

Nehemiah: Census Lists

Nehemiah 11:1–12:26

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*The Lord's Day Evening
February 2, 2009*

Now turn with me if you would to the book of Nehemiah, and tonight we are in chapter 11 and down to verse 26 of chapter 12. We've got a long reading ahead of us tonight. I thought it best to take these lists in one go. There are four lists in these two chapters. I suppose today if we were writing something similar to what Nehemiah was writing in a secular world, these would be things that you would put in an Appendix at the end of a book. But there's a reason why Nehemiah has seen fit, by the guidance and direction and oversight of the Holy Spirit, to put it right here in the words of God.

The four lists in chapter 11...the list begins at verse 4 and all the way down to verse 24...and what we have are a list of names and families of those who volunteered to move back into the city of Jerusalem. (That's 11, from verse 4 all the way down to verse 24.) And then from verses 25-36 of chapter 11, you have a list of towns and villages where ninety percent of the population lived. Then in chapter 12, we have two further lists. They are both lists of priests and Levites. In the first eleven verses you have a list of priests and Levites who came back a hundred years before Nehemiah, at the first return under Zerubbabel and Jeshua. And then in verses 12-26 of chapter 12, you have another list of priests and Levites. And we'll see a connection — and a very important connection — between that first and second list.

Well, this is God's word. Before we read it together, let's look to God in prayer.

Our Father, we would not presume tonight to dictate to You how You should write the Bible to give to us. We accept it as Your word, and we do so without question: a word that is able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ our Lord. And now as we read this section of Scripture together, we ask for the blessing and the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. Help us to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, and help us amidst it all to see something of our Savior. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Nehemiah 11:1–12:26

1Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem, but the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while nine-tenths remained in the other cities. 2And the people blessed all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem. 3Now these are the heads of the provinces who lived in Jerusalem, but in the cities of Judah each lived on his own property in their cities--the Israelites, the priests, the Levites, the temple servants and the descendants of Solomon's servants. 4Some of the sons of Judah and some of the sons of Benjamin lived in Jerusalem. From the sons of Judah: Athaiah the son of Uziah, the son of Zechariah, the son of Amariah, the son of Shephatiah, the son of Mahalalel, of the sons of Perez; 5and Maaseiah the son of Baruch, the son of Col-hozeh, the son of Hazaiah, the son of Adaiah, the son of Joiarib, the son of Zechariah, the son of the Shilonite. 6All the sons of Perez who lived in Jerusalem were 468 able men. 7Now these are the sons of Benjamin: Sallu the son of Meshullam, the son of Joed, the son of Pedaiah, the son of Kolaiah, the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ithiel, the son of Jeshaiiah; 8and after him Gabbai and Sallai, 928. 9Joel the son of Zichri was their overseer, and Judah the son of Hassenuah was second in command of the city. 10From the priests: Jedaiah the son of Joiarib, Jachin, 11Seraiah the son of Hilkiyah, the son of Meshullam, the son of Zadok, the son of Meraioth, the son of Ahitub, the leader of the house of God, 12and their kinsmen who performed the work of the temple, 822; and Adaiah the son of Jeroham, the son of Pelaliah, the son of Amzi, the son of Zechariah, the son of Pashhur, the son of Malchijah, 13and his kinsmen, heads of fathers' households, 242; and Amashsai the son of Azarel, the son of Ahzai, the son of Meshillemoth, the son of Immer, 14and their brothers, valiant warriors, 128. And their overseer was Zabdiel, the son of Haggadolim. 15Now from the Levites: Shemaiah the son of Hasshub, the son of Azrikam, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Bunni; 16and Shabbethai and Jozabad, from the leaders of the Levites, who were in charge of the outside work of the house of God; 17and Mattaniah the son of Mica, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, who was the leader in beginning the thanksgiving at prayer, and Bakbukiah, the second among his brethren; and Abda the son of Shammua, the son of Galal, the son of Jeduthun. 18All the Levites in the holy city were 284. 19Also the gatekeepers, Akkub, Talmon and their brethren who kept watch at the gates, were 172. 20The rest of Israel, of the priests and of the Levites, were in all the cities of Judah, each on his own inheritance. 21But the temple servants were living in Ophel, and Ziha and Gishpa were in charge of the temple servants. 22Now the overseer of the Levites in Jerusalem was Uzzi the son of Bani, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Mica, from the sons of Asaph, who were the singers for the service of the house of God. 23For there was a commandment from the king concerning them and a firm regulation for the song leaders day by day. 24Pethahiah the son of Meshezabel, of the sons of Zerah the

son of Judah, was the king's representative in all matters concerning the people. 25Now as for the villages with their fields, some of the sons of Judah lived in Kiriath-arba and its towns, in Dibon and its towns, and in Jekabzeel and its villages, 26and in Jeshua, in Moladah and Beth-pelet, 27and in Hazar-shual, in Beersheba and its towns, 28and in Ziklag, in Meconah and in its towns, 29and in En-rimmon, in Zorah and in Jarmuth, 30Zanoah, Adullam, and their villages, Lachish and its fields, Azekah and its towns. So they encamped from Beersheba as far as the valley of Hinnom. 31The sons of Benjamin also lived from Geba onward, at Michmash and Aija, at Bethel and its towns, 32at Anathoth, Nob, Ananiah, 33Hazor, Ramah, Gittaim, 34Hadid, Zeboim, Neballat, 35Lod and Ono, the valley of craftsmen. 36From the Levites, some divisions in Judah belonged to Benjamin.

Chapter 12

1Now these are the priests and the Levites who came up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua: Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra, 2Amariah, Malluch, Hattush, 3Shecaniah, Rehum, Meremoth, 4Iddo, Ginnethoi, Abijah, 5Mijamin, Maadiah, Bilgah, 6Shemaiah and Joarib, Jedaiah, 7Sallu, Amok, Hilkiyah and Jedaiah. These were the heads of the priests and their kinsmen in the days of Jeshua. 8The Levites were Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, and Mattaniah who was in charge of the songs of thanksgiving, he and his brothers. 9Also Bakbukiah and Unni, their brothers, stood opposite them in their service divisions. 10Jeshua became the father of Joiakim, and Joiakim became the father of Eliashib, and Eliashib became the father of Joiada, 11and Joiada became the father of Jonathan, and Jonathan became the father of Jaddua. 12Now in the days of Joiakim, the priests, the heads of fathers' households were: of Seraiah, Meraiah; of Jeremiah, Hananiah; 13of Ezra, Meshullam; of Amariah, Jehohanan; 14of Malluchi, Jonathan; of Shebaniah, Joseph; 15of Harim, Adna; of Meraioth, Helkai; 16of Iddo, Zechariah; of Ginnethon, Meshullam; 17of Abijah, Zichri; of Miniamin, of Moadiah, Piltai; 18of Bilgah, Shammua; of Shemaiah, Jehonathan; 19of Joarib, Mattenai; of Jedaiah, Uzzi; 20of Sallai, Kallai; of Amok, Eber; 21of Hilkiyah, Hashabiah; of Jedaiah, Nethanel. 22As 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. 23The 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. 24The 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. 25Mattaniah, Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshullam, Talmon and Akkub were gatekeepers keeping watch at the storehouses of the gates. 26These 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.

Well, thus far God's holy and inerrant word.

Turn back with me to chapter 7 and verse 4, because in a sense chapters 11 and 12 pick up the story of something that Nehemiah has told us in verse 4 of chapter 7:

“The city was wide...” [this is Jerusalem]...“The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt.”

Now since telling us that, Nehemiah has explained what has gone on over the last month or so: how a genealogical table was discovered of the names and family tribes of those who came back at the time of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, a hundred years in the past; how Ezra had called them together in Jerusalem and had read the Law of God in their hearing; how they had celebrated Passover; how they had been engaged in an act of covenant renewal, giving themselves wholeheartedly to the Lord. A month or so has gone by, and Nehemiah is now in chapter 11 picking up that theme that God had put it on Nehemiah's heart to repopulate the city of Jerusalem.

The city walls had now been built. The next section that we'll be looking at is the dedication of the walls of the city. But what good is a city, even with fine defensive walls, if no one lives in it? And for that matter, how could the temple with all of its administration (daily services — morning and evening services, weekly celebrations, monthly celebrations, festivals at certain parts of the year — all of that requiring an enormous infrastructure) accommodate thousands of people who would gather at certain points in the city? The city needed to be alive. It needed to be thriving. There needed to be in a measure some city planning and engineering. That's why you have to love Nehemiah! He's a civil servant. He's a civil servant of the Persian king to be sure, but he's a civil servant who's engineering — socially engineering as well as civil engineering.

This morning in Sunday School a couple of us were looking at a wonderful passage in Jeremiah 29. We won't turn there now; I'll tell you what it's about. It's a wonderful passage in which one of my all-time favorite verses occurs. In Jeremiah 29:11,

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

Some of you have that verse, I'm sure, on a photograph...painting...bought from some bookstore somewhere...probably adorns your walls. It's a wonderful verse, and you probably read that verse thinking of — oh, some idyllic setting somewhere. Well, the context of Jeremiah 29 is Jeremiah is writing a letter to

exiles who have just been taken into Babylon. And God is ordering His people in Babylon to get married, to settle down, to build for themselves homes, to urge their sons to marry, to urge their daughters to get married—in a pagan city and a pagan culture. And God is saying, ‘I will be with you. I want you to be a beacon for hope in a pagan city.’ Well, that's Jeremiah 29.

It was an easier call to go back to Jerusalem. If God wants His people to be a shining light in a pagan city, how much more does He want His people to be a shining light in the holy city? Jerusalem is God's city. This was a city like no other city. This was the city where God was present. This is where His Shekinah glory was to be found, above the mercy seat in the temple in Jerusalem. And he's calling upon His people to go back to the city, to engage in city life.

Now imagine. It looks as though the vast majority were living out in the country. Who wants to live in the city? They'd got used to an agrarian way of life, growing wheat and barley, and olives and who knows what...chickens [no pigs, of course!]...but sheep by the plentiful. It was a difficult task. Not as difficult as the call to go to Babylon and be a shining light, but it was a difficult task.

Commentators are divided about the relationship of verse 1 and 2. In verse 1, we read that they cast lots. All the way down to Acts 1, you read about casting lots. And then after Pentecost there's no more casting lots. Once the Holy Spirit comes, and once God gives us the full canon of Scripture, it seems now that guidance is not to be by casting lots. But the Jews believed in providence. They believed that “the lot is cast into the lap, and the outcome is of the Lord.” (Proverbs 16.) You have to have a firm belief in providence to think that casting lots was God's guidance, that God was so in control that even the falling of a stone or a piece of wood one way or another would be determinative of God's will. They cast lots. And then in verse 2 we read, “...the men who willingly offered to live...” Now some commentators think there were some chosen by lot and others who volunteered, and the majority of commentators seem to go in the other direction — that there was a casting of lots, but those upon whom the lot fell willingly complied. They went voluntarily. They went gladly. They went willingly into the city.

The first thing that we see here, then, is this piece of civil and social engineering.

I am fascinated about what's going on downtown. Some of you are involved in it, I think—building hotels, building an infrastructure to revitalize a decaying city. It's happening all over cities in the South, and elsewhere in the country, I'm sure. And where it works, it's a wonderful thing to watch. Well, in part, Nehemiah 7:4 tells us they hadn't built or they hadn't reconstructed housing in the city. This was a piece of social engineering to revitalize the city of Jerusalem...to do it, of course, because the purposes of God were involved. And they did it. One in ten went back into the city.

The second thing I want us to see is community. Did you notice — how could you not notice? — as we read this list, or these lists, of names “the father of...the son of...children...grandchildren”? There's community here. There's family here. What you see in what is otherwise a dry and boring list of names...see beyond that and see family. See generations of families who are committed to the Lord and committed to His word. Behind this list of names lies nights and nights of patient teaching of children, of rearing little ones in the fear and admonition of the Lord; of what Psalm 145 says, that “one generation shall commend the works of God to another, and shall declare Your mighty acts.” As one generation declares to another...yes, God has punished them, and God has sent them into exile. It was what He had threatened in Deuteronomy 7, but God had been faithful to them, too. And now that they were back in Jerusalem, they could trace generations of belief and generations of faith as God in His mercy came in blessing upon families who were committed to family life and family devotion. It's a beautiful thing. You know, those lists in chapter 12...they look like dry and dusty lists...lists of priests and Levites at the time of the first return in 537 BC, and another list of priests and Levites a hundred years later in 444 B.C. But they're the same names. They are the same families. A hundred years later, that family is still praising God, still worshiping God.

There's a beautiful thing here in this congregation. I love it when Ligon says, “My father was a Presbyterian ruling elder.” I love it when he says that. I can't say that. I've been grafted into the olive tree. I can't trace a single member of my family that professed faith. Not a single one. Some of you can trace your parents, and your grandparents, and your great-grandparents, and some of you are concerned about your children. And see here this beautiful picture of covenantal faithfulness: God has been faithful to His promise. It's a beautiful thing to see.

The third thing I want us to see is submission. Submission. Look at what Nehemiah says in verse 2 of chapter 11: that they went willingly. Whether these are the same ones that had been chosen by lot, the point is they went willingly. They submitted to God's will. They submitted to hardship and change. I imagine some of these families living out in one of these towns or villages 40-50 miles from Jerusalem with their little small holding, and land and grass and chickens, and children playing out in the street...and now they're going back to Jerusalem, to inner city life. A smaller house. You can imagine the realtors saying “spacious accommodation” and it's just a little apartment with no running water and no sanitary conditions. Behind the simple words “they went willingly” there must have been enormous sacrifice, not just for them (the names here) but wives and children, committing themselves because they saw it as the will of God.

There have been families from this church who have gone and planted some of the PCA churches here in town. They went willingly. They sacrificed their comfort and ease to help others because they saw it as God's will. Volunteers. Willing volunteers because they saw a need. There have been families — one returning tomorrow, I think — who...they are about to go to another country with their

children, because they see it as God's will. They've been gripped by the guidance of God upon them and their families. And they've said, "Lord, whatever it is You're asking me to do, I do it with all my heart. I do it as unto You." I've known bankers and accountants who have retired from their work early, given up six-figure sums, to help struggling missionary organizations to put their house in order. They saw it as God's will, sacrificing much of their ease and comfort for the sake of the kingdom of God. There's a beautiful picture here of submission and of willingness.

The fourth thing and last thing is variety of ministry. Oh, I had such fun looking at these names this afternoon! Verse 1 of chapter 11, leaders in Jerusalem; verse 3 of chapter 11, leaders in the provinces who joined the leaders who are in Jerusalem. Leaders. Leaders showing example. Leaders giving a testimony to others. They went first. They volunteered for the task.

In verse 9 of chapter 11, you see a reference to an overseer, and then in the same verse, "second over the city." There were overseers, and then there were those who were second. It's probably talking about folk who would need to take care of streets, and sanitary conditions, and building regulations within the city. In verse 16 of chapter 11, you have those who are engaged in "outside work"—who knows what that is? Fixing the outside of the temple? The equivalent of painting and fixing drainage, and who knows what? People who worked with their hands. In verse 11 of chapter 11, you have reference to Seraiah, the "ruler of the house of God"—probably a reference to the high priest. And in verse 17, Mattaniah, the Levitical leader of praise—the Bill Wymond of this passage! And in verse 22, singers and choristers. And in verse 24, and again another reference in chapter 12, to one set of choristers singing or responding to another set of choristers, perhaps because there were two choirs responding in responsive singing to one another, leading in the praise and leading in the worship. All kinds of people — leaders, and those who are second in command, and those who worked with their hands, and those Levites who led in the singing in temple services day by day and week by week.

You remember what Paul says in Ephesians 4, that the church grows only as each member jointly works together. It's a beautiful thing that God gifts us all differently, one doing one task and another doing another task, and the whole coming together to form God's beautiful church.

Well, may God bless to us this reading of these otherwise four dusty lists, but behind it is the purpose of God and the coming of the Lord Jesus.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for the Bible. We thank You that it is always new and always fresh, and we pray that You would hide it now within our hearts, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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