

(Extra)ordinary Faithfulness

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Preacher: Donald Smith

- [0:00] Just had a fairly long list of names, haven't we? We had a decent-sized list last week.! We've got another one coming next week. If you were here a month or so ago in Nehemiah chapter 7, we had an absolute mammoth list there. I wonder, are you at your limit? Have you had enough names by now?
- I hope the answer is no, because I am about to give you another one. And as I read these names out, I want you to try and figure out where this list of names has come from.
- Are you ready? James McLeod. William Gifford. Peter Simpson. John Cooper. Albert Davidson. Alexander Grant.
- Christian Maitland Grant. I could go on. There's plenty more names on that list, but I won't kind of push my luck any further. Does anybody know the answer? You don't have to shout out. You can kind of half-heartedly raise your hand if you want.
- Anybody know where those names are from? Maybe I can't see your hand. Maybe no one here knows.
- [1:25] I'll give you a clue. What day is it? It's not just a Sunday, is it? What Sunday is it? It's Remembrance Sunday, isn't it? Some of you upstairs have probably walked past those names this morning.
- If you were to walk out those doors and turn left towards the stairwell, and left again to go up five steps, there in front of you, you would find these names.
- James, William, Peter, John, Albert, Alexander, Christian, and many more. Above them is inscribed to the honored memory of those connected with this congregation, who in the path of duty and sacrifice laid down their lives in the Great War.
- They are not famous people, are they? None of us knew who they were. None of us knew them personally.
- They were not famous, but they were faithful, weren't they? Faithful to this country, faithful to their people.
- [2:43] And because they were faithful, you do not read that list, do you? You do not look at a war memorial and think, how boring, how dry, how dreary.
- No, you look at it and think, rightly, I might not know who any of these people were, but it is good, it is right to see their names etched into history.
- Not because they were famous, but because they were faithful. Chapter 11 of Nehemiah is a story of faithfulness.
- It is not glamorous, it's not an exciting kind of drama-filled narrative that keeps you on the edge of your seats. It is not, is it one of the famous kind of Bible stories?
- But that doesn't make any of those involved in this chapter any less faithful. Sometimes the most extraordinary faithfulness looks extremely ordinary.
- [3:50] This morning we're going to see that faithfulness on two sides of the story. There's the extraordinary faithfulness of God's people, which looks very ordinary. And there is the extraordinary faithfulness of our God, which also often looks very ordinary.

That is the kind of simple structure of the sermon this morning. So let's just get into the first of those, where we see God's people faithful to their promise. But perhaps, actually, let me just say before I begin, what last week was, I think, challenging for many of us.

I certainly found Nehemiah chapter 10 challenging as I studied it through the week. As I spent time in chapter 11 this week, I have found it very encouraging.

Very encouraging. And I hope you feel that too as we go through. It doesn't mean there's nothing challenging about it. But it does, I think, mean it should leave us ultimately encouraged.

Our first point, God's people are faithful to their promise. What was their promise? Well, that is exactly what we were thinking about last week. If you weren't here with us, you can kind of get a good summary of that.

[5:04] If you just look up to the last sentence of chapter 10, the very last sentence there, the people of God, what are they saying? We will not neglect the house of our God.

We will not neglect the house of our God. That was their promise. And they knew, we thought about this last week, didn't we? They knew that promise would be costly. That promise not to neglect the house of God meant promising to give their money.

It meant promising to give their time. It meant promising to give their resources, their efforts. They promised to give all that. But for some of God's people, it would cost even more.

It was a little while ago now, but the start of Nehemiah chapter 7 left us with a bit of a problem. The walls of Jerusalem had been rebuilt, hadn't they?

They'd gone up in record time, and people of God had all pulled together to get the job done. It was a great thing. It was an amazing feat. But what did we learn at the start of chapter 7? There was no one in the city.

[6:11] Chapter 7, verse 4, The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt.

Now, to us sitting here today, that might well kind of sound like a great opportunity. Here is a blank canvas to go and build on. It's free real estate. What's not to love?

Surely everybody would want to get their hands on the plots. Except, actually, nobody does. Moving into Jerusalem was not an attractive proposition.

As great as the rebuilding of the wall was, Jerusalem was a city with a target on its back. Remember Tobiah and Sambalat back in chapter 2 and 4 and 6?

They did not want to see this city built. They did not want to see it filled. Back in chapter 7, even when it was empty, Nehemiah had to guard the gates with armed men.

[7:19] There were enemies who did not want to see this city grow and thrive. Maybe they would wage war against it in the future. Maybe. Maybe.

I mean, those men, Tobiah and Sambalat, they'd even started a rumor that this was an act of rebellion against Persia. What if Artaxerxes got word of it? There was a very real chance the whole might of the Persian army could come marching over the horizon at any moment.

The wall was secure, but the city was firmly fixed in the crosshairs of enemies all around. It was not safe. And it was not fertile.

Again, that might not sound like that big a deal to us today, but they lived in an agrarian society. And out in the countryside, where everyone was living at the moment before chapter 11, everyone had their own little bit of land to farm.

That meant food. It meant income. It meant security. Moving into Jerusalem meant giving up your job, giving up your wage, giving up your land, and having to find a new means to provide for your family.

- [8 : 37] Moving into Jerusalem was not attractive. But the people of God had made a promise. They had made a promise, and they were going to be faithful to that promise.

The first place we see their faithfulness, their promise, is in their willingness to sacrificially serve. To sacrificially serve. We see that right away in verse 1 and 2 of chapter 11.

No one is kind of queuing up at the gates of Jerusalem, but everyone is willing to kind of put their name in the hat. Because the city needs filled.

A tenth of the population are going to move in, and when their number is called, they step right up. They give it all up. They give up their home, their land, their career, their comfort, their security.

Because they made a promise not to neglect the house of God. That now we don't do it. We don't have a physical temple that we need to go and serve.

- [9 : 43] That there is no city anywhere on a map that you need to move to. But as we were thinking about last week, we have promised to serve Christ and His church in obedience to His word.

In these chapters, God's people aren't just saying the church is their priority. They are showing it. What they are doing would be like someone hearing about a church, maybe on the west coast of Scotland, maybe in Shetland, hearing about a church that needed people.

And so they went in tomorrow morning to work and they handed in their notice. They put their house straight up on the market. When they moved there, there was no houses up for sale, so they have to build something from the ground up.

They have to reskill because there's no job similar to what they used to do. There's maybe a few months without a salary coming in. There's uncertainty about the future. But they go. But they are ready to sacrifice it all.

Why? Not for their sake, but for the sake of the church. I know we are not necessarily all called to do that.

- [11 : 00] Just like not everyone in Nehemiah 11 had to move into Jerusalem. But I think all of our names should be in the hat. To be willing.

Willing to sacrifice whatever it might be for the sake of the church. To be willing to move house. To be willing to change career. To be willing to give up the comfort and the security that we treasure so dearly.

For the sake of the church and the advancement of the gospel. They promise not to neglect the house of God. We have promised to serve Christ's church.

This is the kind of sacrifice God's people should be ready to make in order to stay faithful to their promise. That is what we see here. God's people willing, at least, or willingly giving up their comfort and security.

Why? Why do they do it? Well, for the service of the church, yes. But more specifically, for the sake of worship. They sacrificially serve for the sake of worship.

- [12 : 16] Just look there. Verse 1 and verse 18 of Nehemiah 11. And see if you can pick out there. See how Jerusalem is described. Can you see it there?

One out of ten live in Jerusalem. The holy city. Verse 18. All the Levites in the holy city. Jerusalem is the holy city because that is where God's name dwells.

God's name dwells there because that is where the temple is. The temple is where God is worshipped. Jerusalem needs to be repopulated because God needs to be worshipped.

That is the goal of, I mean, we could probably say that, that is the goal of all that is happening in Nehemiah. From the bricks laying on the wall to a thigh-moving house in Nehemiah 11, these people sacrificially serve.

Why? So that God could be worshipped. All for the sake of worship. And you see that right through this chapter. But perhaps when we're reading it, it did feel like it was just name after name after name.

[13:29] But there is actually quite a lot else, quite a few other details tucked in there. The men listed for Judah and Benjamin, how are they described in verse 6 and 8? They are valiant.

They're men of valor. They are strong and courageous. People who would be able to man the walls, to protect what the walls were protecting. What was behind the walls? Well, there weren't even houses yet, but there was a temple.

The center of worship. Then after the people of Judah and Benjamin, who do we get? Verse 10, priests. What are they doing in verse 12? The work of the house. Who else is there?

Verse 15, the Levites. What are they doing? Verse 16, end of verse 16, they were over the outside work of the house of God. And verse 17, they were leading the praise.

They were giving thanks. The gatekeepers in verse 19 are keeping watch, protecting, guarding. Just outside Jerusalem are the temple servants. And there's more Levites serving the house in verse 22.

[14:32] All of these people have given up something. They have sacrificed comfort and security. Why? So that they can go and make sure that people can worship God.

so that God can be worshipped by his people. And I know like we kind of said at the start, that this sacrificial service for the sake of worship, it is not dramatic, is it?

It is not spectacular. It's not glamorous. What would someone looking on to what is going on in Nehemiah 11c, if a newspaper reporter went to Jerusalem on this day, what would they see around them?

The city would be kind of noisy and dusty with all the building work on it. There'd be a few families moving house. There's just a couple of folks sitting around the gate. They're on guard duty. There's a few kind of Levitical gardeners pulling out some weeds from around the temple.

There's some priests sweeping the floor inside. It's not newsworthy, is it? It's not going to make anyone famous. But here is a list of people who are being faithful.

[15:52] It looks so very ordinary. It might look unsouder and read like it is a bit dull. But what is being achieved through these very ordinary means is something extraordinary.

God's people are able to come together and worship their creator and their redeemer because these people are faithful to their promise and faithfully carry out their duties.

If you here this morning in any way faithfully and sacrificially serve so that God might be worshipped by his people. It might look very ordinary but it is an extraordinary thing because only people who have promised to give their lives to Jesus will give up their time but their money their energy their resources to make sure that he is worshipped.

If you leave your house 20 minutes early to go and pick someone up who wouldn't be able to get here themselves that is that is very ordinary but it is an amazing thing.

If you come at 10 o'clock to rehearse some music that might look very ordinary but it is an amazing thing because it helps God's people worship him. If you show up half an hour to push some buttons on the AV desk the chances that someone's going to come and thank you are slim but it is ordinary and extraordinary because you are helping God's people worship him.

[17:38] The people in the back there they wouldn't be able to hear God's word read if it wasn't for what you were doing. If you sweep the floors or test the fire alarms if you open the doors on a Sunday morning if you welcome people in if you're on the cleaning rota if you help maintain the place that the church gathers into worship it might look like very ordinary faithfulness it might well be very ordinary faithfulness but if you are doing it so that Jesus can be worshipped it is extraordinary.

It is amazing it is such a good thing it is a beautiful thing and there are so many other things that you all do that I've not even mentioned or described. Everyone here in this list in Nehemiah 11 is serving for that purpose and we see they are all serving in different ways there is order and structure too everyone has their own jobs Lewis read for us earlier from Romans 12 what we read in Romans 12 is I think what we see in Nehemiah 11 everyone is getting stuck in it is ordered it is structured everyone is using their gifts in a particular way so that all things might lead to God's glory in practice this faithfulness might look very different in each one of our lives but what is the same right across the board right across the board is that they are presenting themselves as a living sacrifice whatever it might cost me so long as Jesus can be worshipped by his people if you give your life in whatever way however unspectacular however ordinary it might appear if you sacrificially serve in order that Jesus be worshipped by his people then you will probably never be famous but your name will be recorded not in the book of Nehemiah but in the book of life that will be opened on the last day when a new Jerusalem a new heavens and a new earth will be ready to be filled your name will be there in a much longer list of names your name will be there you will be brought into the eternal city not because you did extraordinary things but because you were faithful in the ordinary we are I think in this chapter meant to be encouraged to rejoice in God's people being faithful to their promise to serve him even in very ordinary ways whatever it might cost them it is a wonderful thing we have seen two ways in this chapter that the people of God showed their faithfulness to their promise they sacrificed their comfort and security they devoted themselves to the worship of God but I think we also see two ways in this chapter that God is faithful to his promise our second point this morning

God is faithful to his promise we saw the people's promise in the verse before chapter 11 we do have to go a little further back to see what God's promise was but I think it is worth turning to just flick a few pages back with me to Nehemiah chapter 1 Nehemiah 1 page 398 if you're in the church bibles once you're there just look down with me at verse 8 verse 8 and 9 this is Nehemiah recounting God's promise remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses saying if you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them though your outcasts are in the uttermost part of heaven from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name dwell there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen just to turn back to chapter 11 what do we see we've got two sub points here we can move through them very quickly first

God faithfully gathers his people I mean what is happening here this is a long list of families who were at one time scattered across the face of the earth now they are walking back through the gates of Jerusalem God said if you return to me I will gather you what do we see between chapter 8 and 10 are people returning to God returning to his word repenting of their sin promising to obey what has God done he has been faithful to his promise he has gathered them again he has regathered his sheep but I think what we also actually get a little glimpse of here is that while he is gathering them we also see I think in this chapter that he has never let them go he has never let them go

I don't know if you noticed as we read through it chapter 11 it isn't just a list of names is it it's a list of kind of micro genealogies kind of abridged family trees that show that God has never left his people from the highs of the exodus to the lows of the exile that there were points in their history where God's people were crying out where are you Lord well we see part of the answer here from the exodus to the wilderness from the conquest of Canaan to the time of the judges from King David from the exile from Perez all the way to Athiah that there is God he never lost sight of them he never let go of them and we have seen repeatedly haven't we through Nehemiah how this this is just a shadow God never let go of them and he promised to gather them in

[24:09] Jesus the good shepherd he promises never never to let any of his sheep go he promises to gather every single one to himself the good shepherd says in John 10 my sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me I give them eternal life and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hands there were many points in the history of God's people in the Old Testament where they they no doubt felt like they were no longer in God's hands but he never let them go brothers and sisters for many of you I do not know what kind of week you have had I'll never know fully what kind of year you have had maybe you're in a season where you feel like you are slipping out of God's hands that he does not have hold of you if your faith is in him however you might feel whatever you might be going through

Jesus has promised that he will never let you go and there will be I guarantee it and I can guarantee it because Jesus promises it there will be a point like the returned exiles here in Nehemiah 11 when you will be able to look back at your story your history and see that God has never left you he has promised you eternal life he has promised to take you home to that heavenly city where there will be no more tears no more sorrow or sadness or death he was faithful to his promise then he will be faithful to his promise now he will be he was faithful he will always be faithful if your trust is in Jesus even even in being gathered in here this morning

God is being faithful to his promise to gather you into his presence you might want it to look more spectacular but so often God's faithfulness like our own looks very ordinary an onlooker watching a few bedraggled exiles cart their belongings through Jerusalem's gates would have very little to write home about an onlooker watching a few different folk walk through the doors of a church on Sunday morning we'd have very little to write home about but it is a beautiful picture of God's extraordinary faithfulness working itself out in very ordinary ways in verse 23 and 24 I think we see even in a footnote in the Persian budget there is a God faithfully sustaining the temple servants through a grant from the king it looks so very ordinary but there is God being faithful to his promise helping his people come and worship him gather together before him he gathers his people and he brings them into his land what do we see

God's promise was in chapter one I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen bring them to the place that I have chosen the last few verses of chapter 11 is not a list of names it's a list of places which you might think is even more dull it's very ordinary it's not dull it maybe is just look like a kind of random collection of towns but put it on a map put it on a map and you see God's people edging out edging out from the Persian province of Judea and further into the promised land from Beersheba to the valley of Hinnom it is not dramatic it is a few families just spreading out a little bit but it is God faithfully restoring his people to the land he had promised them again we do not gather do we in Jerusalem God's kingdom is not confined to Canaan they were shadows shadows of a church the church of

Christ gathering in his name shadows of the kingdom of God reaching out to the ends of the earth but do you see how it soft and grows how it spreads just like the tide coming in not usually like a tsunami but like one little wave after another just slipping a little further up the shore the good shepherd has promised that he will bring every one of his sheep into his folds maybe not in hundreds and thousands but in ones and twos God will slowly unspectacularly stretch out to the ends of the earth a colleague curious about church a married couple finding faith a wandering sheep being brought back home little by little until one day one day this city is filled to the brim all because

[29 : 42] Jesus is forever faithful to his word even when that faithfulness looks so very ordinary something extraordinary is happening he gathers his people together so that we might worship he grows his kingdom little by little person by person so that the new Jerusalem would be filled packed from wall to wall that is where he is leading the church that is where he is leading us towards that glorious city one step at a time that we might one day walk through those gates however mundane the journey might feel at times however difficult it might feel however ordinary life seems he is faithfully leading his people home he will never leave us he will never lead us astray neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor heights nor depth nor anything else in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of

God in Christ Jesus our Lord because he is faithful he is and always will be faithful in the extraordinary and the very ordinary he is with you and he is for you from now until the end of the age we come and sacrificially serve that he might be worshipped that even our small act of ordinary faithfulness can only ever happen because of his extraordinary faithfulness so let us do what we have promised to do to serve his church so that he might be worshipped!

and let us worship him for his extraordinary faithfulness that so often looks very ordinary let us pray father we thank you and praise you that you are a faithful god who is forever true to his words lord we pray that in your mercy and grace you would help us to serve you to be ready to give up whatever comforts or security we might have to in order to serve your church in order to make the name of Jesus groan in order to make disciples of him who would long to worship him lord help us to live that you might be glorified lord as we do so may we worship you at all times and all places as the one who is faithful and always will be the one who has promised to gather us to you the one who has promised to bring us not to an earthly

Jerusalem but to a heavenly one to a new heavens and a new earth that will be filled with all of those that you have gathered to yourself in the Lord Jesus Christ the good shepherds who lay down his life for his sheep and will never let any one of them go Lord help us now to worship you to worship you in our singing and to worship you in all that we do as we go out from here in Jesus name we pray amen