

## **Nehemiah: Rebuilding a Thriving Church and Neighbourhood**

### **Introductory Sermon**

**Bible Reading: Nehemiah 1**

Our new series explores the story of Nehemiah. Nehemiah lived in the fifth century BC in a time of great change. In an age of empires, Nehemiah, was among the families of Jewish exiles, and found himself to be the cup bearer to the king of the world at the time, King Artaxerxes of Persia. A remnant of Jews by this stage had returned home to the ruin of Jerusalem after 70 years of exile in Babylon but they were struggling to maintain vision for the huge task ahead of repairing their once great city. Nehemiah turned out to be a great leader of his people, encouraging them to unite for the rebuilding of the walls.

Why look at such ancient history - well, Exile is a helpful image for us and the church today. Nehemiah's story can give us spiritual tools we need to 'Rebuild a Thriving Church and Neighbourhood'.

Like Nehemiah's world, ours is also in a time of great change and upheaval. The world is changing and our country is changing - complex forces at play in our society are bringing about major shifts. Recent debates on abortion, euthanasia, immigration, gay marriage and family life indicate that there is an absence of agreement on some of the most fundamental questions facing society.

**1**For much of our history since European settlement, Australia, along with other Western nations, was a society that agreed on core values arising from Christianity and this was a unifying factor during our country's sometimes bitter disputes. The church has had this privileged place - co-operating with the state in education, welfare and health, a cooperation seen by the vast majority as being in the best interests of our community.

But now that Christian heritage of our nation is being eroded, making way for a more secular society, we are divided at our heart, few of us want to discuss yet which is set to intensify. Amidst this, the church finds itself, partly due to its own failures and abuses of power - being sidelined and is increasingly considered out of date - a relic - no longer given respect, but more often ridiculed. We can feel like we're exiled in our own land.

100 years ago - 1911 census - 96% Christian (church at heart of social life) — 2011 census - 61% Christian. Only 12% attend church more than twice a month. These aren't always the best indicators of the life of the church but they give us a good enough snap shot to show how much things have shifted.

Nehemiah and the exiles' story will reorient and energise us to see that while exile is challenging, it can also be an opportunity to re-imagine what it means to be the people of God in our day and time, when we accept that our identity and power doesn't come from our standing in society, but from the love of God alone.

### **1. Introducing Exile**

(Image of the captives going to Babylon) - In 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army captured the Jews, Jerusalem was destroyed, the walls were knocked down, and the temple was burned. The people were deported to Babylon. Their history as a people had come full circle. From landless, to landed and now back to landless. Their royal city was left in ruins...

As they went into Exile, taken captive, can you imagine the traumatic shift going on for God's people, the overwhelming sense of loss of identity? losing where home is? They have become an insignificant drop in the ocean of this foreign powerful empire —as they made the horrible arduous journey by foot across desert wastelands and into the arms of the great city of Babylon, with its splendour, its temples, gods, rulers, and great wealth, one big question on everyone's heart was whether God is just an insignificant drop in the ocean too. We've been swallowed up by a bigger fish. Has God been swallowed up too? Is God also just small fry like us, no match for the big

players? The exiled Jews were not oppressed, abused or imprisoned. But they were displaced, alienated from the place that had given them identity and security.

**Assimilating:** For some of those exiled to Babylon, it seemed too difficult to hold onto Jewish identity, so they simply took on the Babylonian identity and values. They adjusted their cultural identity and values because it is too hard to truly live as God's people in exile. This is assimilation.

**Despairing:** Others in exile were tempted to despair because the power of Babylon seemed too great, perhaps even greater than God. They're over-awed with the powers of the world — and begin to lose hope in God. This is the temptation to despair.

**Reimagining:** Many other nations of antiquity were expelled from their lands to be swallowed up, vanishing within the turbulent history of empires. But what was it about the Jewish people that meant that no force could break the bond they had with their land, their shared identity, their God?

**How did they find hope and hold onto faith?**

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### **We Are Exiles:**

The story of the exiles offers us a picture — a metaphor — to shape the way we view ourselves and our relationship to the world around us as Christians. That metaphor is “exile.”

**Our exile is an opportunity to reimagine what it means to be the people of God in our day and time...**

As we look at this first chapter of Nehemiah today, I want to give you three essential skills to the art of reimagining faith in a changing and hostile world:

**1. One of the absolutely essential skills of the exile was to be able to hold fast to their most essential stories of who they are.** For the Jews in Babylon these stories were like memories that put steel in their spine, that gave them hope that there was to be a better day. Stories such as the period called Exodus, when God set them free from another superpower Egypt. Now you can understand how being an exile in Babylon filled you with a need to want to know that God was faithful, that he would set you free, that there was a better day coming. So Exodus, the story of being set free from Egypt, was a powerful and even revolutionary story to tell. Imagine telling this story about the time when God destroyed Egypt's army to set his people free right there within the walls of this new great empire Babylon. It was a dangerous story but also one full of hope.

No matter what was going on about them, they remembered who they were as God's people - and then God spoke to them through their prophets at the time of exile bringing great hope into a tough and bewildering place:

Faith is precisely for exiles who remember the land but see no way to it.

### **Isaiah 43:19-21**

For I am about to do something new.

See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?

I will make a pathway through the wilderness.

I will create rivers in the dry wasteland.

The wild animals in the fields will thank me,

the jackals and owls, too,

for giving them water in the desert.

Yes, I will make rivers in the dry wasteland

so my chosen people can be refreshed.

I have made Israel for myself,

and they will someday honour me before the whole world.

### **Jeremiah 31:20-21**

“Is not Israel still my son,  
my darling child?” says the Lord.  
“I often have to punish him,  
but I still love him.  
That’s why I long for him  
and surely will have mercy on him.  
Set up road signs;  
put up guideposts.  
Mark well the path  
by which you came.  
Come back again, my virgin Israel;  
return to your towns here.

So if we translate our situation, as exiles in a post Christian world, what are our hope-filled stories: the story of Jesus, its the gospel stories. Far from being lovely warm bedtime stories for Christian kids, I want to suggest to you that the gospels are actually revolutionary stories, our most vital memories, memories that fill us with hope that it is possible to be godly, possible to be faithful, as Jesus was, but to do it right here on this broken fallen planet. Jesus shows us it is possible to live faithfully, joyfully, purposefully even in an empire that doesn’t acknowledge who you are or what you believe.

How much of a priority do you give to reading scripture?

Nehemiah’s memoir begins with him 1500 kilometres or thereabouts away from Jerusalem. His brother Hanani comes to visit with some others who have been in the homeland. They bring bad news that things are not going well for the Jews. The walls are torn down and the gates burned. They are in disgrace.

Nehemiah’s response to this is deeply felt: he wept. He mourned fasted and prayed for many days. why? Because he is deeply connected to them. They are his people. They share the same hopes, the same struggles, the same sense of purpose.

When we share the same story, we join our individual struggles with our collective struggle with shared purpose.

## **2. The second essential skill of the exile is commitment to speak honestly to God...**

It is easy to be honest before God with our hallelujahs; it is somewhat more difficult to be honest in our hurts; it is nearly impossible to be honest before God in the darker emotions. So we commonly suppress our negative emotions. Or when we do express them, we do it far from where we think God might be. We’re ashamed or embarrassed to be seen this way.

But when read prayers such as Nehemiah’s, we find this will not do. We must pray who we actually are, not who we think we should be. In prayer, all is not sweetness and light. The way of prayer is not to cover our unlovely emotions so that they will appear respectable, but expose them so that they can be enlisted in the work of the kingdom. It is an act of profound faith to entrust one’s most intimate feelings to God, knowing they will be taken seriously. Honest prayer takes our lives to bedrock where God can lay new foundations.

The everyday activities of life press and urge and invite us to pretend that things are all right. Real change begins in the capacity to grieve because that is the most visceral announcement that things are not right. W. Brueggemann

Nehemiah prays:  
Grief about problem  
Conviction about God’s holy character

Confession: Intensity, Honesty, Urgency  
Confidence in God's Promises  
Commitment to get involved

**Ps 13** Start with how you feel  
Request for God to make himself known  
Expression of trust and praise

### **3. The third essential skill of the exile is to work for the peace and prosperity of your neighbourhood.**

Just as vital as being honest before God and keeping stories and memories of who we are close is the need to get out there and be a presence in your neighbourhood, in your city. The worst thing to do in a time of exile is to hide away in a holy huddle. The Spirit's work in reforming the church and the love of God on the move in the neighbourhood go hand in hand.

Listen to Jeremiah's prophecy to the Jews in exile:

This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: 5 "Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. 6 Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! 7 And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare." Jer 29:4 - 7

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While it is true that all is not well within Christianity, there are a different set of questions which can help us to know if we are in a healthy place:

Are there lonely people in our midst finding acceptance and a place to belong?

Are we sharing hospitality beyond our own congregation?

Are we working together positively with other people in the neighbourhood?

Do we put ourselves out for anyone not in our usual social circles?

Are we bold to encourage and lift up others?

What is critical is the capacity to see how the Spirit may be at work in the church and in the world at large.

#### **Conclusion:**

We can feel like exiles in an increasingly post-Christian world. Essential skills for the exile are:

- 1 - Know your identity in God - learn, draw on and live out the story of God's people
- 2 - Be honest with God - pray how you feel and bring your hardships to God.
- 3 - Live for the peace and prosperity of your neighbourhood - no 'holy huddles' please.

#### **Benediction**

As you go on your way, may the Lord Jesus Christ go with you. May he be near you to defend you; may he go before you to show you the way; behind you to encourage you; beside you to befriend you; above you to watch over you; and within you to give you peace. Amen