

The Ways God Works

by Ray C. Stedman

I was told in seminary never to begin a message with an apology, but I want to start this study in Nehemiah 11 and part of Chapter 12 with a confession: When I first began to work on this chapter, I was simply appalled! I found it to be nothing but an unending series of hard-to-pronounce names. I kept saying to myself, “What can I do with this section?” But I am committed to two unchangeable things:

- One is Paul’s word to Timothy, “All Scripture (all of it) is given by inspiration of God and is profitable,” {2 Tim 3:16a KJV}.
- Second, I am committed to the principle that, as an expositor, I am responsible to declare the whole counsel of God.

So we are not going to skip these chapters. There are some wonderful discoveries to be made in them.

I have found in the past that whenever there is an apparently dry, uninteresting list of names in Scripture, God always includes certain clues which, if you follow them up, make the section glow with light. These genealogies and lists of names look about as interesting as a telephone directory, but if you look at the clues – and they are always there – you will find some things of great interest.

The more I worked on this the more I found! I now conclude that this is one of the most fascinat-

ing and profitable sections in Nehemiah. I hope you will agree with me when we complete this study.

Chapter 11 is the account of Nehemiah’s actions in repopulating Jerusalem. Although the city wall has been rebuilt at this point, Nehemiah discovered that he had a problem. He had a fine, well-defended city – but without people! His solution was to draft families to move there, for a capital must be inhabited, since it is the heart of the nation. We discover this clue in the opening verses.

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

These 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 his own property in the various towns, while other people from both Judah and Benjamin lived in Jerusalem): {Neh 11:1-4a NIV}

The great principle to remember in reading the Old Testament is that what happens to Israel on a physical level pictures what is happening to us on the spiritual level. Read with that principle in mind, it becomes a wonderful book of instruction. God, too, is a Builder. The New Testament tells us that he is building a city and one which has inhabitants. It is called *The New Jerusalem*. It is not like the old one, made of bricks and mortar, but a new city built of spiritual stones – “living stones,” according to the New Testament {1 Pet 2:5}. It is intended to be inhabited by redeemed people. If you draw that parallel you will begin to see some of the teaching of this passage in Nehemiah.

I would summarize this introductory account under the heading: *a voluntary draft*. The grammarians among you will immediately recognize this term as an oxymoron. That is not a specialized type of idiot! It is rather a term which contains within it contradictory elements. For instance, if you referred to a person as a “sad optimist,” that would be an oxymoron. One that is very common today is, “fresh frozen food.” If it is fresh, it is not frozen, and if it is frozen, it is not fresh! Anybody who has tried fish in a restaurant knows that. It cannot be both. That is an oxymoron, an apparent contradiction.

After the first service I was handed a note by some who evidently were stimulated by what I said. They offered certain other oxymorons. “Military intelligence” was one, and “congressional ethics” was another. I will leave it to you to decide whether those qualify or not!

I hope you get the picture here. Nehemiah wants to move people into the city because Jerusalem is the center of the nation. You cannot have a capital city that is uninhabited (unless it is Carson City, Nevada). As the governor, he simply issued an edict: “One out of every ten people living in the suburbs must move to Jerusalem.” He went through the towns and numbered the people, counting them off by tens, and then they threw a dice (actually the word is die), with ten numbers on it and whatever number came up the man with that number was expected to move his family into Jerusalem.

But there is something very interesting here. If you read this carefully, it is apparent that when a man was chosen to move into Jerusalem he was permitted to decline if he wanted to. That is because God wanted volunteers for this. So a man

could be chosen, but could decide against moving. Then the lot would be cast again and another name chosen. Sooner or later someone would be found who consented freely to go. According to the account, those who chose to go were commended by the people. They honored them because they volunteered to do what God called them to do.

The application for us is obvious. The same principle applies in the church today. According to the New Testament, we are all called into the ministry – all of us! The ministry belongs to the saints! The minute you become a Christian you are moved into God’s new Jerusalem. You are asked to take up labor there, to do work according to the spiritual gift God has given you. But you must also volunteer to do it. God does not force his people to do what they are asked to do. He gave us all spiritual gifts, but he does not force us to use them. Yet if you want to be respected or honored and commended at last by the Lord himself and by all his people, then the wise thing is to volunteer to perform the realm of ministry he has opened up for you.

I stress this because in our bulletin today you will find there is a need for volunteers in our preschool ministry. There are gaps to be filled. There is a need for help. The call has gone out now for several Sundays, but not enough people have volunteered. Those who have already done so, of course, are honored and commended by the people (and by God) for taking part in this ministry. Are you one of those who should volunteer today?

Beginning with the latter part of Verse 4, our text contains **two lists of names**, some from Judah and some from Benjamin, the two tribes that made up the Southern Kingdom of Judah. These tribes had families that were needed in Jerusalem and there is a mingling of them. We are told that 468 “brave men” from Judah volunteered to live in the city, and 928 men from Benjamin. There are some interesting aspects to this.

Notice the list of names of the descendants of Judah focus upon one man whose name is Perez. It concludes with the statement, “The descendants of Perez who lived in Jerusalem totaled 468 brave men.” When you come across a statement like that in the Bible, take a concordance and look up the name that is emphasized because God is saying something important about that person.

Perez was one of the sons of Judah, who was in turn the son of Jacob, one of the twelve patriarchs who fathered the twelve tribes. The story of his birth, in Genesis 38, is a rather lengthy, sordid account which relates how Judah conceived this son with his own daughter-in-law. Thus it was an illegitimate birth. At his birth it was found that the mother was about to bear twins, and his brother started to emerge first. The midwife tied a scarlet string around his finger to indicate he would be the oldest of the twins, but then the baby pulled his arm back and the other twin came out. Because he broke out in that fashion he was named Perez, which means “breaking out.” But following this rather shadowed beginning he went on to become one of the great heroes of Judah. His descendants are traced in almost every generation since. Even here in Nehemiah, some 400 years after Judah lived, Perez is regarded as one of the heroes of the nation. His descendants are called “the brave men of Perez.”

Then, with regard to the people of Benjamin, notice that they provided twice as many men from this small tribe as those from larger tribe of Judah. The sordid history of Benjamin is given us in the book of Judges. The last few chapters of that book tell a sorry tale of people who fell into sexual sin and began to practice homosexuality. It was a terrible disgrace and stain on the life of Israel. But two important men came from this tribe:

- One is called Saul, the first king of Israel. He is a great disappointment for though he began well he ends his forty years of reign in bitter, acrimonious, angry rebellion against God. He finally takes his own life on a battlefield.
- There is another Saul, however, in the New Testament, who also came from the tribe of Benjamin. This is Saul of Tarsus, who is better known to us, of course, as the Apostle Paul.

What is all this teaching us? I think it illustrates what the New Testament often tells us, that God is no respecter of persons. He does not care how you started out in life. You do not wreck your chances for success in his eyes by beginning at a very low level. God can cleanse people and use them in mighty and wonderful ways. He chooses, we are told, the obscure, the once tainted, the re-

jects of life. He loves to pick up those kinds of people and do wonderful things with them.

I do not want to embarrass someone who is present this morning, but I want to tell you that one of the most respected men of this congregation is Mike Tracy, the head of our maintenance work here at the church. Mike had a rather shabby beginning. He has shared it with some of us at various times. Yet despite the three strikes against him when he started out, God has changed this man. He is honored, respected and listened to. He has a great ministry among us by the grace of God, because that is the way God delights to work. This is what this whole chapter is about – the revelation of how God works among his people.

Verses 10-24 is a rather lengthy section with many names. It is a picture of **God’s provision for ministry** within the city of Jerusalem. If you have a capital city filled with people, then you need a ministry within it to maintain the spiritual strength of those people. This is what we read here.

First, there is a company of priests selected, a total of 1192 of them, who fall into three groups:

- We are told that 822 of them “carried on work for the temple,” {Neh 11:12b NIV}. These were the normally officiating priests. They offered sacrifices, presented offerings, and performed the ritual that Moses had prescribed. They were the ones who ministered to the spiritual life of the people.
- Then there was another group of 242 who were set aside as “heads of families,” {Neh 11:13b NIV}. This means they had a ministry of counseling families, of working out problems and dealing with difficulties in the families of the priests. They did not neglect their own families while they were ministering to other people but these men were especially set aside to minister to the priestly families.
- Then we have listed a third group of 128 men who are called, surprisingly, “brave warriors,” {Neh 11:14b NIV}. Certain priests were also warriors. They fought in the battles that Israel engaged in from time to time in defense of the city.

When we carry this over to the parallel of the church today, we find that God has also provided a “ministry within the ministry,” a group of men and women who are gifted in helping people to understand the meaning of the great sacrifice of Jesus. They teach the doctrines of redemption and forgiveness of sin and help people to understand how to become and what it is to be, a new creature in Christ. Then there are others among us who are especially gifted in helping families understand the difficulties they are passing through and what answers there may be. Finally, there are some who especially serve as warriors – prayer warriors – and in guarding the flock from the invasion of wrong doctrines, or wrong practices that infiltrate the church from outside. So God still works the same way among us today. The whole congregation are priests, but there are some set aside to the spiritual strengthening of the others.

The second division constitutes the Levites. There were 284 of them in the holy city, we are told. They too fall into two groups:

- The first division, we read, are those “who had charge of the outside work of the house of God,” {Neh 11:16b NIV}.

Thank God for the men and women who are in charge of the outside work in the ministry of the church today! I am talking about deacons, as the New Testament calls them. These are men and women who are responsible to carry out various details, to take care of buildings and minister to the poor and the needy. Those who do this work correspond to the work of the Levites in the Old Testament.

- The second group among the Levites, the musicians, are very interesting. If you will look carefully, you will see familiar names among them. One name is Asaph, who is called “the director who led in thanksgiving and prayer.” Another is called Jeduthun. These two names appear frequently in the Psalms. Many of the psalms are dedicated “to the Chief Musician,” who is either Asaph, or, in some cases, Jeduthun. These two men, who lived in David’s day, were chosen to set up the ministry of music within the congregation of Israel.

Let me read to you a couple of verses about them, taken from First Chronicles. In the 16th chapter {Verse 41} we are told that

“Heman and Jeduthun were designated by name to give thanks to the LORD, ‘for his love endures forever.’” That is the central theme of all thanksgiving. All the great hymns and praise choruses are really hymns of praise to God for his love that endures forever. That is the *Amazing Grace* that we just sang about a little while ago. One of my favorite hymns which I never tire of hearing takes up that theme:

O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

That is the great ministry of music. Music in the church is not entertainment. It is a means by which we are strengthened, fed, and helped. At the Congress on Biblical Exposition in the Second Baptist Church in Houston last year, I sat in the congregation during several meetings with tears running down my face as the musicians of that great church blessed me, and strengthened me, by a marvelous ministry of choirs and solos. That is what music is for. God ordained it for that purpose. When I get to heaven I am going to ask the Lord to put the Southern Baptists in charge of the music! They did a wonderful job for us there in Houston!

Another verse, from First Chronicles 25, is interesting. There we are told that “David ... set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun for the ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals.” {1 Chr 25:1a NIV}. “And Jeduthun prophesied, using the harp in thanking and praising the Lord,” {cf, 1 Chr 25:3}. Jeduthun and Heman were under the supervision of the King [David],” {1 Chr 25:6 NIV}. Then get this: “They were accompanied by 120 priests sounding trumpets.” That makes 76 trombones look like pikers!

Can you imagine 120 priests blowing trumpets? What a tremendous gathering they must have had! You would not have wanted to miss church in those days. These are the men who set up the ministry of music within the nation of Israel.

Now obviously, we follow in their steps. We have choirs, orchestras, pianists and organists and soloists. It is not merely entertainment. It is powerful, satisfying, teaching ministry. We ought to honor those who are involved in it.

Then the third group mentioned here in Verse 19 are “the gatekeepers” {Neh 11:19 NIV}, 172 of them. They correspond, of course, to the ministry of ushers who watch the doors. That is exactly what the word means. They are watchers who look out for people and serve them as they come to church. They help them find their seats and get their bulletins and understand what is going on. They open the windows when it gets too hot and close them again when it is cold. This is a ministry that God himself, through the king and the priests, had set up there in Israel.

There are still other ministries mentioned in Verses 20-24. I will not take time to read this, but it speaks of “temple servants” {Neh 11:21 NIV}, of “chief officers” {Neh 11:22 NIV}, of “singers” again “under the king’s orders,” {Neh 11:23-24}. It speaks of one who was “the king’s agent in all affairs relating to the people,” {Neh 11:24 NIV} – trouble-shooters, in other words.

At our last elders’ meeting we discussed asking for people to be available at each service as problem solvers, trouble-shooters, “agents of God in relating to the affairs of people.” This is exactly in line with what ancient Israel enjoyed.

Verses 25-36 list the names of many cities of Judah and Benjamin. Again, I will not take time to read it. You may be interested that Kiriath Arba, which is mentioned there, is an ancient name for Hebron. These cities were widely scattered around Jerusalem. Beersheba, which is mentioned, was probably 50 to 60 miles from the capital city. From the coast to the Jordan valley these cities were scattered, both in Judah and in Benjamin. The Benjamite cities were north and west of Jerusalem, and the Judean cities were south and west. But all are mentioned as towns to which the capital could look for support in times of trouble.

It is easy to see how this applies to the body of Christ scattered around the world today, yet related as one body. I was pleased this morning when Ron Ritchie led in prayer and offered prayers for the pastor of the Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Ber-

keley, the pastor of the South Hills Community Church, the pastor of the Central Peninsula Church and other churches around us. We are not in competition with other churches. We are deriving support from them and they from us.

Chapter 12 is another list of names even more intimidating. But we are not left without some of these helpful clues. It starts right out with the word:

These were the priests and Levites who returned with Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, and with Jeshua. {Neh 12:1a NIV}

This takes us back to the heroes of the past. Zerubbabel led the first return from captivity in Babylon to Jerusalem in 538 B.C., almost 100 years earlier than Nehemiah’s day. Nehemiah is looking back at these men who led that procession. Zerubbabel was a priest and Jeshua was a Levite. They led a company of Israelites back to the city of Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Verse 7 says that they were the “leaders of the priests and their associates in the days of Jeshua.”

Verses 8-10 tell us a little more about Jeshua. By the way, that name is a variant form of Yeshua, which, if you are acquainted with the ministry of Jesus for Jesus you will recognize as the Hebrew form of the name Jesus. Here you have a Jesus in the Old Testament as well. Yeshua, we are told in Verse 10, was “the father of Joiakim.” The account traces his line down to the priest Jaddua.

Let me throw in **a note of historic interest** here:

This mention of a “priest named Jaddua” has been the source of a great deal of criticism of the book of Nehemiah. The critics say that this dates the book further in history to the time of Alexander the Great, in about 323 B.C., which would be 100 years or so after Nehemiah lived. Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that when Alexander the Great led his Greek armies down through the Middle East against the land of Egypt he came up to Jerusalem. He was about to attack and sack the city when he was met by a company of priests led by the high priest, whose name was Jaddua. This man opened the book of Daniel and showed to Alexander the 8th chapter, in which it was predicted that a he-goat with a great central horn (who is

clearly identified as the leader of the Grecian nation) would come against the Holy Land, and that he would conquer most of the world of that day.

When Alexander the Great saw this prediction of his own life and conquests, he was taken aback and so impressed that he spared Jerusalem and went on down to conquer Egypt and establish the city of Alexandria there. So the critics say, "This mention of Jaddua means you cannot trust the dating of Nehemiah. This is not history. This is mere legend. It is not trustworthy." But, unfortunately for that theory, the scholars have now found that there were a number of priests named Jaddua. This is certainly easy to believe because we find in this very account men passing their name on to their sons, just as fathers do today. There were several priests named Jaddua, and several governors of Samaria named Sanballat, another source of the critics' charge. So this theory is clearly unfounded.

The passage teaches us that **we must not forget past heroes**, the men of fame and of glory whom God has used in former days. I have been reading again the writings of some of my early spiritual heroes. For example,

- I am reading the book on Nehemiah by my dear patron saint, Dr. H. A. Ironside, with whom I was privileged to travel for a whole summer before coming here to Peninsula Bible Church.
- Last month I was saddened by the death of Dr. J. Vernon McGee. This man had a worldwide radio ministry. I was his youth director for two summers and learned much from him on how to expound and bring out points of interest in the Scriptures.
- Recently I have been reading some of the ministry of Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas Seminary. It blessed my heart again to see what he stood for and how faithful he was to the truth.
- Men like Hudson Taylor and D. L. Moody were early heroes of mine also.

I would urge you, on the basis of a passage like this, to read biography! It will bless you. It will challenge you and strengthen you to see how God has used men and women of the past to stand against the temptations and the pressures of the world and accomplish much for his glory.

Verses 22-26 give **the chronological time** when the records that we have just looked at were recorded. It does not sound very interesting, but we are told that the first group "the family heads of the Levites ... were recorded in the reign of Darius the Persian." That meant that there was a time when they were kept as temple records but they were not actually recorded permanently until the days of Darius the Second. This would put that record somewhere between 423 and 404 B.C., somewhat later than Nehemiah. Evidently some later hand added this so that we might know when it was written.

Then there is another mention in Verse 23 of "the book of the annals," i.e., the annals of the kings of Judah. One of them is especially mentioned in the reference to "David, the man of God." What a remarkable influence David had! F. B. Meyer says, "How long the influence of David has lingered over the world, like the afterglow of a sunset." Yet David had a terrible record of evil in his life. He fell into adultery and was involved in the murder of his best friend, one of his generals. Because his heart was set on God, however, and he took advantage of God's provision for forgiveness, David is known to history as "the man after God's own heart." If you want to learn how to live as a Christian, you would do well to study his life.

The last record is of the gatekeepers who served "in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah." That brings us to the end of the passage we chosen for today.

Why is all this information given to us?

I think it is clear that it marks the deeds of God as part of the record of history. That is one of the great advantages of Christianity over all the other religions of the world. Most of them are religious philosophies, or simply the musings of men meditating upon various aspects of life. Many of them are a record of visions and dreams of dubious origin. But when you come to the record of the Bible, it is based upon facts. It is not legend. It is not myth. It is not fiction. It is not a record of philosophies or of the inventions of men. It is made up of historic facts. God grounds these great events in the history of the world itself.

A young Christian man told me just last week about being confronted at work by another young

man concerning his faith in Christ. This man said to him, “The Bible is nothing but a collection of myths. Men wrote the Bible. There isn’t any God. Men invented him because they wanted something to rationalize their dreams and visions. There is nothing supernatural about the Bible.” The first young man answered him wisely. He said, “That is not true. You are saying that because you want to have an excuse for your own rebellion. But the truth is that these are facts. These are recorded in history. These great events took place and can be tested and proven by the records of other accounts.”

That is why frequently, as here in this passage, we are reminded of that our faith rests upon incontrovertible evidence. This is particularly significant as we approach Easter, the resurrection day of our Lord Jesus.

These then are the great lessons for us today. I hope you have gained something of profit and wonderful encouragement that comes to us from even the “clean” pages of the Bible. You would not normally expect very much in these sections, but when you begin to explore, they open up much that is valuable to us.