

Good to see y'all on this beautiful Wednesday evening for our midweek refresh In God's Word, we're still going through the book of Nehemiah together and we find ourselves in chapter 12 tonight And I'll read the first 23 verses of which contain more than a few names. These are the priests and the Levites. who came up with Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua, Saraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra, Amariah, Malak, Haddish, Shekiniah, Raham, Miramoth, Iddo, Genethoi, Abijah, Mishamim, Meadiah, Bilgah, Shemiah, Joyarib, Judiah, Salu, Ammok, Hilkiah, Judiah. These were the chiefs of the priests and of their brothers in the days of Jeshua. And the Levites, Jeshua, Benue, Cadmeo, Sherebiah, Judah, and Madaniah, who with his brothers was in charge of the songs of thanksgiving. And Bach, Micaiah, and Unni and their brothers stood opposite them in the service. And Jeshua was the father of Joachim, Joachim the father of Eliashib, Eliashib the father of Joida, Joida the father of Jonathan, and Jonathan the father of Jadaa. And in the days of Joachim were priests, heads of fathers' houses, of Sariah, Mariah, of Jeremiah, Hananiah, of Ezra, Meshulam, of Amariah, Jehohanan, of Malachi, Jonathan, of Shebaniah Joseph, of Harim Adna, of Moriath Helki, of Edo Zechariah, of Genethon Meshulam, of Abijah Zichri, of Menyamin of Modiah, Pilti, of Bilga Shamua, of Shemaya Jehohadrans, of Joyarib Matanai, of Jediah Ezzi, of Salai Kalai, of Amok Eber, of Hilkiah Hashabiah, of Jediah Nathaniel, In the days of Eliaship, Joida, Johanan, and Jadaa, the Levites were recorded as heads of fathers' houses. So too were the priests in the reign of Darius the Persian. As for the sons of Levi, their heads of fathers' houses were written in the book of the Chronicles until the days of Johanan, the son of Eliaship. and the chiefs of the Levites, Hashabiah, Sherabiah, and Jeshua, the son of Cadmiel, with their brothers who stood opposite them to praise and to give thanks according to the commandment of David, the man of God, watch by watch. This is God's word. Well, I was recently speaking with a lady in our congregation who was very excited. She had something she wanted to share with me. She had done a study of her family's genealogy, and she'd encountered some surprises, and they were good surprises. Sometimes you go digging in the closet, and out come skeletons, you just as soon stay in there. But these were good surprises, and she was happy about what she'd found out in her family tree. She was excited about her ethnicity and where her people had come from way back when. Now to other people, hearing about her family tree might have seemed pedantic and dry and not so exciting, but to her it was fascinating, and that's to be expected, isn't it? Because it was her people, after all. Who doesn't want to learn more about where they came from and their people, their ancestors? They are part of who we are. Of course we want to learn all we can about them. So, Absolutely, she wanted to learn as much as

she could, and so she absolutely lit up when she was telling me about this. Well, we can read this list of names, and to us, they may not mean a whole lot, but to their original readers, they meant a great deal. We can rest assured of that, because these were their people. These were their ancestors. These were the branches on their family tree. So these names represented dads and granddads who had talked with them and laughed with them and spent time around the family table with them, and most importantly, had proclaimed the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord to them from one generation to the next. So they represented generations of faithful covenant family tradition. So these names represented living out the commands of passages like Deuteronomy 6. We're commanded to talk about these things with our children. We'll walk along the road, and when we get up, and when we lie down, to wrap them as symbols on our door frames, and of saturating our children's minds and hearts with the truth of God's word, of not hiding the glories of the Lord from the children from the generations to come. And these lists may also seem unimportant because they're filled with names that are pretty obscure to us. We don't know much about these people. But that's kind of the point. History is made up of people whose names we don't really know, but they serve as an important background, a context for the events that we do know about, those events that have shaped our lives. A lot of unknown names and unknown people's lives make up that historical background. Before you build a building, or in this case a wall, the wall around Jerusalem is about to be dedicated, you first have to do some demolition work. You have to tear things down and you have to clear out the rubble. You have to do a lot of cleaning up. And then you have to dig down deep before you can lay another foundation. Well, I took a walk through my neighborhood the other day, and I got to see the unfolding of plans for a new home construction. And it wasn't too exciting to look at. The lot had been cleared out, and there was a lot of dirt and debris, piles of rubbish and so forth. But a deep hole had been dug, and in that big hole had been laid a stable foundation. The house is ultimately gonna be laid on that foundation. That's the part that everyone gets excited about. No one ever looks at a foundation and says, wow, that's a beautiful foundation, or that foundation has great curb appeal. That's the kind of foundation I want for my house. And yet the foundation is arguably the most important part of the construction. Because without a stable and well-built foundation, you shouldn't really build because the most beautiful home, of course, can easily crumble and become rubble if it's not constructed on that solid foundation. Well, likewise, the walls around Jerusalem, having been constructed, are about to be dedicated. It's gonna be a great celebration

and the people are gonna gather to praise the Lord. There's gonna be a lot of joyful hearts and singing and dancing surrounding this dedication. But years and years of demolition, of clearing out rubble, of digging holes, and meticulous construction has taken place to make this dedication possible. And we see that represented in a lot of these obscure names as well. There's been lots of back-breaking, menial, unglamorous, but very, very necessary work that's gone into the construction of this wall. And so all these names that I struggled through a moment ago stretch back about 90 years. It's been almost a century since that first group came from Babylon to Jerusalem. And it represents all that thankless, rigorous, obscure, preparatory work for what's about to be celebrated now. But without all that, without these people whose names we don't really recognize there is no such thing as the rebuilt walls and therefore not a lot to celebrate in Nehemiah 12. There's nothing particularly noteworthy about most of the names on this list. And again, that's kind of the point. These people were simply faithful, obscure, obedient pioneers. who followed the word of the Lord as it was proclaimed by Ezra, and then followed the godly leadership and administration of Nehemiah to leave the land where they had become comfortable in Babylon and to go to this dilapidated city and rebuild it, the city that was still God's promised gift to them, even though it didn't look like much when they got there. And when they went, they weren't seeking notoriety, they weren't seeking fame or fortune or recognition, they were simply being faithful and quiet and obedient to the Lord. He kept them out of their land for 70 years to discipline them, but now it's time for them to come back, so he's brought them back. He's fulfilled the promises given to Abraham that Pastor Lawton so aptly reminded us of last week, that gift of the land to them. So now here in the land, they're using their gifts and their resources and their time and their talents and their labors under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah to rebuild this city and to restore the city walls and to restore Jerusalem to its past vibrancy as the home for the community that God is rebuilding from the rubble. It may not seem very glamorous, but it's good, faithful work. It reminds me a little bit of Geneva, Switzerland, what I've read about it under the leadership of John Calvin and William Farrell back in the 1600s or 1500s. People used to say about Geneva that this city stinks. It had a reputation of being the smelliest city in Europe at the time. It was in terrible shape economically and morally and religiously. The brothels and the taverns were thriving, but commerce and education, not so much. It was a city that was in pretty steep decline. So Farrell first, and then Calvin a little bit later, had a God-given vision for this city. They saw not what it was, but what it could be by God's grace. And

it's centered around the preaching and teaching of God's word. That's what started the reformation there in that land. But both Calvin and Pharaoh were convinced that the preaching and teaching of God's word had implications for all of life, not just quote unquote religious life. So with Calvin, there was no compartmentalizing as if God's word merely applied to church life or religious life. While economics and city planning belong to the secular realm. There wasn't any of that with Calvin. Calvin perceived first and then taught that God was sovereign over every sphere of life. And he rigorously applied the Bible to the whole gamut of Genevan culture from economics to politics to city planning, to commerce, to sanitation, to relief for the poor, to a whole host of other concerns. And a bit like Luther, before him, he taught that God calls people to a whole spectrum of vocations, not just to the pulpit. He taught that you could serve God on the city council, that you could serve God in the shoe shop just as well as you could in the pulpit. And just like Ezra had a Nehemiah, John Calvin had this partner in ministry as well. Pharaoh was an evangelist who was first in Geneva and he saw how bad and depressed things were there in the city. And he read a copy of Calvin's Institutes and he caught a little bit of Calvin's comprehensive grasp of covenant theology applied to every sphere of life. And he wanted Calvin to come to Geneva and help out. And he implored Calvin in no uncertain terms. He said, may God curse you if you don't come. Let's just say, as Marlon Brando might put it, he made Calvin an offer he couldn't refuse. So Calvin came to Geneva, was persuaded to do so from France, and he did that hard work of rebuilding the city of Geneva around three principles. And these are helpfully outlined by Christian Overman in a wonderful essay that he wrote. These three principles were, number one, preaching the gospel, He taught that the church has to be reformed before the world is reformed. And that starts with people being saved by believing the gospel of Jesus Christ. The second principle was teaching the scriptures fully, the whole counsel of God to God's people. So people don't just know how to be saved, they also need to know how to live their lives faithfully. And, uh, The authorities need to be taught how to govern as those who God has delegated his authority to, to rule people well according to God's principles. And people from all walks of life need to know how their sphere of service fits into the big picture and the larger whole. And the third principle was accountability. People need to be held accountable for applying God's word, not just in a theoretical way, but in a practical nuts and bolts way to every area of life. And so Calvin was diligent in applying these three principles to the life in Geneva. And his and Pharaoh's leadership in Geneva, for that reason, reminds me a little bit of Ezra's and

Nehemiah's work in the sixth century B.C. in Jerusalem. How do you renew a city that seems to be in decline? Whether it's a haven for iniquity, as Geneva seemed to be at the time, or whether it's just a burned out, dilapidated mess, like Jerusalem seemed to be at the time. Well, you start with preaching the pure gospel of God's word, and you build out from there. Calvin taught the bankers in Geneva, for example, not to charge exorbitant interest to people that they offered loans to. He taught shoemakers to be excellent in their product, in constructing usable shoes and repairing their shoes. So he left nobody off the hook with regard to the law of God and how you applied that to your vocation, your calling, and to do it well, and to do it for the Lord with all your heart. Well, the city of Geneva underwent an amazing transformation that we're all aware of. It took a while, and it was a rocky road, and Calvin was asked to leave at one point. But over time, the work of God's word did its work. It did not return void. Many came to Christ and they left their vices behind them, and prostitutes were out of work, and Christians took renewed pride in doing their work excellently with all their hearts. Economic prosperity came back to the city, and schools started educating children well again, and the city stopped stinking. So the city was reformed by this ripple effect of the gospel having an impact, not just on the church, but on every segment of life. But judgment starts, doesn't it, with the house of God. The church has to be reformed before the culture has a chance of being reformed. Well, there's something of this, I believe, of the Reformation in Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. Everybody we see from this list took responsibility for doing their share of the work. Priests did their work well, and their daily sacrifices reminded everyone that forgiveness doesn't come freely, that forgiveness is costly, that it requires the shedding of blood. Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins. Which pointed a kid, of course, to the coming of Jesus, our faithful high priest who sacrificed himself. He's the one that the city is preparing for, even though it doesn't articulate that or doesn't understand it fully just yet. We see that singers in the temple worship put their heart into singing the praises of God again, antiphonally facing each other, answering each other, and that they were directed by skilled musicians. And notice that they led the worship, not according to whim, and not according to fancy, and not according to whether they liked the music or not, but according to the word of God as commanded by David. We see that toward the end of the passage I read. Reading through First Chronicles, as I happened to be doing this morning, there was nothing haphazard, and there was nothing random or casual about the way David organized temple worship. It was structured, it was regulated

by the word of God with great care. So it didn't matter to them particularly what they liked or what their preferences were in terms of worship style. It was all important to them what God liked and what God required. God is spirit and he must be worshiped in spirit and in truth according to his word. So there was no, Nothing fancy about their worship. There was just quiet, faithful obedience. The worship was built around what God specified in his word. There was no business about following your own heart or worshiping according to your own whims as you see fit. But David said in 1 Chronicles 22, set your mind and heart to seek the Lord your God. Don't follow your heart, set your heart and mind to seek him and to give him praise and thanksgiving. You'll see that praise and thanksgiving are a recurring theme in chapter 12 because the people are finding more and more reasons to praise the Lord and to give him thanks for what he has done for them as they prepare to dedicate the walls. So, while we're tempted to pass over this chapter and to not wade through this rather difficult list of names as forgotten by history, but I think we can see them instead as very valuable bits and pieces of the family of God as he's raised that family up over history and over the centuries. I think we can see them legitimately as part of our spiritual genealogy. Covenant theology reminds us that there is only one people of God, and these people are of a peace with us. Because there has ever only been one people of God, and these represent maybe obscure, but certainly faithful branches of God's family tree, and therefore our family tree. Without the roots in the trunk. Of course, the branches could not live and could not thrive and could not bear fruit. So we are thankful for what the Lord has done in building that family of faith over the centuries. With that, we'll transition into a time of prayer. So let's praise him for who he is as we remember these wonderful attributes of the Lord. Let's do this out loud for everyone to hear if you feel so led. There certainly is no pressure to pray out loud, but if you'd like to, please do so.