

# Gathering and Guarding the Eternal Household of God

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we're going to turn to our Bible reading this morning, and if you'd like to take your Bibles, if you have one of the visitor's Bibles, it's page 402, and we're in our studies in the book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah chapter 7.

And we're going to read most of this chapter this morning. You'll see it is rather long, and there are lots of names and numbers, so bear with me if I stumble. Just one thing to note is that the paragraphing in the ESV here is a bit unhelpful. Really, the paragraph should end at the end of verse 3, and a new paragraph begin at verse 4.

If you have an NIV, that's how you'll see it's paragraphed more helpfully, and so I'll read it just slightly differently to make that emphasis and hopefully make more sense.

So here we are in the story of Ezra and Nehemiah, lasting nearly 100 years from the first return of the exiles under Joshua and Zerubbabel.

The beginnings of the work of laying the foundations for the temple, the temple being rebuilt. All of the work stopping because of opposition and enemies for many, many decades. Beginning again under the influence of the prophets of God who stirred up the people.

[ 1 : 18 ] Ending again with more opposition. Beginning again with Nehemiah coming back to the city and starting to rebuild the walls. And here we are, chapter 7, verse 1, and the walls are at last complete.

Now when the wall had been built, and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, I gave my brother Hanani and Hananiah the governor of the castle charge over Jerusalem.

For he was a more faithful and God-fearing man than many. And I said to him, let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot. And while they're all standing guard, let them shut and bar the doors.

Appoint guards from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Some at their guard posts and some in front of their own homes. Now the city was wide and large.

But the people within it were few. And no houses had been rebuilt. So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials, and the people to be enrolled by genealogy.

[ 2 : 31 ] And I find the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first. And I find written in it, these 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. They came with Zerubbabel and Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Ramiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvi, Nahum, and Banna.

The number of the men of the people of Israel. And notice first we have the lists of the families and then of some of the places. The sons of Parosh, 2, 1, 7, 2.

The sons of Shephethiah, 3, 7, 2. The sons of Ara, 6, 5, 2. The sons of Pahath-Moab, namely the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2, 8, 1, 8. The sons of Elam, 1, 2, 5, 4.

The sons of Zatu, 8, 4, 5. The sons of Zakkai, 7, 60. The sons of Binui, 6, 4, 8. The sons of Babi, 6, 2, 8. The sons of Asgab, 2, 3, 2, 2.

[ 3 : 41 ] The sons of Adonikam, 6, 6, 7. The sons of Bigvi, 2, 0, 6, 7. The sons of Adon, 6, 5, 5. The sons of Ater, namely of Hezekiah, 98.

The sons of Hashum, 3, 2, 8. The sons of Bezi, 3, 2, 4. The sons of Harif, 1, 1, 2. The sons of Gibeon, 95. And now of the places, note.

The men of Bethlehem and Netopha, 1, 8, 8. The men of Anatoth, 1, 2, 8. The men of Beth, whatever that is, 42.

The men of Kiriath-Jarim, Shephira and Beoroth, 7, 4, 3. The men of Ramah and Geba, 6, 2, 1. The men of Miqmas, 1, 2, 2.

The men of Bethel and Ai, 1, 2, 3. The men of the other, Nebo, 52. The sons of the other, Elam, 1, 2, 5, 4. The sons of Harim, 3, 20. The sons of Jericho, 3, 4, 5.

[ 4 : 37 ] The sons of Lod, Hadid and Ono, 7, 2, 1. The sons of Sena, 3, 9, 3, 0. The priests, the sons of Jediah, namely the house of Yeshua, 9, 7, 3.

The sons of Immer, 1, 0, 5, 2. The sons of Pasher, 1, 2, 4, 7. The sons of Harim, 1, 0, 1, 7. The Levites, the sons of Jeshua, namely of Kadmil, of the sons of Hodeva, 7, 4.

And the singers, the sons of Asaph, 1, 4, 8. And the gatekeepers, the sons of Shalom, the sons of Ater, of Talmon, the sons of Akub, the sons of Hatta, the sons of Shubiah, 1, 3, 8.

The temple servants, the sons of Zihah, the sons of Hasufah, the sons of Tabaoth, the sons of Keros, of Seah, of Padom, of Lebanon, of Hagba, of Shalmal, the sons of Hanan, of Gidel, of Gahur, the sons of Reah, the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nakoda, the sons of Gazan, of Uzzah, the sons of Passiah, of Bezai, the sons of Munan, the sons of Nefushesim, the sons of Babkuk, the sons of Hakufah, of Harur, the sons of Basleth, Mehida, Harsha, the sons of Barkos, of Sisera, Temer, Nezhiah, and Hatifa.

The sons of Solomon's servants, the sons of Sotai, of Sofereth, of Perida, the sons of Jala, the sons of Dachon, of Gidel, the sons of Shaphatiah, the sons of Hatil, the sons of Pohareth, Hazerubayan, the sons of Ammon.

[ 6 : 10 ] All the temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants were 392. The following were those who came up from Telmela, Telharsha, Cherub, Adon, and Imer.

But they could not prove their father's houses nor their descent, whether they belonged to Israel. The sons of Deliah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nakoda, 642.

Also of the priests, the son of Hobiath, the sons of Hakoz, the sons of Barzillai, who had taken a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by their name. 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. The governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food until a priest with Urim and Thummim should arise.

That Urim and Thummim was a way of making decisions, and presumably that was to confirm whether they really were in or out. Verse 36. The whole assembly together was 42,360, beside their male and female servants, of whom there were 7,337.

[ 7 : 21 ] They had 245 singers, male and female. Their horse was 736, their mules 245, their camels 435, and their donkeys 6720.

Now some of the heads of the father's houses gave to the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 daricks of gold. A darick is about the size of a gold sovereign.

50 basins, 30 priest garments, and 500 miners of silver. Some of the heads of the father's houses gave into the treasury of the work 20,000 daricks of gold and 2,200 miners of silver.

And what the rest of the people gave was 20,000 daricks of gold, 2,000 miners of silver, and 67 priests garments. So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel lived in their towns.

Amen. May God bless us his word. Amen. Well do turn with me in your Bibles to the passage we read there in Nehemiah chapter 7, page 402, if you have one of the church Bibles.

[ 8 : 40 ] A passage all about guarding and gathering the eternal household of God. Now there's a real danger in the life of the church that Christian leaders, especially visionary ones, energetic ones, that they can get so taken up with their ministry projects or their mission projects, and this might especially apply to building projects or other big major schemes, so taken up with them that it can seem as if the people of the church are simply there to serve those great schemes, to fund them, to support them, to fund them, to support them with time and energy and so on, to give labor, and all the rest of it.

I think that's sometimes true in the life of the church. But the Bible reminds us that that is totally back to front. Because God's great care and concern and all that he plans and executes is for the sake of his people, the people he loves and cherishes and calls his own.

And Nehemiah was certainly very clear that his project, this great wall building in Jerusalem, was not at all an end in itself. Now everything he's done thus far, everything he's going to still do, is aimed at providing the necessary protection and prospering of this pilgrim people, of God's family.

Because he knew that God's ultimate purpose is to gather his eternal household and to shepherd them at last to share in his everlasting glory.

That's why when we read here in verse 1 of chapter 7, as you see that the walls were at last built, that the gates were finally set, that it's not the end of the project. Far from it. It's really just the beginning of the real story, which is the reestablishing of a living community of God's people in the city, centered around that holy city, where God himself dwelled, that was represented by his temple, which is the footstool of his great heavenly throne here on this earth.

[ 10 : 45 ] And so verse 4 really is the key verse in this chapter. It points up the problem for us. The walls were finished, but they enclosed a large but virtually empty city.

The people within it were few and no houses had been rebuilt. But God doesn't want an empty city. God doesn't want just walls of protection. He wants a teeming city filled with worshipping people.

And so the repopulation of Zion with the people of God, that is now what is going to have to take place. And if you flip over to chapter 11, you'll see that all of chapter 11 and most of chapter 12 deals with exactly that.

But you'll also notice that chapter 11 verse 1 doesn't come immediately after chapter 7 verse 4. Why is that? Well, it's because God doesn't just want to have a returned people, but he wants to have a renewed people.

Because his people are a holy people. And their real worship is the work of fulfilling their calling as a truly witnessing people. witnessing to the world the glory and the power of the God who dwelled uniquely in their midst.

[ 12 : 01 ] And so the restoration and return of Israel was never ever just going to be a geographical one. It was to be a spiritual one. And Nehemiah was called by God along with Esra to lead not just a relocation, but to lead a reformation and a renewal of God's people.

Actually, that's very important, isn't it, for us to remember today, especially when we're in the midst of relocating people to other places to meet on Sundays and to build new congregations.

Because relocating Christians from one place to another isn't of any real value at all by itself. That is certainly not church planting. Unless you plant the gospel and gospel-hearted people there.

It's who and what you plant that matters, not where. And that's why between chapter 7 here and chapter 11, we have several chapters that tell all about real spiritual reformation.

And that must lie at the heart of any great advance in the kingdom of God, whether it's Nehemiah's day or whether it's our day today. And as we'll see in the next few weeks, that real spiritual renewal will only come when God's people are led by God's word.

[ 13 : 17 ] When the revelation of God leads to real renewal through real repentance and rededication to the obedience of faith, which always lies at the heart of a really witnessing people.

Real clarity about God's word applied to people's hearts. It's what we'll see in chapter 8. That's what leads to real confession of sin in chapter 9.

And that's what leads to real and renewed commitment to God's covenant, as we see in chapter 10. Because unless the Lord builds the house, as the psalmist says, you'll always labor in vain.

It doesn't matter who you are or how gifted or able you are. And that's true in church life. That's true in your own personal life. It's true in your marriage. It's true in your family. It's true in your work. It's true in all of your life.

Unless God is building it, you're doing it in vain. Because none of these things are ends in themselves. They're all just to serve the ultimate end of everything in this world and everyone in this world, which is to serve the everlasting kingdom of God.

[ 14 : 25 ] That's all that will matter in the end. So, we'll come to these chapters in due course. But before that, here we are in chapter 7.

Seems really rather superfluous, doesn't it? Just a long list of names. And yet, nothing is in the scriptures by accident. And I think, in fact, we do learn here much that is vital about God's purpose and about his infinite care for Jerusalem, for his city, and for Israel, for his holy people.

In fact, a chapter like this is just so very important because it reminds us of the great theme of the whole Bible story, ever since Eden. It's a story of a God who is regathering scattered humanity into one single united people, into the eternal household of God.

So, I want us to look at just a little about what we learn here about the importance to God of gathering his eternal household. First of all, look at verses 1 to 3, and then we'll look at the rest of the chapter.

Verses 1 to 3, surely, are all about guarding God's place. And the message seems clear. God's city must be protected because it is the unique and only dwelling place on earth of the one true and living God.

[ 15 : 50 ] And therefore, this community is the household of the living God. It is, as Paul says later, it's the pillar and buttress of truth for the whole world. It's the hope of the whole earth.

And the whole future of this earth depends upon this city being guarded. The overwhelming emphasis on guarding is very plain, isn't it?

You can see it. Verse 1, we're told about gatekeepers. Verse 3, there's gates, there's guards, there's guard posts. But notice, it's not just these structures that are emphasized.

Not just structures, but also proper servants, gatekeepers, and singers and Levites. The Levites, of course, were the overall tribe of Israel who were responsible for the spiritual life of Israel.

The priests were drawn from the Levites. And one of the chief functions of the Levites was to teach the people the word of God so they understood the law of Moses. We'll see that in chapter 8. You see it especially in verses 7 and 8 there.

[ 16 : 49 ] It's the Levites who teach the people. And it's worth noting also that the singers and the gatekeepers here are also Levites. They're Levites with these particular tasks.

You see that also in verses 43 to 45. The Levites have these subdivisions of singers and guards and so on. Because part of guarding the spiritual life of God's people, would you believe, relates to the song of the church.

And those who order that must be drawn from those who are trusted teachers of God's word. That's a very important point. I'll come back to it a bit later. But notice this emphasis on the right people who are vital to the protection of God's household.

Right structures are not enough. You need the right people. You need reliable people. That's so important. Sometimes today there are people who get so obsessed with having what they think is the perfect and right structures for organizing any church.

You've got to be Presbyterian with a very big P. Or you've got to be Independent with a very big I. Or Congregational with a very big C. Or Episcopal or whatever it is. And people think that these correct structures are surely the answer to all the church's problems.

[ 18 : 01 ] If we get the right one, everything will be wonderful. Well friends, if that were so, we would be living in permanent revival, wouldn't we? Because somebody must have the right one, if that's the case. But it's not so, is it?

It's not the answer. It doesn't matter what structures you have, unless you have the right people in leadership, or to use the language of verse 2, the right people in charge over Jerusalem, over God's household, you'll get nowhere.

And what verses 2 and 3 are telling us here is that what is really vital in any spiritual leadership is that it really is marked out as spiritual leadership.

What we see here is spiritual men. And they know that real leadership also involves taking shrewd measures in order to protect, in order to nurture God's people.

First, note that Hanani and Hananiah were chosen to be in charge because, above all, they were spiritual men, more faithful and God-fearing than many.

[ 19 : 08 ] They were faithful, that is to the cause, to restoring the kingdom of God on earth. And they feared God. That meant that they wouldn't fear others because they feared God, truly.

Hanani, we know, is obviously a man of initiative. We saw him right back in chapter 1, verse 1. He was the one who went to Susa in Persia to find Nehemiah, no doubt to urge him, to drive him, to come back to Jerusalem, to lead up this whole mission.

It reminds me of Barnabas. Remember in Acts, when the church begins to go in Antioch, and Barnabas goes off and seeks out Saul of Tarsus and brings him there to teach the church. And so Barnabas was really the man who got into ministry the greatest missionary the world has ever known and built that church in Antioch, the greatest missionary church that's ever been.

Well, Hanani was a man of vision and insight just like that. And no doubt Hananiah was the same. They were men of action, men with oomph and get up and go to work for the Lord.

And notice, that is part of what being a spiritual man is. According to the Bible. It's how Paul describes Timothy in Epaphroditus. If you read later on in Philippians chapter 2, he says of Timothy, I have no one like him, genuinely concerned for the welfare of the church and not his own interests.

[ 20 : 26 ] A real servant of the gospel is what he calls him. And Epaphroditus, Paul says, he's my fellow worker and my fellow soldier. That is, he's a tough worker and a fighter for the cause of the gospel.

He says he's a messenger of the gospel and he's a minister, a servant to my needs. Do you see that? He's a man who loves the proclamation of the gospel, but he also loves the people of the gospel and cares for them.

Well, that's real spiritual leadership in Christ's church, according to Paul. That's why in 1 Timothy and elsewhere, Paul gives such a practical guide as to what real spiritual leadership must look like for those who are in charge of God's household.

That's what we'll be hearing about in these next few Sunday evenings from Edward as he preaches 1 Timothy. There's got to be clarity on the gospel. There's got to be competence in teaching it. But there's also got to be commitment and real courage.

There's got to be God-fearing character. Why? Because there are enemies. And God's precious people are very dear to him. That's why he says looking after them is a noble task.

[ 21 : 38 ] Not, by the way, as it's often misunderstood to mean that somebody who wants to be a leader has a noble desire. It can be a very ignoble desire. It can be all out of self-seeking. It's not what Paul's saying at all. But he is saying it's a noble task.

It's a vital task. It's an important task. And it requires, therefore, real spiritual leadership from spiritual men like Timothy, like Epaphroditus, or like Hanani and Hananiah here.

But notice also here that these spiritual men who fear God must recognize the need for shrewd measures in protecting the people of God. Verse 3.

Why have we got all these rules about when the gates can and can't be opened? When the guards must be set? Well, of course, because enemies are real. And because, alas, people are easily fooled and God's people are often rather naive.

But there can be no naivety in any form of Christian leadership. Because there are always going to be, the Bible tells us, people who want to get in among the people of God, saying that they belong, saying that they're on your side, saying that you're all one, but actually, who are nothing of the kind and whose presence will do nothing but destroy and harm the church of Jesus Christ.

[ 22 : 52 ] Let's not dwell on these minor differences that we have. There's so much more in common than the things that divide us. Let's all live together happily. That's exactly what the people were saying to Nehemiah and his colleagues about Tobiah.

Look back to chapter 619, just above. They were saying, oh, Tobiah's a great guy. He's doing good things. We need to have Tobiah's books on our church bookstall. Let's make it book of the month.

Let's have Tobiah to come and speak at our church conference. What a great guy he is. But Nehemiah and his leaders knew that was not so. Everything the man was doing was trying to destroy the work of God as he smiled sweetly at those who listened to him.

The spiritual men who are called to lead and protect the flock of God can't be soft men. They can't be sentimental men. They've got to be shrewd, wise as serpents, says Jesus, as well as innocent as doves.

Because God's church must be protected. And because enemies are dangerous. And because, and last, God's people are not always so discerning.

[ 23 : 59 ] Anybody who's led a small group, a Bible study, a Christian union group, or anything like that knows perfectly well that that is so. And just as God's city then must be protected, so today the church of Jesus Christ must be protected.

Its true message must be protected. Its true method, its true morality must be protected. Otherwise, there is no hope for this planet, for this world. Because the true church with the true gospel of Jesus Christ is the only hope for this world.

That's why Paul says you must guard the good deposit entrusted to you for the sake of this world. And that means in every aspect of church life that having leaders who will act shrewdly and not softly and recognize that sin is real and that dangers are real for the church.

And therefore, we need people who are willing at times to say, no, shut that door, close those gates, don't allow that into the life of the church. Maybe unpopular, but it's to protect the people of God.

And people who fear God and who love God's people must do these things. By the way, in passing, let's note again this place given to the singers and to the song of the church in guarding the spiritual life of the church.

[ 25 : 25 ] The singers were from the Levites because the song of God's people is part of the teaching of God's word and it's therefore vital for the church's health. What the church sings will either build and develop and guard Christ's church, bring understanding and spiritual maturity, or it will erode it and soften it and weaken it and ultimately destroy it.

That's always been so. During the Reformation, it was the rebirth of rich biblical song. That taught as much gospel truth to the people of Europe as listening to the preaching of Luther and Calvin and the other reformers did.

It was the same in the 18th century, the great revivals, the great awakenings here in this country and in North America. It was the hymn writers, it was Newton, it was Charles Wesley and others whose words of their hymnody taught the theology of the gospel of grace all through these islands.

Their hymnody built and shaped and strengthened the church absolutely enormously. And to a great extent, always, always what the church sings will shape not only its theology but its spiritual maturity, its strength and its vision.

And we have to realize that, friends. We have to realize that today much more than many people seem to. If what the church sings is predominantly lightweight in theology, if it's sentimental, if it's subjective, if it's superficial, then it is simply inevitable that the church will become ever more lightweight and sentimental and superficial and subjective.

[ 27 : 07 ] Because that's what's being taught to be in the song which is teaching the church. And even if you're trying in the midst of all of that to teach the Bible seriously, if you're doing that in your song, you will be unwittingly just undoing all that by surrounding that part of the proclamation with a whole gamut of proclamation of a different kind that undermines the real message that you're teaching.

So you see, in that and in many others, other areas of the church's life, the city of God, the church of God must be protected. And God's place will be guarded only where there's real spiritual leadership from those who are unashamed to use shrewd and often unpopular measures to shut gates and to shepherd the flock of God in a world that is full of many threats and many dangers to gospel people.

Well, I want to turn now to the rest of the chapter from verses 4 onwards, which as I said in the ESV is paragraphed unhelpfully, but it really begins in chapter 7, verse 4 because the response in verse 5 is to the problem of verse 4.

There's no people in the city, so God moves Nehemiah to do something about it. And what he does, first of all, is look into the archives and he finds this long list of names and numbers which seems so irrelevant, even boring to us.

We say, well, why not is it here? But here's the thing. It's not just that this is here. This is the second time it's here in this book of Ezra and Nehemiah. It's an almost identical list to the one that appears way back in Ezra chapter 2.

[ 28 : 50 ] So why on earth do we have a list like this? Not just once, but twice. And come to think of it, why on earth do we have all these other long lists of names in the Bible? Have you ever tried reading the beginning of 1 Chronicles in your daily readings?

Nine chapters of nothing but genealogies. Why have we got all these lists of names in the Bible? Well, it's because central to all that God is doing throughout the whole story of the Bible is the calling and nurturing and blessing of his people.

The people he is gathering, his congregation, among whom he is going to live forever and ever when he has purified his people as a radiant bride for the Lord Jesus Christ.

So these verses here, like every other list of names in the Bible, they remind us, above all, about the gathering of God's people. The gathering of God's people.

Because the community of God's people is precious. Because it's through the promise to this people, through the call to the seed of Abraham, that God is recovering the tragic scattering of all humanity because of sin.

[ 30 : 03 ] And mending this fractured and broken world that we know only too well. To bring it at last to harmony instead of chaos.

To unity instead of division. And God's purpose to do that will not be stopped, not ever, until everything that he has promised is at last completely fulfilled in his everlasting kingdom of glory.

That's what this chapter tells us. First of all, I do want you to see this deliberate parallel with Ezra chapter 2. So just look back a few pages to that in the book immediately before Nehemiah.

Remember, it's all one book in the Hebrew Bible. In Ezra chapter 2, you'll see the same list almost exactly. The names are identical apart from one which is missed out. This is the list that Nehemiah has dug out 90 years later.

The numbers, some of the numbers are different because no doubt there were errors in the copying. They didn't have Xerox photocopiers in Nehemiah's day. People had to laboriously copy out all of these numbers and Hebrew numbers were notoriously difficult.

[ 31 : 13 ] But there's no doubt this is the same list. Now look how the list ends in Ezra 2 verse 70. All the priests, the Levites, the people, singers, gatekeepers, temple servants lived in their towns and literally all Israel in their towns.

Chapter 3 begins, when the seventh month came and the children of Israel were in their towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. And what happened is they built an altar in the midst of all the ruins to signal the very beginning of this great rebuilding work to start.

A tiny, tiny start, a massive task before them, rebuilding the temple, the city, and all of these things. Just an altar in the ruins. So little to show.

But I come back to Nehemiah chapter 7 and see again how the list ends in verse 73. The priests, the Levites, gatekeepers, singers, the people, the temple servants, and all Israel lived in their towns.

And when the seventh month had come and the people of Israel were in their towns, all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate.

[ 32 : 29 ] You see, an exact parallel deliberately given 90 years later. But now, the temple is built and the walls are built. And now begins the reestablishing of the true community life of God's people shaped by God's word as we'll see in the next chapters.



So what is the writer telling us by repeating all of this? Well, it's obvious. He's saying, what God begins, God finishes. That was just the beginning, that great return from exile under Zerubbabel and Jeshua and so on.

And that temple rebuilding which has now taken place and all this wall rebuilding which has now finally taken place. It's just preparing for what's going to happen now and go on happening.

The restoration of God's true society here on earth. His redeemed people living as one, united people in his city, under his precepts, in his presence, and under his divine protection.

And not one of his precious people will ever be lost or forgotten along the way. All Israel will be brought safely into his kingdom.

[ 33 : 45 ] That's God's purpose. To gather together all his scattered people as one, to be in his presence forever. You notice the emphasis all through the chapter on the oneness.

Verse 5, he assembles the people all together. In verses 6 and 7, it's the people completely, corporately, as he speaks of them. Not just a group of individuals.

Verse 73, he speaks about all Israel. Verse 66, the whole assembly. That word, all Israel, is very, very important in these later chapters of the Old Testament subsequent to the exile all the way through Chronicles and these books and the prophets who speak about those days of regathering.

God's purpose is to gather all Israel and to restore them to his blessing and his purpose forever. And so these verses, these lists of names are a clear reminder of that and a reminder to Israel that there is still hope for Israel then in Nehemiah's day despite all their sins, despite the calamity of the exile.

God's promise is still certain. God hasn't abandoned his people. He hasn't abandoned his promise to Abraham even though the exile seemed to say that must surely at last have been the case.

[ 35 : 09 ] Isaiah the prophet and many others spoke of that. In that day, says Isaiah, he will assemble the banished of Israel and will gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth and there will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant that remains of his people.

Isaiah chapter 11. There's still hope for Israel and therefore these verses remind us surely that there is still hope for the world despite all this world's rejection of God and scattering because of it.

As God says in Isaiah 56, the Lord who gathers the outcasts of Israel declares, I will gather yet others to him beside those already gathered. A time is coming when all nations and tongues will come and be gathered and see my glory.

See, these verses about God endlessly, painstakingly gathering his scattered people Israel to restore them into one people under his care and protection. They're a wonderful reminder of that great overarching story of the whole Bible.

That God is gathering his people scattered through this tragedy of sin's curse and he's bringing them home together for all eternity.

[ 36 : 31 ] The exile was a terrible, terrible scattering in judgment separating God's people from his presence, from his city, from his temple. It was a huge tragedy.

It was a monumental calamity. It seemed like the absolute unmaking of Israel and all God's dealings with her. But in a way it was just a microcosm of the story of God's judgment on all humanity scattered, banished from God's presence ever since the Garden of Eden.

Genesis 1 and 2 tell us, don't they, of a story of humanity in harmony with God, in his presence, under his protection, in his perfect place. But sin ruins that.

It expels man. He's scattered to wonder the earth. It's epitomized in Cain, isn't it? The wonder, the fugitive. And Babel, remember God's judgment, scattering pride-filled humanity, seeking to build up and usurp God's throne, ruling the world itself.

That's the story of secular history. It's the story of man constantly seeking to rebuild the Tower of Babel, trying to unite in order to rule, but always failing, doing it by force through the great empires of this world, from Rome, Babylon, to the British Empire even, doing it through dogma, the communist constructions, and Soviet Union.

[ 37 : 57 ] Some would say even the European Union. Every aspect of human beings trying to gather themselves together to bring peace to this earth. Has it worked? What do we see?

Always failure, always fracture, always scattering, always lapsing into wars, currency wars, trade wars, physical wars, military wars. Man cannot gather himself together, cannot unite himself, far less gather himself back to the presence of God.

But from Genesis chapter 12 onwards, we see the story of a God who can and who will gather sinful human beings back together, back to himself. Comes through the promise to one man, to Abraham and his family, and he covenants to gather that fractured world, to bring them back to everlasting peace and prosperity once again.

Even that family is fractured in itself. Isaac and Jacob and Esau. Jacob's sons, the tribes, try to kill each other. Warring tribes, but God gathers them together, doesn't he?

And brings them out of Egypt and gathers them around the mountain at Sinai and brings them into his promised land. But still, they fall apart and fracture and fight one another. And then he gathers them together again in Jerusalem under his great king, the Lord's anointed under David.

[ 39 : 25 ] And yet again, the disaster of sin leads to a terrible undoing, to a scattering exile in Assyria and in Babylonia. It's a return to Babel all over again.

And surely, that must at last be an end to God's purpose for Israel and therefore for God's purpose for the world. But you see, friends, this chapter says no.

No! Look! Another exodus has happened. And God is still gathering his people together into one nation, back to his precious place, assembling them together as one under his rule.

A people of Israel reformed all Israel again living in their towns. Began with that return in Ezra chapter 1 and 2 under Joshua and Zerubbabel and so on according to promise.

Remember Nehemiah in the beginning of his book in his prayer speaks of God's promise way, way back to Moses. Remember what you promised to Moses, he says. If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you.

[ 40 : 30 ] But if you return to me, I will gather them from the farthest skies and bring them to the place where my name dwells.

And so you see the list back in Ezra chapter 2 tells us that although it be a remnant, yet still, as the prophets had promised, from that stump left, which is the holy seed, would come forth a shoot to restore ultimately all God's people.

And then here, 90 years later, Nehemiah repeats the list. And he says, look, it's still going on. What God begun way back then, he is still doing and he will finish.

His plan and purpose hasn't been thwarted, not even by your terrible sin, by your failures, by your fracture. God is marching on. He will accomplish everything he has promised right from the beginning.

And do you see what that message would be to Nehemiah's people? Keep on trusting God. Keep trusting his promises. And keep on working and witnessing to God's work and fulfilling God's purpose in your day, in your life.

[ 41 : 46 ] Because God is at work for all eternity and he's therefore at work today in your lives, in what you're doing. It might seem so confusing, it might seem so feeble, it might seem as if nothing's happening but have faith.

Remember, Habakkuk's words. If it seems slow, wait for it. It will surely come, it will not delay. The righteous shall live by faith, not by sight.

But you can trust God to complete everything that he's begun. Look back. This chapter tells us that way back then, 90 years ago, there was just an altar among the ruins.

But look, says Nehemiah, the temple's restored, the walls are now restored. This is the consummation of what Ezra chapter 1 and 2 was but the commencement.

See what God has already done and keep faith that he will bring to completion everything, everything that he's promised for your lives. And that was surely a message those beleaguered people needed to hear as they looked around, as they saw things looking really small and feeble and surrounded by so much hostility, longing for so much more of what God had promised them.

[ 43 : 09 ] But isn't it a word for God's people in every age, for us today? It's so easy to be discouraged, isn't it? We look around and the world seems to be so lost, so shambolic, so utterly frightening.

Isn't that so? And we look around at the church of Jesus Christ and it seems to be so small, so feeble, so tiny, especially in our land, just as tiny as something almost invisible like a mustard seed and surrounded by a field full of weeds.

But didn't Jesus say something about that? That from something just so tiny can grow and will grow something that will one day fill this whole earth.

Just as from this tiny gathered remnant he rebuilt Israel, the people that in fact he brought into being right from the very start from an aged couple and an infertile woman.

And remember from just a tiny handful of very ordinary disciples and followers he brought into being that true renewed Israel, the church of Jesus Christ who even now are being gathered from every tribe and people and nation to be made all one in Christ Jesus.

[ 44 : 23 ] Can't we trust the Lord Jesus? Even when things appear to be very bleak and discouraging in your tiny little CU in your college where things seem to be so beleaguered or in your SU group in school which seems so small or even in a largest church in a city where we're just a drop in the bucket and hundreds of thousands, millions of people around us.

But you see we have so much more to look back on than just Nehemiah and Ezra. We look back on the real climax of all of this story don't we in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to begin that great day of the Lord to begin that gathering of all nations who one day will fill his household of faith.

We look back on Jesus' ministry. Come as John said yes to scatter the chaff but to gather into his barns all his wheat. I when I am lifted up from the earth will gather all people to myself said Jesus.

We look back on Pentecost where we see that symbolic reversal of the Tower of Babel when people from every nation and language heard the good news of Jesus Christ in their own tongue. And we look around and we see the fruit of that Pentecostal mission of the church because just as the church was scattered all throughout the world by persecution so that took the gospel and God since then has been gathering from all over this world congregations assemblies of his people just like this one.

Each one of which just as Nehemiah City did each one of which foreshadows the great gathering that we still await. The one that's pictured in John's vision in Revelation chapter 7 of people of every tribe and language and nation praising God with one voice.

[ 46 : 20 ] The perfect Israel of God 12,000 from each tribe but actually what makes it up? People from every tribe and language and nation that no man can ever number united in praise of Jesus Christ.

Just look around you in the church here this morning in the room that you're in. There's people from every nation and background and language gathered here only through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Should we be discouraged? Should we be cast down when it might seem that we're but a remnant in a nation that is apostate in a world that is hostile to God?

No. Paul said to the church at Colossae all over the world this gospel of truth is bearing fruit and growing and one day one day as he says to the church in Thessalonica at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ we will all be gathered to him he says.

Friends there's nothing more important or precious to God in this world than the community of his people the church of Jesus Christ. It's the apple of his eye it's the people he is gathering together for eternal glory and what God begins he will accomplish always period as the Americans would say and that's what this chapter reminds us it's to encourage us and it is also to challenge us isn't it?

[ 47 : 58 ] Just as I close listen to where all this story of God's precious city ends in the last chapters of the Bible especially if you still think that lists of names are rather dull and unimportant and insignificant it was very very important for those in verse 64 who found their names were not on the list and listen to where this story ends then 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 new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her bridegroom and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying behold the dwelling place of God is with man he will dwell with him and they will be his people he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more neither shall there be mourning or crying nor pain anymore for the former things are passed away and I saw no temple in the city for its temple is the

Lord God almighty and the lamb and the city has no sun or moon to shine on it for the glory of God gives it light and its lamp is the lamb by its light will the nations walk and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it and its gates will never be shut by day and there will be no night there they will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations isn't that a glorious picture but but nothing unclean will ever enter it nor anyone who does what is detestable or false but only those who are written in the lamb's book of life you see there's a day coming when every eye in this world will behold the wonder and the glory of the everlasting city of God come down to fill this fractured world of death and decay with light and with life everlasting and when you see the glory of God coming down that day the only thing of importance the only thing of significance the only thing that will matter and that you will realize has been the only thing that has ever mattered throughout your whole life your work your career your family your achievements everything the only thing that will matter is that your name is part of that list the lamb's book of life that you will have a place therefore in that everlasting household of

God because the story of all history is a story of God guarding and gathering his people for glory through that promise of salvation in Jesus Christ his son and what he begins he accomplishes what he promises he will always fulfill and so the only question friends for each of us is this will I have a place in that gathering will your name be found on that list the list of those who truly belong in the eternal kingdom of Christ let's pray oh God who has prepared for them that love you such good things as past man's understanding pour into our hearts such love towards you that we loving you above all things may obtain your promises which exceed all that we can desire through

Jesus Christ our Lord Amen