Jerusalem -- The Defacto Ghost Town

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[0:00] Welcome to Built on God's Word, the preaching and teaching ministry of Highland Park Baptist Church in Bartlesville, Oklahoma.! Evan George teaches on Nehemiah 7, verses 5-73.

Go ahead and take your Bibles. We'll turn to Nehemiah chapter 7. But we will be turning in several passages so it may feel a little bit like Bible drill. If you ever did that as a young student where you call it a passage and then everybody's quickly turning pages.
To find that location in their Bible. Today we're going to read in Nehemiah 7 and it's going to be a list of those who returned from exile. And what it really does is it sets up a transition note within the book of Nehemiah.
And it really forces us to take a step back and remember the larger picture of what the Lord's doing. So this morning we'll spend part of our time in Jeremiah and in Ezra and then land here in Nehemiah to look at this list.
Last week, Jeremy helpfully walked us through the end of Nehemiah 6 and the beginning of Nehemiah 7. And we read that the wall of Jerusalem was rebuilt. Woohoo! Yes! Praise the Lord! This is great!
[1:10] Nehemiah then begins setting up the administrative structure of the city. Jeremy used the metaphor of secure the base to help us walk through how Nehemiah was reorganizing the city as a whole. To be able to sustain as the place where God's dwelling among his people.

The city reorganized with the wall and that it could be sustained. So Nehemiah sets Hanani as the civic leader and there in verse 2 of chapter 7. And Hananiah as the commander of the fortress, more of a military leader there.
And we'll remember that what distinguished those two that were set up in leadership were that they were faithful and that they feared God. Nehemiah then gets the people in the places where they need to be to secure the work that they have accomplished.
Including providing instructions for when the gates of Jerusalem were to be opened and closed, for example. Following this, if you'll look there in verse 4 of chapter 7, we'll read that.
So verse 4, The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt. So we have Jerusalem, the wall rebuilt, reconstructed.
[2:16] But there's this problem, this next practical issue that needs tackled. There are no houses, and the people within it were few. It's a de facto ghost town. There aren't people here.

And even if we think about it a little bit more as Nehemiah is here, we know that God's purposes aren't ultimately to only rebuild the wall. He wants to reform the people. And so even though the wall was built, we still have these problems of there aren't people there.
The worship of Yahweh has not been fully restored to the hope that there is. And then we ultimately have this larger overarching tissue of the people and their sin, and the reform that's needed, the heart change that is needed.
So let's zoom out a little bit. And if you'll take your handout, you'll see there our main emphasis for today of what we'll see is that God leads Nehemiah to authenticate the people as he reforms them. God leads Nehemiah to authenticate the people as he reforms them. And we're going to see this kind of in two ways by answering these two questions. So first, how did we get a Jerusalem ghost town? Like, how did we end up here?
[3:18] So if you'll take in your Bible and turn over to Jeremiah chapter 25. So you'll turn to the right, you'll go past Psalms, past Isaiah, into Jeremiah. Or you can find it on your device there.

And we'll start reading in Jeremiah 25, verse 1. Jeremiah 25, verse 1. Okay, so follow along as I begin to read.

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The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, that was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, which Jeremiah the prophet spoke to all of the people of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.
So Jeremiah prophesying to the people of Judah, which includes Jerusalem. Verse 3. Verse 3. 28. Do not go after other gods to serve and worship them, or provoke me to anger with the work of your hands. Then I will do you no harm. Yet you have not listened to me, declares the Lord, that you might provoke me to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm.
[4:50] Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts, Because you have not obeyed my words, behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the Lord, and for Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant.

And I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of the mirth, and the voice of gladness, and the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, and the grinding of the millstones, and the light of the lamp.
This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, and the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste.
Those first twelve verses, what we see is that for twenty-three years, for a long time, and we know throughout the history of Israel, even longer, we know the Lord has continued to persistently and faithfully pursue His people and tell them to turn back from their sin, to turn away from their wickedness.
Yet they chose not to, even though they were clearly warned, and God graciously gave them opportunity, after opportunity, after opportunity, after opportunity, after opportunity.
[6:06] And so He says that they will be exiled. He will raise up, it says the tribes in the north, so Assyria will come and take the tribes in the north, and then He promises that the Chaldeans, or Babylonians, they would come and take Judah and Jerusalem.

He says that they will come, and for seventy years, they will be with Babylon. So Babylon, this pagan society who aren't following the Lord, the Lord will use them to accomplish His purposes, and send them into exile.
However, God continues to be faithful to His people, despite their unfaithfulness. He graciously promises them that there will be a time limit, and that after seventy years, the Babylonians will be punished.
So now, turn over to Jeremiah chapter 29. I will start in verse 10. So Jeremiah 29, 10.
For thus says the Lord, When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise, and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.
[7:16] Then you will call upon me, and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. And I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes, and gather you from all the nations, and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord.

And I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. So God tells them that they'll be in exile, they'll be in captivity for seventy years, but God graciously promises to bring them back. You see there in verse 10, He reassures them of the good that He has in store for them, which we ultimately know will find its fulfillment in Christ Jesus. So imagine they've been taken into captivity, seventy years have passed, and now we pick up in Ezra chapter 1.
So flip back to the left over to Ezra chapter 1, the book just before Nehemiah, and we'll read the first five verses there of Ezra 1. In the first year of Cyrus, the king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing.
Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia, the Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel.

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[8:42] He is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of this place, with silver and gold, with goods, and with beasts, besides free will offerings, for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

Then there is up the heads of the fathers' houses, of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem. Just as the Lord said, He faithfully followed through to bring His people back.
This first group in Ezra that goes, they go about 90 years before where we pick up in Nehemiah, when Nehemiah returns. So they're the first wave that goes back. So the Lord uses the Babylonians, takes them into captivity, promises after 70 years, He'll bring them back.
70 years pass, Persia comes and conquers Babylon. The Lord creates the opportunity for them to come back, just as He promised. There in chapter 2, what we see is the exiles who return, a list of those who return.
So you'll see that list throughout all of chapter 2. Now if you look at that list, and now you turn over to Nehemiah chapter 7, what you'll find is the same list.
[10:01] So you turn over to Nehemiah chapter 7, where we pick up in verse 5, you'll turn over and find the same list. Now there are a few minor differences between the two.

Scholars have offered a variety of possible explanations. I think as you have latecomers who come in, some of the numbers slightly change, but nothing here that would have any impact to doctrine or the scriptures being holy and completely true.
So we get to this list of returned exiles. As we think about in captivity, now being brought back, we start to understand that, okay, this is how Jerusalem ended up with, destroyed.
This is how we end up with Jerusalem with not very many people in it. Okay? So now second, we start to get this question of, the wall's rebuilt. Nehemiah and others have come back, but we read there in Nehemiah 7, 4, that the city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt.
And so they're living in the towns around Jerusalem. So Jerusalem doesn't have people in it. And the question then becomes, who should live in Jerusalem? Who are the people that need to be in Jerusalem? And we start to see Nehemiah answer that question.
[11:16] I'm going to give you a moment around your tables to read verses 5 through 73 independently. There are lots of names. That's been a helpful way for us to talk through it as a class.

I'll give you time to read it independently and to discuss what you observe in the text at your tables. And then also start to consider, if Nehemiah is thinking of people to live in Israel, to live in Jerusalem, why would an authenticated genealogy within the people of God matter?
Why would it matter who's there? A few quick clarifications before you go. If you'll look there in verse 6. So 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 own town. They came with Zerubbabel. So Zerubbabel is who we read about in the first chapters of Ezra. So he would have led the first people back and would have rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem.
Yeshua, Nehemiah there in verse 7. This is not the same Nehemiah who's the cupbearer. So this is a different Nehemiah. This is nearly 100 years before and we learn that Nehemiah the cupbearer hasn't been to Jerusalem before he comes for this first time.
[12:31] So we're confident to say that that's not the same Nehemiah. Azariah, Rehemiah, Nehemiah, and Mordecai. So Mordecai is mentioned. There's scholarly disagreement if this is the same Mordecai as the Mordecai in Esther.

So it's likely not the same Mordecai. But those are a few names that you would likely recognize and could potentially raise some questions. But go ahead and this will be the discussion for today that you can see on the back of your handout.
So read those verses and then discuss the observations at your table. And then if Nehemiah is considering who to live in Jerusalem, I put Israel in the discussion, but you can cross that out and put Jerusalem. So the people living in Jerusalem, why would an authenticated genealogy within the people of God matter?
Like why would it matter? I encourage you to think about that. Come back together. We've got about 10 minutes left in our time. A few quick observations you may have made is that there in

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verse 7, you'll see that most likely indicates the leaders of the returnees.
So there's 12 names that are there. Verses 8 through 25 reveal the number of people who belonged to each clan that returned. Verses 26 through 38 indicate the villages and cities to which different people belonged.
[13:49] Verses 39 through 60 detail temple personnel. So priests, Levites, temple singers, gatekeepers, temple servants, and the sons of Solomon servants. This concludes there with people servants and livestock as well.

And you'll notice there in verses 66 through 73, you'll see the livestock that they had, the things that they were able to give.
You'll notice that giving is not under compulsion, but a free giving. And some of the figures, as you think about the Lord's promises to return them, He promised that He would return them with blessing. And so even as you see all of the animals and what they were able to give, it should in your head be able to remind you of God's faithfulness to His promises to provide for His people as He has said He would.
And certainly all of that livestock would have been crucial for their agrarian society and for temple worship to take place, for sacrifices. You could also see, so there in verse 70, so the governor gave to the treasury a thousand derricks of gold, 50 basins, 30 priest garments, and 500 minas of silver.
So Nehemiah leads in the giving. So you'll notice that he's setting the example, setting the pace. He doesn't give the most, but we see that he gives and leads the people also to give. Those figures, for some context, one derrick of gold was the wage for one month of work for a skilled laborer.
[15:14] So when Nehemiah gives a thousand derricks, that's a thousand months worth of work. A mina was about two to three months for silver. And priest garments would probably be about a six month's worth of wage to be able to have one of those.

So if you do some rough financial calculations, you're looking at hundreds of millions of dollars or tens of thousands of years worth of work that he and the others.
You'll notice some gave, even the heads of the fathers' houses, they gave even more than the governor. There in verse 71, so some of the heads of the fathers gave the treasury 20,000 derricks of gold, so 20,000 months worth of labor.
So you can see the overflow of generosity in the people giving. Not that they were compelled or forced or coerced, but they wanted to give their material wealth and their lives in order to glorify God and rejoice in Him as He had provided as He faithfully said He would.
A question then, why would an authenticated genealogy matter at this point? We see there in verse 5, Nehemiah says, Then my God put into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy.
[16:27] And I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first, and I found it written, and then he repeats much less than what we find in Ezra. But why would that genealogy matter?

Okay. The first part I mentioned is, the Lord promised He would bring them back. This list verifies that He was faithful to His promises, and these are the people who He brought back, and it demonstrates God's faithfulness. It also tells us, the people of God who can lay claim to the promises of God, who are the people of God?
And what Nehemiah sees is to going back to the people of God who return, that using that as the starting point. And there is the degree, I think that you were talking there, of what these names in the list, and as Nehemiah checks them and seeks to assemble them to be enrolled by genealogy, what these names set up is effectively who the people of God are and who in subsequent chapters they will use in an effort to repopulate Jerusalem.
So it wouldn't be desired for the people in Jerusalem to be a bunch of people who aren't following God. Because what's going to happen is there's going to be a renewing of the covenant, they're going to repopulate Jerusalem, there's going to be confession, repentance of sin, like all of these things will be happening, and God's people must be a holy people, a holy nation.
And so Nehemiah brings out this list as a starting point for how to establish who the Jews actually are so that he could establish who could live in Jerusalem. So this genealogy that he uses here is really the first step taken to validate the identity of the true people of God such that they could be purified and continually reformed.
[18:08] A few other things that you'll notice there is some were eligible to be in the priesthood, some weren't. That goes back to who's eligible to be a priest, who's the Levites who were eligible

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for that.

If you go back to Numbers 3.10, you'll see that the Lord says, and you shall appoint Aaron and his sons and they shall guard the priesthood, but if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death. So if you couldn't prove that you were a son of Aaron by lineage and you attempted to do the priestly duties, there were severe consequences for that.
So they wanted to safeguard the holiness of that role. But if we zoom out just a little bit, Nehemiah chapter 7 serves as a transition chapter in the book. The first half of the book of Nehemiah informs the reader of all the turn of events leading up to and beginning of the project of building the wall of Jerusalem.
That happens up to this point where it's completed. And the second half reveals what steps Nehemiah takes to revitalize Jerusalem and be a catalyst for spiritual reformation and revival for the people of God.
Rebuilding the wall is only Nehemiah's first step in removing the reproach from those who return from exile. The walls do not exist for their own sake. Their significance depends on what is supposed to be happening inside Jerusalem itself.
[19:19] The thriving community of God for the glory of God. That Yahweh would be worshipped in this place. And after this when we see the continual reformation and revitalizing of God's people they'll go on to confess sins to repent to renew the covenant with the Lord for a time at least.

We see that with those priests and Levites and other temple personnel the way things are structured here that right ordered worship will result from this for a time. And we know that ultimately from these promises these links and from Zerubbabel who we mention come the fulfillment of the Lord's promise of sending the Messiah the Christ Jesus.
So embedded in here the Lord is reestablishing his people to fulfill his ultimate promise of sending his son Christ to save us from our sin. So with that we'll turn to application.
So a few thoughts as we think about this list the people of God and what the Lord's doing in the book of Nehemiah. When you zoom out and consider larger periods of your life how have you seen God's faithfulness?
Praise him for those. Second, in your present situation what promises of God do you need to remember? Take heart.
[20:33] He is faithful to those promises just as he was faithful to the ones we read today. Another question would be what reforming does your heart need? I encourage you to address that with the Lord.

Pray to him and invite another believer to walk alongside you in that. And as we think about this list of exiles we're walking through Hebrews right now and you can almost think of this Old Testament list of names similar to the New Testament list of names that we're going through in the book of Hebrews and that they should embolden and encourage us in our faith.
These people who were in Babylon many of them prospered there. So when they decided to leave Babylon as the Lord stirred up within them to go as he called them to obedience they knew that was what he was calling them to do.
They chose to leave behind much. Comfort, resources, security to make the dangerous trip back to a desolate Jerusalem. One that's broken down.
So they left really so much to faithfully follow God and so we should be encouraged and emboldened by their faith just as we get to go and continue to walk through Hebrews today we ought to be emboldened by the faith of other believers.
[21:42] Let's pray. Father we praise you this morning thankful for your son Jesus who came to save us from our sins. Lord we're thankful that all of your promises are yes and amen in Christ.

Lord we praise we continue to walk through Nehemiah. Lord that as we see the rebuilding that you've done of Jerusalem and the reforming of your people there that Lord you would continue to be reforming us making us look more and more like your son Jesus as you promised.
Lord would you open our eyes to anything in our lives that does not please you and Lord we turn back to you in repentance trusting in your forgiveness. Lord we're thankful for your great love for us.
Lord as we think about who the people of God are we think of these verses and how Nehemiah starts there to reestablish who are your people then. We're thankful now that all those who come to you in faith confess that Christ Jesus is who he says he is that turn to you in repentance faith Lord that they are your people.

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We're so overjoyed that we get to be your people not because of anything that we've done or could do but because of your saving work in our lives. Lord would you remind us of that afresh this morning or would you stir up within our hearts greater love and delight in you.
[23:04] God bless you and bless you. We now go to the main service and get to praise you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. To learn more visit us in person or see the website at highlandparkbaptist.net

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