



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Nehemiah 11:1 - 12:26

Topic

Nehemiah casts the lot to determine who among the Israelites must repopulate Jerusalem

Title

"Hit Me with Your Best Lot"

You're shipwrecked, adrift in a lifeboat with several other crew mates. Supplies have been spent. The time has come. The highest ranking crew member suggests you cast lots.

According to one nautical writer,

Casting lots in a lifeboat in this situation was already a long-standing custom of the sea.

Even the most naïve deckhand knew what to do in a lifeboat when all the inhabitants were starving, because the sea shanties and ballads memorialized the tradition.

Speaking of cannibalism... Two cannibals met one day. The first cannibal said, “You know, I just can’t seem to get a tender missionary. I’ve baked them, I’ve roasted them, I’ve stewed them, I’ve barbecued them, I’ve tried every sort of marinade. I just cannot seem to get them tender.”

The second cannibal asked, “What kind of missionary do you use?”

“You know, the ones that hang out at that place at the bend of the river. They have those brown cloaks with a rope around the waist and they’re sort of bald on top with a funny ring of hair on their heads.”

“Ah,” the second cannibal replied. “It’s no wonder... ***those are friars!***”

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“Hit Me with Your Best Lot”

Ordinarily, casting lots has a decidedly negative connotation. We associate it with extreme situations, like the lifeboat crew, where the ‘winner’ is the loser.

It’s hard for us to wrap our heads around the fact that casting lots was a **perfectly proper, prevalent, prominent, proven procedure** in Old Testament times for determining the will of God. The writer of the Proverbs goes so far as to say, “The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the LORD” (16:33).

The Israelites cast lots in chapter eleven of the Book of Nehemiah:

Neh 11:1 Now the leaders of the people dwelt at Jerusalem; the rest of the people **cast lots** to bring one out of ten to dwell in Jerusalem, the holy city, and nine-tenths were to dwell in other cities.

Now that it was secured by its walls and gates, Nehemiah wanted the Israelites to repopulate Jerusalem.

They cast lots and one out of every ten families were required to move from the country into the city.

Their response is certainly not what we expect:

Nehemiah 11:2 And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem.

The 10% were held in high esteem by the majority, and even though they were compelled to cast lots, they are described as “offer[ing] themselves.”

We don't cast lots, but as Treebeard said, “Let's not be too hasty.” There are lessons to learn from the practice.

I'll organize my comments around two questions: #1 Have You Discovered God's Lot In Your Life?, and (if you have), #2 Are You Directed By God's Lot In Your Life?

#1 Have You Discovered God's Lot In Your Life?

(11:1-36)

Remember the Magic 8 Ball? There are twenty answers floating inside - Ten of the possible answers are affirmative, while five are non-committal, and five are negative.

A Magic 8 Ball feature film is being discussed. While you're anxiously awaiting that, you can download the Magic 8 Ball app.

A Magic 8 Ball is how we tend to think of the casting of lots in the Old Testament. It wasn't a form of entertainment. Neither was it like a Ouija board; it wasn't divination. It was how God's will was revealed in certain circumstances.

Israel cast lots, *a lot*:

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- The conquered lands of Canaan were divided among the Israelites by lot (Joshua 18-19).
- The sin of Jonah was determined to be the source of the storm threatening the ship by casting lots (Jonah 1:7).
- The high priest was selected by lots at the time of David (First Chronicles 24:31).

One historian explained,

The exact process by which lots were cast in ancient Israel is not always clear; there were probably several different methods. One way was by using different colored or marked stones, producing binary outcomes - yes or no, good or bad, selected or rejected. Pieces of broken pottery could have names or marks written on them as well, thereby offering a wider array of possible outcomes.

The Jewish Feast Purim involved casting lots. Dr. J. Vernon McGee said this:

I have [Proverbs 16:33] written over the Book of Esther. In his pride Haman cast lots to determine the day of destruction of the Jewish

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people. But God intervened and delivered His people; and the Jewish Feast of Purim (meaning "lots") is a celebration of that providential day.

That is how the Israelites understood casting lots. God ruled over it, or He overruled it.

We are always quick to point out that casting lots is not the way believers in the church age discern or determine God's will. The last valid lot-casting is in the Book of Acts, where the disciples cast lots to choose someone to take Judas' twelfth spot as an original apostle. It was justified by Scripture; it was exactly what they ought to have done.

Casting lots as a means of discerning an answer from God ended there as the promised Holy Spirit was soon after given to the church on the Day of Pentecost.

I want to use the word lot, instead of will, because it is the language of the text, and because I think it better communicates that God

has a definite will for you to discover - what we commonly call **your** “lot in life.”

Chapter eleven suggests everyone has a lot in life from the Lord in that, scattered amidst many names, you find various callings and vocations. Let’s begin by reading verses one and two again; then we’ll get into those lots in life.

Neh 11:1 Now the leaders of the people dwelt at Jerusalem; the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to dwell in Jerusalem, the holy city, and nine-tenths *were to dwell in other cities.*

Neh 11:2 And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem.

We think of the 10% as being volun-told where they were going to live. To a freedom loving people like us, it sounds like forced relocation. Imagine being told you must move to Riverdale.

But to them, when the lot came up “Yes,” they were excited to offer themselves, knowing God had made the choice.

The 90% recognized that the others were specifically chosen by God to receive special blessings.

From what we’ve said thus far... How would you answer this question: What lot has God cast into your lap?

Whatever it is - Are you spiritually excited, knowing it is in God’s will for you - even if you don’t understand it? Are you offering yourself to God in it?

If you are looking upon someone else - on their lot in life - Are you blessing them in it? Do you see it as a privilege - whether it seems good or not good?

That’s a ‘lot’ to think about.

Verse three tells us how the rest of the chapter shakes out:

Neh 11:3. These *are* the heads of the province who dwelt in Jerusalem. (But in the cities of Judah everyone dwelt in his own possession in their cities - Israelites, priests, Levites, Nethinim, and descendants of Solomon's servants).

This is likely the list after the lottery. Verses 4-24 are the the families that dwelt in Jerusalem, while verses 25-36 are those living outside the city.

If you scan the verses, you'll find the following callings or vocations: priests; valiant men; overseer; leader of the house of God; brethren who did the work; mighty men of valor; one of the great men; overseer of business outside the house of God; the leader who began thanksgiving with prayer; overseers of the Levites; singers in charge of the services; and the kings deputy.

The titles may be different from ones we use today, but the general idea is the same:

- In the house of God, there were full-time servants, e.g., priests, Levites, and singers. In the church, the current “house of God,” on earth, there are full time ministers and missionaries.
- In Jerusalem, there were government employees, e.g., the king's deputy. In the church, we find many who work for one or another local, state, or federal agency.
- They had “mighty men of valor”; “great men.” We have military, law enforcement, fire services, first responders.
- There was at least one guy who worked in business outside Jerusalem. He stands for all who don't fit into the previous categories. He is an everyman or woman, living for the Lord out in the world - just like you.

Let's switch back for a moment and use our more familiar term, and ask, “How do I discover God's will?”

The most basic place to start is with the apostle Peter's great exclamation, God "is longsuffering toward us, **not willing** that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (Second Peter 3:9).

Have you received Jesus Christ as your Lord? As your Savior? Nothing else matters if you haven't. It is God's will that you be saved. In the Gospel of John, we read, "And this is the **will** of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (6:40).

After you get saved, Jesus continues to work in you. It's called sanctification. It is Him, in cooperation with you, making you more like Himself day-by-day, until the Day He presents you perfect and without blemish in Heaven. To that end, the apostle Paul exhorted, "For this is the **will** of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality" (First Thessalonians 4:3).

Contrary to current trends, there **is** sexual sin. God established marriage as a covenant of companionship between one biological man, and one biological woman, to be monogamous and to last as long as both shall live. Within those reasonable, protective, loving boundaries, sexuality can be thoroughly explored and enjoyed.

Anything sexual *outside* of marriage, well that's gonna be sin: Fornication (which is voluntary sex between unmarried persons), adultery (which is fornication committed by a person who is married), homosexual or lesbian behavior, rape, pedophilia, incest, and bestiality would be major headings on the list.

Sexual sin includes seeing these things - not just doing them. After all, Jesus said lusting after a woman was adultery.

This is a good spot to insert Romans 12:2, which says, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your

mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect **will** of God.” We’re to hold to the Bible’s standards, e.g., those regarding human sexuality, without wavering and thereby we will “prove” God’s will is both acceptable and perfect.

Next in discerning God’s will, there’s First Thessalonians 5:18, “in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

A great overriding philosophy of life. You’re not thankful *for* everything, but you can be *in* everything, because God is good, and God is in charge.

Let’s return to our primary question, “Have I discovered God’s lot in my life?”

Start with the five or six verses I just referred to. Get saved. Once saved, pursue holiness, and be thankful.

These form a basic foundation, or framework, upon which to discover your more specific lot in life.

#2 Are You Directed

By God's Lot In Your Life?

(12:1-26)

Let me read you a quote I encountered in my research:

You don't have to go far in either the Hebrew Scriptures or the New Testament before you hit them - those lists of unpronounceable names! The lists and genealogies in the Bible have been a source of much consternation (and sometimes merriment) as hapless readers struggle through exotic and multisyllabic Middle Eastern names in their Bible study groups. Do we really have to bother with these lists? Is it so bad to just skip them?

They may be a tongue-twisting challenge, but there can be great benefits to studying the lists in the Bible. Quite often there are treasures buried in the driest, hardest places in God's word, hidden for those who love the Bible enough to start digging.

I agree. *But I'm still not going to read them aloud.* For you who are more spiritual, the author I just quoted listed the following four reasons YOU should read the lists:

1. Names have meanings.
2. They show the Bible is a book of genuine history.
3. Looking through the generations reminds us of God's faithfulness.
4. And, details are often included amidst the names that make a point.

(For the record, I either read the names, or listen to them being read, in my devotions. I'm not completely carnal).

I did take the time to count the names in the first twenty-six verses: 108.

As I'm fond of suggesting, if you are pregnant with a boy, you might want to consult this list. At least your son won't have the same name as four other boys in his class. There's something cool about being the only Ginnethen, or Bakbukiah.

Neh 12:1 Now these *are* the priests and the Levites who came up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua: Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra,

The first twenty-six verses of chapter twelve are a register of priests and Levites. There's a little overlap in these verses about the dedication of the wall described at the end of the chapter. We'll look at them in conjunction with that dedication next week (Lord willing and rapture permitting).

In Israel, priests and Levites especially understood this idea of having a lot in life. Israel, as you recall, consisted of twelve tribes. In order of birth, they are: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulon, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Joseph and Benjamin.

(The tribe of Joseph included his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh).

God chose the tribe of Levi to serve the Temple. All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests - only the descendants of Aaron, Moses' brother, the first High Priest.

You were born into your Levitical lot in life. Nothing you could do about it. There was no changing tribes. There was no dropping your buffs to merge, à la *Survivor*.

It's like being born Italian. Not all of us have been so uniquely blessed.

One result of their birth was that, unlike the other tribes, Levites inherited no land. I might have made that sound like a bad thing. We usually think that way. We should not; quite the opposite. Listen to this (from *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*):

At first this may seem puzzling, but closer examination reveals that in lieu of territorial possessions the tribe of Levi was allotted the sacrifices or offerings (Joshua 13:14), the priesthood (Joshua 18:7), and the Lord Himself (Joshua 13:33). **Who could have dreamed of a greater inheritance?**

These guys were definitely directed by their lot in life. And at this point in Israel's story, they were going for it with all their might.

If you're not in open sin, or rebellion, you are most likely right where God has cast your lot. He's probably giving you many of the desires of your heart in terms of family and career; He's good like that.

Are you going for it in the Lord?

For example: The apostle Peter, in a section about our lives in the world, said, "For this is the **will** of God, that by doing good you may put to

silence the ignorance of foolish men” (First Peter 2:15).

Fools aren't a small subset of humanity. It isn't that one guy or gal at work that creeps everyone out. A fool is anyone not in Christ. In their hearts, they say “No” to God.

“Doing good” doesn't mean you are a model employee or student or citizen. *That's a given; it goes without saying.* It means doing whatever you do as a model employee, student, or citizen unto the Lord so there is no mistaking your love for Him.

I'm not suggesting you aren't doing enough. But let's face it: The New Testament frequently exhorts believers to awaken from spiritual slumber, to stir-up the gifts and callings of God. It was to a seemingly successful local church in Ephesus that Jesus said, “You have left your first love.”

We shouldn't be looking for Magic 8 Ball answers. With that, you can keep shaking it until you get the answer you want.

We should be cultivating an ever growing, ever deepening, relationship with Jesus, offering ourselves as living sacrifices. From a foundation or framework of pursuing holiness, He will reveal our lot in life, and supply it with superabundant grace.