sons of Hagaba, the sons of Shalmal, 49 the sons of Hanan, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, 50 the sons of Reaiah, the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda, 51 the sons of Gazzam, the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, 52 the sons of Besai, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephushesim, 53 the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur, 54 the sons of Bazlith, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha, 55 the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah, 56 the sons of Neziah, the sons of Hatipha. 57 The sons of Solomon's servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Sophereth, the sons of Perida, 58 the sons of Jaala, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel, 59 the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, the sons of Amon. 60 All the temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants were 392. 61 These were they who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addon and Immer; but they could not show their fathers' houses or their descendants, whether they were of Israel: 62 the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, 642. 63 Of the priests: the sons of Hobaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai, the Gileadite, and was named after them. 64 These searched among their ancestral registration, but it could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean and excluded from the priesthood. 65 The governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest arose with Urim and Thummim. 66 The whole assembly together was 42,360, 67 besides their male and their female servants, of whom there were 7,337; and they had 245 male and female singers. 68 Their horses were 736; their mules, 245; 69 their camels, 435; their donkeys, 6,720. 70 Some from among the heads of fathers' households gave to the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 gold drachmas, 50 basins, 530 priests' garments. 71 Some of the heads of fathers' households gave into the treasury of the work 20,000 gold drachmas and 2,200 silver minas. 72 That which the rest of the

people gave was 20,000 gold drachmas and 2,000 silver minas and 67 priests' garments. 73 Now the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants and all Israel, lived in their cities. And when the seventh month came, the sons of Israel were in their cities.

Okay, we did that again and we did that because the Lord honored them by putting their name in the Bible twice. The Lord so valued the fact that these left Babylon. It's a bigger deal than we understand. They were at home in Babylon. They had planted, God told them through Jeremiah, "When you go to Babylon, pray for the welfare of the land in which God is taking you and plant and build your lives there." And the Jewish people were successful there. We have testimony to it in the fact that we have people like Nehemiah becoming the cupbearer to the Persian king. We have Esther becoming the Queen of Persia. They were esteemed among the people. God blessed the Jewish people. They succeeded financially. They had businesses. They had homes and when it came time, when God issued the edict through Cyrus in 539 BC, 538, and said, "You can go home to build a temple to the Lord," it was not an easy thing for people now who had gotten comfortable and were now in doing well, prosperous in a land to pick up and leave. But those who knew who they were, who knew why they were here, realized they weren't here to make a living, they weren't here to have a pleasant life, they were here to build an eternal kingdom and so they picked up and they did whatever it took to make their way back to Jerusalem. They went from Babylon, a place of beauty, a place where every kind of, you know, ware could be bought, every kind of food could be purchased, everything was great. It was like leaving, you know, the United States to go into the backwash of the world. You'd have to have a sense of calling to do that and they did.

So God honors them. "He who honors Me, I will honor." God values the work so greatly and he values the work that you and I do. Every time we put our hands to the work, he values it, he esteems it. He not only values the work, it's a glorious work because God values the work, it's a glorious work because God blesses the work. He blesses the work with his presence and his power. It's really an interesting thing that you can almost miss. I want you to turn back over to Ezra 2 for a moment and I want you to read verse 70 with me, the last verse. There are no names in it so it's going to be easier than most of that passage was.

70 Now the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants lived in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

Now listen very carefully.

1 Now when the seventh month came,

We're talking probably 537 BC, maybe 538, we don't know for sure, it doesn't tell us exactly what year it is. We know it's between 538 and 536 so it's about 90 years before

Nehemiah in chapter 7 where we are. Listen, though, "Now when the seventh month came," this is the seventh month in say 537 BC,

1 Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem.

Now turn with me over to Nehemiah 7:73 and remember, he's telling us the same story as before, right? And so he tells us the same thing, he ends it the same way, "Now the priest," this is Nehemiah 7:73,

73 Now the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants and all Israel, lived in their cities. And when the seventh month came, the sons of Israel were in their cities.

Look at chapter 8, verse 1.

1 And all the people gathered as one man

Does that sound familiar? In the seventh month, the people are gathered in their cities and we find out that actually he's now talking about Ezra, sorry, not talking about Ezra, well, he is talking about Ezra but he's not, okay, he's not talking about Ezra 2. He's not talking about the return under the Zerubbabel. He's now shifted to say in the seventh month now, in 445 BC, in the seventh month on the first day, the same exact time 92 years to the day, something is about to happen. 92 years ago, to the day, the seventh month, the first day, which for those who know the Jewish calendar know that is the Day of Trumpets, the new year, on the seventh month, the first day 92 years ago, all of the people lived in their cities but they gathered together as one man in Jerusalem and what they do, Ezra 3 tells us, that chapter, they built the altar of God. They were in their cities, they came back. They were in their cities but they came together to build the altar of God, to restore worship. Now 92 years later to the day after taking you through all of those same names again. I can imagine, you know, first reading that it's a little déjà vu when you read through it, right? "Wait a minute, I've seen this before." And then you come when the seventh month, now back to Nehemiah 7:73, the end of that verse, "when the seventh month came, the sons of Israel were in their cities. And all the people gathered as one man," not in Jerusalem, it is in Jerusalem but he says more specifically, they gathered as one man

1 ... at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel.

Well, the first thing I want you to see is 92 years apart, the people live in the city but on the same day they gather as one man in Jerusalem. They come together with a supernatural blessing of God. They gather together to do a great work and both of these days there is a monumental work, a work of monumental importance that is done. 92 years before it had been to rebuild for the first time in 70 years, to rebuild the altar so that

sacrifices could be made again, so that worship could be restored, and now 92 years later, they gather together as one man, this time they say, "Bring out the book," and the word of God is preached.

So what you see here is God's blessing the work. He was doing the work 92 years ago and though the work seems to be unimpressive to us now, he's doing the work now. He is blessing his people. He is at work. I love how in Nehemiah, Ezra/Nehemiah, you see, and the same with Esther, you see God's hand, you see God working but it's not bells and whistles and fireworks going off like we see other places in Scripture because God over time is weaning his people off of the supernatural signs and wonders to be people who love the book, who love the book because in the book you meet Christ and his Spirit works, and you have spiritual miracles. And the spiritual miracle is that God is bringing them all together, in fact, you could say another point, it's a glorious work because God values the work, it's a glorious work because God blesses the work, it's a glorious work because God continues the work. He's continuing to work. He brings them together in rebuilding the altar and bringing out the book is the end, it's basically a bracket around the three returns. All three things are bracketed by these two recountings of those long lists of names.

The people of God were called to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. They rebuilt the altar, then later they would lay the foundation, and later they would finish the temple. The second return under Ezra was to restore the law to its rightful place, and so it seems to be there and yet it's not quite. So the third return is to rebuild the wall, to bring separation and holiness to the people of God. And then now that all of that is done, now the law is restored, the covenant is renewed, and God has been at work all along, and the point is though it appeared to be unimpressive work, though it appeared to be in many ways pointless work, though it appeared that God wasn't doing anything, in reality if you had the eyes of faith, God is doing amazing things. This is the way God works. God loves to work not in the earthquake, not in the strong wind, but in the gentle, still, small voice. He loves to work in such a way that only people who have faith see it.

So when you look at the difficulties of serving your brothers and sisters, helping one another through life, making a visit to someone that you feel you have nothing to say, you've got no energy, but you know you need to do it, though it may seem to be unimpressive, though it may seem that nothing happens, what happens in reality in the spiritual world is invisible to you and me, but what we know is when you actually undertake work for God out of a desire to be faithful to him, out of love for Christ, God doesn't miss one single word that you say. He loves it. He treasures that work and he works through it in ways that we can't imagine. Something much bigger than I can see or mind can perceive is going on. You are participating in the forging of God's eternal kingdom. You are doing something that has eternal lasting value that will never ever be taken away. That's why it's so much more important than everything else in the world. Everything else in the world, the business that we build, the education that we pursue, the houses that we build will burn up, but what will not burn up is the word of God and the souls of men. And when you take the word of God and apply it to the souls of men, you

are doing something that will last forever, you are joining God in the work that he loves to do. You're joining God in the work that he made you to do and he calls you to do.

It's a glorious work because God values the work, God blesses the work, God continues the work, and God beautifies the work. God beautifies the work. It doesn't look impressive to us at first but to eyes that have been made to see, if you've been given ears to hear and eyes to see, it's the most beautiful work in the world. The church is the most beautiful place on the planet. All of us as unimpressive as we look, in God's eyes this is the most beautiful place in all of the world. It's more beautiful than the Grand Canyon. It's more beautiful than the most beautiful coastline. It's more beautiful than the greatest mountain. It's more beautiful. This is the most beautiful place to God and if it's the most beautiful place to God, it is the most beautiful place.

I love how this is so beautiful how the Lord does this and it takes eyes to see, ears to hear. "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised and the city of our God, His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth is Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great King." He says Mount Zion is the most beautiful place in the world. That's what the psalmist says. More beautiful than Babylon? The hanging Gardens of Babylon, really, one of the seven wonders of the world? More beautiful than Susa or Memphis or Nineveh? More beautiful than Rome or Athens? More beautiful than Atlanta or Tokyo or Mexico City? Maybe not outwardly. I don't think it is outwardly. I haven't been to Jerusalem but I'm just betting it's not. You know, in fact, let's just talk for a moment about Canaan. Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey. Canaan, the most beautiful land. Daniel calls it in his vision the beautiful land, Canaan. Canaan is the most beautiful land in the world but not to the external view of man.

You know, it's interesting, you see things like this, I thought about this the other day. Lot in Genesis 14, when Moses separates from Lot. I mean, Moses, Abraham. When Abraham separates from Lot, remember Lot is his nephew. They're tending sheep. Their flocks are getting interspersed a little bit. Their herdsmen are having some issues with each other and so Abraham says to Lot, "Listen, we're kin. We don't want to have these conflicts. The whole land is before you. You go whichever way you want to go and I'll go whichever way I want to go." I don't think Abraham should have said that. I think he should have said, "You go. Canaan is mine. You go find some other place." But he didn't do that. He said, "You choose." And it says Lot looked, he looks at Canaan where they are and he looked to the Jordan valley where they weren't, and he saw that it was well watered like the garden of God. That's what outside of Canaan looked like. Outside of Canaan it looked like the garden of God and so Lot went there and he settled in Sodom because he was looking with human eyes. He didn't see reality.

So you look at Jerusalem, it may not be the most impressive place but do you know what makes Jerusalem so beautiful and Canaan so incredibly beautiful? It's because God is there. God makes it beautiful. And Canaan is a pretty wonderful place too. You read about what the Jews in Israel have done to make Canaan, it's just astounding the kind of technology they developed to water their crops. It's just blooming. But anyway, that's not the point. The point was, listen, you could look for a lot more impressive places

outwardly but God says Canaan is the land flowing with milk and honey. And just like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob didn't possess the land and God was teaching them something more, God was teaching them something more, it's not really about the land, it's not really all about the crops, it's about the presence of the living God, it's about living in my presence.

It's about the gospel. What you and I were created for was to know God and he is the only thing that satisfies the longings of our soul. We were made for God. You're here today and you don't know Christ and you don't know God, you don't have purpose, you're struggling with your identity, why you're here, you need to understand that you were made for God. The only thing that will satisfy your soul is to know and love God and the problem we have, you have the same problem I have, is that you're a sinner and your sins have separated you from God like every one of us, our sins separated us from God. They create a chasm that is unbridgeable and they also create in us a natural distaste for the one thing that we need and so that we think that which we need is everything but God, but in reality the only thing that we truly need is God. But God in his infinite mercy has made a way for sinners like you and me to come to him by giving his Son the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross, by him bearing in his own body the just punishment for your sins and my sins. He paid for them in full. He suffered in your place and he rose again on the third day to prove that God accepted that offering, and if you will receive him, he will be your Lord and Master. He will come into your life and he will bring you into union with himself and you will know God and you will know life, and you will have a reason to live, a reason to get up in the morning. You will be looking forward to this work that we are doing is a work that is going to last forever. It's a glorious work because it is an abiding work. It lasts forever. It is the most beautiful work. It's the most blessed work.

You know, it means that Jerusalem is the most beautiful place in the world, that Canaan is so glorious, part of that is to say when God's people are gathered around his throne in worship, that is the most beautiful a human being can be. That is the ultimate expression of what you were made to do, to be around his throne, seeing his glory, and adoring his name, and when you are doing that, you are truly what you were made to be. And listen, when you and I get involved in each other's lives and when you find me and I'm struggling and you see the ugliness, you see all that's unattractive, unimpressive, and you come with this book, you come with the Holy Spirit, you come not knowing what to do but you come best you can with the word of God and you speak the truth in love and you take me from where I was somehow struggling to now worshiping, you are unleashing the beauty, you are making Canaan the land flowing with milk and honey, you are making Jerusalem the joy of the whole earth, and people around do see it. They don't all want to see it but they can't escape it. God's glory is being made known. What an awesome privilege we have. Let's don't despise the work. Let's put our lives in the center of the city of God because that's the only thing worth living for.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, how grateful we are for the privilege of being Your children, Lord, of seeing the wonder of what You've done to save sinners, seeing the beauty of Your plan to keep

doing what You're doing in the church. Lord, it does seem, as men look at it to be such an unimpressive thing and yet it is the most glorious and we just come this morning acknowledging that we're not noble or mighty or wise but we're Yours and how glad we are to be Yours. And we rejoice this morning that everyone who is hearing these words, You are inviting to be Yours. There's nothing to keep them back from coming to You. Jesus Christ is so great a Savior that He's made the way open. Bring them to Yourself Lord. Run to Jesus. Father, have Your way in our hearts. Teach us not to think lightly of the work to which You have called us. Make us faithful, make us determined, make us strong. Give us endurance and, Lord, do it all for Your glory. Make Your people look more and more like Jesus. And we pray this in His name. Amen.