

Nehemiah: O No! More Names

Nehemiah 7:5-73

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*The Lord's Day Evening
November 2, 2008*

Now, I was explaining to our missionary guests tonight that he had come on the night when I had a clunker of a text. I knew this chapter was coming, of course, a long time ago. And worse than that, in some ways, we've read this list of names before, because this list of names occurs in Ezra chapter two.

This is like a Hall of Fame. (Now have I won over the sporty types? I too have XM/Sirius radio [*laughter*], but I had no idea that SEC football was on it! [*Laughter.*] I did notice they took away my opera channel.)

Imagine with me visiting a museum. We had a rule of thumb when I was younger and I was raising my children and we would go somewhere. For every fun thing that we did in whatever city we happened to be in, there had to be a visit to a museum. That was the pay-back for the fun thing, because history is important. Now if you don't think history is important, then you've already been sold over to post-modernity. You have rewritten your own history. In the corridor out there, if you make a bee-line in the direction I'm pointing now, there's the History Room. I wonder how many of you have been in it. It's a fascinating place...pictures and memorabilia, and I imagine all kinds of archival material, better kept than any church I've ever seen in my entire life. It's a historian's dream. Whoever writes the history of First Presbyterian Church over its many, many decades will just glow, I think, when they walk into that History Room because much of the work has been done for them.

But there's a problem. Not just the fact that there's a list of names; it's the fact that this list of names which occurs again (or has occurred) in Ezra 2 is different. It's not exactly the same, although it's meant to be the same. As we'll see in a moment, Nehemiah is reading the list that Ezra made. But when you look at the list, it's not exactly the same. There are different names and there are different numbers.

Now, numbers were the bane of copyists' lives. When you try to remember a number and you copy it, the risk of not copying the same number is increased

exponentially. Now this raises a problem. It raises a difficult problem. It raises a sensitive problem. If these are meant to be the same lists, how can I trust the Bible if there is a difference? Now that maybe doesn't disturb you. It should disturb you...it really should disturb you, because we believe the Bible to be infallible and inerrant. At least we believe that the original autographs as they were originally written are infallible and inerrant, but we also believe that in the whole business of copying the original to the texts that we have with us today — a fascinating and difficult process, and there's a science behind it — we believe that we can fully trust the copies of the copies of the copies of the copies and so on that we have and hold in our hands here tonight.

But there are differences. How do we explain the differences? Now for me to point out what those differences are would be a work of supererogation. It would be massively complicated and I would bore you to tears and you'd fall asleep. You can consult on them. Here's what we do. The first thing that we do is this: we never let go of our belief that the Bible is infallible and inerrant, and we never let go of that truth because Jesus believed that. Jesus believed that. That's a safe place to be. Whatever problems there might be in the Old Testament, there were problems in the Old Testament that Jesus read, and He believed the Bible to be infallible and inerrant, and that's the place I want to be. I don't care who it is who is pontificating this or that problem, I want to be where Jesus is. That's the first thing. I believe the Bible to be infallible:

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine and reproof and correction and instruction in the way of righteousness, that the man of God might be thoroughly furnished unto every good work.”

Now that being said, it is possible that the explanation for the differences between the two lies not in the original but in the copies that were made. Those differences are so minor, they are so miniscule they don't affect any essential doctrine whatsoever, nor do they affect my belief that the Bible is infallible and inerrant.

But I don't have to go that route, because ninety years has passed since Ezra first wrote that list in Ezra 2. Now ninety years can do a lot of things. For example, after Ezra had written that list in Ezra 2, some might have been born. There might have been new additions to the family which would have immediately altered the numbers, and rather than Nehemiah say, 'Look, we've altered the numbers now to take into consideration those who were born immediately after Ezra's list,' it's already been done. It's possible that others joined Zerubbabel and Ezra. Maybe illness, maybe looking after an aged parent back in Babylon in the Persian Empire made it impossible for them to come, but after they had seen some of their own family surviving for ten, fifteen years in Jerusalem, they themselves might have made that journey and they were added to a subsequent list. The archives that were kept were altered, and maybe that's what Nehemiah is now reflecting.

What am I saying? I'm saying there are all kinds of possible explanations, none of which require me to say, 'Well, there you go. You can't trust the Bible.' Now if you go to college, if you go to certain seminaries, that's the immediate recourse: there's a problem in the Bible, you can't trust the Bible. No. There's a problem in the Bible, but there are good explanations, possible explanations to overcome those problems.

Now. I just wanted to say that before I start reading this list of names. Let's turn to Nehemiah 7, and we're going to begin at verse 5; and before we read the passage together, let's look to God in prayer.

Lord, this is Your word. From heaven You breathed it out and gave it to us to help us, to instruct us, to encourage us, to rebuke us, to teach us many things, to lead us to Jesus. Now bless us, we pray, as we read this word together. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

NEHEMIAH 7:5-73

5Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy. And I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first, and I found written in it:

6These were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried into exile. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his town. 7They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum, Baanah.

The number of the men of the people of Israel: 8the sons of Parosh, 2,172. 9The sons of Shephatiah, 372. 10The sons of Arah, 652. 11The sons of Pahath-moab, namely the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2,818. 12The sons of Elam, 1,254. 13The sons of Zattu, 845. 14The sons of Zaccai, 760. 15The sons of Binnui, 648. 16The sons of Bebai, 628. 17The sons of Azgad, 2,322. 18The sons of Adonikam, 667. 19The sons of Bigvai, 2,067. 20The sons of Adin, 655. 21The sons of Ater, namely of Hezekiah, 98. 22The sons of Hashum, 328. 23The sons of Bezai, 324. 24The sons of Hariph, 112. 25The sons of Gibeon, 95. 26The men of Bethlehem and Netophah, 188. 27The men of Anathoth, 128. 28The men of Bethazmaveth, 42. 29The men of Kiriath-jearim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, 743. 30The men of Ramah and Geba, 621. 31The men of Michmas, 122. 32The men of Bethel and Ai, 123. 33The men of the other Nebo, 52. 34The sons of the other Elam, 1,254. 35The sons of Harim, 320. 36The sons of Jericho, 345. 37The sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, 721. 38The sons of Senaah, 3,930.

39The priests: the sons of Jedaiah, namely the house of Jeshua, 973. 40The sons of Immer, 1,052. 41The sons of Pashhur, 1,247. 42The sons of Harim, 1,017.

43The Levites: the sons of Jeshua, namely of Kadmiel of the sons of Hodevah, 74. 44The singers: the sons of Asaph, 148. 45The gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, 138.

46The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth, 47the sons of Keros, the sons of Sia, the sons of Padon, 48the sons of Lebana, the sons of Hagaba, the sons of Shalmal, 49the sons of Hanan, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, 50the sons of Reaiah, the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda, 51the sons of Gazzam, the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, 52the sons of Besai, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephushesim, 53the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur, 54the sons of Bazlith, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha, 55the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah, 56the sons of Neziah, the sons of Hatipha.

57The sons of Solomon's servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Sophereth, the sons of Perida, 58the sons of Jaala, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel, 59the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, the sons of Amon.

60All the temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants were 392.

61The following were those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addon, and Immer, but they could not prove their fathers' houses nor their descent, whether they belonged to Israel: 62the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, 642. 63Also, of the priests: the sons of Hobaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai (who had taken a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by their name). 64These sought their registration among those enrolled in the genealogies, but it was not found there, so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. 65The governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food until a priest with Urim and Thummim should arise.

66The whole assembly together was 42,360, 67besides their male and female servants, of whom there were 7,337. And they had 245 singers, male and female. 68Their horses were 736, their mules 245, 69their camels 435, and their donkeys 6,720.

70Now some of the heads of fathers' houses gave to the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 daricsof gold, 50 basins, 30 priests'

garments and 500 minas of silver. 71 And some of the heads of fathers' houses gave into the treasury of the work 20,000 darics of gold and 2,200 minas of silver. 72 And what the rest of the people gave was 20,000 darics of gold, 2,000 minas of silver, and 67 priests' garments.

73 So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel, lived in their towns. And when the seventh month had come, the people of Israel were in their towns.

Well, so far God's holy and inerrant word. Now three things I want us to see in this chapter tonight...

I. Nehemiah is planning for the future.

First of all that Nehemiah is planning for the future. Turn back to verse 4:

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

They had been living, you see, in the main, outside of the city of Jerusalem. Perhaps during the time of the rebuilding of the wall many of them had taken lodgings within the city, but now that the wall was finished they had gone back to live outside of the city once again. And when we come to chapter 11 of Nehemiah we'll see what the proportion is—that ninety percent of the population will have been outside of the city of Jerusalem in nearby towns and villages.

Now one of the prophecies that had influenced Nehemiah was the prophecy of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31. In Jeremiah 31, there's this extraordinary prophecy. Jeremiah is prophesying that a day is coming when God will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, and part of that prophesy in Jeremiah 31 includes the repopulation of the city of Jerusalem.

What are we supposed to make of that prophecy? Some regard that prophecy as predicting an event perhaps when Jesus physically returns...that He will go back to Jerusalem and something extraordinary will happen in the physical Jerusalem that we know in Palestine or in Israel today. I don't accept that particular interpretation, and I rather think that that part of Jeremiah's prophecy refers to the new heavens and the new earth, and to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God, and that is how the Bible ends, you remember, in Revelation 22 with a vision of the city of God descending from God out of heaven. And Jeremiah is prophesying something relating to Jerusalem.

Now in Nehemiah's time (after the exile), that prophecy has a central place, I think, in his thinking and is what drove him to go back to Jerusalem. It's what's driven him to build the walls as a defensive measure for the city of Jerusalem.

But what good are walls if there's no one inside to defend? What good is there for the city of Jerusalem if there's no one inside?

And what we see now is a vision for the city. He has a vision to populate the city of Jerusalem. You know, Nehemiah is one of the great urban planners. It's a hugely significant and topical issue today — urban renewal. What do you do about a city that has become derelict, where there are slum areas in the city, areas of dereliction, no-go areas...areas perhaps where gangs are beginning to form? Nehemiah is dealing with that kind of thing. He needs people to move back into the city. We'll see in chapters 8, 9, and 10 and 11 and 12 and so on, how Nehemiah actually goes about doing that — getting volunteers to move back into the city. It would be like asking me to move into Belhaven. I live in Ridgeland. I live out in the country. I don't have room for chickens and sheep as some of these had, but you understand there's a problem here. How do you get people who live out in the country, who've perhaps got used to country life and country social ways, to move back into the city again? You've got to admire him. He's an urban planner with a vision and a burden for the city.

You know, the church has to have a burden for the city, and First Presbyterian Church has to have a burden for the city. We're in the city. This is the city, and we need to have a burden for those who live around us. I'm constantly fascinated by discussions we have in our staff meetings about this very thing: how can we be an influence, how can we be salt, how can we be light in the place that God in providence has placed us? This is where we are, and our elders here have decided this is where we're staying. They've made that bold (and let me say courageous) decision, and I applaud them for making that decision. But along with that comes the whole issue of how can we be not just a source of defensiveness, but how can we be salt and a light and a beacon in the city?

Well, that's what Nehemiah's dealing with. He's planning for the future. You notice how he puts it in verse 5 — God put it into his heart. Don't you love that about Nehemiah? He's a man who's sensitive to the leading and guiding of God. Now don't take that and run with it...you know, that every urge and every inclination and every feeling that you get this is the Lord putting it into your heart. It may be indigestion. It may be what you ate the night before. It may be a thousand things, so you need to ask all kinds of wise questions of those that you love, and even of those that you don't love, because sometimes the best advice and the truest advice will come from those who don't tell you what you want to hear. So all of that has to be tested.

But I find this a beautiful thing that Nehemiah is a man who lives close to the Lord. He's a prayerful man. He's a man of God. He's a man who loves the Bible. He loves the Scriptures. He has a burden for the things of the Lord. He has a burden to see the kingdom of God expanded, and he has a burden for the city, for the city of Jerusalem with all of the social and political and economic problems that come with city life in the fifth century B.C. And we've already seen

that many of them are just like the problems that we are facing in 2008.

But you know, the key to his leadership...he was a man who lived close to the Lord, and when God spoke to him, he obeyed. However difficult, however problematic the task was, the Lord put it into his heart. Well, what we see here first of all is Nehemiah's concern for the future.

II. Nehemiah's concern for the past.

Now secondly, what we see here is Nehemiah's concern for the past. Now he wants to build the city. He wants to populate the city. He has urban renewal with all of the problems of...well, in Britain it would be called *compulsory purchase orders*, and in America when government purchases certain property, it's called — *imminent domain*! Imminent domain, and all the problems that that brings. How do you go about that? Rezoning, moving one section of the population to another part of the city, or maybe even outside of the city? Hugely significant and difficult problems for a politician, for a governor. How do you go about doing that?

And do you notice what he does? He goes back to the past. He goes back to an archival record that's ninety years old, a list of the original men and women and their goods (camels and horses and what they gave), most of whom, if not all of whom...you know it's ninety years, so most of them if not all of them are now dead. He goes back to the past. Now why does he do that? You know, he could have said [and forgive me], "What we need is change!" [I mean, forgive me now!][*Laughter.*] "We need a new way here." He could have said that, but he doesn't. He says, 'Our future depends on our past.' Now think biblically with me for a minute. He's not simply talking about politics, you understand, so don't necessarily equate what Nehemiah is doing with modern America.

Think what Nehemiah is doing and equate that with the church. What is the future of the church? Aren't we asking that question right now? Haven't you filled in an extraordinarily interesting and informative form that asks some wonderful questions because we want to know where do we go from here? Strategic planning. Well, this is Nehemiah's Strategic Planning 101: you go back to the past. You start with the past.

Why is he doing that? Is it because he's just an old fuddy duddy who's set in his ways, who can't seem to get out of the box? You know, he's singing the same old song over and over ... "Boring. We want something new." No, of course not! He's a man of God. And who are these people over whom he is the governor? They are the people of God. They are the Lord's people. They are the Lord's covenant people. What is Nehemiah doing by going back to the past to an archival record that's ninety years old? He's reminding them of who they are. They are the sons and daughters of the heroes who came back from Babylon, who made that four-month journey not knowing exactly what it was they were going back to, who had

built that temple, who had lived there and died there. They wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for those people — this list of people that he's reading here. They wouldn't be there.

You know, sometime — don't all go at once, because that will be a huge problem. But sometime pop your head around that History Room. You know you don't have to spend ten hours in there, but just walk up and down. Look at the pictures on the wall. Now if you all go at once, that's going to be a problem! [Laughter.] But next time you're there and the door is open, pop your head in. Have a look at some of those pictures. You'll see men and women in those very formal clothes that they wore a hundred years ago. You'll see Brister Ware standing outside the church! (Who's still alive!) [Laughter.] "Lest we forget...lest we forget."

It was Psalm 105 this morning: the Abrahamic covenant... "lest we forget." It's been Veterans Day, the honor roll call of the faithful who gave the ultimate sacrifice, "lest we forget." In Britain this past week there's been the parallel of what you call Veterans Day...*Remembrance Day*. And there's a very solemn and moving service. It's one of the most moving and solemn occasions in British life. It's called the Remembrance Service,¹ in the Royal Albert Hall in London. And all of the military will gather, and there's a representative of the Queen if the Queen herself isn't there. Usually she is. And from the ceiling of the Royal Albert Hall there will fall at a certain point a poppy leaf...a red poppy leaf...one for every soldier who has died during the course of the First and Second World Wars and subsequent wars. And they will just fall. And the process will last for probably five or ten minutes, until the entire floor and all of the service men and women that are standing there, their heads are just covered with these red petals. And the words of Laurence Binyon's ² poem — a poet from the First World War:

They shall not grow old
As we that are left grow old;
Age shall not weary them,
Nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun
And in the morning
We will remember them.

¹ Remembrance Day. Armistice Day celebration in the United Kingdom (Armistice Day: on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918, the formal hostilities of the First World War ended. In the United States it was known as Armistice Day for many years, until 1953 when the name was changed to Veterans Day to honor all veterans of all wars.

² Robert Laurence Binyon. He is best known for the poem *For the Fallen*, first published in *The Times* in September, 1914. The seven-verse poem honored the World War I British war dead of that time and in particular the British Expeditionary Force, which had by then already had high casualty rates on the developing Western Front. The fourth verse from that poem has gained an existence of its own and is known today as "The Ode" - one that applies to all war dead.

And that's in part what Nehemiah is doing here. He's reading a list which sounds really boring, but they are the heroes of the past. It's an honor call, "lest we forget" who we are. They hadn't come back to Jerusalem to make money. They hadn't come back to Jerusalem to be stonemasons. They hadn't come back to Jerusalem to live out in the country with their chickens and their sheep. They'd come back to Jerusalem to be the people of God, the Lord's covenant people, the sons and daughters of these faithful covenant people.

III. Nehemiah speaks to the present.

So he remembers something about the future and he remembers something of the past, in order that he might say something about the present. You notice how it ended. And we talked about this when we looked at Ezra 2. He reminds them of what they had originally given to the work of rebuilding the temple — all that gold, all that silver. And sometime when you have a moment, go to the church library and ask: "I want to see the Persian coin." In a cabinet in the book room just down the corridor here...there's a glass cabinet, and inside there's a tiny little Persian coin. It comes from the fifth century BC — the very coins (at least related to the very coins) that are mentioned right here. He might — as he did for me this morning — he might even let you hold it in your hand. [You can't take it out of the room! But you can hold it in your hand.] And you know, as that tiny little silver coin was in my hand, I thought, "I wonder if any of the people mentioned in Ezra and Nehemiah ever touched one of these coins." Imagine if that was so! That's phenomenal! And it's here, in the library at First Presbyterian Church!

Why is he reminding them of what they had given? Extraordinary amounts of money; generous amounts of money...to provoke this generation to do the same. That's why he did it. This is what your fathers did. This is the self-sacrifice your fathers gave. They went through depressions. It would be fascinating to see the giving at First Presbyterian Church in the Depression of the late 1920's and the early 1930's. It would be fascinating to see. And I wonder how our faith could measure up to theirs. There's more in this chapter than meets the eye, and it's a challenge that we might, like them, be out and out for the Lord.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for this portion of Scripture. We ask that You would write it upon our hearts and spur us on to greater acts of faith and service, and dedication for You. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please stand; 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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