



Finer Grounds

Nehemiah

Lesson 11: Nehemiah 11

Nehemiah’s restoration of faith in Israel was in full progress. As we have seen so far it was more than just administering laws and regulations, it also involved changing the hearts of the people. Remember, in chapters 8 and 9 the people had been gathered to Jerusalem to hear the word of God read aloud by Ezra. We already know that the leaders among the people signed a promise to God to “not neglect the house” of their God. What is also important to consider is that Jerusalem still had few permanent inhabitants. We need to realize that in order for God’s work to continue throughout the temple, different people with specific tasks had to be available to help with the daily tasks and functions of the temple and city of Jerusalem. With few people in Jerusalem, how could that be accomplished? Also keep in mind that Jerusalem is the city of God, His holy city on earth, and up until this point God’s city has been a “reproach” to the surrounding nations because of its weakened, damaged condition (cf. Nehemiah 1:3). How much glory would it bring God if almost none of His chosen people wanted to live in His holy city?

Read Nehemiah 11:1-2.

In verse one there is a contrasting statement. What two groups of people are being contrasted?

What actions are they being contrasted for?

I am going to get a little technical here, so hang with me. One helpful tool when studying the Bible is to observe contrasting statements. Contrasting statements can be found by identifying conjunctions such as “but,” “although,” “though,” or “whereas.” In verse one, we can see the “but” divides two groups of people; “the leaders” and “the rest of the people.” It’s significant that the “rest of the people” had to cast lots to decide who had to live in Jerusalem. Casting lots was similar to our modern day tradition of drawing straws. When a group of people is faced with a difficult task, and typically no one wants to volunteer, they leave it to chance to decide impartially who will be the one to step up to the plate. Not enough people were willing to go to Jerusalem to live there, so they cast lots to decide who would relocate. That means one tenth of the population was chosen by lot to move into Jerusalem; they didn’t go there by choice. All of God’s people recognized that in order for God’s work to continue, and for God’s city to be restored to her proper glory, Jerusalem had to be repopulated. However, just because they recognized that it needed to be done didn’t mean they were willing to do it themselves. Very few of them were willing to step up and take on personal responsibility, or undergo the difficulty of relocating to Jerusalem without being prompted. Since so few of the people were willing



Finer Grounds

to volunteer, one out of every ten was “drafted” into that service through casting of lots.

Imagine if the United States were suddenly under attack by an invading country, and we needed to increase our military numbers significantly to survive, but for some reason very few men volunteered to step up and defend; a draft would have to be instituted. This is very similar to what’s happening with the people of God in Nehemiah.

In the kingdom of God which is more noble: to volunteer to serve God when a need arises, or to have that responsibility thrust upon us by others?

When pressing needs arise and difficult tasks must be accomplished in our congregations, what is your response?

What situations have you seen where very few people in the church volunteered to meet an important need?

Now that we understand how reluctant “the rest of the people” were, we can compare that to “the leaders” of the people. In verse one it says “Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem.” Since this statement directly contrasts the following statement, where a tenth of the

people were forced by lot live in Jerusalem, we can infer that the leaders volunteered to live there.

Skip ahead and read verses 3 and 20. Why would it have been such a personal sacrifice for these leaders to volunteer to move into Jerusalem?

In addition to physical sacrifices they had to make, why might this be a huge emotional sacrifice as well?

Not only did these leaders leave their homes from the other cities in Judah, but they also had some difficult work ahead of them. As a social or spiritual leader, they had to guide God’s people and correct their misgivings. During this period of restoration, this may have not been the most glamorous job. However, the people blessed the leaders who volunteered to live in Jerusalem (v. 2). Think about the significance of why these volunteers were being blessed. It was the people’s way of bestowing favor and filling the leaders with strength to fulfill their tasks. These leaders took initiative and it was publicly recognized (although they didn’t volunteer just to be recognized). Most likely, they are finally following Nehemiah’s example of sacrificial service for the good of God’s people (cf. Nehemiah 5:14-19). It is hard to be the forerunner for change. It often means long hours of thankless, dissatisfying work dealing with disgruntled people. Regardless, these men knew something had to be done and they were willing to do it. More often than not, the



Finer Grounds

Lord's church has few leaders volunteering and more people avoiding a task or responsibility they recognize needs to be done. We have probably all experienced the feeling of sitting in a group of silent Christians, waiting for someone else to volunteer, and yet no one does. We may have doubts creep into our head telling us "we're not qualified," or "we aren't strong enough in Bible knowledge." Well Nehemiah was a spiritual leader not because he was extremely qualified (remember he was a cupbearer originally). He was fully dedicated to restoring God's people back to God's original commands. Nehemiah, and these leaders of the people, was willing to do something about it.

Read Nehemiah 11:3-36.

Focus on verses 22-23. According to the passage, what was the job the sons of Asaph had to do?

Why is this significant to the overall theme of this book?

You may have already noticed that the entire chapter focuses on the people who either volunteered, or were selected by lot to live in Jerusalem. Like the census in chapter 7, the people are organized by either their group's occupation (or how they would serve), or by their tribe.

To identify the different groups, highlight or underline the divisions in the text (i.e. sons of Judah, sons of Benjamin, priests, Levites, gatekeepers, temple servants).

Now that you see these divisions more clearly, you will know that the sons of Asaph were singers for the house of God (v. 22). Specifically, the text says that "there was a commandment from the king concerning them." Wait, what king? Wasn't Nehemiah merely the governor? Isn't Artaxerxes king in the empire? Why would Artaxerxes care about the singers in God's temple?

Read 1 Chronicles 15:16-22, 1 Chronicles 25:6, and 1 Chronicles 28:11-13, 19. In these passages, what were the original commands concerning the sons of Asaph?

Who was the king who issued the command?

What prompted the king to issue these commands in this way?

Throughout this study, as we dig more into the text, it is important for us to remember one of the main themes of the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah's entire goal was restore the people back to God. In order to do that, they had to go back to the original commands. In 1 Chronicles, King David establishes that only specific groups



Finer Grounds

of men will be the official singers and musicians in temple worship. These weren't just any group of men. The appointed singers were Levites. Specifically, within the Levites, the singers had to be descendants of Asaph. That limited the pool of candidates enormously. It is important for us to recognize in Nehemiah chapter 11 that God's people restored the correct people to the correct roles in worship. They didn't just assign any volunteer to any role. Even when casting lots to fulfill a role, the original commands that were given by God through King David were fulfilled. It is important for us, when we need to assign tasks in the congregation, that we make sure we don't overlook God's original requirements. We may have good intentions as far as efficiency goes in completing a service toward God, but it is important that we never overlook what God originally commanded.

In this chapter, we didn't really break it down verse by verse because this is really just another census of the men that were to go and live in Jerusalem. What I want you to take away from this lesson is the example the volunteers gave. They were willing to step up and fulfill a necessary role when called. Another key observation is that God's people recognized that a duty still had to be fulfilled, even though few wanted to do it themselves. That meant casting lots, and those who were called did what they had to in order to serve God's kingdom. Most importantly, even though God's people were shorthanded on willing volunteers and participants, they still followed God's original commands. They didn't use the lack of enthusiastic participants as an excuse to neglect the house of their God.