

NEHEMIAH 11 and 12

Although important, I wasn't sure that Nehemiah 11 and 12 would work in a Bible study situation. Have a go anyway! I've put selected questions at the bottom. The best thing to do probably wouldn't be to read the whole chapters, but just to pick out selected verses, or to get people to skim the chapters privately to get the feel of what's going on.

The point of these chapters is that God's promises are fulfilled, and that the walls are completed and the city is repopulated. God has not abandoned his covenant, and has brought his people back. They are chapters of celebration and completion.

Chapter 11 and the early part of chapter 12 tells us about those who went back to Jerusalem to live. It is a list of names – names preserved for us because this would have been a difficult thing to do (remember that much of the city is still a ruin).

It would have been a sacrifice to move from your home in the country into the city. This is shown by the fact that people cast lots to find out who would do it (11:1). This also shows God's sovereignty over the whole process. However it was important, because the only way the city could get up and running again was if it was to be fully populated. It was the way of the people fulfilling God's promises about Jerusalem. The covenant community are now living back in God's city. They are no longer scattered, but are beginning to be back together in the place God had chosen as his dwelling (remember Nehemiah's prayer in 1:9)..

You'll notice as you read the lists that order is important. Families are important. People are mentioned who take charge of particular aspects of the work in the city (see 12:16). These are not simply a random collection of individuals who go back to live in Jerusalem to do their own thing. These are a people, a community, who serve God in an ordered way.

The worship of God is important – there is stress on the Levites, priests and the work of the temple. God's city is primarily described in these verses as a "holy

city” (11:1). It is the city set apart for God, and important because of the worship of God.

Then, from 12:27 we get a glorious scene – the celebration of the completion of the wall. Two choirs stand on top of the wall and they alternate praise to God. This shows the strength of these walls (a far cry from what the enemies said about the walls – see 4:3!). The emphasis in this celebration is not what they had achieved, but what God had done (verse 43), and they are deliberately showing their link back to David (verse 36-37). This is not a brand new start, but a continuation of God’s people serving God in God’s city.

Then, finally, there is organisation (12:44-47). For the city to function things need to be structured. So people are put in charge of storerooms, and they make sure the priests get their portions. There is a time for celebration, but there is also a time for organisation. For good things to last there need to be structures put in place. Enthusiasm won’t carry us through in the long term.

How do we apply these verses to us? Hebrews 12:22-24 tells us that we have come to the heavenly Jerusalem. We are part of a greater city, which the earthly Jerusalem was only a small shadow of. We are chosen by God to serve sacrificially, and to worship God as part of a people in it. We are part of a holy city – we exist to worship God in Jesus Christ. We can look back and see ourselves as being part of God’s purposes through all history. Yet, we too, as the church, need to take seriously the need to be practical and to organise well to allow God’s work to continue.

POSSIBLE Q’s

Look at 11:1-3

- What are the people doing in these verses? Why do you think they are doing it?
- Do you think it would have been a hard or easy thing to come back to live in Jerusalem at this time?
- How is God’s control over this process shown?

- What does this say about God's promises? (Remember Nehemiah's prayer in 1:9)

Look at the lists in chapters 11 and 12

- Do the people return to Jerusalem simply as a collection of individuals to do their own thing? How is the fact that they are a community, with particular roles to play, emphasised?

How is the city described in 11:1? Why do you think it's described in that way?

- How is the fact that Jerusalem is a "holy" city emphasised in these lists of people and their jobs?

Look up Hebrews 12:22-24. How are we part of a city?

Look at 12:27-43. Is this simply a celebration of the people's brilliance in building the walls?

- How is the fact that it has been God's work emphasised?
- How do the people stress their continuity with God's people who have lived in Jerusalem before?

Look at 11:44-47. Why is organisation and structures important in God's work? What is the danger of relying on enthusiasm alone?