
Recap:

I want us all to picture Jerusalem.

For decades, the city has been a **wounded** and **exposed** place. Its walls have been torn down and its gates have been **destroyed by fire**. The people have really lost their sense of **identity, of purpose**.

Nehemiah 1:3

And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

So the narrative for many, many years has been one of **trouble, shame** and **vulnerability**.

And then against all odds, the miraculous happens and the wall is rebuilt in 52 days.

Today:

(Nehemiah 7:1-2)

"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.

The Knoxville Bride:

I want to tell you something I've been sensing, and I want to hold it with **humility**.

Over the last several months, I've had conversations with a number of people who love **Jesus, love this city and love The Bride**, and there has been a shared sense that something is shifting in our city. There is a new thing coming from the Lord.

I don't mean that in some **vague** way where we say, "God is always doing a new thing." Of course He is. That's our God.

But, I mean something **way more specific**.

I sense an invitation from the Lord to His Bride in this city into a deeper level of devotion, stewardship, and activation. That will lead to revelation, repentance and restoration within our city walls.

I don't know exactly what that will look like. I don't know everything God is going to do. And I certainly don't want to **manufacture** something God hasn't said.

But I do believe there are seasons when God begins to prepare His people for something before we can fully see what He's preparing us for. I think that is the season we are currently in as a church body and as a city.

So maybe the question isn't simply,
"What is God going to do?"

That's a good question. And honestly, I'd love to know.

But maybe the more important question is:

Will we go with Him?

Will we partner with Him in whatever He's doing?

Will we say yes before we even knowing fully what he is asking?

And if our answer is yes, then there's another question we have to ask:

Are we becoming the kind of people who can carry what He wants to give us?

Are we the kind of people He can trust with what comes next?

The question really is: **"Who are we becoming?"**

Building Gives Way To Becoming

I love where we find ourselves in Nehemiah 7.

Because Nehemiah isn't simply telling a story about a wall.

The wall has been built.

The gates are being established.

The temple has already been rebuilt.

God's people have been gathering.

Infrastructure has been going up.

And then there's a shift.

God begins to focus His attention on the people who will inhabit what has been built. And I think that's the moment we are in, right here in Knoxville in 2026.

Humans love to build things and God does too, for the record. Easily measurable/definable/tangible. I'll use churches as an example.

For decades, churches have spent enormous amounts of energy building:

- ministries
- buildings
- systems
- teams
- programs
- culture
- Infrastructure

I want to be so careful here and so honoring, because I don't want to diminish the energy, faithfulness, and sacrifice that have gone into all of these things we've been building in obedience to God. **They matter. They are good, and they are worth celebrating.**

But there comes a moment when we have to recognize that it is very easy to look at the walls we've built and become satisfied simply because the walls are standing.

The temptation is to think, **"The work is done."**

And if we're not careful, even the good things God has told us to build can slowly become the things we begin to protect, serve, and ultimately worship.

The very things that were meant to serve the mission can begin to **define the mission.**

And before we know it, we're no longer asking, **"Holy Spirit, where are You leading us?"**

We're asking, **"How do we protect what we've built?"**

And I think Nehemiah 7 is a beautiful picture of this moment.

Stuff has been built and then God turns His attention to the people.

Because there comes a moment when **building has to give way to becoming. (REPEAT)**

Who should we be “becoming”? What kind of person is the Lord looking for? Who can be trusted?

“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.” (Nehemiah 7:2)

Faithfulness:

Yes means yes, no means no. Private life is the same as the public life.

Faithfulness is the capacity to be trusted with something that belongs to someone else. STEWARDSHIP. My life is not my own.

Dealing With Our Fears

God-Fearing:

-Not in the smiting sense, but in the “God is God, and I ain’t” sense.

“ We all have a God given capacity to fear, it will be filled with something. Let’s just make sure its filled with the fear of God. It’s not enough to simply get rid of a fear, it must be replaced with the proper fear” -Mark McComas

1. **Fear of Failure** : We can become more afraid of **getting it wrong** than we are concerned about **being obedient**.
2. **Fear of Rejection**: Will I still be loved if I obey?
3. **Fear of losing control** : I’ll obey if you tell me the plan first.
4. **Fear of Suffering** : What will my obedience cost me?
5. **Fear of Being Forgotten** : Does my life matter?
6. **Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)**: What if I miss my moment?
7. **Fear of Scarcity** : What if we don’t have enough?

Fear of Man says:

What will they think of me? Will they approve? Will they be disappointed? Will I look foolish? Will I lose their respect? What if they don't understand what I'm doing?

The fear of God says:

“I'd rather disappoint people than disobey God.”

Tell story of my recent repentance of fear of Man: Alex, the Lord is calling you into some deep places and you cannot take this with you.

HE IS SAYING THE SAME TO YOU, this stuff can’t go with you. (New thing, Promise land, etc.)

That's where “fearing God more than many” gets really practical.

The fear of God means:

I am more afraid of becoming disobedient than I am of becoming uncomfortable.
More afraid of grieving the Spirit than disappointing people.

More afraid of losing my dependence on God than losing my autonomy.
More afraid of missing His invitation than protecting my comfort.

The risk we run when we live in a constant state of fear, is we can be so afraid of losing what God has allowed us to build that we're no longer willing to follow Him beyond it.

So God is forming a faithful people who fear Him more than they fear anything else. And if we're going to be people who can be trusted with what God wants to do next, we have to learn to fear God more than we fear failure, rejection, suffering, scarcity, or what anybody else thinks of us.

Let's be so captivated by God that everything else finds its proper place.

Ok, let's read some more from Nehemiah:

"I gave them this order: 'Don't open the gates of Jerusalem until the sun is up. And shut and bar the gates while the guards are still on duty. Appoint the guards from the citizens of Jerusalem and assign them to posts in front of their own homes.' The city was large and spacious with only a few people in it and the houses not yet rebuilt." (Nehemiah 7:3-4)

- Keep an eye out, the gates are here, but they need to be tended.
- Few people, houses not yet rebuilt. Still work to be done. The wall is finished but the city isn't fully restored.

"Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy. And I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first, and I found written in it: 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." (Nehemiah 7:5-6)

Anyone else get to the genealogy and then this strange dread hits you? Like when I look at an excel spreadsheet or some sort of tax document? You're not alone. But there is some really important stuff here. It's there for a reason.

The genealogy is about identity

Babylon had not erased them.

Exile had not erased them.

Their names were still known.

Their families were still remembered.

Their story was still connected to God's covenant.

SOMEONE NEEDS TO HEAR THAT TODAY.

MAYBE YOUR RESTORATION IS LIKE A SONG

Now, there's one more little detail in Nehemiah 7 that I don't want us to miss.

After all the names, families, servants, animals, and numbers, Nehemiah tells us:

"The singers: 245."

Nehemiah 7:67

And I love that.

Because remember what these people have been through.

Jerusalem had been destroyed.

The temple had been destroyed.

Their homes had been destroyed.
They had been carried away into Babylon.
They had lived as exiles.
And yet, when Nehemiah begins taking inventory of the people who have returned...
he counts the singers.

That may seem like a strange detail.
But it isn't the first time we've seen them.
When the first wave of exiles returned under Zerubbabel,
Ezra 2:65 tells us there were 200 singers among them.

And then in Ezra 3, when the foundation of the temple is finally laid, the priests and Levites and singers gather together and they sing:

“For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

And there's this incredible scene.
Some of the people are shouting for joy.
But some of the older people are **weeping**, because they remember what the old temple looked like.
Joy and grief are standing shoulder to shoulder. And the people are singing anyway.
That's important. Because exile didn't kill the song. The song survived the exile.

And I wonder if this is part of what restoration looks like.
Because we often think of restoration as getting back what was lost.
“God, give me back what I had.”
And sometimes He does.
But sometimes He doesn't.

Sometimes the marriage isn't restored.
Sometimes the years aren't given back.
Sometimes the person doesn't come home.
Sometimes the dream changes.
Sometimes the ministry looks different.
Sometimes the body stays broken.
Sometimes you don't get your old life back.

But that doesn't mean God isn't restoring you.
Let me say it this way: restoration and reversal are not the same thing.

God's restoration often doesn't take us back to the way things were before.
But He instead restores something deeper.
He restores your hope.
He restores your trust.
He restores your ability to worship.
He restores your ability to encounter Him in the middle of a life that doesn't look the way you thought it would.
And I think that's why the singers are so significant. **We are all called to be singers. 50ish commands to sing in scripture. This is not for professionals “all the earth” means all the earth.**

Maybe your song isn't the same song it was before.
Maybe it's deeper.
Maybe it's quieter.

Maybe it carries some sorrow in the harmony.
Some melancholy in there
Maybe there's a note in it now that could only have been written in Babylon.

"But your song is declaring something: exile doesn't get the final word." *KEEP SINGING.*
The cross has the final word.

The Here and Now

And maybe that's the bigger story Scripture is telling us.

He wasn't just bringing people back to a city.
He was forming a people who could carry His presence again.

And I keep thinking about Jesus' parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25.
"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."
(Matthew 25:1-13)

They're all waiting for the Bridegroom.
They're all carrying lamps.
They're all expecting Him to come.
But when the Bridegroom is delayed, the difference between them becomes visible and obvious
Five of them had oil.
Five of them didn't.
Harsh? You can't use someone else's oil. No, this about a deeply personal, abiding relationship with God. You can't get that from someone else.
And I think there's something really important there for us.
Because Jesus doesn't tell that story so that we can become obsessed with figuring out exactly when He's coming or what He's up to. He tells it because **He wants us to be ready when He comes. He wants us to be ready to obey when he says go.**

And what does readiness look like?
It looks like people who have learned to remain close to Him.
People who have oil in their lamps.
People who haven't simply built something for God, but have learned to **abide with God.**
And that brings us back to the question we've been asking throughout today

What kind of people are we becoming?
Because we're not just waiting for God to do something.

We're becoming a people who can carry what He's given us.
We're becoming faithful people.
A people who give God their Yes before He even asks the question.
God-fearing people.
Abiding people.
People whose song has survived the exile.

And here's the thing:
We're still in exile. That's where this gets very real for us.

Conclusion

Guys, we're in exile until Jesus comes back.
We're living between what was lost and what will one day be fully restored.
We're waiting for the day when Jesus returns and makes all things new.
But here's what I don't want us to do in the meantime.

I don't want us to spend our lives trying to make exile as comfortable as possible.
I don't want us to become experts at medicating ourselves against the ache of living in a world that isn't yet what it's supposed to be.
I want us to become people who bring the goodness of God into the exile.

Because that's what God's people have always been called to do.

Think about Daniel.
Daniel was in Babylon, but Babylon wasn't in Daniel.
He served the king. He worked within the culture. He sought the good of the city. He learned their language. He operated within their systems.
But he never surrendered his allegiance.
He never forgot who he was.
He never forgot who his God was.
And when Babylon asked him to compromise his worship, Daniel drew the line.
He learned how to live faithfully in exile without letting exile become home.

In other words:

Don't forget who you are just because you're in exile.

And I love something John Eldridge has talked about. He describes the tabernacle and temple as “**little outposts of Eden**” in the world.

Eden was lost. Humanity was exiled. But wherever the presence of God dwelled, something of Eden was being recovered.
And then Jesus comes.
And the temple moves.
The presence of God is no longer confined to a building.
We become the dwelling place of God.
Which means that wherever the people of God go, there can be an outpost of Eden.
A little place where the goodness of God breaks out into the exile.

The wall was never the destination.
The wall was there to create a place for the people.
The people weren't the destination either.

They were being formed to become the dwelling place of God.
And now we are the dwelling place.

FULL CIRCLE

"What is God going to do next?" He going to do what He's going to do. And we anticipate His goodness and His kingdom breaking through, but there we ask...

Will we go with Him? Will we abide? Will we keep oil in our lamps?
Will we remain close enough to Jesus to hear His voice?
Will we become faithful people who fear the Lord?
Will we allow God to restore the places in us that have been broken?
Will we let Him deepen our song?
Will we let Him have our time, our resources, our gifts, our plans, our comfort, our future?
God isn't necessarily asking us to do more.
He's asking us to **abide more deeply**.

And then, from that place of abiding:
Go.
Carry the Presence.
Carry the goodness.
Carry the song.
Carry the hope.
Carry the Kingdom into the exile.

"So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel, lived in their towns. (Nehemiah 7:73)

Simplicity