COUNTING FOR GOD

Nehemiah 7:1-73

By

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Nehemiah Lesson 7

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Nehemiah 7:1-73

Have you ever struggled with feelings that your life is not worthwhile? I think we all feel that way at times. I know that I do! Life goes by so quickly! I often think about, “What am I accomplishing that really matters? How can I spend my life so that it counts for something worthwhile?”

The correct answer to those questions is to spend our lives so that they count for God and His purpose. If our lives count for God, then they count not just for time, but for eternity. So the key question becomes, how can I live so that my life counts for God?

Believe it or not, Nehemiah 7 has some answers to this important question. It is one of those chapters that make you wonder why God took up space in the Bible for it! It especially makes you wonder when you realize that verses 6-73 are essentially the same as Ezra 2. Why would God put this long list of unpronounceable names in the Bible once, let alone twice? It’s just not the sort of chapter that you relish when you come to it in your Bible reading!

The chapter serves as a pivot in the Book of Nehemiah. Chapters 1-6 describe the restoration of the wall of Jerusalem. Chapters 8-13 tell about the restoration of the people of Judah. Chapter 7 begins with three verses describing the precautions that Nehemiah took to guard the newly walled city from attack, thus wrapping up the first half of the book. Verses 4-73 look forward to the reforms of the second half of the book by showing how Nehemiah went about repopulating the city so that it would become a vital center for national and spiritual life.

In Ezra, this list of names of those who returned from Babylon under Zerubbabel in 536 B.C. served to document who was a true Jew. In Nehemiah, nearly a century later (444 B.C.), the list answers the question, “Who is available to repopulate the city and to provide for temple worship?” Nehemiah uses the list to instill in the people a reminder of their personal and national identity as
God’s people and to encourage them to fulfill their responsibilities in light of this identity.

There are variations between the two lists that are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile. Derek Kidner (Ezra & Nehemiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [IVP], pp. 38-39) points out that the names in the two lists show only the slightest variations, whereas half of the numbers disagree apparently at random, with sometimes one list and sometimes the other giving the larger figure. He argues that this is a classic example of how difficult it was for scribes to copy lists of Hebrew numbers. The doctrine of inerrancy asserts that the Bible is without error in the original manuscripts. Since we possess only copies, sometimes we are not able to reconcile conflicting details that may have arisen from scribal errors.

But to set aside these technical scholarly questions, the spiritual message of Nehemiah 7 is intact. It is:

To count for God, commit yourself to the things that matter to God.

The chapter reveals five things that matter to God:

1. Worship matters to God (7:1).

Nehemiah mentions that after the walls were rebuilt and the doors were installed, he appointed the gatekeepers, singers, and Levites (7:1). Most commentators say that these worship leaders were also assigned guard duty at the city gates. While that may be so, I agree with Derek Kidner (p. 102) that these men take priority here because worship was the city’s reason for existence. Maybe they held choir practice while standing guard, but the reason for protecting the city from invaders was not just so that everyone could live securely. It was primarily so that the worship of God in the temple could take place.

From what we read in the Book of Revelation, a good part of heaven will be spent praising God in corporate worship. The saints gather with the angels and the four living creatures and the 24 elders and sing, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,” and “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever” (Rev. 5:9, 12, 13). We will be so caught up with the beauty of the glory of God that we will be lost in wonder, love, and praise!
Gary Larsen has a Far Side cartoon showing a guy sitting on a cloud in his white robe with a harp, and he’s thinking, “I should have brought a magazine.” Sadly, that’s how even many Christians think of heaven—a boring time! But to the degree that we think that, we have failed to see the stunning beauty of Jesus Christ!

When you come on a scene of natural beauty, such as a beautiful sunset at the Grand Canyon, even if you don’t know anyone standing nearby, you want to say something to them: “Wow, that’s awesome, isn’t it!” We do that because beauty creates spontaneous praise in us, and praise is best when it is shared. Heaven will be a time of drinking in the infinite beauty of the infinite God and sharing it with others. If you want your life to count for God, grow as a worshiper by growing to know God in His infinite beauty.

2. **Godly character matters to God (7:2-3).**

Nehemiah was an exemplary leader who knew that to be effective, he needed to delegate responsibility to other competent men. While certain administrative skills are necessary for effective leadership, the main requirement is godly character.

Nehemiah picked two men. Hanani was probably his blood brother, who had come to him at Susa with the report of Jerusalem’s sad condition (1:1-3). He is appointed as the civil leader of Jerusalem. Hananiah is appointed as the military leader because “he was a faithful man and feared God more than many.” Together they are charged not to open the city gates until the sun was hot, and to bolt them and stand guard when they were shut. Also, they were to appoint guards from the residents of the city, each in front of his own house. There are three godly character traits here:

A. Faithfulness.

The Hebrew word means reliable, truthful, and firm. Hananiah was a man you could depend on. He spoke the truth and if he promised to do something, he did it. If you want your life to count for God, work at becoming a faithful person. It is a fruit that the Holy Spirit produces in us as we walk in dependence on Him (Gal. 5:16, 22). All of us are stewards of the gifts and time that God allots to us. Paul said that it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy, or faithful (1 Cor. 4:2).
Faithfulness is also an essential ingredient in relationships. If you do not trust someone, you will not get close to that person. You always keep your distance, for fear that he will take something that you say and disclose it, perhaps with distortion, to others. If you sense that someone is not truthful, you don’t trust him and you won’t get close to him. Since our God is a faithful God who always speaks truth and keeps His word, as we grow in godliness, we will grow in faithfulness.

Let me briefly suggest four ways to develop faithfulness.

*Recognize and define the responsibilities that God has given you to do. As a Christian, you are responsible to obey God’s commands to live a morally pure life that honors Him. As a husband and father, you are responsible to provide the basic needs for your family. As a parent, you are responsible to train your children in God’s ways. As a gifted member of Christ’s body, you are responsible to serve Him in some capacity. You cannot be faithful if you are foggy about what you’re supposed to be doing.

*Start with and don’t neglect the small things. If you’re faithful in little things, you will be faithful with much (Luke 16:10). In the context, “little things” refers to your managing the money God has entrusted to you. Do you squander it on selfish pursuits or do you invest it wisely for God’s purposes? Do you pay your bills on time? Are you honest in financial matters? Do you keep your word? Do you live an orderly life? Do you keep appointments on time?

*Keep your relational priorities straight. Your relationship with Jesus Christ is first. If it goes, everything goes. Spend time alone with Him each day. Your relationship with your family is next. If I do not order my family relationships properly, I am not qualified to lead in the local church (1 Tim. 3:4-5). Relationships are so important that John says that if I do not love my brother whom I have seen, I cannot love God whom I have not seen (1 John 4:20).

*Learn to use your time more effectively. Most unfaithful people complain that they don’t have time to do what they are supposed to do. But we all have the same number of hours each day. Faithful people learn to use their time well.

B. Fear of God.
Hananiah “feared God more than many.” The fear of God is a matter of degree: Some fear God a little; others fear God more. The fear of God grows out of the knowledge of God. When you see who God is and you realize who you are by way of comparison, you fall on your face in fear, realizing that He could rightly cast you into hell for your many sins. Even when you know that He has been gracious to you through Christ, you do not presume on that grace by becoming irreverent toward the Holy One. You remember that He knows your every thought and deed, and so you seek to please Him in all you do. If you want your life to count for God, grow in the fear of God.

C. Watchfulness.

Nehemiah not only built the wall with the sword and the trowel, he also posted guards and gave careful instructions to these appointed leaders on the need to guard the city. He trusted God, but he also set up a watch (see 4:9). The two are not in opposition.

Jesus warns us frequently to be on the alert (Mark 13:34-37). First Peter 5:8 warns us, “Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” We need to watch out for the spiritual dangers that Satan strews across our paths, to avoid falling into sins that would destroy us. As married couples, be alert to the dangers that could destroy your marriage. As parents, be alert to the dangers that could destroy your children. As church leaders, be alert to the dangers that could damage God’s flock.

Note that a time of success is a critical time to be on guard. The walls were built, the gates were in place. It would have been easy to kick back and let down the guard. The enemy often hits right after a victory. Be especially careful then!

Also, we need to be especially on guard in our own homes. Nehemiah instructed that each one stand guard in front of his own house (7:3). Guard what movies and TV shows come into your home. Guard what comes through on your home computer. Take caution if your children spend the night at a friend’s home, as to what they plan to do and who is supervising. Instruct and warn your kids about spiritual dangers and how to call if they need help.
To count for God, commit yourself to worship and to godly character, because these things matter to God.

3. People matter to God (7:4-73).

From a historical, salvation perspective, these Jewish genealogical records are important because when the Messiah came to this earth, it was important to prove that He was descended from the tribe of Judah and the lineage of David. When we worked through the list in Ezra 2, we went over the various categories in some detail, so I’m not going to repeat that here. But the list illustrates three important points that apply to us:

A. Individuals are important to God.

Although these names do not mean anything to us, they mean something to God. He knows His people by name. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, “calls his own sheep by name,” and they follow Him because they know His voice (John 10:3-4). I try to learn the names of those who regularly attend here, but my brain is limited and I often fail. But even if I fail to remember your name, there is One who never forgets! He created you in His image and He put you here at this time and place for His purpose.

Make sure that Jesus knows you by name! You may be thinking, “Doesn’t Jesus know everyone by name?” In the sense of His omniscience, yes. But in the sense of personal knowledge, no. On judgment day, He will say to some who cry, “Lord, Lord,” who did many things in His name, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23). They were not truly His sheep, because they did not follow Him. He gives eternal life to His sheep, and they will never perish, and no one can snatch them out of His hand (John 10:28). Make sure that you are one of His sheep!

The fact that individuals matter to God also means that they should matter to us. Invest your life building Jesus Christ into people, and your life will count for God and for eternity.

B. Families are important to God.

The list contains many family groups (7:8-25). God designed the family as the basic unit of society. A man and woman are to leave their own families of origin and come together in a lifelong covenant relationship. In that context, children are to be born and
reared in God’s ways as revealed in His Word. The family is also the building block of the local church. To say this is not in any way to devalue singles, who are a vital part of God’s family. But it is to say that the church is only strong when the families in that church are strong. Is it any wonder that Satan is attacking Christian families? If we want our lives and our children’s and grandchildren’s lives to count for God, we must guard our covenant commitments in our families.

C. Men are important to God.

The list is made up of men. This does not mean that women are unimportant to God. The Bible elevates women to a status that is unknown in other religions. Husbands are to grant their wives honor as co-heirs of the grace of life (1 Pet. 3:7).

But at the same time, Scripture is clear that there is a hierarchy of roles in the family and in the church. Husbands are the heads of their wives, just as God is the head of Christ and Christ is the head of the church (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23). Elders and teachers in the local church are to be men (1 Tim. 2:11-15; 3:1-7). These God-ordained roles are not culturally determined. Rather, they have to do with the church and the home reflecting the image of God, where there is an equality of personhood, but at the same time, a hierarchy of roles in which the Son willingly submits to the Father to carry out the divine purpose. If Satan cannot break up a home through divorce, his next tactic is to get the man to be passive.

Men, for your life to count for God, you need to take seriously your responsibility to lead your wife and children in the things of God. By lead, I do not mean barking commands in Archie Bunker fashion from your armchair in front of the TV set! I mean walking with God as an example and becoming a servant-leader, even as Jesus led. I mean actively loving your wife and training your children. Don’t dump that job on your wife!

To count for God, commit yourself to what matters to God: worship, godly character, and people.

4. Your place in God’s family history matters to God (7:4-73).

Nehemiah says (7:5) that God put it into his heart to assemble the people to be enrolled by genealogies. Then he found this book
of the record of those who first came up to Jerusalem. It served as a map for the current enrollment. As Kidner (p. 103) puts it, Nehemiah’s “immediate concern was to get his people rightly orientated, sure both of their inheritance and their calling.”

As Christians, our physical lineage is not nearly as important as our spiritual lineage. We need to know that we have been born spiritually into God’s family, the church, through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And, we need to have some evidence of it. Those claiming to be priests who could not find any record of their ancestry were excluded from the priesthood until a priest could verify it by divine means (7:61-65). Even so, a believer should be able to verify where God promises eternal life to those who believe in Christ and say, “I have put my trust in that specific promise of God.” And, the believer should see some evidence that God has changed his heart. Before, we were hostile toward God. Now, by His grace, we love God and the things of God.

It is also important to realize that God put you here at this point in the history of His people to fulfill the role that He has ordained for you. Previous generations passed the torch to you. You must carry it faithfully and pass it on to the next generation. One reason modern Christians are so carried away by the world is that they are ignorant of church history, of how God has worked down through the ages through His people who have been faithful to His calling. Reading Christian biographies and church history will give you perspective for the times we live in. Finally,

5. **Your understanding of and commitment to God’s purpose matters to Him (7:6, 73).**

The people in this list returned from Babylon to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own city. They easily could have stayed in Babylon. Their families had been there for several generations. They were established and comfortable there. It was not easy to pack up and move across hundreds of miles of hostile territory to a land that had been devastated by war. But they knew God’s promise to their forefather Abraham, to give him this land. He had said that His name would dwell in this temple in this city, to be a glory to the nations. So they understood and committed themselves to God’s purpose, in spite of the hassle and hardships involved.
God’s purpose is to be glorified among the nations by calling to Himself a people redeemed by His Son, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession,” who “proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called [them] out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). If you know Christ, He has given you a spiritual gift, material resources, and opportunities to be used to glorify Him and further His purpose. To count for God, commit yourself to His purpose for your life. There is no greater reason to live than to live for God’s purpose!

**Conclusion**

I want to close by giving a word of balance in this matter of having our lives count for God. It is good to learn from every godly example that you can, whether in the Bible or in church history. But also it is important to come to terms with how God made you. Don’t kick yourself because you’re not someone else. You will be frustrated if you think that you have to be just like someone else and do what he did. I love Spurgeon, but he was one of a kind! I hope that I learn from him, but I’m not Spurgeon by a long shot!

Each of us is unique and God has assigned each of us a different role to fulfill. In Nehemiah 7, some were priests, others were gatekeepers, singers, and temple servants. Each role is important to God. Discover who you are in Christ and commit yourself fully to be all that God wants you to be. Jim Elliot, who laid down his life at 28 for the cause of the gospel, wrote in his diary, “Wherever you are, be all there. Live to the hilt every situation you believe to be the will of God” (Elisabeth Elliot, Through Gates of Splendor [Spire Books], pp. 19-20, italics his). Commit yourself to the things that matter to God. That’s how to make your life count for Him!
Discussion Questions

1. How does a person discover exactly who he or she is in the Lord?

2. Can we go too far in fearing God? Is the fear of God in tension with or in harmony with the love of God?

3. How can a man who feels spiritually inferior to his wife give proper leadership to his family? Or should the wife lead in such cases?

4. If all these names matter to God, shouldn’t every Christian make an effort to learn the names of new people at church? How can a person who struggles with this overcome it?

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