

Here For Good 2.0

Part 2

Nehemiah 7:1-73

1. Creating Community.

- The Priority of Praise.

- Nehemiah 7:1-2, 70-73; Jeremiah 13:11

2. Guarding Community.

- Nehemiah 7:3

- The Priority of Protection.

- 1 Peter 5:8; Psalm 124:1-6

3. Quest for Continuity.

- The Priority of People.

- Nehemiah 7:4-5



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Part 2: Here for Each Other

At a Catholic church in Milan, Italy, a young man and woman from South America entered each day for about a month and sat before a statue of the Madonna. The priests assumed they were just like any other devoted Catholics, coming for prayer. Day after day they came, sat for an hour or so, and left. One day the cleaning man noticed an unusual electrical cord leading from the plug used to provide electricity to light up the statue. Upon further examination, it turned out the young couple had been coming to church every day. . . to charge up their cell phone battery.

The parish priest, Don Antonio Colombo, said in the newspaper article, that the couple apparently didn't have a home of their own. The church was at least the place where they charged their batteries. Let me ask you: what is the church for you? I don't mean the building; I mean the community of believers. Is it just a place to charge your batteries, or are we like a home, a family for you?

Church is a great place to charge your life's batteries, but it's supposed to be more than that; it's supposed to be a home – a place where family is, where we draw strength and energy from each other, together in Christ, through his Spirit, where we get the energy we need to operate in the church and in this world in the way we were created by God to operate.

Of course, if church is just a place that you meet in with a bunch of strangers for an hour or so a week, then you are missing the point. For you, it's not much more than a building. The building is important – it's very important. It is the place that we gather together in, it's the place we worship together in, we learn in, and where our children, youth, young adults and adults of all ages are served and ministered to through all of life's joys and challenges. The building needs to be able to do all that for us, which is why it is so important to renovate areas of our church. Many of the spaces we use were designed for people over a generation ago – nearly 50 years old. We need to update our building so we can keep growing and serving each other and our families. That's why Here For Good is so important: first, we paid off the debt, now we need to raise funds to begin renovations. But I'll repeat what we've already said many times before: your leaders are committed to the fact that we will not go into debt again.

Let me get you up to speed on what's been happening. Since we had the mortgage burning celebration in July, your elected Leadership Team has interviewed architectural firms and has hired a company called BPH Architects out of Lynnwood, Washington. BPH has been designing and building scores of churches in the state of Washington for over 40 years. We are also putting together our renovation team made up of members of our elected Leadership Team and our church family. They will soon send out a survey to all of you in order to get your opinions of what we need to work on. They'll work with the architect and Leadership Team to prioritize what renovations we can do with the funds that come in through Here For Good. We will eventually hire a contractor to work with our renovation team and architect in doing those projects. And in every step along the way, we will communicate thoroughly, regularly, and frequently

with you to keep you informed. And just to remind you, in the Church of the Nazarene, we cannot take on a major building project without approval from the members, so when we've got our master plan finalized, the members of the church will vote on it. You will be informed and involved throughout the entire process.

But the necessity of that process is why I don't have specifics about what those renovations will be – not yet, anyway, because we need to hear from you; I can only give you general areas, like the worship center, the foyer restrooms, the children's areas, and other areas that we've talked about in this booklet. But – I trust the process, and you should too. We won't make decisions in a backroom somewhere and then surprise you; you will be informed and involved. You know me – you know that my leadership style is I'm a process and a consensus guy. I believe the process of getting somewhere is *just as important* as the end product, if not more. We won't do this without you! Okay? The building is important, so we want to do this right, and do it together.

Still, you and I know that being the church is *not* the building; it *is* about the people of God, the community of believers, and carrying out together our God-given mission in this world. Being the church is what we do as God's people in, and from, the building. Being the church is about being a family of believers, filled with meaningful relationships where every person is significant *inside* the church, and every person is reached with God's love *outside* the church.

The building is just the "headquarters," if you will. Important, yes, but only representative of, and facilitating the needs of the church.

We're going to learn that from a section of the book of Nehemiah from the Old Testament. As you know, Ezra/Nehemiah is a favorite book of mine in the Bible, and we are going through it together in our Sunday morning adult Bible App class. It's a great story from history about God's people. The Jews had been overthrown and were under the authority of foreign kings. They were in exile for over 70 years. Jerusalem, the capital city of their home country Israel, was in ruins. They were scattered with no place to call their own, no national identity, and only a faint memory from over three generations ago of what it was like to be God's people, chosen and dearly loved. But God didn't forget them, and he moved the heart of the pagan king to allow a remnant of the Jews to return to Jerusalem and begin rebuilding their community. They started with a couple guys named Zerubbabel and Joshua who went to Jerusalem and led them in rebuilding their Temple – the building where they gathered in, worshipped, learned, and served each other. Then, in the second wave, Ezra came and led them to re-establish their culture around God's Word. Lastly, in the third wave, through an amazing and miraculous set of circumstances, a man named Nehemiah was able to leave his position as the king's trusted advisor and travelled the 900 miles to Jerusalem. Nehemiah went to rebuild the walls around the city, as well their community and their civic and financial structures.

Nehemiah was a person of integrity, a leader, and a man of deep devotion to God. He was also a man who lived from the knees up—a man of prayer. And he prayerfully set out to rally the remnant of Jewish people that remained, and they rebuilt the wall. You think it's been tough being the church in a pandemic; Nehemiah led God's people in spite of a lack of funds, in a depressed economy with little to no resources, few skilled workers, and being surrounded by enemies who desperately wanted them to fail. And despite all that, the people *finished* the renovation project. The wall was between thirty feet and 80 feet high, over ten feet wide, and over two miles long. And they finished it from the ground up in less than two months. They learned a lot in the process, and so

have we since we began Here For Good a year and a half ago.

But once God's people finished the wall, the *real* work would begin for them. You see, it wasn't ever about the wall, really. The renovation project was only to assist them in building the community of believers, to define and fulfill their destiny as God's people in that city – exactly like it is with us; we are renovating in order to fulfill our mission as God's people in West Valley.

Like the people in Nehemiah's time, we are faced with the challenge of overcoming obstacles that can keep us from being a true community, the family of believers. We've got renovations to do in order to better be God's Church. Also, like the rubble around what once was the walls, we live in a broken-down culture, where it's hard to recognize that there was even once faith in God. And what's left is the debris of disconnected community.

According to Robert Putnam, a sociologist who wrote the book, *Bowling Alone*, community life has declined continuously in America over the past quarter to half century, to the point where something as simple as family dinners have decreased by 33%. Having friends over has decreased by 45%. Attending club meetings in communities, once a backbone of civic involvement, has decreased by 58%. Stephen Marche writes in his article in *The Atlantic*, "Over the past three decades, technology has delivered to us a world in which we need not be out of contact for a fraction of a moment. In 2010, at a cost of \$300 million, 800 miles of fiber-optic cable was laid between the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and the New York Stock Exchange to shave three milliseconds off trading times. Yet within this world of instant and absolute communication, unbounded by limits of time or space, we suffer from unprecedented alienation. We have never been more detached from one another, or lonelier. In a world consumed by ever more novel modes of socializing, we have less and less actual society. We live in an accelerating contradiction: the more connected we become, the lonelier we are. We were promised a global village; instead we inhabit the drab cul-de-sacs and endless freeways of a vast suburb of information."¹

All of that research was done as Facebook was just *beginning* to gain traction, and that along with all the other social network sites have increased the problems exponentially – we are more digitally connected than ever, but we are more isolated than ever.

Add to that this pandemic we are in, and it makes matters worse. Research has shown that even as we meet via zoom or in person with masks, it fatigues us because our brains have to work harder to pick up visual cues. Normally, we look into someone's face to read visual expressions, but we aren't able to do that as well over the internet or with our faces half covered. Our longing for community has only grown more acute and intense. I'm so very thankful that we are able to connect with our online community for the folks who are not able to get out or are too far away to be in person. The reality of online community is not going to go away. We can't pretend that everything will go back to what "normal" used to be, because *this* is the new normal. So we need to work even harder to create opportunities to connect with each other and develop community, even when we're online. That's why, for the folks who are worshiping with us through streaming or Facebook or YouTube, we'd really like to hear from you and connect with you. We want to do all we can to be a community that you can be a part of, even from a distance, and help you grow in your faith. That's why we encourage you to click that tab and let us know who you are and who is with you. We want a relationship with you.

¹ <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/is-facebook-making-us-lonely/8930/>

Because into this kind of culture, we are called to come together as a community that loves and cares for each other and for the people around us, where each person is loved, safe, and important.

And, according to research, the church is still the best place for this to happen. US News and World Report stated in an article that “. . . religious congregations remain the single strongest influence to bring isolated, solitary people into community events.

More people come together on a regular basis for church assemblies than meet for any other cultural or voluntary institution in our country. No other modern industrial nation compares to the United States in this regard.”

While we have our work cut out for us, we as a church are still the premium place for God to bring people together. So we need the best place to gather that we can have.

How do we learn to develop community in a society that is so separated and isolated? What we learn from Nehemiah, in answer to that, has application to our lives and homes as well.

Let’s look at chapter seven of Nehemiah and learn the priorities so that we can be about this great work of being God’s people in our lives, our homes, and our church. Chapter seven is a great place to learn this. It’s a little long, but would you let me read it to us? I’ve shortened it by summarizing some portions. There are long lists of names and numbers of the people returning to Jerusalem, so as I’m reading, you’ll see italicized words – that’s where I’ve summarized it for us. There are some fascinating things in those lists of names, but we don’t have time to go into that today.

So would you honor God’s Word and stand with me as I read it? Thank you:

“After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers, the musicians and the Levites were appointed. I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do. I said to them, “The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses.”

Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt. So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials, and the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return. This is what I found written there:

These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town, in company with *the leaders*):

The list of the men of Israel: (*List of men from 32 families and towns totaling 25,406*)

The priests: (*a list of descendants from 5 families, totaling 4289*)

The Levites: (*descendants of one family totaling 74*)

The musicians: (*descendants of one family totaling 148*)

The gatekeepers: (*descendants of six families totaling 138*)

The temple servants: *(The temple servants and the descendants of the servants of Solomon for a total of 392)*

(A list of people from five towns and three families, and priests from three families, that could not prove their Jewish heritage: 642) These searched for their family records, but they could not find them and so were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. The governor, therefore, ordered them not to eat any of the most sacred food until there should be a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim.

The whole company numbered 42,360, besides their 7,337 male and female slaves; and they also had 245 male and female singers. There were 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels and 6,720 donkeys.

Some of the heads of the families contributed to the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 darics of gold, 50 bowls and 530 garments for priests. Some of the heads of the families gave to the treasury for the work 20,000 darics of gold and 2,200 minas of silver. The total given by the rest of the people was 20,000 darics of gold, 2,000 minas of silver and 67 garments for priests.

The priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the musicians, and the temple servants, along with certain of the people and the rest of the Israelites, settled in their own towns. (Nehemiah 7:1-73, niv)

Thank you – you can be seated. Hopefully you saw how the people all came together, from their various places, families, and roles, and they all gave generously and sacrificially of their money for the renovation – *just like we are doing with Here For Good!*

First see that, like us, they had the challenge of...

1. ***Creating* Community.**

As God's people, they now had a place to belong, but they had the greater task of *belonging*. Now that they had the building, they needed to answer the call to be set apart as a people, belonging to God and to each other. They had neither of those for at least seventy years – actually several centuries if you count the generations of disobedience. They had accomplished together the incredible task of renovating the Temple and the wall, so perhaps now they could learn to commit to each other and love each other. This is the same for us: we are all giving generously for the renovation, but we are doing it because renovation will help us become the community of God's people, loving God and loving each other.

For the Israelites to do that, they had to establish the first order of priority:

The Priority of ***Praise***

See again what Nehemiah said in verse one that we read:

“After the wall was finished and I had set up the doors in the gates, the gatekeepers, singers, and Levites were appointed. I gave the responsibility of governing Jerusalem to my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah, the commander of the fortress, for he was a faithful man who feared God more than most.” (Nehemiah 7:1-2, nlt)

Among the first people appointed to leadership were the singers—those who helped

lead worship, much like our worship team, and then the Levites, who were like the pastors. They knew that their biggest priority was to be a people of praise; a people who would worship God in their public gatherings and in their private lives. That's always been God's intention. God stated his intention over and over again: that His people would be set free from slavery in Egypt: *set free to worship Him*. That's why God says that He brings *us* together to praise Him: In Jeremiah He says:

“As a belt is bound around a man's waist, so I bound the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah to me, declares the Lord, to be my people for my renown and praise and honor.” (Jeremiah 13:11, niv)

That's why worship is so important to us. We want to be a place where God's presence is worshipped, and where God is honored. That's why we need the best possible place to do that together in. Renovation is important! We want to worship him with our lives. It's a mark of being His people.

Is that your priority with *your* life? If you want your home and your life to be all God created you for, then it must first and foremost be a place where God is honored and praise to God comes easy.

Notice also that passage says that the gatekeepers and the leaders were put in place. The gatekeepers are the ones who make sure that no outside influence slips in among the community. And then the leaders that were put in place had to be godly leaders, people of integrity and outstanding commitment to God.

That certainly sounds like the church – a place where our leaders make sure that we maintain a theological and ethical standard of living according to God's Word, leaders who live lives of integrity and deep commitment to God. Is that true in your life and home? Parents, are you living lives of integrity and commitment to Christ outside of church?

I want you to also see one other characteristic of God's people and the life of praise that describes this community. It's at the end of the chapter in verses 70-73:

“Some of the heads of the families contributed to the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 drachmas of gold, 50 bowls and 530 garments for priests. Some of the heads of the families gave to the treasury for the work; 20,000 drachmas of gold and 2,200 minas of silver. The total given by the rest of the people was 20,000 drachmas of gold, 2,000 minas of silver and 67 garments for priests. The priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, and the temple servants, along with certain of the people and the rest of the Israelites, settled in their own towns. (Nehemiah 7:70-73)

Here's the point: if our church is going to be a true community of praise to Christ, it will be marked by our *generosity*. We will be a *giving people*, and our leaders set the example. We will be people who are willing to give for the renovation, and to give and work in whatever ways are necessary for our church. We are to be people willing to make sacrifices for our church and for each other.

God's people in Nehemiah gave gold and silver, they gave resources, and they volunteered in whatever way was necessary. I can guarantee you, if we are going to accomplish what God has for us, we must be a giving people. If we are going to learn from Nehemiah, we must be people like they were, people who give financially for the cause. And our leaders are the first to do so. You have pastors and Leadership Team members (that's our church board) who understand the priority of not only regular

tithe (which is giving 10% of their income to the church) but in addition to giving tithe, they are also giving generously toward Here For Good – we count it a privilege to lead the way in giving generously. Your leaders also give beyond that in offerings of their time, their talent, and their treasure. They do that week in and week out. They *lead* us to give in generous ways. So let me ask you this: do *you* give to your church? Do the people around you see you as a generous and giving person? Do the people you work with, your neighbors, your children, know you to be generous with your life, your time, your money, and resources? Have you committed to give to Here For Good? If you haven't committed yet, please start praying now about how much you will give. If you *are* already giving, please commit yourself to at least meeting your initial commitment, if not increasing it. Because giving generously is part of our praise to God.

Second, see that they had the task of...

2. **Guarding Community.**

Remember, we already saw that there were gatekeepers appointed. Their job was to guard the entrances to the city, much like security at an airport, protecting the community from threats, keeping the threats outside the gates. Now look at verse three: (This is Nehemiah talking) I said to them:

"Do not leave the gates open during the hottest part of the day. And even while the gatekeepers are on duty, have them shut and bar the doors. Appoint the residents of Jerusalem to act as guards, everyone on a regular watch. Some will serve at sentry posts and some in front of their own homes." (Nehemiah 7:3, nlt)

This is...

The Priority of Protection

Being the people of God is an important thing, and it's worth protecting. The guards were told not to open the gates until late in the morning when it was safer to do so, and then by the early evening to make sure that the gates were tightly closed and barred. Nehemiah then gave orders that there would be guards throughout the night to watch over the city to protect it.

As your pastor, I know part of my job is to protect you, and also to train *you* to protect this valuable thing we have. That's why you always hear us warn you about disunity and the actions that cause disunity, like greed and gossip. In addition, don't forget we have an enemy who wants to attack and destroy us. The Bible tells us to:

"Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour." (1Peter 5:8, nlt)

It is vital that we protect each other.

Now think about your own life and home. Do you protect your life with this same sense of seriousness? The people in Jerusalem were still surrounded on all sides by hundreds of thousands of troops of their enemies. Do you have that same sense of urgency for protecting your Christian life? For protecting your home and family?

Build a wall of strong values and convictions in your life and home, so that you'll be protected from the flood of attacks from the enemies that will pound against it.

That's why one of our major priorities is "member care." When we talk about moving money from mortgage to ministry, one of the major ways we want to invest those

ministry dollars is in member care – making sure our church family is well taken care of. We want to do a better job of connecting with each other, so we need the systems in place to help us do that. We want to be there for each other when we are struggling, or needing help, or in the hospital. We'll want to expand our small group ministry, doing a better job of utilizing those groups to come alongside one another. We are organizing our pastoral staff to try to do what Pastor Arden did (it's been a year and a half since he passed away, but I miss my friend like it was yesterday). We need more robust children, youth, young adult, adult men's and women's ministries and worship ministries. Your pastors, leaders, and volunteers are able to do a lot with very small budgets; think what they could do with a greater investment from those mortgage to ministry dollars!

We need safer spaces for our children. Our gathering spaces for youth, young adults, and adults need to be updated. All of these things will help us honor and serve each other of each generation.

I've told you before, but I'll tell you again: God has called us to be a multi-generational church; a church in which all generations are honored, and all generations honor each other. We must be a multigenerational representation of the Kingdom of God.

We have other priorities that I'm excited to tell you about, but I'll save those for the next couple of Sundays.

We – the church – are the wall that God uses to protect one another – especially the most vulnerable. The Bible says that for those who love and follow Him, His love and righteousness will be with them and their children's children. You will be protected! The Bible says:

“If the Lord had not been on our side . . . The flood would have engulfed us, the torrent would have swept over us, the raging waters would have swept us away. Praise the Lord who has not let us be torn...” (Psalm 124:1-6, niv)

We make it a priority to protect our church, our homes, and our lives by our commitment to Christ and to each other.

Finally, see their...

3. Quest for Continuity

It was important to Nehemiah that they *maintain* their sense of community continuously throughout this time, so he set out to keep track of them. He was concerned, because the city was large enough, that someone could slip through the cracks without anyone knowing. So he kept track of them by counting them all. So we see...

The Priority of People

See what it says in verses four and five:

“At that time the city was large and spacious, but the population was small, and none of the houses had been rebuilt. So my God gave me the idea to call together all the nobles and leaders of the city, along with the ordinary citizens, for registration. I had found the genealogical record of those who had first returned to Judah.” (Nehemiah 7:4-5, nlt)

And then he goes into a long list of all the families, over 42,000 of them altogether. Now

some of you might remember that earlier in their history King David took a census of the people, and it was an evil and selfish thing to do. David wanted to feed his ego by knowing how many served him. God punished David for that. But that's not what Nehemiah is doing. God actually told Nehemiah to do this, and there are many times in the Bible when this was done. In fact, God gave instructions to Moses on how to do it properly.

Let me just point out why the counting of people is important: People will sometimes ask why we keep track of numbers. We like to say that we count people, because people count! We want to maintain continuity of our community, we want to do all we can to be sure that we are taken care of, encouraged, and supported together in Christ. That's why we keep track of who is progressing through our foundation classes; just like in school and college they keep track of your progress. *Every one* of us is important. No matter how insignificant you might feel or think you are, you are important. We want you to know that; you count enough that we count you. That's why we encourage you to fill out the Connection Books and to fill out the tab online – so we can do everything we can to support and encourage you.

And dads and moms – sure your kids know that they count, too. They aren't just something that should be seen and not heard. They are individuals whom *God* intentionally created in their mothers' wombs, the Bible says. He loved them enough to die for them before they were born. He created them to be a part of His great purposes in this world. Make sure your kids know that they count. We want you to know *you count; you matter*. Every person is important.

That's what it means for us to be "Here For Good" – until Jesus returns, we are here for each other.

Prayer

Benediction:

May God, who gives (us) patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15:5-6, nlt)