

Citizens for the City

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- [0:00] God's help as we come to his word. Heavenly Father, we praise you and give you thanks so much for your word.
- ! We thank you so much that all scripture, all scripture is breathed out by you and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and training in righteousness.
- And that includes, very much includes, the chapter we have just read. That the man of God may be complete and equipped for every good work.
- Our confidence is in you and in your word, so would you do that now? Teach us, reprove us, correct us, and train us in righteousness.
- All for your glory, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, after a break last Sunday, for a wonderful sermon last Sunday morning and Saturday evening as well, two sermons in Romans, we return to our morning series in the book of Nehemiah.
- [1:12] And this morning in chapter 7, we come to a bit of a kind of hinge chapter in the book. Section 1, chapters 1 to 6.
- And they kind of focus on the rebuilding and reforming of Jerusalem's wall. And we saw last time, chapter 6, verse 15, that the work is done.
- The wall is finished. And now we turn to the kind of second major section or focus of the book.
- And in some ways, we could say the primary one or the one that this is all building towards. And that is the renewal and reformation and rebuilding of the spiritual lives of God's people.
- The spiritual reformation that needs to take place in the hearts of God's people. The people have been building with shovels in one hand and swords in the other hand.
- [2:12] And verse 3 tells us, doesn't it, that swords are still needed. Opposition is still there. There is still a threat. But if I can put it this way, the shovels, the excavation work that now needs to be done is no longer on the wall, but is the excavation of sin from inside the people's hearts.
- Now, why is this needed? Why? Why? Because God wants a holy people for his city.
- God wants a holy, a righteous people for his holy city. His city is rebuilt. But who is to live there? Holy people.
- The city of God is to have a people of God in it who love God, are devoted to God, and worship God. Remember, God's city here, Jerusalem, the city of David, it fell.
- Why? Was it because of just pure military might on the part of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians? No. It fell because of people's sin. The people sinned and sinned and rebelled against God and did not heed the warnings, and so they were put out of the land and the city was destroyed.
- [3:28] They were in exile. And so as they've come back from exile and as the city is rebuilt, what is God going to be looking for? A holy people, a righteous people, people who will turn from sin and to God.

A holy city for holy citizens. The city of God for righteous people. Well, I hope you're starting to ask, well, what does that have to do with us here in Aberdeen this morning?

Perhaps even as we just read that chapter, or perhaps as you maybe got the email on Friday or knew we were coming to Nehemiah and you read that chapter and you think, what is this doing here? That was a long list of names, however long it felt for you.

It was 15 minutes, felt 15 minutes longer for me, believe me, trying to get through it, right? But we stand on the assurance of God's word. That all scripture is breathed out for God and it is breathed out from God and it is all, every single jot and tittle, every word is for our good.

And we trust that we'll see that this morning from Nehemiah chapter 7. So what do that list of people have to do with us here in Aberdeen this morning? What does that truth that God's city is for God's people have to do with us?

[4:42] Well, that's what we're going to turn to now and I hope we'll see that as we move through these points. Three points, but just so you know, our first one is our longest. So first point here, the city of God is only for the people of God.

The city of God is only for the people of God. Or we could put it this way, we are to be citizens saved by Jesus. Jesus, the city of God is for citizens saved by Jesus.

So as we said, the walls are rebuilt. We see it there in 6.15 or even in the first verse of our chapter, chapter 7, verse 1. It is finished, the walls are rebuilt. It's done in record time. Had this been something that was going to be recorded for Channel 4's Grand Designs, they wouldn't have even had time for the kind of TV camera to turn up and whoever the presenter is to come and do his kind of interviews, right?

They wouldn't have even arrived yet on set because this was done so quickly. The walls are built, but did you notice as we went through there's a problem? There's a problem.

There's not enough people living there. There's no homes, verse 4. The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt.

[5:57] And so Jerusalem, you see, was not to be rebuilt to sit empty. No, it was to be filled. Jerusalem needs people, citizens, worshippers to come there and worship God.

And more than that, as we heard from Isaiah 44 earlier, God had kind of promised to fill the city, to repopulate the city after people had been in exile. I trust that nobody would remodel their home for, I don't know, what is a loft conversion these days or an extension to the garage?

I don't know, 50, 100, 200,000 pounds, whatever it is. Nobody remodels their home and does an extension and says, let's just leave it sitting empty. That's fine. Nobody's going to build a new office block and not try to fill it with tenants.

No, right? That would be silly, right? Here we have a rebuilt city, but it's empty streets, no houses. And so what is to be done? Well, verse 5, then God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people.

So Nehemiah gets everyone together to be enrolled by genealogy. And I found the book of genealogy of those who came up at first.

[7:08] That is those who came up from exile after God took his people from Babylon and started to send them back to the land. And so do you see what God is doing here?

The city needs to be filled again. And what's the answer? Who is going to come? Well, the answer is this. Let's look for the descendants of those who came back from exile, from among the people of God who came back.

And it is from amongst those people that Jerusalem will be filled again. And so, dear friends, that is why we have this very long list of names in Nehemiah chapter 7.

It's from these people, these people who are the people of God, that Jerusalem can be filled again. Now, this doesn't actually start and begin to happen until chapter 11.

You'll see at chapter 11, verse 1 and 2, we're going to get there soon. It doesn't start to happen until then. And about 10%, 1 in 10, are taken back into the city. But if you like now, Nehemiah is readying the people.

[8:10] He's preparing the people to come into the city again. And so Nehemiah gets this very old book, this genealogy, which also appears in Ezra chapter 2. And he assembles the people, and he basically checks everyone in.

He checks their ancestry, their birth certificates. Do you belong to the covenant people of God? This is kind of Nehemiah's version of going on ancestry or something.

I don't know how you do it now these days. I'm guessing most of it's online. You go on a website, you pay some money, and you trace your family tree back, okay? No internet in those days. You couldn't just pull up a website. No, there'll be a very long list that he had, this genealogy written out.

Here's all who came. This is the family tree, and it's from these people we will come back to the city. I had a friend in America. Well, I think I had more than one friend, I hope.

But one of my friends in America thought he was the rightful heir to some castle down in England somewhere, kind of nine generations ago or so. Some of his family obviously emigrated over to the United States, and he was sure that there was some castle in England that belonged to him.

[9:19] Now, he really did trace his ancestry back to somewhere in England, whether or not he actually thought the castle was his or not. I never quite got to the bottom of all that, but he really thought there is somewhere we're from, and I think maybe it could just be mine.

Well, should my friend ever go to England one day and turn up to that particular estate or castle or house or whatever it is, and he says, I think this is mine.

I think I can come and live here. What are they going to say? They're going to say, but prove it. Show me your family line. Show me your family tree.

That's what I need for you to take possession of this. Show me your ancestry. Is this really being passed on from generation to generation to be yours? And that's what Nehemiah is doing here.

To come and live in this city, to dwell in this city, you need to be from among God's people. He's saying that only God's covenant people can come to live in Jerusalem.

[10:21] And so that's the principle here. God's city is for God's people. And so questions for us then. What does this have to do with us?

If only God's people can live in God's city, I think the questions for us now are, well, where is God's city now? To what city is it that as Christians here today in Aberdeen we are to look to and long for?

And who are God's people? Who are God's people? Where is God's city and who are God's people? Let's answer those two questions now. Where is God's city now?

To what city do we here this morning look towards? Well, the city of God now in these new covenant days since the coming of Christ is the new Jerusalem.

The new Jerusalem, the one which the scriptures look to that will be brought down from heaven to earth when Jesus returns. It is a citizenship of God's people today is heavenly, a heavenly citizenship to a city that God will bring from heaven to earth when he, when the Lord Jesus returns.

[11:33] Listen to the apostle John in Revelation 21. 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, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people.

And God himself will be with them as their God. Dear friends, this morning, if we belong to the Lord Jesus, and we're going to come and talk about that in a minute. But if we belong to him, we have a citizenship to a city that is coming.

To a city which is coming. A new Jerusalem which is promised. Now I think the question still stands for us this morning. Why did this change?

Because these people in Nehemiah chapter 7 are going to a literal Jerusalem. A literal city. So how did this change? God's people here had to go and live in Jerusalem, in Judah.

[12:36] But we don't have to. We're not called this morning to kind of rush to the airport. Buy a ticket, a one-way ticket. And fly over to a literal place on a map.

A city with walls that has a longitude and a latitude and go there. No. Well, why? Because since the coming of the Lord Jesus, if I can put it this way, Jerusalem is no longer Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is no longer Jerusalem. Or since the coming of Christ, we see that Jerusalem was always there to shadow. To point forward to a greater city that would come and fill the whole earth.

So Jerusalem is no longer Jerusalem. We, like these people, are not called to go to this city that actually exists here on earth today. No, we belong to a heavenly city. Now there's lots to say about why that is. But here's two very brief reasons.

Well, one. Jerusalem itself fell in AD 70. It was destroyed around 40 years after Christ. You couldn't inhabit it again.

[13:37] And most significantly, in AD 70, the temple is destroyed. You see, you came to Jerusalem, to the temple, to worship. But it was destroyed. And so people couldn't do that.

Well, why? Why would God allow that to happen? Well, because Jesus himself is the temple. Jesus himself is the temple. He's the one we come to to meet with God, to worship God.

He's the one we come to. And we can meet with him all across the world, you see. Oh, we can meet with him anywhere. We meet with him here this morning in his word. And so Jerusalem, this city that we're speaking of here this morning in the Old Testament, does not have the significance of place that it did then.

No, in Christ, we meet with God across the world. And secondly, throughout the Bible, Old and New Testament, Jerusalem is a shadow. It's always to be a shadow of a heavenly city, of a new Jerusalem that's to come.

We see it in the Old Testament and the New Testament. We see it in promises at the end of Isaiah 66. Hebrews 11 tells us that Abraham longed for a city whose builder was God.

[14:47] The new Jerusalem, the city of God, that is. Galatians 4, Paul speaks about the Jerusalem above. And finally, Hebrews 12.

The writer to the Hebrews said, You have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. Dear friends, that is to say, that is to say, God's plan was always to bring his people to a greater city, to a greater city of God.

And so the call of these verses isn't to go and live in a kind of bricks and mortar city, which can be found on a map today. But it is a call to an eternal city, a heavenly one, which Jesus will bring to earth when he makes all things new.

And what a home it is. What a home it is. John goes on in Revelation 21 to tell us, In that city, there will be no more death, no more crying, no more pain.

And dear friends, isn't that the world we long for? The city of peace truly at peace. We have no idea, perhaps, do we, if this latest peace in the Middle East will hold.

[15:57] But in the new Jerusalem, the city of God, there will be eternal peace. For there will be no sin, no sadness, no death. No, God will dwell with his people and his people with him forever.

And so, dear friends, dear friends, keep the hope of that city before you every day in this aching world. Yes, this world aches and groans, and we ourselves in our bodies, we ache and groan, don't we?

But Christ is preparing a place where all will be made new. You see, even here in Nehemiah chapter 7 verse 3, swords are still needed. But no, in that place, no swords, no pain, no death.

No, we are citizens in Christ of a city that is to come. Lift your eyes and long for it. It is coming. So that is the Jerusalem that we will long for today, the city we are headed to.

But secondly, who are God's people? Well, if only God's people can live in God's city, who are God's people? Well, the answer of Nehemiah 7 under the Old Covenant was those of the genealogy, those who are descended from the exile, those of God's people.

[17:05] But under Christ in the New Testament, well, God's people? It is those saved by Christ. Now, remember, there is only one people of God saved by Jesus in the Old Testament and New Testament.

Yes, one people of God. But the application to us here is that we do not need to be of Jewish descent, of literal descendants of this people to get into the city. You see, these people are all here looking at the genealogy.

Do I belong? We don't need to do that. To get out the family tree and see if it traces back through our bloodlines, if you like. No, it is by spiritual descent.

It is through Christ. And so, Jew and Gentile, no matter our nation, our parents, our background, God's people are those who belong to Jesus. And he calls all.

It doesn't matter where we're born. It doesn't matter where we're from. It doesn't matter the language we speak, anything. He calls us all. So, yes, if we belong to Jesus, our citizenship is in heaven and the city of God is ours.

[18:09] God's people are those who belong to Jesus by faith, by faith. So, what is Nehemiah saying to us here? What is he saying to us here? In short, only that God's people can live with him in heaven.

When heaven comes and all is made new and the new Jerusalem descends, we need Christ on our passport. We need God as our father, Jesus as our brother.

Then that city is ours. But if you don't know Jesus here this morning, if you don't know the Lord Jesus, you do need to know that this city, this eternal city of God, it isn't for us.

And actually, we get hints of that in the text. Look down at verse 61 with me. The following were those who came up from Telmela, Telharshah, Cherub, Abdon, and Emmer.

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

[19:13] Now, the text doesn't go on to tell us that they're not allowed in, but it does hint at a problem, doesn't it? They can't prove that they belong. The others, yes, you can come, but here, we're not so sure.

It casts doubt. And that is certainly true of the city of God. No, our citizenship in heaven only for those who belong to Jesus.

Again, John, in Revelation 21, verse 27. Nothing unclean will ever enter the city, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

In other words, who gets in? Only those written in the Lamb's Book of Life. The point? Well, it is only by the grace of God we get in. Only by the grace of God that our citizenship can be in heaven.

So, dear friends, this morning, if you haven't trusted Jesus, come to him. Believe on him. Receive him. Like the chair thing. Put all your weight on him, and you get a new family, a new passport, and a future in a city that makes London or Dubai or New York or wherever it is look like an utter backwater.

[20:24] There is a city there that God is bringing, and only in Christ can you get there. But if we have come to Christ and trusted Jesus, this city is ours, and know this, that you cannot be turned away.

You cannot be turned away. This hope of the city of God is ours forever. When we lived abroad in the U.S., one of the things that just was at the back of your mind from time to time is, what if our visas here were canceled and we were turned out?

During COVID, that first summer, as everything was kind of kicking off, it was kind of mooted that international students, we were internationals in the U.S., I was an international student, that international students might have to be returned to their home country.

And I thought, well, we might be told to leave, to go. And it wasn't nice having that kind of hanging over us. We didn't, but the thought of it wasn't nice.

Dear friends, in Christ, we need never, ever have that feeling about heaven. If we belong to Jesus, we need never, ever have that feeling about our hope of the city of God and entering there.

[21:41] No, in Christ, we have a new passport, a new name, a new family, a new identity. We belong to Jesus and nothing, nor no one can ever take that from us.

Cast out by our own family, Jesus will never cast us out. Shunned by our friends, Jesus will never shun us. Denied entry to a country that we long to emigrate or live in, we will never be denied entry to heaven, to the new Jerusalem, the city of God, if we belong to Jesus.

We are citizens saved by him. And the new heavens and the new earth is ours. So, dear friends, have that confidence today that in Christ your future is certain.

Second, we are saved by Jesus, citizens saved by Jesus. Second, the city of God is preserved for the people of God. The city of God is preserved for the people of God.

Or we could say we are citizens preserved by Jesus. We're saved by Jesus and we're preserved by Jesus. Okay, we might say our family tree is no longer Adam, but Jesus.

[22:50] I belong to him. He's my brother. God is my father. The city, the heavenly Jerusalem, I believe that it is my home, my eternal destiny. But will I make it?

Will I make it? Or even is God going to be true to his promise and bring down this city? Will Christ return? Or is all this a bit of a fairy tale, just too good to be true?

Is he faithful to actually do this? And the answer of the whole of the scriptures that we're going to see here is yes. The city of God is preserved by God for the people of God.

We will make it. And he will have the city ready for us. And I want to show you that from verse 27. Just look down at verse 27. It's not going to jump off the page.

We need to do a bit of digging as we've done all morning. But have a look there, verse 27. The men of Anathoth, 128. Do you see it there? The men of Anathoth, 128.

[23 : 51] Okay, it doesn't jump off the page. But in that verse, we see the assurance that God really will do it.

So how do we see that? Well, we don't have time to go back there. But what if we were to hyperlink that text and kind of double click it on a computer? Where would it take us back to? It would take us back to Jeremiah.

And it would take us back to the time in Jeremiah where the city is under siege. Where Nebuchadnezzar has come and Jerusalem and Judah is about to fall.

Exile is coming. The people are leaving the land. It is not good. It is a war zone. Okay? And the people are leaving. It's clear that, humanly speaking, all is lost.

The exile is about to begin. And at that moment, Jeremiah buys a field at Anathoth. He buys a field. Now, I don't know what you think, but usually during war and sieges where you're fleeing for your life, it's probably not the time that people usually invest in real estate.

[24 : 57] You probably don't think to jump on ASPC and buy some land if Aberdeen was surrounded and under siege, right? You don't normally think to do that. Let's take the checkbook out as arrows are flying my way because I want to buy this portion of land.

It's not usually the time to invest. But Jeremiah did. Why? Because God was saying, my people will come back to this land.

And not only that, I guess, but then some of the men of Anathoth themselves have made it back and will likely have had some of their descendants in front of Nehemiah, as he called the list.

In short, God is faithful to his promise, even in exile, as they went out the land, in hope and assurance of God's word that they would come back. He bought that piece of land, and God did bring the people back and the descendants back.

He was faithful. Well, exile came, but they returned. Dear friends, as we walk as exiles and strangers in this earth today, perhaps we can ask, will God really do it?

[26 : 02] Will Jesus really return? Will a new world with no sin or tears or sadness or news of wars or rumors of wars, that these bodies riddled with sin and sickness, will it all go?

And will that resurrection hope of a new world, will it come to pass? Well, this little verse is God's big way of saying, yes, yes.

You see, even the first recipients of Nehemiah would have been living at a time, not long after these events, but at a time when they would feel the nations begin to hem in again. It all just feels very frail.

Does God really have us? Are we secure in him? Is the church really going to be protected by God? And this chapter, and that little verse, is here to remind God's people, yes, we have eternal security in him, the city of God.

Our dwelling place with God is utterly secure. He will finish what he started. And our kind of exile and time as aliens and strangers on this earth will end.

[27 : 12] And the new heavens and the new earth will come. So, dear friends, in days, again, when it's easy to be despondent, keep your eyes fixed on this city.

Keep your eyes fixed on this city, more than the city of Aberdeen, more than any other city, look to the city that God is bringing. For he will surely bring it, and he will be faithful to do so.

So, the city of God is for citizens saved by Jesus. It is preserved by Jesus. And thirdly, and very briefly, it is for those who are called to worship Jesus.

The city of God for those who are called to worship God. What is God bringing the people to the city for? Yes, to defend it, verse 3, enemies prowl.

But ultimately, why? Well, to worship him and fellowship with him. God calls us to his city to worship him, to dwell with him. If you have that passage still open, you'll see that the list is kind of orientated and grouped together with some of the subsections, or most of the subsections, around temple worship.

[28:17] Verse 39, we see lists of priests. 43, the Levites. 46, the temple servants. 57, sons of Solomon's servants.

And in verse 60, we get all that summarized. All the temple servants. And it is there in the temple that God's people would come to know him and worship him.

And even there at the end, you see the lists of money given, verses 70 and 72. Those sums of money are given, maybe not strictly as acts of worship, but devotion to the work and of seeing the temple getting back up and running again.

So what is the point? The point is this, that Jerusalem is to be the place where God's people know him, worship him, fellowship with him, and of belonging together with him.

And dear friends, for us today, in the Lord Jesus, that is what we have now. Hebrews 12, again, in Jesus, we come to Mount Zion.

[29:22] As we worship this morning, we are to worship on earth as it is in heaven, to hear from God and to know one day that city will come and we'll be with him forever.

And so in the worship of God and fellowship with God and word and prayer, we're to be right at the heart of all that goes on. And that's what we're going to see in the next couple of chapters.

God's people brought to his city and the people are renewed by his word, renewed in prayer and renewed in worship, spiritual renewal starting amongst the people of God.

But for now, just a question, just a question. God brings us to himself to worship him. So do we love worship? Do we love knowing God?

Do we cherish time with him, worshipping him, glorifying him, longing for the day we'll see him face to face? Dear friends, if not, ask him this morning for help to make that part of your life.

[30:20] Because it is the joy that awaits us in heaven, seeing him face to face and knowing God forever. So dear friends, as we close, as we close, what do I want us to take away this morning?

More importantly, what does Nehemiah 7 want us to take away this morning? That in Christ, entry to the city of God is yours. In Christ, and only in Christ, entry to the city of God is yours.

And knowing that our future is certain, then dear friends, keep your eyes on Jesus, have confidence to keep trusting him as we wait to call Zion home, with all its joys being ours forever, as we dwell in the city of God forever.

Amen. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, I ask that you would help us to make these words of this old hymn our own.

Savior, since of Zion City, I through grace a member am. Let the world deride or pity. I will glory in thy name.

[31:34] Fading is the worldling's pleasures, all his boasted pomp and show, solid joys and lasting treasures, none but Zion's children know.

Indeed, Heavenly Father, then, help us to glory in your name and your grace till we see you in your city, face to face, worshipping you forever.

Help us to walk these days, knowing our citizenship is in heaven, and one day you will return and make all things new. We long for that day. Keep us for that day. And until that day comes, help us to worship, glorify, and follow you, Lord Jesus, we ask.

And we ask this in your name. Amen.