

# Building Your Life Around the Presence of God

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*Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to Nehemiah 12. It is such a blessing to have folks that really, it feels like when you think about the de Swardt, and the Mack family, it feels like they're just coming home when they come to visit. You guys are on leave and you're coming home. We're glad to have you back home. We feel like that about you. You're in our hearts. What a joy it is to serve the Lord together. Also there's going to be some fellowship time on Wednesday evening. We haven't worked out all the details. If you went on the trip in 2018, we took a mission trip and went to South Africa and worked with Sybrand and Beth and Wayne and Carol Mack on the ACBC Conference, 2018 Africa, ACBC Africa, and a number of you went and so we're wanting to have time for fellowship and so be looking for more information about that. It will probably be on Wednesday as well, so just kind of put that on your calendar and be watching for email information about that. Looking forward to getting to spend some time together and, as we said, Sybrand will be sharing the word of God and an update on Wednesday evening so you want to be sure to take part in that and be here if possible, and if not, online.

This morning we want to look at this issue really of the, we've come to the passage that's the climax in some ways of the entire books Ezra/Nehemiah. We said this is one book. We've been expositing Ezra and then Nehemiah back-to-back because in the Old Testament, in the Hebrew Bible it's one book and we believe it's likely written by one author, possibly Ezra or one of his disciples, and so we come now to chapter 12. Remember the point of the book of Nehemiah is the rebuilding of the wall. Ezra/Nehemiah, there's three returns. It's the people return from exile. The Jews are coming back from exile in Babylon where God had sent them because of their sin. They had been taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar and so now they're returning and the books Ezra/Nehemiah recount the three returns. They return in three installments, the first under Zerubbabel in 536 BC and they rebuild the temple. The second installment under Ezra in 458 BC with the purpose of refocusing the people on the law of God. And the third return in 445 BC under Nehemiah with the express intent of rebuilding the wall or the walls of Jerusalem. So all three of these really is God reestablishing his people in his land, his people in his land with the temple, the place of his presence, the law of God, the foundation of their lives, and the walls of Jerusalem which provide the protection and separation necessary for the people of God to truly be who they're called to be and to devote themselves to worship.

So the climax, in a way, of the entire affair is the finishing capstone now of the dedication of the walls and so we come to this chapter which recounts that for us. It's interesting, one of the things that I thought about in preparing this week was, you know, if you've been with us as we've preached through this, you know that they finished the wall in Nehemiah 6 and yet there's a lot of intervening material. You normally finish and you dedicate pretty quickly to the finish, in fact, when they finished the temple in Ezra 6, they immediately dedicated it but here there is, the finish is in Nehemiah 6 and you've got some extra material in Nehemiah 6, you've got this long list of people in Nehemiah 7, you've got this recounting of revival that happens in Nehemiah 8 and 9 and 10, and then 11 we looked at last week, this recounting of the people that repopulate Jerusalem, all this information. Hey, we're looking for the dedication and why is all of that here? And when you come to chapter 12, I'm actually going to begin reading at verse 27 today, we're going to read the first 26 verses a little bit later today, Lord willing. I definitely plan to do that, unless I drop dead we're going to read those today. Still Lord willing, right? I don't know. But I'm going to start reading in verse 27 because we're going to look at the dedication which is the focus of what the chapter is about, and then we're going to note how God inspired the writer of this book to insert the first 26 verses before the dedication and we're going to try to consider what is this telling us about how we are to live.

The focus of this passage really is to tell the people that originally received this book, the original audience was the nation of Judah, the reconstituted nation of Israel, so to speak, in the land probably 20 to 30 to 40 years after the events, okay? The events happened in 445 BC but the book is given at some later time in its Spirit-inspired complete form to the people of God. And it's always instructive to think about how was this book received by those people at that moment that they received it, and if we consider that, it helps us to see what God's trying to teach us through the Scripture that we're studying. So when we think about that, the circumstances of the people, they are in difficult circumstances and God's telling them, "Listen, in the midst of incredible difficulty, how are you to live?" And essentially the message is build your life around the presence of God.

So the title of the message is "Building Your Life Around the Presence of God." That's really the purpose of life. We were made to know God. We were made to dwell in his presence. This is life. This is eternal life, to know God and Jesus Christ whom you sent, and so we see in this passage this primary, central, defining purpose that is to shape our lives. Really there's a sense in which the focus on the presence of God that we're seeing here is something that should be the center of life in a way that the planets orbit the sun. The sun is at the center and everything is connected to and actually falling toward the sun. That's what orbiting is, really. It's gravitational pull that is falling toward it but it never quite makes it because it just keeps falling and it comes around in a perfect orbital rotation in God's providence, but that it's actually the attraction that holds the planets in orbit is the pull of the center and we should live our lives in such a way that our lives orbit around the presence of God. That's the only way to live. Now of course, to do that you have to come to faith in Christ because we come into this life as people who are not orbiting around what we should be orbiting around. We actually turn and we orbit around ourselves. That's the essence of sin to make it about us. But the chief end of man has been

well stated in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever.

So we're to build our lives around the presence of God, to live in his presence, to seek to live all of life in his presence, to seek to see that everything is sacred when we are living this way. "Whatever you do, whether you eat or drink, do all for the glory of God," 1 Corinthians 10:31. Everything is to be sacred for the Christian. This is the reason to live. This is the purpose. This is what we're to do no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in. It's really, there's such a clarity to that. Think about this: no matter what happens tomorrow, your mission is the same, be centered on God through Christ. That's it. The world can change, our lives can change, but our calling does not and our God does not, and because he doesn't change and he is the one who says, as we just read a moment ago from the passage leaning on the everlasting arms, the Deuteronomy passage that Ted shared, he delights to be our refuge. He delights for us to rest upon his everlasting arms and so as life brings whatever it may, we go to God and we find in God that we were made for God. The theologian has said, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee. Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in thee."

That's the truth and so we are called to live this way and this is what these people are learning in this chapter and it's presented to us through the rededication or the dedication of the new walls of Jerusalem that have been rebuilt, and it's presented to us in this 12<sup>th</sup> chapter. Let's read at verse 27 about the dedication of the walls to the end of the chapter and then we'll read, a little bit later we'll read the rest.

27 Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites from all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem so that they might celebrate the dedication with gladness, with hymns of thanksgiving and with songs to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps and lyres. 28 So the sons of the singers were assembled from the district around Jerusalem, and from the villages of the Netophathites, 29 from Beth-gilgal and from their fields in Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built themselves villages around Jerusalem. 30 The priests and the Levites purified themselves; they also purified the people, the gates and the wall. 31 Then I had

Now we return, we understand that we think Ezra wrote the book but he incorporated some of Nehemiah's personal journal and here we go back to the first person of Nehemiah's journal.

31 Then I had the leaders of Judah come up on top of the wall, and I appointed two great choirs, the first proceeding to the right on top of the wall toward the Refuse Gate. 32 Hoshaiah and half of the leaders of Judah followed them, 33 with Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, 34 Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah, 35 and some of the sons of the priests with trumpets; and Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph, 36 and

his kinsmen, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God. And Ezra the scribe went before them. 37 At the Fountain Gate they went directly up the steps of the city of David by the stairway of the wall above the house of David to the Water Gate on the east.

Now you get the picture we're going to see he's talking about, he directed for one group of the leaders of the people, the priests, and Levites, to mount the wall and to walk around and he's going to do, there's a second choir and they're singing as they go around the top, they're walking on the top of the wall. The wall is obviously wide enough for a man to walk on, possibly they made it wide enough even for something to be rolled on in case of battle and stuff like that, that's what they usually did when they made walls like this. And so two choirs are walking around the city and this is the dedication of the walls. So the second group he says, verse 38,

38 The second choir proceeded to the left, while I followed them with half of the people on the wall, above the Tower of Furnaces, to the Broad Wall, 39 and above the Gate of Ephraim, by the Old Gate, by the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate; and they stopped at the Gate of the Guard. 40 Then the two choirs took their stand in the house of God. So did I and half of the officials with me; 41 and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah and Hananiah, with the trumpets; 42 and Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam and Ezer. And the singers sang, with Jezrahiah their leader, 43 and on that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar. 44 On that day men were also appointed over the chambers for the stores, the contributions, the first fruits and the tithes, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the portions required by the law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who served. 45 For they performed the worship of their God and the service of purification, together with the singers and the gatekeepers in accordance with the command of David and of his son Solomon. 46 For in the days of David and Asaph, in ancient times, there were leaders of the singers, songs of praise and hymns of thanksgiving to God. 47 So all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah gave the portions due the singers and the gatekeepers as each day required, and set apart the consecrated portion for the Levites, and the Levites set apart the consecrated portion for the sons of Aaron.

Let's pray together.

*Our Father, as we open Your word, we are mindful of our great need of grace. We confess that our minds are dull, our hearts hardened and at times not as responsive as we want. We ask that Your Spirit would work in us, that we would find that in Your light*

*we receive light, that the opening of the word, of the law, brings light and life. So teach us. Lord, show us our great need of You. Show us the greatness of Christ and the beauty of living in His presence. We pray in Your name. Amen.*

All right, so we are looking at living our lives around the presence of God, building your life around the presence of God, and we see this in this picture of the people. Now I want to think for a moment about their circumstances before we get into the outline, you know, just to remind us again they lived in very difficult times. The people of the day that we're reading about, 445 BC, they had difficult times but it continued. They were living under Persian hegemony, that is, Persian rule. The Persian government had taken over from the Babylonians and though they let them go back to their land, they no longer kept them captive in Babylon yet they were still under oppressive, you know, governmental just reign, and so they were continually dealing with just the difficulty of being ruled over. Remember from the prayer and you can look at this if you weren't with us, in Nehemiah 9 the prayer of confession that they make after the revival breaks out, they say twice in verse 36, "We are slaves in the land. We're back in the land, praise Your name! You've been kind to us but we are slaves in the land. Our labor is for the king, the emperor, who rules over us and we are in great distress!"

So their lives are characterized by this great distress. The word "distress," such a powerful word to the Hebrew. It means "to be pressed in and to be forced into a tight space," and it's outward pressure that's confining and conforming and pushing you in but the word pictures the inner anguish that flows from the external pressure. To be in distress is to have inner anguish that is brought out upon you because of this external pressure and so they're saying, "We are in not just distress, we're not just having, we're in great distress." Isn't that great? The stress was not relieved. They continued under the oppression of the Persians for another 115-120 years after the events in this chapter. 115 years. Then Alexander the Great makes them slaves of Greece and they're slaves of Greece for another 170 years. They have a brief respite during the Maccabean revolt and then the Romans come in and oppress them.

So they have governmental oppression, they have a situation as we've been reading through the book of Nehemiah, we said they're surrounded by a hostile culture and hostile people who don't just dislike them, they want to hurt them. They want to destroy them and so they've had to live in fear even as they've rebuilt the wall. So they lived in times of government oppression and cultural animosity and hostility. How should you live in those circumstances and how should you live if it's going...for them, they didn't know this, God doesn't tell us the future, right? So they didn't know how long it was going to be like that. They might have thought the Messiah is coming next year but the reality was the Messiah wasn't going to come for more than four centuries and that when the Persians left, the Greeks were going to come in, and when the Greeks left, shortly after that the Romans were going to come in. So generations would go through this and even that is instructive. It shows us that God is not interested in making the external circumstances, not primarily at all interested, he does in his kindness bless us with external blessings but I'm saying his priority is not to make your external circumstances palatable and enjoyable. Look at the Scripture, you just cannot infer that with any kind of halfway

focused interpretation of the Bible. He doesn't promise, you know, that things are going to be easy. In fact, looking at Scripture, you would expect the opposite for the people of God. Things tend to be difficult but what God does is promise that he will be with you in the difficulty and in that you will have more than you ever imagined, because if you have God, what else could you possibly desire?

That's what the psalmist says in Psalm 73 after he's lamented the fact that he sees oppression all around him. He doesn't understand why the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, and he's a righteous man and he's thinking, "I don't know if it's worth it." And he says, "If I had spoken this to other believers, I would have sinned against the next generation." He says, "I've just been dealing with that in my heart," secret thoughts of his heart doubting, doubting, "Why is God this way? Why has God abandoned me? Why is God abandoning his people?" But he's not said anything, he's not said anything and he says, "But I went into the sanctuary of God and then I discerned, came to a clarity." He said, "Surely You're going to deal with all of this. You're going to deal with the wicked and You're going to bless the righteous." And after he sees that, he says, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And besides thee I desire nothing on earth." Think about that, that perplexity led him to seek God in a way that he could say, "What do I have in life but God? And what do I want? What would I possibly want instead of God? Nothing."

This is what these people are being challenged to see because their circumstances are difficult just as ours are. Isn't it encouraging that as we look at the deterioration of our culture, an increasingly, see an increasing appetite for, you know, oppressive kind of arbitrary almost rules and laws, you know, authoritarianism on the rise all over the world. It can be discouraging but good news, this isn't the first time it's happened and the people of God received instruction on how to live in these circumstances in the past. And these circumstances, they'll come and go at the whim and pleasure of God but we have an opportunity to live for his glory and to experience his joy in the midst of it in a way that will magnify his name and his excellency and that's what we're called to do. We're called to build our lives around the presence of God and the very difficulties remind us of that.

So the purpose of life is God's presence. You even see that in the passage in this just dedication of the walls. There's a couple of key words that I want to bring out before we get into the outline. There's two points and I haven't gotten to the first point yet. This is the introduction so maybe I should have eight points in my introduction. No, but anyways, seriously. The first point is coming in a minute. But the purpose of life, the theme is building your life around the presence of God, the purpose of life is to live in God's presence and to live in God's presence in every area of your life. And you see this, the emphasis on the presence of God is made really emphatically clear in the passage as they are worshiping God as they dedicate the walls, and what's significant is like in verse 27, the word "dedication," at the dedication of the wall that they might celebrate, then later on down it says celebrate the dedication with gladness. Twice the word "dedication" occurs. This is a word that is not used very often in the Bible at all. It's used also in Ezra 6 to speak of the dedication of the temple but it is used almost exclusively, it speaks of initiating something or starting something for the first time. Dedication, initiation, inauguration, this kind of thing. But it's only used in the Bible about worship. Like say,

for instance, it's used in Numbers 7 a number of times to talk about the dedication of the altar that they used at the tabernacle, the first place of meeting God in his presence. You had to have an altar to offer sacrifices to come into the presence of God and so the altar was dedicated. Then it's used again, the next time you find it is in 2 Chronicles 7 when the temple, the tabernacle is replaced by a permanent place of worship, the temple, and the new altar at the temple is dedicated. Then you have it in Ezra 6 when the temple is built, they dedicate the temple. And now you have it, they're dedicating the walls. That's kind of surprising. The walls, that's not a part of the temple. That's not the altar. Why are we dedicating the walls and why this worship service, even? And what we're going to see basically is we're dedicating the walls because the walls, the whole city is being shown to be the dwelling place of God. Not just the temple, Jerusalem belongs to God. Jerusalem is God's dwelling place.

Another key word is the word "purified" in verse 30, "The priests and the Levites purified themselves; they also purified the people." To have a worship service, they purified themselves, they purified the people, "the gates and the wall." They purified the gates and the wall. The word "purified" means "to make clean." It's a key concept. You read it particularly a lot in Leviticus, clean and unclean. Remember the distinctions, clean/unclean food. If you have a certain illness, you're unclean but then you could be made clean. What's that about? To be clean is to be fit for the presence of God. To be unclean is to be not fit for the presence of God. So that which is clean, that which is purified and made clean is fit for the presence of God, so the Levites and the priests need to be made clean so that they can be in the presence of God, the people need to be made clean so they can be in the presence of God, but the gates and the wall are made clean because God's presence is going to fill the whole city. So it's all about the presence of God. The whole city is made ready for God to come and dwell in it and so the Lord dwells in Jerusalem.

You know, those Psalms that speak of the glory of Jerusalem, the beauty of Jerusalem, Psalm 48:1-3 actually, "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised," listen to these words, "In the city of our God, His holy mountain. Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, Is Mount Zion in the far north." What makes her so beautiful? What is it? The next verse, "The city of the great King. God, in her palaces, Has made Himself known as a stronghold." God is there, that's why it's beautiful. Psalm 50:2, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth." God is in Jerusalem and that's what they're seeing. It's not just the temple, the whole city is holy. In fact, in the previous chapter twice, I don't think I pointed this out last week but it says the holy city, the holy city. The city is holy unto God.

So the city is fit for the presence of God and so there's a sense in which they're seeing that the presence of God moves out from just the temple, it's to fill the whole city of God and for them this means that the presence of God is going to be at the center of their life, that if they're going to build their lives around the presence of God, they have to build their lives around Jerusalem. They have to tether themselves to Jerusalem, so to speak. They have to seek to orbit Jerusalem and so in their worship, their daily lives, it's all about Jerusalem. The new moon festival each month, taking the sacrifice to Jerusalem. The

calendar, the Jewish calendar, remember all the various feasts, go to Jerusalem because the presence of God is there.

So for us the same way, we're to live our lives around the presence of God. It's all about worship. In fact, I'd encourage you to read Romans 12:1. I'm just going to summarize it here and think about this, that the book of Romans, the first 11 chapters tell you all about what God has done in Christ for you and chapter 12 turns the corner and it becomes very practical. The first 11 chapters, theology, last five chapters 12 to 16, practice. This is what you need to know. This is what you need to do. And the hinge between what you know and what you do is Romans 12:1 and Romans 12:1 says this, "Therefore in view of God's mercies, brothers, I beseech you to offer your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your only reasonable service of worship."

The hinge to making theology what you know into what you do, living a different life, he's going to be very practical in later chapters about all kinds of issues, but the hinge is worship. You see what God has done, you continually focus on and you worship him and you seek his face. You live like a priest, to offer your body as a living sacrifice. He's basically saying, "You're a priest, live like it. Live like a priest every moment of every day." Everything is caught up into worship. Everything is caught up into the presence of God. That's the purpose of life.

Now for that to happen in your life, this chapter has some really helpful instruction and there's two points now that I want us to look at in the remainder of the time we have. How do you live your life in the presence of God? There are a number of things we could say but this chapter has part of that answer for us and it basically says if you want to build your life around the presence of God, listen to this very carefully, if you want to build your life around the presence of God, you must build your life around the people of God. You must build your life around the people of God. Jerusalem at the center, the city of God, though the people lived outside the city, the city of God was to be the center of their lives, and for us the city of God and the temple of God are the church, the people of God.

You see this a number of ways. Let me just show you some of the passages. Hebrews 12. The church is the temple and the church is, in a sense, is Jerusalem. So the old covenant, God is teaching us through types. He's doing like John Calvin said, he's baby-talking with us, he's teaching us very important spiritual realities through the actual events of the Old Testament people of God in Israel. This is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10. They were an example to us of things that happened to them were to teach us. But in Hebrews 12:22, he's talking to the Jewish Christians now and he's saying, "Listen, guys, you guys know all about Jerusalem, you know all about how it was the center, you know all about the sacrificial system but you have not come to the earthly Jerusalem." Listen to what he says in verse 22, "you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels," so that Jerusalem is the place of God's presence and it's actually a type of heaven. Of, "the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled

blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel." Revelation 21, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. The place for man to dwell with God. In fact, it's interesting, there's a wall around the city in Revelation 21, a very high wall that separates all ungodliness from the presence of God.

So the wall of Jerusalem is about that. The city is about the presence of God and the city has the temple of God in the center. That's where the presence of God is the place where he meets with God. The city walls bracket this area and the temple is at the center, and we see a number of places where this is shown to be typological. I'll mention 1 Peter 2, this is verse 4, 1 Peter 2, "coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also," you Christians, he's saying, "you also as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." You see, when you come to Christ, you become a part of the temple, the true temple. The earthly temple was a type of this true temple. Jesus then became the temple and everyone who's connected to Jesus is now the temple.

Now turn with me to Ephesians and I want to show you this also in Ephesians 2:19-22. He's talking to the Ephesian Christians and he says, he's told them earlier, "You used to be strangers and aliens to all of the things of God," but he says verse 19, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit." What he's saying is the people of God are the temple of God and so there's a sense in which he's saying if you're going to build your life around the presence of God and the presence of God is Jerusalem, is the temple, that is that for Christians he was telling the Old Testament believers before Christ, build your lives around the presence of God and the people of God, he's telling us the same thing. The application of this is to build your life around the people of God. You cannot make the presence of God truly your focus without also making the people of God the priority of your life.

The church is to be the center of your life. That's something that I was very slow to come to understand. I have to admit, I was more, you know, we are products of our culture, right? And so as a consumerism, I mean, we're all basically if you've been in America long, it's all about consumerism. You're the consumer. Churches market themselves, try to tell you they have better services than others. Basically it's almost like commercials. You know, why drink this drink versus that drink? Why use this, buy this car versus that car? Why buy this, you know, whatever versus that whatever. Well, because of the benefits it gives you and churches can do the same thing. "Come here. We have this great service over here. We have this great service over there. Come here and stay here and we want to keep you satisfied as satisfied customers." And people leave churches all the time because they're no longer satisfied customers. "It used to meet my needs but now it doesn't therefore I'm leaving." That is a completely unbiblical way to think about the church. It's a very American way. It's just completely unbiblical. It is completely

ungodly. If we're going to make the presence of God the center of our lives, the people of God have to be at the center of our lives because God manifests himself somehow in the communion of the saints.

So the centrality of the church is the first point. I don't know if I gave you that actually. The centrality of the church. How are we going to live life in the presence of God? We need to understand the centrality of the church and make that commitment to the centrality of the church. If you're still in Ephesians you can turn over to chapter 5, verse 18. I want to show you how the presence of God relates to the people of God. The New Testament makes this, if you just read the New Testament, just think about that concept, and read your New Testament and just watch it just jump out at you. One of the ways it does is through this word "one another," these two words in English, "one another." But Ephesians 5:18. I want more, if you're saying I want more of the presence of God in my life, I want more of God's power and peace and love and joy in my life, I want these things, how do you get them? Well, if you're really going to live life in the presence of God, you're going to have to be with the people of God. If you're not, you're living your life like on a starvation diet. People who live apart from the church, I'm not saying there aren't some, there are true believers that are living apart from the church. There are, there certainly are, but they're in danger. They're in a dangerous position. When people come to Christ, they come to be united to a head that wants us to be connected to his body. How can you say you're connected to the head if you're not connected to any other part of the body? You're a finger and you're not connected to another knuckle or to a hand, you're not connected to the part of the body, you're not connected to the head.

So we want the presence of God. Ephesians 5:18, the command to be filled with the Spirit. "Do not get drunk with wine," verse 18, Ephesians 5, "for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit." You want to be filled with the Spirit. Every Christian should want that. The presence of God permeating your life. Look what he says next. The command is be filled with the Spirit. That's the main verb and it's a passive imperative, be filled. You're commanded to let the Spirit fill you but how does the Spirit fill you? I think there's a window into that in the next five participles that follow in the next three verses, "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the reverence of Christ." Now some of those are things that are going on in your own heart, always giving thanks for all things, that's in your own heart; singing, making melody in your heart, with your heart to the Lord, that's in your own heart; but two of those things are clearly involving others, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs and being subject to one another in the fear of Christ. If you're going to be filled with the Spirit, you need some "one anothering" to be going on and one of the ways that you are filled with the Spirit is you are speaking to each other the things of God. You're speaking them and you're hearing them and as we do that, we are filled.

Isn't it, you've experienced this if you're a Christian. Maybe you're down, you're discouraged, you feel distant from the Lord and you get into a circumstance where somebody else needs encouragement, they're in a worse place than you are like on a

comparative note, they're closer to Eeyore than you are. You know Eeyore? Anyway, Winnie the Pooh. Okay, that's enough. Eeyore is always down, it's always doom and gloom, everything is terrible. So they're on the Eeyore scale, they're farther along than you are. You might have thought you were at a 7 or 8, you might have thought you were at a 9 but you meet them and you feel, "I'm only at a 6. They're at 9 ½." And so what do you do? Well, the Lord working in you, "I need to encourage this brother," and so you start encouraging them. You speak to them in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs and you start encouraging them in the Lord and what happens? You begin to experience more joy in your own heart, more peace, more love. Everything is happening in you because you started ministering to someone else and what's happening to them? They are receiving that and they're being filled with the Spirit.

That's what we're called to do. You need and I need other people, other believers. You can't fully walk with God as an island. You cannot do it. If you want to, repent. You want something God doesn't want for you. I mean, we all have, some of us are more introverted and it's tougher. I understand that. Some of us are extroverted and we're happy to be talking to people but we don't talk about these spiritual things enough. So we all have our challenges. We all need Christ in his grace to work in us, and we all need each other.

So you can't, you can't have the presence of God in its fullness without the people of God. You have to make it a priority. I mean, this is so clear in this whole book, it makes this clear. Ephesians 4, turn back over to chapter 4 verses 14, 15 and 16. He's talked about how we're not to be tossed here and there by waves of doctrine in verse 14 and he says, "but speaking the truth in love," Ephesians 4:15, "we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ." He's using the metaphor here, he's changed the metaphor from the temple and Christ the foundation stone of the temple that he did in Ephesians 2, and now he's using the metaphor of the body and he says Christ is the head, we are parts of the body, and as we speak to one another, speaking the truth in love we grow up in all aspects into him, that is, you have to have other people speaking the truth to you for you to get more connected to Jesus, as connected as possible requires other people. Verse 16, "from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." So it's like as you speak the truth to one another, you become connected to other people, you're becoming connected to Christ. He loves when you love his people and he hates when you mistreat them, and if you belong to him, if we belong to him, he'll discipline us when we do. He'll do it in love but he will discipline.

So the centrality of God's people. We have to pursue the presence of God together and the idea of the walls of separation, there's a sense in which we're to see ourselves as separate and distinct from the world. Listen to this, this is important. The walls of Jerusalem is the completion, the capstone of this process of God planting his people in the land of Canaan again, the temple, the law, the walls. The walls are there, a clear demarcation between the people of God and those who are not the people of God and we are to live in such a way that the people of God have a priority for us over those who are

not the people of God. This doesn't mean that we don't have responsibility as parents, of course, and as children, of course. Unbelieving parents, we're to honor them because God says you honor them, you honor them all the way to the end, of course, but there's a sense in which the people of God, the family of God is even more precious and close in the heart of the believer who's walking in obedience, it's more precious than his earthly family. That is clear. It's hard but it's clear and in reality it's hard but it's just right and it's the path to life.

The separation and so you're to see unbelievers as not that we, you know, sit around and hate the unbelievers. No, we're to love the unbelievers because God loves the unbelievers but we're to see ourselves as separate and distinct from them even as we love them, even as we reach out to them and when we come here, it's family. This is my family. This is my home. That's how we're to live and if you have that as your heart's desire, you will then have more of the presence of God in your life. God loves to dwell among his people. Think about Jesus in John 17, his high priestly prayer. He basically says this, "Father, make them one, make the body, the people that You've given Me out of the world. I don't pray for the world," he says. You read that prayer, John 17, "I don't pray for the world, I pray for those You've given Me out of the world that they may be one even as We are One, that they may be unified and that in their unity, they will be one even as We are One, I in You, You in Me, and I in them." The unity of the body is intimately related to our unity with God and you can't say you love God and hate your brother. You can't say you love God whom you have not seen and hate your brother whom you have seen. You cannot walk with God as you are hating your brother.

He's talking about brother now. We're not supposed to hate unbelievers either, we shouldn't be hating unbelievers, we should be loving unbelievers, but 1 Peter makes this point too, I think it's chapter 2, verse 18 says, it says, "Fear God. Honor the king. Honor all men. Love the brotherhood." Do you see that, the difference between honor the king? Fear God. And you see the difference between honor all men, love the brotherhood. That's the command and so some of us are not experiencing the presence of God like we like, some of us are struggling in ways that we are because we are not prioritizing the people of God and you reap what you sow.

So the centrality of the church, that's the first point. That's essential. We have to make a commitment to the centrality of the church. This has been really had to do during the last year and a half, hasn't it? I mean, everybody's got more disconnected in the last year and a half. Families are more disconnected. Coworkers, I mean, think about how many of you work from home now. You don't see those people. There are no water cooler conversations unless you go get some water while you're on Zoom in your Zoom meeting. Everybody is more distant and it's had its impact on the church and God is just calling us to make, if he's calling us to make the people of God the center of our lives, we really need to carefully thoughtfully consider this instruction in light of the challenges of the day which are real. It's not easy to figure this out. Some of you are in circumstances where you really, you're doing the right thing to stay away from gatherings of people but if you're doing that, I just want to ask you are you broken-hearted over that? I'm doing it but it hurts because I'm not face-to-face with God's people. And if you're not and the

chances are you're not because all of our hearts get dull to these things, don't they? I mean, I'm here every week, I have to be here every week. That's one of the things I said earlier, I came out with consumerism in my mindset and then I'm a pastor and so I feel like I have a conflict of interest in asking you to be at church because if nobody shows up, I probably will get fired. At some point it's not going to end well for me, but that's an entirely self-focused thought process. It doesn't matter about me, it matters about Jesus and his people.

So I had to learn that and so I was too soft on church attendance because I also had been around, you may have been around people who were legalistic in an external kind of way about church attendance. If you're not there every time the door is open, you're sinning. And it wasn't about the heart. Let me say this: if you don't want to be with the people of God every time you can then there's some sin in your life. Now I understand that you can't be with the people of God every time that you might because other commitments that we have in life, of course, but we should want to be with the people of God as much as possible because we love being with the people who love Jesus because we love Jesus.

Anyway so we have to challenge each other in this area. What are the ways we need to be more committed to the people of God? Like I said, it's not every single time the door is open. We're not going to start an attendance thing that says you only made 9 out of 10 this month. No, we're not talking about that but we want to call each other to the standard of prioritize the presence of God because that's all that matters, and if the presence of God matters, then the people of God have to matter. And you know, if you're happening to stay home because of COVID, which you may and your heart may ache over that, you can still be connecting to the people of God. You can do it through Zoom. Isn't it great? I mean, there's a danger, it's a double-edged sword, but Zoom call, that's really awesome. Or whatever your choice, I know there's all kinds of different ones. I'm like always behind, three or four times behind whatever the cool thing is.

So anyway, but to be able to fellowship, to see another person's face is better than talking on the phone, and talking on the phone is better than just writing an email or even texting, although texting is good too, not saying it's not, there's a place for it. But we need to be with the people of God and if you can't be with the people of God, find a way to be with the people of God and let people know that you want to be with people and there will be people who will be burdened to want to be with you through some technological means. You just need the church and the church needs you. Other people need you.

So the centrality of the church. Now the second point is really interesting. Now we get to the last 26 verses and I know I misspoke when I said I guarantee we're going to read those verses. I'm going to try to anyway but I thought I could forget. It doesn't just take me dying, I could forget. Anyway, that's a pretty likely event but I did remember, praise the Lord. So today we're going to read the first 26 verses and I want you to think about why they're here and what I'm going to tell you we're going to be reading, just so you kind of get prepared in your mind, he's going to basically take time to tell us who the priests and Levites were at three different periods in the history, essentially associated with the three returns. There were priests and Levites there when they came back under

Zerubbabel. There were priests and Levites there when Ezra came back. There were priests and Levites there in Nehemiah's day. And the priests are the ones who actually performed the work of the temple. They actually offered the sacrifices. They actually burned the incense. They actually go into the temple proper which is the building itself, the holy place. The temple actually is bigger than that, it's the whole courts and everything, and Levites can go into the courts just like other people can but the Levites are descendants of Levi, one of the sons of Jacob, who were devoted to God to be about the worship of God. So the priests are a subset of the Levites. They are the family of Aaron. Aaron was a Levite and all of his descendants now are the priesthood, the Aaronic priesthood. The Levites beyond that are the only ones that can do certain things related to the temple and the tabernacle. They're the only ones that can do certain cleaning, to do the singing, to do the gatekeeping, to do all of the things that have to be done, the practical concerns, and so basically what you see is he takes time to tell you about the leadership of the people of God before he tells you about the dedication. And he basically is saying this in these 26 verses, "The leadership is exactly as it ought to be therefore God is blessing."

And so we're seeing the importance of leadership and I want to suggest to you that priests and Levites, there's an interesting thing. I think there's possibly a parallel that we can think about. The priests are more in charge, these are the spiritual leaders of the people. The priests meet with the people and handle more of the spiritual focus. The Levites are more interested in the practical concerns associated with that. It's like almost, I'm not saying it's a perfect 1:1 but elders and deacons, two offices in the New Testament church. The point of this is the necessity of godly church leadership. You want to put the church at the center of your life and you need to put a good church at the center of your life. You need to have godly church leaders. That's what this is saying. That's why these 26 verses.

So now let me read them.

1 Now these are the priests and the Levites who came up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua: Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra, 2 Amariah, Malluch, Hattush, 3 Shecaniah, Rehum, Meremoth, 4 Iddo, Ginnethoi, Abijah, 5 Mijamin, Maadiah, Bilgah, 6 Shemaiah and Joiarib, Jedaiah, 7 Sallu, Amok, Hilkiyah and Jedaiah. These were the heads of the priests and their kinsmen in the days of Jeshua. 8 The Levites were Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, and Mattaniah who was in charge of the songs of thanksgiving, he and his brothers. 9 Also Bakbukiah and Unni, their brothers, stood opposite them in their service divisions. 10 Jeshua became the father of Joiakim, and Joiakim became the father of Eliashib, and Eliashib became the father of Joiada, 11 and Joiada became the father of Jonathan, and Jonathan became the father of Jaddua. 12 Now in the days of Joiakim, the priests, the heads of fathers' households were: of Seraiah, Meraiah; of Jeremiah, Hananiah; 13 of Ezra, Meshullam; of Amariah, Jehohanan; 14 of Malluchi, Jonathan; of Shebaniah, Joseph; 15 of Harim, Adna; of Meraioth, Helkai; 16 of Iddo, Zechariah; of Ginnethon, Meshullam; 17 of Abijah, Zichri; of Miniamin, of Moadiah, Piltai; 18 of

Bilgah, Shammua; of Shemaiah, Jehonathan; 19 of Joiarib, Mattenai; of Jedaiah, Uzzi; 20 of Sallai, Kallai; of Amok, Eber; 21 of Hilkiah, Hashabiah; of Jedaiah, Nethanel. 22 As for the Levites, the heads of fathers' households were registered in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, and Johanan and Jaddua; so were the priests in the reign of Darius the Persian. 23 The sons of Levi, the heads of fathers' households, were registered in the Book of the Chronicles up to the days of Johanan the son of Eliashib. 24 The heads of the Levites were Hashabiah, Sherebiah and Jeshua the son of Kadmiel, with their brothers opposite them, to praise and give thanks, as prescribed by David the man of God, division corresponding to division. 25 Mattaniah, Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshullam, Talmon and Akkub were gatekeepers keeping watch at the storehouses of the gates. 26 These served in the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and in the days of Nehemiah the governor and of Ezra the priest and scribe.

So he basically lists priest and Levites in these different eras and says they were qualified and they were committed to what they needed to be committed to and you need a church, you need to put yourself in a church that has qualified leaders who are committed to what they need to be committed to. This is a sobering word for those of us in leadership. We need to be qualified people who are committed to what we need to be committed to. Qualifications we're going to talk about next time and the commitment we'll talk about a little more next time but I want to say this, what you see as you read this and I encourage you to read this again this week because we're going to come back to this next week, we just don't have time today, and that is the qualification for leadership was their lineage by birth. In the New Testament, it's no longer about blood lineage but it is about birth. Only those that can lead the church are those who have the new birth, been born again, and then qualified by the character is the key focus and we're going to see that next time. But the commitment and this is really beautiful how he brings this out, these people did everything according to the word of God. Everything was done in absolute accordance with the word of God. The Bible was the authority for what they were doing. The instruments they used, the way they divided up the choirs, the way that they sang antiphonally was all according to the book. They weren't making it up on their own. They weren't trying to see what pleased people. They were trying to see what pleased God.

So for us to live life in the presence of God, we have to be committed to the people of God and we have to be committed to a solid church. This means that if you're going to move and you leave Providence, you need to make your top priority finding a church where you are going. We will help you try to do that and you should be thinking about it. I know that if I were moving, I'd be thinking about my drive time to work, what are the opportunities for the kids around, absolutely, but the number one concern if you're thinking biblically is how close are you to a faithful church. That's number one and if it's not number one, you're just being unwise and you will suffer and your kids will suffer. If you want to live life in the presence of God, you need to be with the people of God, you need to be around a church that is trying to be faithful to God's word. And the wonder of it is the Lord takes imperfect people and whenever you get to a church, I always love this

when people come to our church, you know, sometimes I'll notice that they're really enthusiastic. They've been to maybe, whatever church they came from, for whatever reason they like our church, they like the way we sing hymns or they like the way we have content, the content Ted shares about stuff, makes it so rich, doesn't it? You know, "Boy, that was awesome today about leaning on the everlasting arms," and so you're so encouraged, you're encouraged by the word, you're encouraged by the lady's Bible studies, you're encouraged by biblical counseling, you're encouraged by however you receive the word and you come in excited and sometimes what happens is reality, you know, eventually sets in that we are not all that. We're just messed up people, no better than other people. We have the same issues but the key thing is not the perfection of your life but the direction. We are people who want to follow Jesus and you want to be with other people who want to follow Jesus. That's what we all need and it's so urgently important. We can't do it without it. That's what God was teaching us through this amazing event 2,400 years ago.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Our Father, we praise and honor You. You are the King of heaven. You do all things well. The way that You have chosen to make Your people, form us and bring us together as projects, I mean, Lord, we're all projects that You're working on. We're Your workmanship created in Christ Jesus and so You make us new and then You work on us the rest of our lives to make us more like Jesus, to fill us with more of Your presence to make us more fit vessels and servants to You, and so we are all works in progress and then You put us together with other people who are works in progress and we see the flaws and we see sometimes the sin, often the sin, we see sins in each other. We get close to one another and we see that we aren't what we ought to be but we thank You that our job is simply to keep reminding each other that Jesus is everything that we need and He's everything that we're not. Lord, help us. Help us love Your people because we love Christ. Help us love being with Your people because we love Christ. Help us do that in such a way that we're committed to one another, that we're willing to stay with one another through hard times, through difficulty, through difficult relational issues that we have to work through over time. Let us stay with one another, keep pursuing one another for the glory of Christ because He's worthy. Make us more and more what You want us to be and, Lord, we do want more of Your presence. We want to experience Your presence on a daily basis. We want to make all of our lives about the centrality of God. We want people to see us and see You in us. So help us be pursuing that together as You have willed it. We praise You that You've done it this way, Lord. We might think it would be easier to do it on our own but we would be wrong. Thank You for Your perfect plan. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.*