

## Sermon – 26/04/2009 pm

### Repopulating Jerusalem

Study Text: Nehemiah 11

The people of God committed themselves to bringing the first-fruit of their crops and flocks to the house of God, and tithing all their income. They understood that this is what God required after they read the Book of the Law of God. God required one day out of seven as his holy day. He required one dollar out of ten to be given to the Levites who ministered before the Lord.

In this chapter we see the people tithing of their own number. They decided that one out of every ten persons should live in Jerusalem to maintain and protect the holy city. God requires not only a portion of our time and our money but also requires some to enter into full time service of the house of God. He requires some to be ministers or missionaries who will preach and teach the Bible to the ends of the earth. In previous generations some Christian families prayed for at least one of their children to enter into full time Christian service – they may well have had ten children.

### Holy City Repopulated

*Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem (11:1).* The temple was rebuilt and the walls of the city completed but few people were living in the city, too few to maintain and defend the city (7:4). A high wall will keep out the enemy for only so long if there are no people on the inside to fight. Any building not occupied or used will soon deteriorate and fall into disrepair, no matter how magnificent or ornate. Some magnificent church buildings are falling into ruin because they are no longer used for worship.

Jerusalem needed a living, worshipping community if it was to be maintained and defended. It needed more people. It may seem strange to us that a city needed more people but in those days people preferred the country. They lived off the land. In the city they had no land for their crops and their flocks. When the exiles returned from Babylon they went back to their ancestral properties to live off the land. They came up to the holy city to help build the wall and to worship but did not live there.

How were they going to get people to move to the city? Throughout history people groups have moved for one place to another, often under the threat of death. Even in the last century there were great relocations undertaken by Hitler and later by another brutal leader in Cambodia. Pol Pot forced millions of people to leave the city and live in the country – and in doing so millions perished.

In the community of God's people such inhuman methods were not contemplated. They looked to the Lord and let him decide who would move. They cast lots for families to move to Jerusalem. Some people even volunteered to move – although it not certain that this was an additional group (11:2). It may have been that those who drew the lot accepted the decision and went willingly. So it was that one out every ten men or families ended up living in Jerusalem. The rest stayed in the country towns and villages, everyone on his own inheritance/property (11:3, 20).

Who were the people who ended up living in the holy city? Many were priests and Levites and temple servants but there were also lay people from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The names of these men or family heads are given in yet another list in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The numbers are also given.

A similar list is recorded in 1 Chronicles 9, but neither the names nor the numbers correspond exactly. Scholars argue as to why this is so. Maybe there was a document from which both writers were copying and editing as they went along. We may never know why, but we do know that both lists are in the inspired and infallible word of God.

Why do we have these lists anyway you may ask? Why do we bother reading them today? We must remember how God chose Abraham and gave him a covenant promise – ‘through Abraham all the families of the earth will be blessed’. This promise was repeated to Isaac and Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons of whom three are mentioned in this chapter. Perez and Shiloni/Shelah were sons of Judah. How was God going to bless all people through Abraham? Who is the promised ‘seed’ of Abraham? Paul makes it clear in Galatians 3:16 – *and to your seed who is Christ*.

The Exile was, in human terms, a threat to this big picture of the coming of Messiah or Christ. It was important that genealogies be maintained for this purpose – that in the fullness of time God would send forth his son, *born of a woman, born under the law* (Galatians 4:4). The New Testament starts with a genealogy, the genealogy of Jesus Christ, in which the names Judah and Perez are found.

Genealogies were also important in determining who the people of God were. At that time the people of God were the Jews, the descendants of Abraham through Jacob/Israel. The land of Canaan was divided among the twelve tribes of Israel (except Levi), and between families in these tribes. This was how the society was ordered. It was not a system of landlords and serfs as in other societies. Each man had his own possession (11:3). Remember what Naboth said to King Ahab who wanted his vineyard – *the Lord forbid that I should give the inheritance of my fathers to you* (1 Kings 21:3).

Jerusalem was a much smaller city in Nehemiah’s time than it is today. The city was dominated by the temple. It was the holy city. It is no surprise therefore to find that many priests lived in Jerusalem. In this list 1192 is the number given for priests, the largest of all the groups. There were only 456 Levites including the gatekeepers. The priests did the work of the house of God (11:12). Only priests could make the burnt offerings and go into the inner part of the temple. The Levites led in various aspects of worship, such as thanksgiving and prayer (11:17). They were in charge vessels and furniture as well as supplies and things outside the temple (11:16, 1 Chronicles 9).

Lay people also lived in the holy city. There was a large contingent from the tribe of Benjamin (928 *cf.* 956 in 1 Chronicles 9). The tribe of Judah had 468 representatives in the city. These are described as ‘valiant’ men or better ‘outstanding’ or ‘able’ men (11:6). Some of the priests are called ‘mighty men of valour’ (11:14). Whilst it is uncertain what exactly this term means, it does appear that some priests at least were given military training. The priests were not devoid of physical prowess.

Any group of people needs a leader. A number of men are mentioned as overseers or leaders in this community living in Jerusalem. Joel was an overseer of the Benjamites, Zabdiel of the priests, and Uzzi of the Levites. Whether these men were elected or appointed we are not told. Maybe they were chosen by lot under the direction of the Lord.

## Holy Singers

The chapter appears to come to an end at verse 20 – *and the rest of Israel, of the priests and Levites were all in the cities of Judah, everyone on his inheritance/property*. The rest is the 90% not living in Jerusalem. But then special mention is made of the singers in charge of the service of the house of God (11:22).

These singers were the sons of Asaph, a man David appointed along with two others (Jeduthun and Heman) to be in charge of this aspect of worship (I Chronicles 25:1). Although they were Levites they were under the command of David the king. Under royal orders, they performed their duties according to a roster (11:23). Asaph's name is found in the title of many Psalms (*e.g.* Psalm 50). David loved to sing praises to the Lord and made singing an important part of worship.

The king in verse 24 seems to have more reference to the Persian king, current or past. The verse states that a son of Judah was at the king's hand. He was like a representative of the Jews in the presence of the king. The Persian kings wanted all their subjects to worship their own God. That is why Cyrus sent the Jews back to Jerusalem – as directed by God. They wanted these people to pray for the king and his sons (Ezra 6:10). Maybe the king kept an eye on this matter.

## Holy Land

The concluding section of this chapter picks up from verse 20 telling us where the rest of Israel settled. The returning exiles went back to their family property. That is why it was important to establish their family line. The family of a friend of mine had property in East Germany when the communists came to power. Fifty years later the Berlin wall came down and he was trying to regain this property. He had to establish his family line.

The original land of Judah extended from Beersheba to Jerusalem – the valley of Hinnom is on the southern boundary of Jerusalem (11:30). Benjamin was a small tribe that occupied an area just north of the holy city. Further north was Samaria. Some doubt that the exiles would have gone out into the whole land when they returned, but if they were going to ancestral property they may have spread out. Moreover, this was still a province of the Persian Empire and they were not openly seeking to re-establish Israel.

It was important to the exiles not only re-establish worship of the holy God in the holy city but to re-establish themselves as holy people in the holy land. This was the land God gave to their forefathers. It was all written in the Bible. They were the covenant people of God, the people to whom God had promised Messiah – *a prophet like Moses from among the people of Israel* (Deuteronomy 18:15, Acts 7:37). The people of God awaited this promised deliverer who did eventually come. He was born in Bethlehem in the land of Judah.

Like these ancient people of God we must keep on in obedience to what is written in the Bible. We are not a particular race but are still a holy nation, a royal priesthood a people belonging to God (I Peter 2). We look forward to the coming of Christ also – not his first coming but his second coming. And how are we to live as we wait? We are to proclaim the praises of God in this dark and sinful world. We are to be preaching the gospel in all the world as a witness to all nations and then the end will come, said Jesus (Matthew 24:14).