

Nehemiah 7:1-73

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] To turn to Nehemiah chapter 7. I'm going to take a little break for the next few weeks and Chris Roberts is going to preach for the next few weeks. And you need a break for my voice. I feel like I need a break for my own voice. So we'll come back to Nehemiah at some point in the new year.

And somebody did say to me that we hadn't finished the book of Job, which I had hoped you'd all forgotten. And so at some point in the very distant future, I think we might come back to that too. And there's a shop on Greenford Avenue. You may have gone there and they do a great trade in giving you the wrong coins. And so they've got me, I think, at least three times with a euro instead of a pound.

And if you're like me, you just take the change and you go, you don't realize it, do you? And then you go to spend it again and suddenly you've been given a dodgy coin. It wasn't authentic, not a proper pound. We know, don't we, what it's like to look and see if something is authentic. Is it the real deal?

Well, the danger of buying on eBay, isn't it? You don't know whether the Canada goose jacket that you're going to buy is authentic or not. You hope it is, but you don't know.

[1 : 24] And Nehemiah 7 is all about testing for authenticity. It's all about holding the claims of God's people to belong to God's kingdom up to the light and checking it's the real deal.

So we're in the second half of the book of Nehemiah and chapters 1 to 6 are all about Nehemiah's preparations and for God's city to function normally again, the rebuilding of the walls.

Do you remember he's concerned with getting the infrastructure right, getting all the practicalities into place, so that the city of God, the life of the city of God could function properly.

And now we're moving into kind of the second major division. The book is really in two halves. It's 7 to 13 is the second half. And that deals with the reformation and the revival of God's people.

The restoration of the walls has happened. But the reformation and the revival of the people of God, well, is still to come. 1 to 6, God's people restored.

[2 : 28] And chapter 7 is all about God's people being restored. Let me give you an overview of 7 to 12. There's five key words, I think. So chapter 7 is all about reality.

And chapter 8 is all about revival. Chapter 9 is about repentance. And chapter 10 is about renewal. And chapter 11 and half, chapter 12 is about restoration.

Lots of R's. Reality, revival, repentance, renewal, and restoration. And you might think that's a really great structure.

And it is. And I say that at the start because the rest of the sermon, the structure isn't great. All right? And so chapter 7 is all about reality and authenticity.

Chapter 6, you remember right at the end, we're told the city's finished. The walls are done. And the gates and the doors are hung. That's verses 1 to 3 of chapter 7. And the governor of the city, Nehemiah, he appoints leaders, security guards, officers at the doors, so that the city can be kept secure and managed well.

[3 : 39] He's a great administrator, a great civil servant. And then he turns his attention in verses 4 and 5 to a key problem. That's confronting this newly rebuilt city.

And the city is wide and large, but the people within it are few. And no houses had been rebuilt. So do you see the problem?

The city is finished. But the JCBs and the work crews and the builders are still working on the nicer suburbs. The homes are still being built.

Loft extensions are being done. And the city itself is finished. But there's not enough people there to repopulate it. And Nehemiah is concerned.

It's not just that he's made a massive mistake in kind of investing in the city's infrastructure and property development that no one wants to live in. That's not his worry. Nehemiah's concern is that the city of God, the center of God's plan at this stage in human history for the salvation of men and women and boys and girls should go empty.

[4 : 45] The idea that God's chosen place from which the message of salvation will go out into all the world, that the idea that this city should lie empty is unthinkable to Nehemiah.

So he calls everyone together for registration of the families. And he wants to know what he's got to work with. He wants to know the number of candidates for citizenship in the restored city.

So he goes through the genealogical records of everyone who came back to the city of Jerusalem 80 years previously under a man named Zerubbabel. So Nehemiah has that list of the people who came back.

And he's going to compare that list of the people, the families that came back 80 years previously with what he's got to work with now. Those who came 80 years previously to start this great building project.

And verses 6 to 73 is really a lengthy quote from that document. Same list you find in Ezra chapter 2.

[5 : 53] And I want to draw a number of conclusions from this list. And the first of them is really simple. We need to notice that God records the names and the sacrifices of his people.

It's really simple and it's very obvious. God records the names and the sacrifices of his people. And so Ezra made a list of all the names of the returnees from Babylon 80 years before.

The gifts they'd made to the work of the temple. But ever since that list was first composed, it had lain forgotten in an archive. It was in some filing cabinet.

Until Nehemiah pulls the record out and dusts it down. But for all of this, this list is mundane, isn't it? Perhaps it is even insignificant to us.

And yet it appears twice in Holy Scripture. Twice in the inspired word of God in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7. When the work begins, it's there.

[7 : 03] And now when the work ends. And I think it tells us something important about God's perspective. We live in an age of instant gratification.

Of immediate results. Where what is happening right now is more important than anything else. If I hear one more time, we live in unprecedented times, I'm going to scream.

We don't. But our culture thinks we do. Because what is important, what is happening now in 2020, is more important than anything that's happened before. And one consequence of that is that the concern for immediacy is to completely disregard the past.

We've seen that so often this year, haven't we? And so we quickly forget the successes and the struggles of previous generations. We celebrate the triumph of all things new.

But God never forgets. In fact, God honors his people. They're never overlooked. However insignificant, however slight they feel their contribution is to be, he records it, he notes it down.

[8 : 14] And the names are recorded in his word twice. Their gifts in verse 70 and in verse 73 are remembered in detail.

And I think it's wonderfully encouraging to know that just like these ordinary men and women about whom we know nothing, other than that they came back from exile and they helped build the city, that just like them, God never overlooks us.

And God never forgets us. And we are never peripheral to his concern. And God never forgets our work for him.

Those hours that no one knows about for language class. Those hours preparing the craft for Club 16. Helping ministries to run.

Giving a cup of cold water to strangers. Caring for your children. Never forgotten. Matthew Henry puts it like this. Whatever is given to the work of God, he is not unrighteous to forget it.

[9 : 24] Nor shall even a cup of cold water, wherewith he is honored, go without its reward. And so maybe you are working away unnoticed, unthankful, unrecognized.

And what Nehemiah 7 tells you, it tells you where to look for recognition. You look to God. To God who never forgets. Confident that he is the one who notices it.

And he is the one who will reward you in his infinite grace. And so firstly, let's see that God records, and God writes down, and God keeps a list of his people and what they've done.

The second thing we need to understand is how Nehemiah is going to use this record. How he's going to use this genealogical record. And it's something of a litmus test for him. It's an attempt to hold up their claims. To hold up the claims of the population, that they belong to God's people.

[10:32] To hold that up to the light and to test, is it for real? Are they authentic? Are their ancestors recorded here in this list? So that Nehemiah can be sure that they are bona fide members of the covenant community of the people of God.

But if their names are not here, if their family names, their surnames are not here, then they don't belong. There are, as we've seen, lists of individual family lines, verses 8 to 25.

There are lists of people by town and province, 26 to 38. There are lists of Levites and priests and gatekeepers and temple servants and singers and servants of Solomon.

And so, the whole of life, the whole life of the city is there. Every strata, civil servants, temple servants, ordinary Joes, tradesmen, craftsmen, businessmen.

And in verses 61 to 65, there's another problem. There's those who've come back from exile, some of them who had come back from exile long ago, had no way of demonstrating that they were really, actually members of God's people.

[11:49] Verse 61, it's a problem, isn't it? The following were those who came up from Telmela, Telhasha, Cherub, Adon, Imah, but they could not prove their father's houses nor their descent, whether they belonged to Israel.

And the issue was even more acute for the priests, verse 63, and also the priests, the sons of Abiah, the sons of Hachos, the sons of Barzillai, the Gileadite.

These sought their registration among those enrolled in the genealogies, but it was not found there. So they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean.

And so if you can't show yourself that you are an Israelite, you've got a problem. And no one except bona fide priests were allowed to minister in the temple or eat the sacred bread.

And so these people operating as priests are now excluded. Throughout Israel's history, there were times when people from other nations joined the people of Israel.

[12:57] They associated themselves with Israel. Some were kind of assimilated in. And the question here is over the identity of those groups. Clearly they thought they belonged.

But Nehemiah needs to know, are they for real or not? Are they authentic or not? And it was a pressing and an urgent issue. Because if they are inauthentic and these really are Babylonians, then the chances that they are going to remain faithful to Yahweh, to God, is very small.

Chances are they've still got ties to other people, to another religion, to another pattern life.

Chances are they're loyal to another nation and in the end another God.

And so the question is pressing and it's urgent. And it still ought to be pressing and urgent and burning for us. It's one I fear that we don't ask that question of authenticity, of reality maybe enough. How do you know? How do you know that you really belong? Is my faith genuine or counterfeit? Just as Nehemiah used the genealogical record to test the claims of the people to belonging, we too in Scripture are given a standard to evaluate the reality of our faith.

[14:21] And so if you look at 1 John, and 1 John is full of tests. So it says, doesn't it, if we claim to have fellowship with God, the God who is light, and yet we don't walk in the light, well the truth is not in us.

We lie and do not practice the truth. Or verse 8 of 1 John 1, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Verse 10, if we say we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

Or chapter 2, verse 3, whoever says, I know him, but does not keep his commandments is a liar and the truth is not in us.

What is John asking us to do? John asks us to look at our lives and to look at our motives and to look at our hearts and ask, is Jesus first?

Of course, none of us do that perfectly and John knows that as well, doesn't he? Because he says, the blood of Jesus Christ, if we confess our sin, will cleanse us from all sin. But do we long and strive and labor for him?

[15:43] Do we make that honest and humble and heartfelt, regular, specific confession of sin? Is that a characteristic mark of our lives? And cling to Christ alone for our acceptance with God and our identity in the world, that he is our only hope in life and death.

we make claims to belong to the people of God like the men of El Melech and Telhash and Cherub and Adon and Nimr.

We associate ourselves with the church of Jesus Christ. We might even make outward Christian patterns of behavior our norm. We might have identical religious behavior to the people next to us tonight.

but we don't make knowing and living and loving Christ the central fact of our lives. And it's as though we were like those that have come back as exiles to Jerusalem.

But they could not show that they were really descendants of Abraham. Verse 65, we're told what was decided in the case of the priests. We're told, aren't we, that they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean.

[17:12] And the governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food until a priest with Urim and Thummim could arise. Urim and Thummim, Thummim, that is what God gave in the Old Testament as a mechanism for guidance when an issue was in dispute.

And we don't know exactly how it worked. We don't exactly know what they were in detail but we know they were a simple mechanism that the priest could use to discern between two options. And the priest used them for the people of God and Urim and the Thummim which I find so difficult to say was to teach the people of Israel that God alone is the judge.

That's the big point of them. That God alone is the judge. God is the one who gets to decide. And the matter is in his hands. And the use of them here reminds us of a really crucial truth about the matter of kind of authentic of really belonging to the people of God and the city of God.

It is subject to the will of God alone. He is judge. God decides who are his people and he alone can determine our place in his kingdom. And so it's not a matter of your behavior.

[18:37] It's not a matter of our conformity. It's not even a matter of intellectual assent. It is a matter of the sovereign will of God alone. God alone has the power to include you in the community of salvation.

And we need to hear that. We need to hear that because if you're like me you are constantly tempted to think that being a Christian is a matter of habits and actions and behaviors and all of those things are important.

Habits and actions and behaviors are important. The Bible has a great deal to say about shaping our lives but this passage is reminding you and I that authentic Christianity is supernatural.

It is not just behavioral. It is the work of God. He alone makes people his children. Mark Dever in a book says this he's a minister in America he says he had a conversation with a Muslim friend about the difference between Christianity and Islam.

And he's trying to explain those differences and he said I could put a sword to a person's throat and make them a sufficiently good Muslim. Muslim friend agreed that was true. But I continued I cannot put a sword to someone's throat and make him a Christian.

[19:56] Becoming a Christian is not a matter of you doing this and not doing that or you following that law and not doing that thing. To be a Christian is to have your life transformed by God.

Let me read you another illustration it's by John Chapman an Australian evangelist who died about 10 years ago. A funny man he says this I was talking to a young bloke after a uni meeting and he said that what he was going to do was to live it up until the end of his life have a really great time and then just the moment before he died he'd become a Christian.

I said to him how do you know that you'll be able to become one at the end? He said I could become a Christian whenever I like. I said you can only become one when God says.

He insisted he could do it. So I said to him well if it's as easy as all that why don't you give us a demo? Why don't you show me how you'll do it by becoming a Christian right now if it's that easy?

I said you'd be able to pull it off at any time wouldn't you? Yeah he said but right now he said I don't want to. Come on I said you aren't trying very hard if you really can do it do it now it should be a piece of cake.

[21:10] he started to get a bit touchy I don't want to he said sternly try a bit harder I said want to want to I don't want to he said gritting his teeth well I said that's the problem isn't it?

What makes you think you'll want to at the end? to be a Christian takes an act of God the Bible presents the human problem and the problem in your life and the problem in my life never as something that can be solved by coercive force or by kind of human imposition what can I do as a preacher?

I can present to you the good news accurately we can't we as believers live a life of love towards you and we can pray that God convicts you of your sin and I can pray for you and I can pray that God would show you your need of a saviour and that God would give you the gifts of repentance and faith but I can't make you a Christian and many of us who have been believers maybe for many years we're tempted to fall back into this kind of faulty way of thinking to see Christianity as a matter of appearances but it's not God makes sinners his children if you're not a Christian tonight and you've realised that you've begun to wonder is my religion the real thing or not I want to encourage you to take your problem to God take your problem to God because he alone can save you now by all means feel free to come and talk to me I or one of the elders would be glad to talk with you and listen to you and pray with you and search the scriptures do that and don't give up coming to church but you you go to God through Jesus Christ and he is the one to whom you must give account and he is the one with whom you have the issue and salvation belongs to the Lord and you can come to God tonight through Jesus Christ and so you see this the effect of searching our hearts of asking am I for real is not to undermine our confidence and our assurance it's actually to ensure that our confidence is well founded that I rest in Christ alone and so if we search our hearts tonight and we come to a fresh rejection of shallow superficial Christianity that's a really good thing that kind of relates to merely outward performances but actually leaves my heart untouched if we come as a result of tonight to cast ourselves again on the mercy and grace of God and Jesus alone for our hope and salvation if we can look away from our own goodness to God's sovereign gracious power and then and only then will we have a profound sense and a deeper sense that we're in his hand and we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and kept by the power of God alone unto salvation forever secure and safe so finally let me show you the place of this section of scripture this kind of list chapter 7 it stands at the completion of the great building project and the list of names stands at the kind of consummation of the work begun by God's people 80 years earlier same list in Ezra 2 back then it was it was a record of those who were just there it was a roll call but now in Nehemiah 7 it's a record of who belongs and of course all of that points us forward doesn't it it points us way forward into the future it comes from Nehemiah through the New Testament to us and then way beyond us it points us to the day when the great rebuilding work of the temple city of God which is the church of Jesus Christ will be fully complete and so in Revelation chapter 21 it tells us the consummation of these things where John says that I saw a new heaven

and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more and I saw the holy city the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adored for her husband and so here's the final consummation here's the end of time here's the work done and Jesus is building his church his city his temple and we are being built together tonight as a household for God to dwell in by his spirit building blocks well that's your life and my life sinners transformed by the spirit of God and one day that work will be complete and done and the new Jerusalem will come which Nehemiah's city points to and John goes on about that day in the chapter in 21 that they will bring it into glory and the honor of the nations but nothing unclean will ever enter it nor anyone who does what is detestable or false but only those only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life in the Lamb's book of life and so on that day there'll be another book there'll be another register opened and all the authentic names of the people of God will be read and there'll be a roll call of all those who've aligned themselves and trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ trusted in Jesus Christ the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world and they will take their place in his city forever and so let me ask you are you the real thing or not will you belong in the Jerusalem that's still to come is your name written in the Lamb's book of life you're looking not to your own kind of religious performance or your own moral superiority but to the sovereign God who alone makes Christians despairing of obtaining a place in the heavenly city on any other grounds than that of the cross of Jesus Christ is it in the Lamb Jesus that you're trusting because it's in his book that your name must be written and you can know that same moment of joy can't you [28 : 16] I decided not to read Nehemiah 7 I probably should have read it all but as I read it the list of names and the numbers you probably would have thought what has this got to do with this but imagine you were there on that day in that vast assembly and everyone is there and the names are being called and everyone is listening for their surname and you recognize the name of family names of friends and neighbors and cousins people in your church and people you came back from exile with and people you've grown up beside and you're holding your breath am I there and then you hear it you have a place in the city you have your citizenship in the people of God and you're

secure and what joy there will be what joy and so tonight please if you're clinging to
Jesus however weak you may be however kind of beset by sin you may be if you're clinging to
Jesus your place is secure let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray