

CITY OF HOLINESS

NEHEMIAH 11:1-2 | Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem. And the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem the holy city, while nine out of ten remained in the other towns. ² And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem.

LAMENTATIONS 1:1 | How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave.

ISAIAH 52:1 | Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for there shall no more come into you the uncircumcised and the unclean.

The temple is built. The wall is up. But something is missing. People! Jerusalem is a ghost town. *The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt* (NEH 7:4). *How lonely sits the city that was full of people!* (LAM 1:1).

Great progress has been made since the return from exile. Phase 1: Rebuild the temple (EZRA 1-6). Phase 2: Reform the community (EZRA 7-10). Phase 3: Restore the walls (NEH 1-7). Phase 4: Return to the Word (NEH 8). Phase 5: Renew the covenant (NEH 9-10). Phase 6: Repopulate the city (NEH 11). Phases 1-3 were initiated by governors and priests. Phases 4-6 were from the ground up. Nice balance.

In Phase 6, the people in the rural areas agree to move ten percent of their number into the city. But who would willingly leave home and farm to live in an urban landfill? There's only one thing to do. Let God decide—by the casting of lots (11:1). Some of the people, however, volunteer to relocate (²). Blessed are they! Why? Because, whether they know it or not, something really wonderful has happened. God himself has moved into the city after a long absence. Jerusalem is now a *Holy Ghost* town.

In case you missed it, Jerusalem has a new name: *the holy city* (¹). This title is used only after the exile. It means that the soul of the city is being healed and cleansed from the abominations that had defiled her and drove God away. The Prophet Ezekiel witnessed the *Ichabod* moment when the LORD of Glory departed from Jerusalem in an extra-terrestrial chariot (EZE 11:23). But now, O happy day! The city that Isaiah once called *Sodom* is now called *the holy city*. The LORD of Glory has returned. That's something to celebrate.

What drives God away from a city, a church, or a human soul? The defilement of sin! Light and darkness cannot co-exist. What brings God back? Read Ezra and Nehemiah! Repentance. Returning to the Word. Renewing the covenant. In a word, holiness, which essentially means wholehearted devotion to God from the inside out.

WALL OF DUTY

What good is a city without people? Repopulating Jerusalem was one way of seeking her shalom. Singapore is not short of people. But this beautiful city could surely do with many more salt-and-light disciples-in-community who live to glorify God in personal holiness and social responsibility (MATT 5:13-16).

■ What's lacking? People. Put yourself in the shoes of our pastors. They are working so hard to keep church open, on-site and online. Consider their dilemma: Some of us register for onsite service, but neither show up nor cancel, thus depriving others the opportunity. Others have concluded that virtual attendance is good enough. And most grievous to observe, many are not returning to their home churches at all, neither onsite nor online. Some are sampling other pastures. Others have 'virtually' migrated to famous churches overseas. Lament: *How lonely sits the churches that once were full of people*. Stand in solidarity with our pastors. On top of doing all they can to keep church open and care for their flocks, they have to cope with our apathy and complacency. Search your heart. Are you part of the problem? Repent of

any indifference toward your home church and insensitivity toward your pastor and his woes. Be part of the solution. Return to community.

■ What's lacking? Holiness. *Without which no one will see the Lord* (HEB 12:14). *Holiness is the habit of being of one mind with God... hating what he hates, loving what he loves, and measuring everything in this world by the standard of his Word* (JC RYLE).

• Examine yourself. Are you *perfecting holiness in the fear of God* (2 COR 7:1 NKJV)? Resolve to spend the rest of your life doing so. *For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honour* (1 THESS 4:3-4).

• Discern the Body. May we be known as people who pursue holiness, practise holiness, perfect holiness, and propagate holiness always and everywhere. *Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'* (1 PET 1:15-16).

■ What else is lacking? The glory of God. We're a long way from *Ichabod*, thank God! But where is the distinct experience of God's resplendent glory in our gatherings? God said: *My glory I give to no other* (ISA 42:8). This refers to idols, of course. But it is also true that when we seek our own glory, God withdraws his. Soul search: In what ways do we crowd out the glory of God? Are we seeking glory from others (JN 5:44; 7:18; 1 THESS 2:6)? Are we projecting our uncrucified flesh instead of the crucified Christ? Watch and pray: *When ministry becomes performance, then the sanctuary becomes a theatre, the congregation becomes an audience, worship becomes entertainment, and man's applause and approval become the measure of success. But when ministry is for the glory of God, his presence moves into the sanctuary. Even the unsaved visitor will fall down on his face, worship God, and confess that God is among us* (WARREN WIERSBE).