

The Great Ecclesia

Reading: Psalm 22

Introduction

In previous studies we have seen the importance of the ecclesia in the Old Testament, established on the day of the assembly before mount Sinai. It was this ecclesia that had instituted principles upon which Christ's ecclesia would be built. As we have also considered, at times the whole ecclesia would be involved and be pleased with an important decision concerning matters of faith and worship.

This study is a continuation and fitting conclusion centered around the phrase "a great ecclesia" or "a very great ecclesia". There were certain times during the history of the ecclesia in the Old Testament where they gathered together. This assembling of the whole nation is termed "a great ecclesia". We will look at two occasions, one in Nehemiah and one in Ezra, where this term is used during a time of crisis for the nation in which something was wrong. There was sin in the ecclesia and a judgment had to be made. There are also two more occasions with Solomon and Hezekiah where Israel is gathered to celebrate a feast. These fraternal gatherings were attended by large crowds and likewise called "a great ecclesia".

In the Old Testament the cities of Israel were the local ecclesias (Deut. 13:12-18). When they came together it was "a great ecclesia". In the New Testament as well, ecclesias were identified by their city. This is a lesson for our ecclesias today. Each ecclesia is autonomous, judging within its own gates, but we are also part of a bigger whole. The standard among the ecclesias must be the same so that when we come together either for judgment or in worship, we do it as "one man" (Ezra 8:1).

This will lead us then to consider the greatest ecclesia of all. The Lord Jesus Christ with his saints in the kingdom. A place where we will both celebrate in feasts and pass judgment on the nations. The joy that was set before Jesus so that he might endure the cross (Heb. 12:2) was the vision of this "great ecclesia", his ecclesia that he built (Matt. 16:18), finally being completed when we are all in his presence (1 Thess. 2:19-20).

Assembling for Judgment

There are times when a problem is larger than any one ecclesia. The ecclesias must come to together as a great ecclesia to agree on a solution or judgment and to make sure it is implemented. One of these cases is found in Nehemiah chapter 5.

Nehemiah

During the days of Nehemiah there was "a great cry of the people... against their brethren the Jews" (v. 1). They had come into debt because their brethren had exacted hard usury upon them. Loans which were impossible to pay back because of the high interest. They enslaved them and there was no way out for them in their extreme debt. This was a great injustice.

When Nehemiah heard it (v. 6) he was extremely angry. Any other man might have done something rash. Nehemiah was not that type of man as he carefully thinks about it and wisely considers that this is a matter for a great ecclesia.

“Then I consulted with myself, and I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother. And I set **a great assembly [ecclesia]** against them.”

He wants the best outcome and as this is a widespread problem, he called together a great ecclesia to support this judgment. What these nobles and rulers had done was clearly against the law. Nehemiah alludes to this in verse 9 when he says “ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God?” which is taken from the usury laws in Leviticus 25:17,36,43. We’ve seen this before in our studies. The ecclesia is the place where there is to be developed a healthy fear of God. Anyone who disregarded the word was to be disfellowshipped. This is what is said in verse 13,

“Also I shook my lap, and said, So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth not this promise, even thus be he shaken out, and emptied. And **all the congregation [ecclesia]** said, Amen, and praised the LORD. And the people did according to this promise.”

The consequences pronounced was agreed upon by the whole ecclesia. As you can see the principles applied here are the same instructed by our Lord for his ecclesia in Matthew 18.

Ezra

Ezra chapters 9 and 10 tell of another time when a great ecclesia would have to come together for judgment. In chapter 9:1-2 it says,

“Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, **have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations**, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that **the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass.**”

According to the list at the end of chapter 10, this was a huge problem. The enormity of the issue so overwhelms Ezra that he rent his garments, plucked out his hair and just sat their astonished. When he finally gathered himself, he prayed. We have it recorded from verses 6-15. The answer to that prayer was a very great ecclesia.

“Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him out of Israel **a very great congregation [ecclesia]** of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore.”

Ezra found that he was not alone in this matter. There were others who trembled at the word of God (9:4). The men, women and children of this great ecclesia were also weeping for their sins. It was the great ecclesia that came up with the solution (v. 3). They came to an agreement, a covenant, on this

matter that those who had married foreign women must put them away (10:3). Anyone who did not do it was to be disfellowshipped as it says in verse 8,

“whosoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited, and himself **separated from the congregation [ecclesia]** of those that had been carried away.”

These were not the judgements of one man, Ezra. It was the agreement of the counsel of the princes, the elders, and the whole ecclesia. It pleased them all as it says in verse 12,

“Then **all the congregation [ecclesia]** answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do.”

These are all again familiar patterns and lessons for our ecclesias in the world today.

The Children Included

There is an interesting aspect of the great ecclesia in Ezra 10:1 that I want to point out. The great ecclesia includes “children”. This is not an isolated occurrence. Its beginnings are found in Deut. 31:9-13,

“And Moses wrote this law, and delivered it unto the priests the sons of Levi, which bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and unto all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, saying, At the end of every seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles, When all Israel is come to appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing. **Gather [ecclesia] the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger** that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law: And that **their children**, which have not known any thing, may hear, and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as ye live in the land whither ye go over Jordan to possess it.”

The word “gather” in verse 12 is the verb form of ecclesia. Moses is instructing here that every seven years, the year of release, during the feast of tabernacles they are to have a big study day. At this time, they would read the whole law in front of adults and children. It was to be a solemn assembly. There are many times in scripture where the children are part and parcel of the great ecclesia (Josh. 8:35; 2 Chr. 20:5,13-14; Ezra 10:1; Neh. 8:2; Joel 2:16). The reason, as given in verse 13 is that they may hear and learn to fear God.

I have heard tale of some ecclesias abroad that have their Sunday School the same time as the Memorial Meeting. I suppose the reason is so the little tykes don’t disturb the solemnity of the occasion. According to the scriptures nothing could be more wrong. It is critical as parents of young children that you try and get your child to sit quietly in meeting. As a parent you are going to have to gauge that according to the child, but you have to try as soon as possible and stick to it. It is the greatest blessing you can give them to share that moment with adults as we all approach God in fear.

I remember when our girls were little, and we'd get those sideways glances when they made too much noise and we had to take them out of the room. The elders sometimes forget how hard it is. But we should all be very lenient when a child acts up in meeting, seeing it as a very necessary part of the whole ecclesia, and trusting that as the parent walks them out of the room that they will teach them the fear of God in the hallway.

Assembling for a Feast

The great ecclesia came together not always for judgment but also for times of joy and fellowship. You can see that here in Deut. 31:12 which was to take place every seven years, the year of release at the feast of tabernacles.

Solomon

During the days of Solomon this is done at the dedication of the house of God. It is recorded for us starting in 2 Chr. 5:2-3,

“Then Solomon **assembled [ecclesia]** the elders of Israel, and all the heads of the tribes, the chief of the fathers of the children of Israel, unto Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion. Wherefore all the men of Israel **assembled [ecclesia]** themselves unto the king in the feast which was in the seventh month.”

The feast of the seventh month was the feast of tabernacles. At this time, Solomon stands before the whole ecclesia and blesses them (2 Chr. 6:3,12-13). He says a beautiful prayer about forgiveness and at the end they have a great feast in 2 Chr. 7:8-9,

“Also at the same time Solomon kept the feast seven days, and all Israel with him, **a very great congregation [ecclesia]**, from the entering in of Hamath unto the river of Egypt. And in the eighth day they made a solemn assembly: for they kept the dedication of the altar seven days, and the feast seven days *[14 days total]*. And on the three and twentieth day of the seventh month he sent the people away into their tents, glad and merry in heart for the goodness that the LORD had shewed unto David, and to Solomon, and to Israel his people.”

This is a wonderful foreshadowing of what the kingdom of God will be like. This was the kingdom of God! God had chosen Jerusalem to build his house (2 Chr. 6:4-6). The ark, the symbol of the glory of God, came to its “resting place” (2 Chr. 7:41). Solomon, the seed of David, sat on the throne of the Lord (2 Chr. 6:10). The whole kingdom had come from Hamath (Euphrates) to the river of Egypt (cp. 2 Chr. 9:26; Gen. 15:18). There is so much here that gives us the taste of the kingdom to come. Especially the whole ecclesia celebrating the feast of tabernacles with so much joy. This was usually for a week but here it is for two weeks.

Hezekiah

In our last study we considered the ecclesia in the days of Hezekiah. Did you notice the “great ecclesia” there? It is in 2 Chr. 30:13,

“And there assembled at Jerusalem much people to keep the feast of unleavened bread in the second month, **a very great congregation [ecclesia].**”

This feast was also extraordinary because it was doubled to two weeks,

“And **the whole assembly [ecclesia]** took counsel to keep other seven days: and they kept other seven days with gladness.”

There had not been such immense joy among the ecclesia since the days of Solomon (v. 26). Both of these incidents foreshadow the kingdom age. You can see the types. Hezekiah stands like the Lord Jesus Christ to be an intercessor for those who are not sanctified (v. 17-18). When Hezekiah says, “The Lord pardon every one” he uses the Hebrew word kaphar which means “to cover” and is the word used for making atonement. The Lord hears the prayer and heals or forgives the people (v. 19).

Jesus and the Great Ecclesia

We are those who are in need of sanctification which can only be achieved by Jesus Christ. It is this sanctification that makes us his brethren, part of the ecclesia which he is building. This is what Hebrews 2 is teaching, starting at verse 10.

“For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in **bringing many sons unto glory**, to make **the captain of their salvation** perfect through sufferings. {11} For both **he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one:** for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, {12} Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the **church [ecclesia]** will I sing praise unto thee.”

Solomon and Hezekiah were but types of the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. His ecclesia will be the greatest, being filled with sons of glory, those sanctified by his blood, those who he is not ashamed to call his brethren. This was the joy that was set before Jesus and how he endured. They are “all of one” because they are of “one heart” as in the day of Hezekiah (2 Chr. 30:12). It was the “great ecclesia”, being in the very presence of so many brothers and sisters, being one together in true harmony, fellowship and worship in the kingdom.

“For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? For ye are our glory and joy.” (1 Thess. 2:19-20)

This joy of Christ for his ecclesia is in Hebrews 2:12. This is a quote of Psalm 22:22 and is another connection back to the Old Testament. The word “church” is the Greek ecclesia and in Psalm 22 it is the Hebrew word “qahal”. What is in Psalm 22? It’s that great Messianic Psalm which was in the mind of our Lord while he was on the cross for he quotes the first verse, “My God, my God why, why hast thou forsaken me?” We know this Psalm because it predicts him being pierced (v. 16) and the parting of his

garments (v. 18). There is another side to this Psalm that looks beyond his death. It all starts in verse 22, the verse that is quoted in Hebrews 2:12.

“I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of **the congregation [ecclesia]** will I praise thee.”

There is a change in the Psalm at this point that goes from past tense to future tense. If the words of verses 1-21 are the thoughts of Jesus on the cross, I like to think, verses 22-24 are his words on the morning of the resurrection. His thoughts immediately turned to his brethren, declaring the name of God (as we see in the Acts).

There is another turn at verse 25 which undoubtedly is now about the kingdom. Look at verse 25,

“My praise shall be of thee in **the great congregation [ecclesia]**: I will pay my vows before them that fear him.”

There is our phrase “the great ecclesia”. Why is it here? Because it is the focus of Christ of the great ecclesia in the kingdom of God. In that Kingdom there is going to be a great feast (v. 26, 29) that will be so much greater than Solomon’s or Hezekiah’s. The Lord Jesus at the last supper said, “I will not any more eat thereof, until it be fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Luke 22:15). This is the Passover. The feast that Hezekiah had foreshadowed. Brothers and sisters, we are going to be partakers of that feast and it will not be just a little bread and sip of wine. Imagine yourself there.

In Ezekiel’s vision of the great temple in the kingdom he was told that the east gate would be continually shut for there the prince, shall sit to eat bread (Ezek. 44:2). Ezekiel tells us the Passover and Feast of Tabernacles will be reinstated at that time. The prince will not be eating there alone. The temple is so massive and extensive because there will be the “great ecclesia” of which he saw while on the cross. There will be fulfilled that promise of Jesus that he would eat of it again with all his brothers and sisters.

At the last supper Jesus also said to his apostles in Luke 22:29-30,

“And I appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath appointed unto me; **That ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.**”

There would be feasting with Jesus at his table in the kingdom, but they would also be judging. This brings out the other aspect of the great ecclesia which we saw at the beginning of this study. The ecclesia is about fellowship, but it is also about judgment.

The ecclesia which we belong to now is a training ground for our rulership in the kingdom of God. Paul took the Corinthians to task for not exercising judgment. He says in 1 Cor. 5:12-13,

“For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.” (quote from Deut. 13:5)”

It seems these days there are a lot of brothers and sisters becoming more concerned with judging outsiders than judging in the ecclesia. The focus now is to be judging in the ecclesia. We rightly do not vote or protest during this day and age. We are not active in worldly politics and government. But it will not always be that way. We should have a keen sense of the injustices of this present age but being realistic that we will only be able to fix it when Jesus comes again. For it is at that time that we will live and reign with Christ for a thousand years. Look at the words of Paul as he continues in 1 Cor. 6:1-3

“When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or **do you not know that the saints will judge the world?** And **if the world is to be judged by you**, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that **we are to judge angels?** How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!”

The matters we judge on now are trivial compared to what we will be doing in the kingdom. This is a training ground.

People these days are crying out for justice. They chant “no justice, no peace”. We know what they mean. If you don’t give us justice, we will not give you peace. The ironic thing is this is actually a Biblical principle. There can be no peace without justice.

The injustice in this world is real. It is terrible. It should prick us to our hearts. You, as a saint in Christ’s kingdom are the answer. You might say to yourself, “I don’t think that is appealing to me, being a ruler.” Just think of this... you will be immortal, like unto the angels. The full “power of the world to come” (Heb. 6:4-5) will be yours not just a taste as it was in the early ecclesia. This is the great ecclesia. You will be better equipped than anybody to right the wrongs of the kingdoms of men. The racism, poverty, and violence so rooted in our societies will be overthrown by the justice and peace of the kingdom of God, his great ecclesia.¹

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government **and peace** there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it **with judgment and with justice** from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.” (Isa. 9:6-7)

Brother and sisters, as God’s ecclesia, let us prepare our hearts for that day. It is coming soon.

¹ Reference could also be made here to Psalm 149:1 which mentions “the congregation [ecclesia] of the saints” and verse 8-9 which mentions the judgments of the saints on the world.