

Living in the Holy City – Nehemiah 11:1-36

I. Introduction:

- A. Obviously **Nehemiah 11** follows **chapter 10**.
 - 1. And as such we **could** make this message is a **continuation** of our last lesson – which, as you know, followed logically its predecessor.
 - 2. Last Wednesday we looked at the promises which Israel made to God, comparing them to the relationship **we** have to the Lord – within the context of the our church.
 - 3. Israel's concluding promise was – **“and we will not forsake the house of our God.”**
 - 4. Tonight we could look at the entire 11th chapter in the light of that promise.
 - 5. But I'm going to try not to do that. Let's make it stand on its own two legs.
- B. The first half of **Nehemiah 11** is a list of people who began to live in the rejuvenated city of Jerusalem.
 - 1. The second half of the chapter, beginning with **verse 20**, names many of the residue of Israel, including priests and Levites, who chose to live elsewhere in Judah – as far away as Keilah & Beersheba.
 - 2. Before reading the chapter and learning the context, we might assume that the second group – those who **chose NOT to live** in Jerusalem – were making sacrifices to live in the country villages.
 - 3. But it was the other way around – the residents of the city were the brave and self-sacrificing people.
 - 4. And this lends itself to one or two 21st century lessons.

II. Consider, first, the city of Jerusalem.

- A. Remember that it had been rased to the ground by the Babylonians about a century earlier.
 - 1. The **temple** had been destroyed, the **walls** of the city were torn down, the **houses** rifled and burned.
 - 2. Remember too that those homes and the streets between them had been drenched in human blood.
 - 3. Then what was left was occupied by the very worst citizens of Judah or by the Canaanites.
 - 4. When the first refugees returned under Zerubbabel they found little more than foundations, trash, and the ghostly memories of the city in its former glory.
 - 5. But now a temple had been built, temporary homes had been erected and a wall surrounded the city.
 - 6. And yet there still wasn't much infrastructure – there wasn't much that made that bunch of people into a community.
 - 7. There were few locally-owned markets – but no coffee shops – no fast food outlets – no parks.
 - 8. Most of the resident's food had to be purchased from non-kosher foreigners.
 - 9. In many ways Jerusalem looked like a foreign community, filled with heathen people and heathen characteristics.
- B. But notice the term by which Nehemiah called Jerusalem in **verse 1** – **“the holy city.”**
 - 1. Seven times, the Bible calls Jerusalem **“the holy city.”** and this is the first.
 - 2. The second time is later in the chapter.
 - 3. **David** never uses this phrase, but **Isaiah** does twice.
 - 4. And then so does **Matthew**.
 - a. Describing Christ's temptation, he says, **“Then the devil taketh him up into the HOLY city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple...”**
 - b. And then describing the third day after the crucifixion, there **“came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the HOLY city, and appeared unto many.”**
 - 5. The **Apostle John** speaks of **the New Jerusalem** as **“the holy city.”**
 - 6. But he also speaks of Jerusalem during the Tribulation, saying, **“it is given unto the Gentiles: and the HOLY city shall they tread under foot forty and two months.”**
- C. **Why** does the Bible call Jerusalem **“the holy city?”**
 - 1. In none of those references is Jerusalem enjoying the peace and prosperity of God.
 - 2. In most cases it was abiding under the foot of Gentile domination, being judged for the sins of its citizens.
 - 3. Or as in the case in **Nehemiah**, it is still rising up out of the dust of God's judgment.

- D. So why is Jerusalem called “*the holy city*” especially here in **Nehemiah**?
1. First, because **God’s temple** was there.
 - a. The temple was the place of meeting between Jehovah and His elect people. It was holy.
 - b. *“God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved” – Psalm 46:5.*
 2. When Solomon finished building the temple, the Lord told him, *“I have heard thy prayer and thy supplication, that thou hast made before me: I have **hallowed (made holy)** this house, which thou hast built, to put my name there for ever; and mine eyes and mine heart shall be there perpetually.”*
 3. The Lord had ordained that there be only one properly authorize altar, and Jerusalem had become its site.
 4. The poet might say that Jerusalem was at the bottom of the staircase to Heaven.
 5. *“Unto the place which the LORD your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there, even unto his habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come.”*
- E. And where has the Lord chosen to place His name today?
1. Isn’t it in His ecclesia – His assembly, His church?
 2. There is no other organization, no association, no missions board found in the New Testament.
 3. Christ established His church and authorized it to carry out His ministry in our day and time.
- F. Jerusalem wasn’t “*the holy city*” because Ezra and Nehemiah were there.
1. The church isn’t special because you and I are members.
 2. Jerusalem wasn’t holy because it once houses great prophets there – or there were prophets at that time.
 3. It wasn’t holy because the people were making vows to love the Lord and serve Him with all their ability.
 4. And it wasn’t holy because Christ would one day walk there, or it will be the Millennial capital of the world.
 5. It was holy because God in his sovereign grace declared it to be so.
 6. I won’t push the parallel to hard, but we might liken it to **justification** – *“God declared it to be righteous.”*
 7. Christ’s church today is honored and honorable because of the Christ who has set His name there – because His gospel is preached there – because He has chosen to use it for His glory.

III. Now, what about these people and their choice about where to pitch their tents?

- A. As capital of the nation, the rulers of Judah dwelt in the city.
1. But they were there out of duty. Let’s not consider them this evening.
 2. Besides Nehemiah and the rulers, only a relatively few people were choosing to set their roots in the city.
 3. And others were praising them for their sacrifice.
 4. Then because Jerusalem now had a wall circumscribing the city limits, but the population was so sparse, the leaders of the nation ordered that a lottery be held to fill up some of the void.
 5. The **losers**, not the **winners**, of the lottery were to stay within those walls.
 6. **Verse 2** – *“And the people blessed all the men, that willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem.”*
 7. **Verse 1** – *“And the rulers of the people dwelt at Jerusalem: the rest of the people also cast lots, to bring one of ten to dwell in Jerusalem the holy city, and nine parts to dwell in other cities.”*
- B. I’ve already highlighted some of the reasons those people hesitated to dwell in Jerusalem.
1. It was not a pleasant place to live in those days; it was ugly; filled with poverty and perhaps disease.
 2. And it was still a heathen community to a great degree.
 3. Perhaps it was a difficult place to make a living.
 - a. Did Jerusalem, at this time, have stock yards and butcher shops?
 - b. Other than the cottage variety, did it ever have industry and factories?
 - c. If Mrs. Malachi was making baskets or pottery, to whom could she sell her wares since there wasn’t a big market?
 4. For those people who had an agrarian upbringing there was little opportunity to feed their families.
 5. The grass looked far more green out there in the countryside – in Kirjatharba and Dibon and Bethphelet.
 6. And as it is with people today, it was natural for those folk to be more concerned with their own prosperity than the prosperity of the House of God or the things of God – even Heaven.

7. Philippians 2:21 – *“For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s.”*

- C. Before we go any farther, let’s retreat back to Nehemiah’s description of Jerusalem – *“the holy city.”*
1. For a sake of a lesson or two, let’s spiritualize the context.
 2. Let’s say that it was **BECAUSE** Jerusalem was *“the holy city”* that some people hesitated to dwell there.
- D. Certainly in their day, but in any day and age, to live in *“the holy city”* can be dangerous.
1. We haven’t seen it for a few chapters, but remember that Sanballat and his heathen friends had been making life hard on the residents of the city.
 - a. You might say that it was **because** Jerusalem was *“the holy city.”*
 - b. Every resident of that place had a target on their back.
 - c. Or at the very least the unbelievers patted them on their backs, placing a sticky note that said, *“Kick me, I believe Jehovah.”*
 2. Sanballat, Tobiah and their friends had been threatening to kill God’s people, especially those working on the wall – the means of protection and separation for the city.
 3. At first they just laughed, jokingly saying that *“if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall.”*
 4. But it escalated to seriously dangerous levels as the work continued.
 5. You might say that **the more holy the city became** the **more dangerous** it was to live there.
 6. Then when Nehemiah began implementing God’s laws, especially about the Sabbath, hurting the wallets of the foreign traders, their hatred of *“the holy city”* and its residents intensified.
- E. As I said on Sunday, the Devil fears and hates *“the house of God”* because *“unto (God) be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”*
1. Why is the house of God neglected?
 2. Because many weak and beggerly *“Christians”* are not willing to face the hatred of the world.
 3. They are wearing the fashions of the world and have avoided putting on the whole armor of God.
 4. And thus, being unprotected, it is dangerous to live in *“the holy city.”*
- F. And then standards are higher in *“the holy city”* than in unholy cities.
1. The people of Bethlehem are not going to hear the Word of God has often and as intensely.
 2. And that is just the way many in Israel would like it to be.
 3. They don’t want to live under the conviction of the Holy Spirit.
 4. They don’t want to see people whose lives are more godly than their own.
- G. And isn’t it true that we are not quite the same people in church that we are out of church – *“the holy city.”*
1. I don’t shave every day, but I always shave in preparation for our church services.
 2. I don’t wear the same kind of shirts at home that I do when I come to God’s house to worship Him.
 3. Perhaps you can’t say the same thing, but maybe you should.
 4. I think that the house of God should have a dress code.
 5. I don’t think the Lord is pleased with today’s casual approach to worship.
 6. I don’t think God accepts modern worship music, modern Bible versions, modern *“Christianity.”*
- H. Do you think the same thoughts while in *“the holy city”* as you do at home?
1. Do you worry and fret here as much as you do at home, or do you try to lay those things down because this is God’s House?
 2. I know you like to read, but what do you read when you are actually in *“the holy city?”*
 3. Do you guard your lips, your eyes, your mind and heart more diligently here than in other places?
 4. Should we play video games on our phones during the preaching about God’s sacrifice for sin?
 5. Do people surf the internet here as they do in the privacy of their bedroom?

- I. Some people don't like the fact that there are higher standards in the House of God than elsewhere.
 1. The preachers kids – PK's – find it hard because more is expected of them than of their friends.
 2. And sometimes people just decide they'd rather live as far from the "the holy city" as possible.
 3. Some people don't want to live in "the holy city" because there are those standards.

- J. And there are certainly different obligations and responsibilities in "the holy city."
 1. What does that man do with God's tithe when he moves out of Jerusalem into Ziklag?
 2. Is he as faithful as he was when he was still at work building the wall?
 3. Does he pray for the ministry of the word and the ministry of the sacrifice when he doesn't experience or observe that ministry on a regular basis?
 4. Is he concerned about the souls of others when he only has his own soul to think about?

- K. In Nehemiah's day "the holy city" was not highly sought-after real estate.
 1. And looking around the religious world today, I'd have to say that very little has changed.
 - a. For example, during the earlier virus scare, when other churches were shut down, did anyone visit here?
 - b. Hasn't the pandemic been an excuse for some people to live in the villages outside "the holy city?"
 2. Thankfully, there are those few who would rather live in "the holy city" than in the most expensive penthouse suite the world has to offer.
 3. I hope that you are of that kind of people.
 4. Don't count on it, but there may be some human praise extended towards you.
 5. Far more important will be the Lord's *"Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord."*