

The People and Place Where God's Name Dwells
Reflections on the Book of Nehemiah
March 30, 2014

Introduction – A Special Place

There's a season in a young adult's life that is very confusing. You feel displaced. You miss home, but you're glad to be away. But then the holidays roll around and you want to go home – provided, of course that you had a good home. Assuming that you did, coming home was always a special pleasure.

It was the place where your family's name dwelt and it reflected the peculiar qualities of your kin. If I came home for Christmas, there was the tree decorated just so. There were all kinds of baked goods – the stocking cookies with goodies baked inside and almond frosting on the tips were my favorite. We always took walks together with the little dog choking on the collar. A trip down to the marina “to look at the boats” was required. We probably played games where I acted very cutthroat if I was winning or grumpy if I was losing. (That was just my shtick and my family could always depend on me to be a poor sport.) I always drank several cups of tea in one sitting. My parents had great water. And we talked and talked. Coming home wasn't special because of the carpet, paint, and walls. It was the way of life – the traditions – that made home the place where my family's name dwelt.

Have you ever thought in those terms about “God's house” – the place where his name dwells? I know we don't use the phrase, “God's house” very much anymore. And mostly, that is with good reason. But think of it like “coming home” after you've been away for a while. What would the place “where God's name was” be like?

That idea is very close to what the ancient Jews understood Jerusalem and the Temple to be like. When the people of Israel first came into the land given to them by God, they were to tear down all of the shrines and temples to pagan gods and “...seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go,” (Deut 12:5). Eventually, that place became Jerusalem, and specifically, the Temple: “...the Lord said to David and to Solomon his son, “In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out

of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever” (II Kings 21:7). The idea that God’s name would dwell in the Temple runs as a central theme throughout the Old Testament. It is pervasive in the psalms, the underlying theme in Ezra and Nehemiah, and it is the heartcry of many of the prophets. But more than just an interesting cultural and theological observation about ancient Israel, the place where God’s name dwells has profound implications for us as God’s people today.

Text – Nehemiah 1:5-11

And I said, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. 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 parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

Nehemiah 13:30-31

Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits.

Remember me, O my God, for good.

Jerusalem and the Temple: The Place Where God's Name Dwelt

The story of Nehemiah opens with a prayer to restore Jerusalem, the place where God promised his name would dwell. At the end, after building the wall and leading a spiritual renewal of the people, we observe Nehemiah re-establishing Temple giving and worship. For all of this, he asks God to remember him.

Ever since Israel became a nation at Mt. Sinai after their exodus from Egypt, they were to be the people with whom God would dwell. During their 40-year sojourn in the desert, God's presence led them as a cloudy pillar by day and a pillar of fire by night. It was at the Tabernacle that sacrifices were made and God met his people. It was at the Tabernacle, the portable worship sanctuary that God had designed for them, that heaven and earth met. When the people entered the land, the Tabernacle was located variously at Shiloh, Gibeon, and Bethel. King David, the man after God's own heart, earnestly desired to build a permanent Temple in place of the portable Tabernacle. But God did not allow him to build it because he was a warrior – a man of bloodshed. Instead, David laid the plans and gathered the material for his son, Solomon, to build the permanent Temple in Jerusalem.

Solomon's Temple was glorious. But it was the presence of God himself that was even more glorious than the building. On the day of the Temple's dedication, Solomon offered a lengthy and profound prayer, parts of which include:

“But will God indeed dwell with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you, that your eyes may be open day and night toward this house, the place where you have promised to set your name, that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place...”

II Chronicles 6:18-20

As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. And the

priests could not enter the house of the Lord, because the glory of the Lord filled the Lord's house. When all the people of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the Lord on the temple, they bowed down with their faces to the ground on the pavement and worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever."

II Chronicles 7:1-3

Significantly, the Temple was built on hill – a high place – symbolically reinforcing the idea that it was where heaven and earth intersected. It was the place where God met with men. When the people of God were faithful, they would take an annual pilgrimage to the city and the Temple. Because the Temple was on a hill, they would ascend the mount to offer their sacrifices and worship. It was a joyous journey for the people. Psalms 120-134 are all psalms of ascent – designed to be sung as the worshippers made their way up the hill. All of them recount the faithfulness of God with great joy.

But the sad history of Israel after Solomon was that the people chose the path of apostasy into idolatry and disobedience. God eventually raised up Assyria and Babylon to chastise them. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple and carried most of the nation off into exile. The story of Ezra and Nehemiah is the renewal of the people who returned years later along with the rebuilding of the Temple and the city. It was the fulfillment of Nehemiah's prayer, "that God's name would once again dwell there."

Jesus Changes Everything

But when Jesus came, everything changed. The Apostle John hints at Christ's mission when he says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt [literally, *tabernacled*] among us, and we have seen his glory..." (John 1:14). Jesus's own words and actions were even more subversive. In the last week of his ministry before his crucifixion, Jesus taught in the Temple, frequently saying, "You have heard it said...but I say unto you." He also took the authority upon himself to cleanse the Temple from the peoples' sacrilegious money-changing. Earlier in his ministry, he had cryptically said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). The gospel writer tells us that Jesus was referring to his own body as the temple. Clearly, and

shockingly, Jesus was setting himself above the Jewish Temple. And when he gave up his spirit on the cross, the torn veil in the Temple affirmed that everything had changed. The Temple was no longer the place where heaven and earth would meet. From that day forward, the Temple was obsolete. Heaven and earth would meet in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ has now replaced the Temple. That is the theme of the entire book of Hebrews: “In speaking of a new covenant, [the Lord] makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Hebrews 8:13).

It is the Apostle Paul who articulates the fullness of God’s plan in all this. God had formed a people for himself that he called out of Egypt. Israel was to be the people through which God would bring his plan of salvation to fruition. They met with God in worship and sacrifice first at the Tabernacle and later, the Temple. It was there that heaven and earth intersected. But the Tabernacle and the Temple, out-workings of the Law that was given at Sinai, were temporary - mere shadows of what would come through Jesus Christ. In the fullness of time, Christ came to offer the perfect – once for all sacrifice – for us. In Jesus Christ alone, heaven and earth meet. Now, Paul tells us, there is a new Temple: us! There is a new place where heaven and earth meet and it is not brick and mortar like the old Temple. It is flesh and blood. The new temple is the people of God. In speaking of the corporate church, the Apostle asks, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (I Corinthians 3:16) He elaborates further in his letter to the Ephesians, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:19-22).

Marks of the People in Whom God Dwells

As the new temple of God, “we are the people and place where God’s name dwells.” I have been pondering and reflecting on this idea for the last several months. In the last thirty years we’ve had Seeker-Driven churches that have grown into very popular and massive ministries. We have Purpose-Driven churches that have gained focus and built large and successful ministries. And then there are the ever-busy Program-Driven churches that specialize in meeting

the felt-needs of consumer Christians. We could take one of those paths and pursue it with all of our ability. We might grow and bust out these doors. We might have the most up-to-date church building in the city. We could be the talk of the town. But unless we are the people in whom God's name dwells it is all "wood, hay and stubble." Unless God's presence – his glory – is manifest in us we are wasting our time. Seeker-Driven, Purpose-Driven, Program-Driven – all of those are the strategies of men without the power of God. Instead, let us be what my friend, John Piippo calls, "The Presence-Driven Church." We are the Temple of God. We will never reach our destiny as a church until we hunger and thirst for God's presence to be manifest among us.

What does it mean to be a "Presence-Driven Church?" What are the characteristics of the "people in whom God's name dwells?" The Scripture tells us that **holiness** in the way we live should mark us:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

I Peter 2:9-12

When Jesus drove the money-changers out of the Temple, do you recall what he said? He said, "...my house shall be called '**a house of prayer**'" (Luke 19:46). Dear friends, we have a long way to go in this area. And it will require a lot of change in our church culture. I am sure most of us are praying people. But it seems that too many of us are privately praying people. Brothers and sisters, your faith was never meant to be just private. I don't see that anywhere in the New Testament. Everywhere I look in the Book of Acts, people prayed together – meaning

they voiced their prayers out loud with each other. When I hear other folks pray, I am greatly encouraged. Too often, however, when we are in groups, the only folks I hear praying out loud are pastors or deacons. I know. That's human nature. But we'll not fully be the people in whom God's name dwells until we learn how to pray together. But I'm confident we'll get there. We'll work at it.

If we are God's dwelling place – the temple of the Holy Spirit – then impassioned and meaningful **worship** should be one of our characteristics. We won't be satisfied with a teaching sermon that stimulates our intellect. We won't be satisfied with music that suits our tastes and doesn't embarrass us when we invite friends. We won't be satisfied until we experience the manifest presence of God – like the glory that Solomon experienced – in our worship services. After Easter, I will be starting a new series on corporate worship. I hope that you'll come with an open mind and heart and be willing to be transformed as we consider what the Scriptures have to say about how we should engage with God in worship.

We, as the corporate people of God, are the temple of the Holy Spirit. But the Apostle Paul also told the Corinthians that their individual physical bodies were temples of the Holy Spirit as well. (I Cor. 6:19-20) In that context, he was telling them why they needed to abstain from sexual immorality. But the exciting concept of our bodies as temples also tells us that we take God with us wherever we go. We don't serve God or worship him only when we are at church. We serve and worship him throughout the landscape of our life: our work, our school, our play, and at home. We are, in the New Testament's words, "ambassadors for Christ." **We take his name with us wherever we go.** That's what it means to witness. People will see God's presence and work in us and take notice. Some will even want to come along with you.

In the end, the "people in whom God's name dwells" will be a people who are becoming more and more like Christ. They will be a people who are being changed. (Pause)

Are you being changed? In what areas is God changing you?

There are only two reasons why your life isn't being changed by God. 1. You don't have a relationship with him. Or, 2) you are resisting him by ignoring him or pushing him away. Both of those conditions can be changed today by saying "yes" to God.

Forget the building. Forget the programs. Forget the music. Forget the preaching. All of those good things are secondary. The question is: does God dwell here? Do we experience his glory in **holiness of life, prayer together, impassioned and meaningful worship, and empowered witness?** That is what it means to be the people in whom God's name dwells.

Remember home? You know, the place you loved to return to because it was the place where your family's name dwelt. Church, we are to be God's home. May we never be satisfied with less. And when God's presence and glory is manifest in us, the promise of old will certainly be true:

Thus says the Lord of hosts: In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of [your] sleeve, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'

Zechariah 8:23