

Who belongs? Nehemiah 7

Nehemiah 7, the second and longest of the five lists of names in Nehemiah, a book about the restoration of Jewish settlement in Jerusalem and its surrounds in the 5th century BC.

If you are sitting there thinking about exploring Christianity, not yet a believer, you are probably thinking – these people are weird. There may be great soaring poetry in the Old Testament, dramatic stories, age old wisdom – but why would you give your Sunday to listening to a list of names you don't know from a time and place so distant?

And if you are a believer you might be thinking – I know we have a commitment to all of Scripture as God's word, but can't we be a little discriminating? Can't we just ignore those parts that seem to be of only antiquarian interest – I mean names like Zattu, Zaccai, Binnui mean nothing to me.

All that is understandable, but I want to convince you that what seems irrelevant to us because it is located in another time and place distant from us is powerfully encouraging of our trust in our God

And what seems, with its emphasis on genealogy, on physical descent from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to exclude us from membership of the people of God is wonderfully inclusive – and that is good, because membership of the people of God, being people who are free to live in the presence of the holy God, in whose presence, in the words of the Psalmist, is the well spring of life, and in whose light we see light [Psalm 36:7-9] – is better than anything, the fulfilment of our every longing for peace, beauty, truth and life.

How am I going to do that, Lord willing?

By asking two questions of the text

Firstly, Why do we have a long list of names here, at this point in the book of Nehemiah?

Secondly, why this list of names, because this list with one or two minor differences is a repetition of the list of names given in Ezra 2, the list of names of those who first returned to Jerusalem after Cyrus' decree permitting their return around 538 BC. That is, this is a list of names from about ninety years before – 90 years. Why does Nehemiah use this list of names?

And having answered those two questions from Scripture I then have a third question – a question for you to answer, and that is

“Am I confident my name would be enrolled in the people of God, those who can rely on the living God's faithfulness and steadfast love, who have an inheritance in the kingdom of God, who are free to go in and out of the new Jerusalem?”

That may sound a bit abstract if you are not used to Bible language – but it is another way of asking – do I know peace with God now, can rely on His love, and be confident that whether I live or die I am welcome in His presence, in whose presence there is life for ever.

Two questions for the text, and one for you.

Why do we have a list of name here?

Nehemiah 7: When the wall had been rebuilt and I had the doors installed, the gatekeepers, singers, and Levites were appointed. ² Then I put my brother Hanani in charge of Jerusalem, along with Hananiah, commander of the fortress, because he was a faithful man who feared God more than most. ³ I said to them, “Do not open the gates of Jerusalem until the sun is hot, and let the doors be shut and securely fastened while the guards are on duty. Station the citizens of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some at their homes.”

Where are we up to in the book? Verses 1-3 tell us we are at a very significant point.

Temple worship v. 1 is happening in properly ordered way, sustained by those whom God has appointed to support and safeguard it – the Levites, singers and gatekeepers. The temple is working as it should.

And v. 3 the newly completed wall is working as it should, offering protection to the temple and the distinctive worship and life of the LORD’s people that goes on within the walls. That distinctive life can now be pursued and developed, and we see v. 4 Nehemiah’s mind turning to that.

Nehemiah 7:⁴ The city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and no houses had been built yet.

He is thinking about repopulating Jerusalem now that the wall has made it secure, renewing the life of the city God had chosen in making it the site of the temple to be the dwelling place for His name [1 Kings 11:36], leading the Psalmist to say the LORD ‘dwells in Jerusalem.’ Ps, 135:21, to call Jerusalem ‘the city of our God, the city of the great King’ Psalm 48:1-2. It was God’s place where His people could dwell in God’s presence.

And some of you might recognise in those words a summary of God’s reign, really from the time of Adam and Eve – God’s people dwelling in God’s place in God’s presence under His rule. That was true of the garden before the Fall, it was what the land of Israel was meant to be, and it was symbolised above all in Jerusalem where God under the sign of the temple dwelt amongst His people and exercised His rule through the King He had chosen, David and his descendants.

At this point in Nehemiah we have God’s place – secured by the wall

We have God’s presence – symbolised by the rebuilt temple and its renewed worship

But God’s people?

Who are they? What characterises them?

And just as Jerusalem now has a solid boundary – the wall, is there a clear boundary to God’s people, that distinguishes those who belong to God’s people, those with a right to dwell in His presence, from those who don’t?

It would appear that not all the returned exiles are clear on that question.

We read in chapter 6 of prophets willingly being hired by the leaders of the surrounding nations to discourage and discredit Nehemiah. At the end of chapter 6 we learnt of friendly relationships by many of the nobles of Judah with Tobiah the Ammonite – one of the trio opposing Nehemiah in rebuilding the wall, even intermarriage with his family.

Nehemiah 6: ¹⁷ During those days, the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. ¹⁸ For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, since he was a son-in-law of Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berechiah. ¹⁹ These nobles kept mentioning Tobiah's good deeds to me, and they reported my words to him.

Some of the returned exiles saw being connected with the people around them, and especially the powerful around them, as advantageous. They saw no problems in sharing in their plans, marrying them and even, as we see in chapter 13:4 in giving them a place right at the heart of the life of Jerusalem, in the temple. For these returned exiles, and others who joined in marriage and commerce with the surrounding nations, there appeared no clear boundary to the people of God, or only a very porous one that could be adapted for their convenience and profit as they sought to secure and enrich themselves by alliance with those Nehemiah has called the enemies of God's people 4:11, people whose goal was to make the returning Jews just like themselves and so subjugate them to their authority.

So who are the people of God, those who have a place in God's place in God's presence?

It is at this point we read that God put a thought into Nehemiah's mind.

Nehemiah 7: ⁵ Then my God put it into my mind to assemble the nobles, the officials, and the people to be registered by genealogy. I found the genealogical record of those who came back first, and I found the following written in it

Prompted by God Nehemiah is going to make the boundary between the people of God and the other people's clear by registering or enrolling [ESV] the people by genealogy, by their descent from those who lived in the land before the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah and their exile to Babylon.

Why by descent? Why is that the God given way to work out who belongs to God's people and had a right to live in the rebuilt Jerusalem?

The answer is the reality that has been driving all the action we read of in Ezra and Nehemiah – the return of the people, the rebuilding of the temple, the rebuilding of the wall, and the reading of the law to come

The great reality behind all that is happening is the covenant entered into by the LORD with the nation Israel, that is the people descended from Jacob the grandson of Abraham, at Sinai when the Lord had rescued them from slavery in Egypt, and the promises that underly it, the promises made to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Why by descent? Covenant and promise

Consciousness of Israel's covenant relationship with the LORD is there from the beginning of Nehemiah

In chapter 1 Nehemiah had prayed these words

Nehemiah 1: ⁵ Lord, the God of the heavens, the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps his gracious covenant with those who love him and keep his commands

He prays to the covenant keeping God and appeals to God's covenant promise to a judged and exiled people

Nehemiah 1:7 We have acted corruptly toward you and have not kept the commands, statutes, and ordinances you gave your servant Moses. 8 Please remember what you commanded your servant Moses: "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples. 9 But if you return to me and carefully observe my commands, even though your exiles were banished to the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place where I chose to have my name dwell."

Nehemiah is recalling the teaching of passages like Leviticus 26:40-45, Deuteronomy 4:29-30 and Deuteronomy 30:2-4

Let me read just one from the record of the renewal of the covenant before the Israelites crossed the Jordan into the promised land. Moses has outlined the consequences of disobedience to the covenant requirements in chapters 28-29 and then he says *Deuteronomy 30*: "When all these things happen to you—the blessings and curses I have set before you—and you come to your senses while you are in all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you,² and you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and all your soul by doing everything I am commanding you today,³ then he will restore your fortunes; have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. ⁴Even if your exiles are at the farthest horizon, he will gather you and bring you back from there.

It is on God's commitments to Israel made in His covenant that Nehemiah is relying, the covenant in which the Lord had committed Himself to be Israel's God and give them the land of Canaan, that land flowing with milk and honey.

And that covenant relationship, the covenant entered into at Sinai, is itself an expression of God's faithfulness to His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, repeated throughout Genesis. [Genesis 12:1-3, ch. 15, 17:1-14, 22:15-18, 26:2-5, 28:13-15, 48:3-4]

Again, let me read just one example

Genesis 17:4 "As for me, here is my covenant with you: You will become the father of many nations. 5 Your name will no longer be Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I will make you the father of many nations. 6 I will make you extremely fruitful and will make nations and kings come from you. 7 I will confirm my covenant that is between me and you and your future offspring throughout their generations. It is a permanent covenant to be your God and the God of your offspring after you. 8 And to you and your future offspring ^h I will give the land where you are residing—all the land of Canaan—as a permanent possession, and I will be their God."

People are registered in the people of the restored Jerusalem by descent because it is the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that God has made His people and to whom He has given the land of Caanan. By God's saving acts, first in rescuing them from slavery in Egypt and then by bringing about a second Exodus from captivity in Babylon, they are those who belong in God's presence in God's place.

Seen in this light the long list of names with numbers of descendants – all real people – is a testament to the abiding purpose of God to have a people for His own

And a testament to God's character, to His faithfulness, steadfast love and righteousness in keeping His covenant with Abraham's descendants

The commitments the LORD makes, He keeps, keeps out of His grace and kindness – for these are not perfect people. In Ezra and Nehemiah you will hear repeated confession of sin, in Nehemiah's prayer, and also in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9.

Now, just think of that list, all those people come back to the land of promise, 70 years after the beginning of Judah's captivity, beyond all human hope and expectation.

These are not made up events. The destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchednezzar, the decree of Cyrus, the return of the exiles and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, are all historically attested events – they happened.

So if you are not yet a believer – this list tells you the God of Christians is no dumb idol, and not a comfortable fiction. HE is real. He speaks and keeps His word – a word spoken by the prophet Jeremiah of Judah's return seventy years before, a word spoken to Abraham more than a thousand years before.

He is powerful. It is not fulfilment by co-incidence, but by the LORD's deliberate and revealed beforehand actions. To keep His word He directs the movements of nations and empires.

Israel's history is a window on the LORD's dealings with His creation

He is not absent from His world, but present and active; active to judge and to save.

He is not someone you can safely ignore, for it is His plans that are fulfilled.

And He is someone whose words you can rely on.

Think of that, in a world of my truth, your truth, of half-truths, spin and lies.

The LORD speaks the truth through His prophets, and finally through His Son Jesus

A sure word that will always be fulfilled

A word that can free you from the darkness and confusion by cutting through the web of lies that hides the light of His love and justice.

This God is worth getting to know, and you can know Him by getting to know His Son Jesus, His first and final word.

And if you are a believer in Jesus, and through Him a believer in the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, this list of name is powerfully encouraging.

The LORD, our God, has a purpose, to have a people of His own, separated to Him alone – and He does not deviate from it.

The LORD, our God, made a commitment to His people – and despite their failings, He kept it.

When they were facing extinction as a people, the death of the nation Israel – a people who for 70 years were without land, temple, sacrifice, He gave them life.

Know His might, and His grace – He will never fail to keep His promises to His people

And that is us, believers in Jesus

Or is it – for this list makes the boundary of God's people, who is in and who is out, descent from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

That concern for descent, and clarity about it, is very present here – especially in verse 61-65, which lists those unable to prove by descent that they were Israelites and excludes from the priesthood those unable to demonstrate their descent.

This is a list and descent from Israel a criteria that would exclude most of us from membership of the people of God.

Can we ever be included?

If God is going to include non-Jews amongst His people, does He have to change the way He sets the boundaries of His people?

The answer to those questions is Yes and No, but to see that let's ask the second question

If Nehemiah's purpose is to make clear the boundaries of God's people by enrolling people by genealogy, why begin and end the exercise with this list of names?

Remember, this list is, apart from small differences [see Kidner, Tyndale, footnotes on pp. 38-39], identical with the list of Ezra 2, the list of those who left Babylon to return to Jerusalem and Judaea 90 years before Nehemiah is building the wall – 90 years.

Why would you do a registration from a list 90 years old? It's a bit like compiling a census list from the records of the first fleet.

And Nehemiah makes no other list for registration. This is where the registration begins and ends – this is what God put into Nehemiah's mind.

You might say – all the people Nehemiah is dealing with are descendants of these who came at the first.

But we know that is not true, just as it was not true that all the people living in Australia in 1890, or now, were descendants of those who came on the first fleet in 1788.

There was further movement of people from around the Persian empire to Jerusalem and Judaea.

Ezra 8, for example, contains a list of those who returned with Ezra, and that was about 80 years after the returnees on this list in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7

And the people on the list are not all those descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who lived in the Babylonian and then Persian empire

Many stayed where they were. Ezra mentions a settlement at Casiphia, from which he recruited Levites for his returning team [Ezra 8:17]. And we have the evidence of the book of Esther of many Jews spread throughout the Persian empire.

This was never a complete list of Abraham's descendants, even of those living in Jerusalem and Judaea in Nehemiah's time,

So why this list as the foundation for registration of the people of God?

What else, beside genealogy, is true of those on this list? What distinguishes those on this list, that makes this the appropriate list for the foundation of the registration of the people of God, those who belong in God's place in God's presence?

The answer is faith, faith in the word

This is how this list is first introduced in Ezra, at the beginning of that book, in chapter 1

Ezra 1: In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken through Jeremiah, the Lord roused the spirit of King Cyrus to issue a proclamation throughout his entire kingdom and to put it in writing:

²This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: "The Lord, the God of the heavens, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has appointed me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. ³Any of his people among you, may his God be with him, and may he go to Jerusalem in Judah and build the house of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴Let every survivor, wherever he resides, be assisted by the men of that region with silver, gold, goods, and livestock, along with a freewill offering for the house of God in Jerusalem."

⁵So the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, along with the priests and Levites—everyone whose spirit God had roused—prepared to go up and rebuild the Lord's house in Jerusalem

They have Cyrus' permission, but going back to Jerusalem is no easy thing. The place is in ruins.

It would be like returning to Gaza from New York, going from sophistication and comfort to live amongst rubble.

Worse, because there is no international body supporting you.

But they had a word from God, the word spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, to which the author of Ezra draws our attention, a word that expressed God's covenant commitment, a word preserved and cherished by some among the exiles.

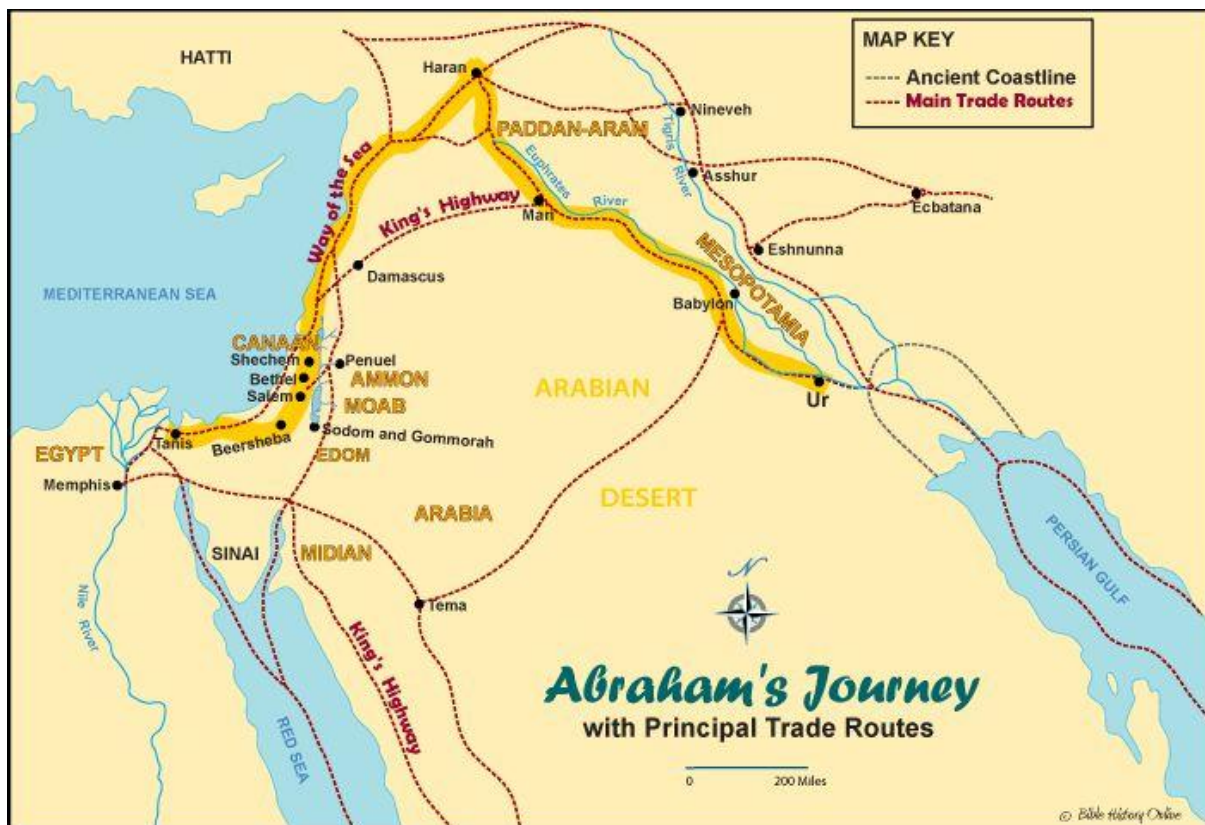
Jeremiah 29: ¹⁰For this is what the Lord says: "When seventy years for Babylon are complete, I will attend to you and will confirm my promise concerning you to restore you to this place. ¹¹For I know the plans I have for you"—this is the Lord's declaration—"plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. ¹²You will call to me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart. ¹⁴I will be found by you"—this is the Lord's declaration—"and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and places where I banished you"—this is the Lord's declaration. "I will restore you to the place from which I deported you."

It is faith in the word of the LORD their God that prompted them to make the journey, faith which distinguishes those on this list.

A faith like Abraham's – believing God could give life to the dead – to a shattered nation, to bring into existence what was no longer, the people of Israel as a distinct people in the place God had given them.

A faith that led them to literally walk in the footsteps of Abraham, trusting the promise of God, to be amongst those who, in Paul's words, "are not only circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith our father Abraham had while he was still uncircumcised" Romans 4:12

This is Abraham's journey from Ur to Caanan via Haran [Gen. 11:31-12:5]



This is the exiles' journey



The people on this list are distinguished not just by descent from Abraham, but by sharing the faith of Abraham.

When God stirs up Nehemiah to register the people of God, those who can live in God's presence in God's place, using this list from Ezra 2, from ninety years before, tells us that membership of God's people, being inheritors of God's promises, has always been by faith.

God makes faith in His word the boundary between those who are included in His people, and those who are excluded, faith in His promises that preserves the distinct identity and character of God's people.

This has always been the way, as Hebrews 11 witnesses

It is not just a New Testament thing, although the New Testament makes it crystal clear.

Like Abraham, like the returning exiles, we too are included in the people of God by faith.

But having the gospel of Jesus we have a fuller and better word, one spoken in the last days by God's Son Jesus that proclaims that Jesus having died for our sins and risen again is the Lord with all authority

And we have fuller and clearer promises, because in the Lord Jesus all the promises of God find their fullest expression

Promises of forgiveness through faith in His death as the atoning sacrifice for our sins

Promises of righteousness in the judgement of the last day through faith in Jesus

Promises of adoption as God's children, of resurrection, of the Spirit

It is faith like Abraham's that is 'fully convinced that what God had promised He is able to do' [Romans 4:21] that includes us amongst the people of God, makes us the inheritors of all God has promised in Christ.

Why is it important to know the truth this list in Nehemiah 7 teaches, to know that faith in the Word has always been what characterises God's people?

Firstly it is important for our identity. This is the boundary between God's people and those who are not.

It is not church attendance

It is not being born in a Christian family

It is not knowing your bible well

What distinguishes God's people from those who are not, what distinguishes Jesus' people from those who are not, is faith in Jesus' word as the word of the living God

The living faith like Abraham's that believing the word heeds the call of God to us. That is not a call to go to Canaan or a ruined Jerusalem, but the call the Lord Jesus makes to deny ourselves and follow Him, to live by all that He has taught us, and perseveres in that over the years.

But more, it is important to know that inclusion in the people of God is by faith because God has another Jerusalem, the Jerusalem that is above, the city God has prepared for those who trust Him [Heb. 11:8-10, 13-16].

This is the city Abraham was journeying towards

Hebrews 11: ⁹By faith he stayed as a foreigner in the land of promise, living in tents as did Isaac and Jacob, coheirs of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

It is the city many psalms speak of [ps. 46, 48]

The city we have a picture of in Revelation 21-22

Rev. 21: ¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²I also saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband.

And Revelation goes on to describe the glory of that city, the joy of living there

Revelation 21: ³Then I heard a loud voice from the throne: 'Look, God's dwelling is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and will be their God. ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away.

It is pictured as a place of light, free of all evil and harm, its life renewed by the river of life flowing from the throne of God, where His people will see His face.

Words trying to describe a reality so beautiful and glorious our imaginations struggle.

Will you have a place in this city?

God's word is clear that only those written in the Lamb's book of life have a place in that glorious city.

Revelation 21: 27 Nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those written in the Lamb's book of life.

Its citizens are only those enrolled in the records of heaven by persevering faith in the gospel, who, in the words of Rev 12:17 keep the commands of God and hold firmly to the testimony of Jesus.

These, and only these, belong to the people of God who can live in the presence of God.

If you are not yet a believer in Jesus – well done for making it through a talk with such a seemingly unpromising beginning as a list of names and probably a lot of unfamiliar language and ideas.

But know God has a people of His own, distinguished by faith in His word.

The living God does make a distinction between those who ignore or reject His word, and those who believe Him.

If you are living now not listening to and believing His Son the Lord Jesus, you will have no place in that city, but be left outside – where the Lord Jesus says there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, misery and darkness

That is the bad news

But the good news is that because it is by faith you too can be included in God's people if you will change your mind about Jesus.

If you will turn back, give up trusting yourself or other gods or ideologies, and living to please yourself, and instead believe the gospel that Christ has died for your sins and been raised from the dead, and confess Jesus is Lord, calling out to Him for forgiveness and to be accepted amongst His people, you will be forgiven and have a place in the new Jerusalem.

Calling out to Him is what we call praying – it is asking Him to be forgiven. HE lives, He hears, and He will answer.

And if you are a believer being welcomed into that city is so important

Don't blur the distinction between the people God has redeemed for Himself, those who believe His gospel, and those who don't.

Like some of the children of the returning exiles in Nehemiah's day we can be tempted to do that because we don't want to be held to the distinctive life of God's people that genuine faith lives, the life of doing all that Jesus teaches

Whether it is to help us make money, or to help us feel accepted amongst our neighbours, or to have a seat at the table with the powerful, we can make obedient faith in Jesus secondary,

Want to welcome and commend amongst us those who do not believe the word of God, and instead have made their reason, or their tradition, or their feelings and intuitions the final authority for their belief and life

That blurring Dishonours God who alone decides who are His people and has made faith in His word their distinguishing characteristic

Strengthens others in their unbelief – suggesting somehow they have a place amongst God's people while still ignoring or rejecting God in favour of their own word

Imperils the community of God's people, for the root of the distinctive life of God's people is faith in Jesus, which is faith in His Word

Instead

Let's be grateful that God has prepared a city for those who believe the gospel of His Son, that new Jerusalem – where all our trials and hardships will be gone, every tear wiped from our eyes

And persevere in the faith that inherits, the faith of those whose names are enrolled in the people of that city,

The faith of Abraham who

"¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body to be already dead (since he was about a hundred years old) and also the deadness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰ He did not waver in unbelief at God's promise but was strengthened in/by his faith and gave glory to God, ²¹ because he was fully convinced that what God had promised, he was also able to do" [Romans 4:19-21]

We have more grounds than Abraham to be fully convinced that our God will do for us what He has promised.

For our faithful God, in the face of what seems impossible to us, has demonstrated over and over again that what He says He does

Why we have a Nehemiah to read – because God kept His promise and brought back a people when they had ceased to exist as a nation, lost all that made them distinct.

Why we have a gospel – because God kept His promise to send a Saviour, and in the face of the world's rejection raised Him from the dead

Count it a privilege beyond price to be enrolled in the people of God, those who can live in God's presence, those who can enter the heavenly Jerusalem and belong there

Set your hearts on the things above where Christ our Saviour is

And live out the obedience of faith now in the distinctive life of God's people, which we will hear more about in the next few chapters of Nehemiah, fully convinced that what our God has promised us in the gospel of His Son Jesus, HE will do.