

Called to the City

Jason Abbott

I remember feeling unsettled but not really knowing why. The congregation I was leading had just purchased a building and finished a significant remodel of it. Our church family was growing—across generational as well as political boundaries. We were moving towards our goal of planting a church in a largely unchurched area of the city of Harrisburg. We had a unified staff and elder team. Ministry was good. God was really blessing us.

And at home, our family was comfortable. The kids attended a great school. Their school-bus literally picked them up at the end of our sidewalk. Natalie and I would simply sit at our kitchen table and watch them get on the bus in the mornings. No waiting in the cold. No walking to the bus-stop. I mean talk about convenient! Just drink my coffee and waive to them. Things were good for our family.

So, why then was I unsettled? What was going on?

We started thinking about it and praying about it. And for a number of reasons, Natalie and I felt God was asking us to consider leaving all of that ease and comfort. So, we decided we should be open to that. Thus, I began to consider possible callings, in Colorado. Mostly I felt God calling me to Colorado. To a picturesque little town in the mountains with good restaurants and awesome hiking. That's what I imagined. That's what I thought God must be calling my family to. (It would be a tough calling, but somebody would have to go. Here I am Lord. Send me.)

When the First Free job appeared on our radar, Natalie and I both noticed it because of our history here. Yet, neither of us initially considered it a real possibility. *Moving five kids to the city; navigating their schooling; coping with the pace of life; pastoring in a skeptical setting!* We thought we'd better begin praying for the family who God would call to First Free. We were committed to praying for your pastor, even in the midst of our transition to our next church...in Colorado.

Well, we prayed our big family right into the city. We prayed our family right into God's will for us here. Not into the place we would have imagined for ourselves. Not into the land of tall mountains but the land of tall buildings.

Friends, this is how it is with God. When he moves, we're sent on mission. When he moves, we're called to places we'd never have imagined ourselves going. And, this is precisely what we're going to see in today's text.

Nehemiah 11-12:26

11 Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem. The rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten of them to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns.² The people commended all who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.

³These are the provincial leaders who settled in Jerusalem (now some Israelites, priests, Levites, temple servants and descendants of Solomon's servants lived in the towns of Judah, each on their own property in the various towns,⁴ while other people from both Judah and Benjamin lived in Jerusalem):

[What follows is a list of the individuals who would repopulate the Holy City, the city of Jerusalem (11:1-36). Remember it had been decimated and left in ruins. What good is a rebuilt city if no one lives there—a rebuilt wall if it protects no one? And finally, in conclusion, we're given a list of names of the Priests and the Levites who moved to Jerusalem (12:1-26). This indicates the reestablishment of the worship of Yahweh in the temple. Once again atonement for the sins of Israel will be made. Once again the people of God are going to live as well as worship in the city of God. That's what these lists of names represent.

So, let's pray and, then, we'll see what this passage in Nehemiah can teach us about serving and worshiping God today in our city.]

I think when we dig into this passage and situate it in the context of Nehemiah that we learn two implicit lessons. **(1st) Revival drives mission.** When people meet with God, they serve God. They live in his purposes. **(2nd) Mission entails sacrifice.** As we serve God, we will progressively sacrifice what we want for what he wants. And, we'll find great reward in doing so. Well, let's look at each of these.

1. Revival drives mission.

This is really seen in the texts we've already looked at leading up to this one. Recall that three weeks ago the people came in unity to Ezra and commanded him

to read the Book of Law of Moses—from the first few books of the Old Testament. And as they hear it read, they are heartbroken, and they recognize their faithlessness to God and their sins against him. They long to repent. But, it's the time for festival, for the Feast of Booths. So, rather than repent the people must celebrate.

Yet, two weeks ago, we saw that the people didn't forget to confess their sins and repent of them. After all the celebrations were over, they again come before God in unity and throw themselves on his mercy and grace. They own their sinful history. They own their rebellion against God. And, they ask him to forgive them for it all, knowing that it is his very character to do so. This is exactly what they'd witnessed over and over again in their history—that the Lord is gracious and merciful to those who repent of their sins. So, they trust him to be so again and he is.

Then last week, Del helped us to see how the Israelites renewed their covenant with God. They committed to live lives of obedience and to observe his commands. This was nothing less than a vow to live in right relationship with God. In a nut shell, the people were pledging themselves to the Lord: “You—Yahweh—will be our God, and we—Israel—will be your people” (Psalm 95:7). They were making a new start. This is nothing less than a revival in Israel.

Now, in my experience, the concept of revival has been misused often times in Christian circles. And, the biblical conception of revival has largely been replaced by something lesser—something shallow.

Even in the last few years, there have been many self-proclaimed “revivals” which have popped up. Some flashy leader is invited to town. Promises are made—promises of healings, promises of resurrections, promises of miraculous happenings. People flock to see these things. Crowds assemble to be near this charismatic leader. There's excitement. There's emotion. There's activity. Then, however, it all ends. The leader goes away. Things settle down. And, life returns to normal.

Friends, that's not revival. Real or true revival does not leave us unchanged. Real or true revival is not dependent upon some charismatic leader doing miracles. (For heaven's sake, a portion of the First Great Awakening began under the sermons of Jonathan Edwards. Those who have studied Edwards's preaching style have noted that he typically read his sermons from his manuscripts in a rather monotone voice. He was no charismatic preacher. Yet, revival came thru his preaching anyway. *Why?*

Because friends—*the people of God met with the Living God as the Word of God was revealed to them in those sermons.* That brings true revival!)

And, true revival always brings change. It calls people to be about the business of God. That's what we see here in today's text. The people go on mission.

The first part of the mission was to rebuild the wall. But now that's completed. What's next? The people need to repopulate the Holy City and rebuild the remainder of it—the homes and shops and temple, the culture and commerce and worship of it. They're called to bring Jerusalem back to life. That's what Nehemiah came back for; isn't it? Not just to rebuild a wall, but to rebuild the City of God. That's what Yahweh sent him to do. That was the mission. And now, the people in this season of revival have fully owned that mission.

Look again at the first two verses of today's text.

Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem. The rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten of them to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns. The people commended all who volunteered to live in Jerusalem (11:1-2).

There are those who are chosen to move to the city on mission by casting lots, and there are those who volunteer to move. In the first case, Israelites go on mission because it is their duty. The lot falls on them to do so. In the second case, Israelites are personally moved to volunteer for this mission. In either case, it is the revival which sets the stage for their actions. They must trust the Lord and what he is doing in this rebuilding and repopulating mission if they are to go.

But, there is another group here which we could easily miss. Those who stayed in their hometowns. They too are called to action. They too are called to the mission. Nine out of ten must stay in the surrounding towns. Nine out of ten must work there. Nine out of ten must support the mission by staying and not going. This also emerges from the experience of revival.

What would those in the city eat without the farmers in surrounding towns? What would they wear without the wool and linen which these hamlets produced? How would the temple sacrifices operate without the flocks they tended?

Make no mistake about it, everyone in this passage is unified in this mission. They have met with the Lord, and there has been revival. Now each of them is doing what he or she must to see Jerusalem rise from the ashes. Revival drives all of this! Revival drives mission!

And, this is true today as well. When we are confronted by the Living God, we will serve him. We all have a roll to play. Isn't that what Paul emphasizes?

...just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ [there's the revival!] we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully (Romans 12:4-8).

Friends, revival (gaining new life in Christ Jesus) drives each of us to mission. We'll use whatever gifts we have to serve his kingdom—go wherever God calls us to go. Friends, to be a follower of Jesus is to be on mission for Jesus.

2. Mission entails sacrifice.

And, that's very apparent in this text. There are at least two ways this mission will entail sacrifice for God's people. **First**, one out of every ten Israelites will have to relocate. They'll have to leave their villages and jobs and families in order to move to Jerusalem. For the city to regain its life, their lives will have to change. For many of them (if not all of them) this will mean hardship and loneliness and loss.

And, for all those who remain in those villages, it will mean much of the same. Brothers and sisters will be going. Children and grandchildren will be moving away. Friendships will be separated.

The resurrection of Jerusalem meant sacrifice for them.

Second, God's calling to the city of Jerusalem was not a glamorous calling. The city was in ruins. They weren't being called to settle in Chicago's Gold Coast or River North. It wasn't even a calling to Andersonville—which is really awesome,

by the way. No! They were called to broken-down shops and broken-down houses. In short, things were a mess in Jerusalem.

Those who moved there were literally rebuilding a city: new neighborhoods, new businesses, new relationships, new everything. There were great challenges all around them. Friends, we must fight the temptation to romanticize this little scene whenever we read it. This was dirty and difficult work. It was messy ministry.

Being called to Jerusalem was a costly mission. It entailed sacrifice.

And, it means the very same thing for us today. When we follow after Jesus, we are called to choose. We have to choose who we're going to serve at every turn—in every conversation we have, in every purchase we make, in every show we watch, in every thought we think, in every job we take. In all of this, Jesus calls us to follow after him. He calls us to submit our will to his will.

Take a moment and consider the costs of this mission.

- It may mean that you have to leave a comfortable situation for a hard one. This was true for the Israelites who went to rebuild and repopulate the city of Jerusalem and for Nehemiah whenever he left his position as cupbearer to the King of Persia.
- It may mean you'll need to speak of things which will make you unpopular. Jesus regularly said these kinds of things, and we must say similar things—when we follow Jesus—which will be unpopular. This will cost us.
- It may mean you have to seek reconciliation with someone who's hurt you. Forgiveness always entails sacrifice. This is most clearly seen at the cross of Christ Jesus. Forgiveness cost him his life.

Friends, just as God's calling to Jerusalem was a hard and sacrificial calling, so too is our calling to the city of Chicago. We must be committed to serve the Lord if we're to succeed. But, that's going to take revival in us. It's going to take the Spirit of God in us—bringing us conviction and dedication to the messy, difficult ministry of this great city.

And, without a doubt, it'll mean sacrifice. You'll have to put your "Colorado" on the backburner. You'll have to put off your own will and, instead, put on Christ,

because—in the immortal words of the Mandalorian—“This is the way.” The way to everlasting life! The way to true joy! The way to ultimate meaning!

So Jesus said: *Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it* (Matthew 16:24-25).

Friends, this is the way to the New Jerusalem, the Holy City (Revelation 21:2), to the great city...whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10). Amen.