

Gathering

Nehemiah 12:27-43

Our new series started by looking at why a large gathering of people is the climax of the story of Nehemiah, and a vital part of God's purposes for church life today.

The conclusion of the story of Nehemiah is God's people gathering together to celebrate what He had done for them. This places it in a long story of God bringing people together to worship Him: Eden, Abraham's family (Genesis 12), Mount Sinai (Exodus 19), annual festivals (i.e. Exodus 23:17), the establishment and dedication of the Temple (2 Samuel 6:15, 18-19; 1 Kings 8:1-5, 14, 22). The Psalms frequently celebrate this (e.g., Psalm 35:18, 149:1). Israel's failure to honour God by worshipping Him correctly at the temple was part of the reason for the punishment of exile, along with idolatry and injustice but before and during the exile, God promised through the prophets that He would regather His people again (e.g. Isaiah 54:7). For decades they lived with this seemingly impossible dream, and then God made it happen. That's why it's such a big deal in Nehemiah that the people are gathering again in Jerusalem to worship God.

Centuries later, when Jesus comes to Earth, He not only draws a crowd but He forms a community. His death and resurrection are seen not only as the way for you or I to be saved as individuals but as the rescue and remaking of the people of God. He starts a new Israel which begins like the first one did, with God and 12 men, and a "company" is formed that we're told numbered 120 when Jesus ascended to Heaven (Acts 1:15). He tells them to wait for the Holy Spirit to fill them, and they know from their history and from Him to stay close together (Acts 2:1-4). The Spirit can be given to anyone, anywhere but it's not an accident or coincidence that He is first given to a gathered group. This leads to people "from every nation under heaven" being "added" to the company of believers (Acts 2:5, 41). This new community meets in the temple and in homes (Acts 2:46) – big gatherings and smaller gatherings. Now when they are scattered it's no longer as punishment but so that all the world might hear and be gathered in: wherever the apostles went, they formed churches which met together.

The people in the New Testament realised that there was something happening beyond the benefits they enjoyed when they met together. Paul tells the Ephesians that God has "raised us up with [Jesus] and seated us with him in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 2:6). The writer to the Hebrews tells us that something is happening to followers of Jesus now that is greater than God's encounter with Israel at Mount Sinai: a spiritual gathering to God is occurring right now, and our physical gatherings are an expression of this (Hebrews 12:22-24).

This is the fulfilment of God's eternal intention for us, that we be united with Him and each other, just as God the Father and God the Son and God the Spirit are one true gathering. When Jesus prayed to the Father on the night that He was betrayed, He asked four times that His people would "be one, even as we are one" (John 17:11, 21, 22, 23). Revelation 7:9-10 shows us that the climax of history, like the climax of Nehemiah, isn't lots of isolated individuals meeting with God, but a gathering.

Gathering together, therefore, isn't just about what you or anyone else here gets out of it: it is a prophetic demonstration of God's plan, of where all of history is heading, to a final and forever gathering of the people of God, united with Him as He has always been united in love.

Questions

- What did you miss most about Sunday services during lockdown? (And, is there anything you didn't miss?!)
- Luke said that the most important reason (of all the many good reasons) for gathering together was the prophetic statement it made of God's gathering a people to Himself. Were you convinced by this, and do you find this more or less motivating than the other reasons you have for gathering?
- What does it tell us about God's nature that He's so committed to gathering people to Himself?
- If someone who wasn't a Christian asked you why you went to a church service, what would you tell them?
- Some people imagine life in the new age to be a long and dreary worship service (harps, clouds, etc.): how would you correct this perspective?
- We're not always good at challenging one another but how could you encourage people you know to make attending Sunday services more of a priority in their lives? (Obviously this has been a unique time for seeing family and friends that we haven't seen for months or even years.)