

## **Introduction to the Book of Nehemiah -**

### **Jenga**

I wonder how many of us have played Jenga?

The aim of the game is to build the tower as high as possible removing blocks from beneath, without causing the tower to fall. The winner of the game is the person who manages not to cause the whole thing to come crashing down as they remove their block.

A great game, lots of fun. But when the tower has come crashing down and is just a bunch of wooden rubble, if you want to play again you have to rebuild it. If you have the plastic sleeve, that makes it a bit easier, but otherwise, it's a case of re-building it layer by layer. It takes time, but it's worth it for another game.

Over the next few weeks, we're going to be following the story of a man who did some serious rebuilding. We're going to be looking at the book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament, and the inspiring story of Nehemiah who heard all about the broken down walls of Jerusalem and was inspired to do something about them! God placed it on his heart to get the walls rebuilt, and that was exactly what he did - he formed a plan, he gathered a team of people and he got the enormous wall surrounding the city restored in 52 days.

We can learn so much from the story of Nehemiah today, particularly at this time when we are getting ready to return to worshipping in our church building. After so many months away, it's time to rebuild!

**Let's listen to our two bible readings.**

**BIBLE READINGS: Nehemiah 1:1-11 & Luke 18:1-8**

### **SERMON**

The book of Nehemiah really is a wonderful book in the Bible. But we might not be so familiar with it as we are with some of the accounts in the Old Testament. And so it might be helpful, before we delve into it, to just begin with a bit of background so that we can really appreciate the situation and events that Nehemiah is dealing with. So, bear with me as I do a two-minute tour of the centuries leading up to 446BC! Here we go!

You'll remember in Genesis, God had spoken to Abraham of a Promised Land and how Abraham had trusted in God's promise and left his land. Many years later the Israelites had been enslaved in Egypt until God called them out under the leadership of Moses, God making a covenant with them and leading them into the Promised land.

Hundreds of years passed during which the nation experienced struggles, faithlessness, and wrestling with God. After the high point of Israel's history under King David, things had gone downhill, with Israel splitting into two kingdoms: Israel and Judah. Because of their disobedience, Israel was conquered and its people scattered, followed by Judah (the people we're concerned with in Nehemiah) who had continued to rebel against God. In 587 B.C., the Babylonian army captured and destroyed their city, Jerusalem, knocking down the walls, destroying and burning the temple. The people were deported to Babylon, hundred of miles away. We can only imagine the trauma of the destruction of your city and being forced to live in a foreign land.

But God hadn't forgotten His people. He allowed the Persians to conquer the Babylonians, significant because the Persians ruled with a very different means of control. They allowed captured people to resettle in their native lands, as long as they supported the Persian state and paid their taxes. And so, over a period of a hundred years from 538BC, the exiled Jews were allowed to migrate back to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple, the story of which is told in the Book of Ezra. But the rest of the city still lay demolished and desolate.

And this is where Nehemiah comes in.

In the very first verse we learn several important facts:

"The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa..."

Nehemiah, a Jewish exile, was living in the major city in Elam, part of Babylonia (today - south western Iran), far away from his homeland. It was the twentieth year of the Persian King Artaxerxes - and that means that we know this was the year 446BC.

We learn right at the end of the chapter (verse 11) that Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king. His job was to taste the king's wine before the king drank it to make sure it was not poisoned. Not my kind of idea of wine-tasting, I have to say!! But as cupbearer, Nehemiah had frequent access to the king, and was potentially a man of some influence.

On the return of his brother, Hanani, from a journey to Jerusalem, Nehemiah "questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem."

And the report given is very bleak indeed: "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

Nehemiah's fellow Jews from Judah have returned to Jerusalem, but years after they've been back the city walls are still broken, still displaying the shame of its invasion by the Babylonians. As Nehemiah pictured in his mind the city lying still in ruins, the great walls that had meant to protect her, he felt the pain and shame of his people and the dishonour that this brought the Lord, too. Perhaps he imagined people from other countries travelling through and shaking their heads or smirking at the pitiful state of this once great city.

And Nehemiah wept.

Such is his love for his homeland, that Nehemiah mourns and fasts and prays for days. He repents on behalf of God's people for their past rebellion against God, and he seeks God's favour, reminding himself and God of God's faithfulness, love and power, his covenant with his people. Nehemiah was a highly gifted leader, a practical man, a team builder, but first and foremost he was a man of great humility, a man of prayer, persistent prayer like that of the widow in Jesus's parable; a man concerned with the honour of God. And he knew that without God's "yes", without God's strength and wisdom, any human plans he might have had would either come to nothing or fail at the first hurdle. And what was that first hurdle? The first step in his plan? Well, the very last sentence in this first chapter give us a hint: "I was cupbearer to the king". More of that next week...

But what can we learn from this first chapter of Nehemiah for our situation today as we start returning to worship in our building on Magpie Hall Road? As we think about our theme of "Time to rebuild" this morning, there are certainly great truths we can learn from God's Word.

On March 16th, with the announcement of the Lockdown, we were told that we had to close our doors and shut our building. No more gathering to worship until further notice. No opportunity to say our temporary goodbyes to one another, no Anglican prayer liturgy to prepare us for the exit. No chance to put everything away neatly. It was all very abrupt. We were worshipping together and then we weren't! Suddenly, church leaders up and down the nation found themselves thrust into the brave new digital world, live-streaming, recording, YouTube, zoom, frantically trying to find a new way of connecting God's people in worship! Nothing like this had ever been experienced in our lifetime certainly.

Senior church leaders, at the time, shared some reflections about our situation, helping us to think theologically about our experience. Bishop James, in his first message, spoke of how there was a sense in which, like the Jews' experience in exile, "we were living in a strange land", asking perhaps a similar question to theirs: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land", as they felt cut off emotionally and spiritually from the roots of their worship, and the Temple? How could we sustain our worship of God, without our church where we habitually offered our praises and our prayers? If you like - how would we survive?

Those who survived the exile and were back in Jerusalem were in a bad way - in great trouble and disgrace, we learn. And the physical state of the city walls was perhaps a symbol of the inner state of the people of God. We know that when they had gone into exile their community was in a mess, spiritually. The Jews of Judah had been warned again and again about their sin and rebellion against God, and the judgment that was coming if they didn't return to the Lord. But they ignored the warnings and had borne the consequence.

The physical walls of the city were broken down and in a state of rubble, but their spiritual foundations had been in a state of utter disrepair for much longer. And they needed to repent.

Thankfully, after 5 months of being away from it, our church building is in pretty good shape. Thank you to our caretaker, Pete, who's been keeping an eye on everything. Yes, we know that with our Quinquennial, we do have some walls to deal with, but in the time that we've been away, only one wall has come down you'll be glad to know (!), and that's the small front wall which someone unfortunately ran into with their vehicle.

But more importantly, our church community wasn't, thanks to the grace of God, in the kind of spiritual disrepair / spiritual rebellion that the Jews were in prior to their being invaded and exiled. Our spiritual foundations weren't in a state of disrepair like the people of Judah. Now, of course, that doesn't mean we can sit back and be pleased with ourselves! That's spiritual pride, which soon leads to downfall. God calls his people, the church, to be humble before him, to search our hearts and to repent not just of our personal sin but where we fall short of his glory, corporately. God loves his people just as we are, but He doesn't want to leave us just as we are. As we return to the church building, God wants to build us up as his people spiritually. He calls us to turn, turn, turn to Him and to seek him with all our heart.

So. The Jews who had returned to Jerusalem had survived.

We have survived! But the Lockdown experience will have affected and changed us in all sorts of ways. And some of us may have thrived in our relationship with God; some of us will have struggled and wondered where He was and is in it all.

And as we enter this time of returning and rebuilding, we must remember that we'll all have been affected differently by the lockdown and will continue to experience the effects. And we need to look out for one another and particularly be aware of those who are struggling because of months of isolation; those who won't be able to return immediately because of their health and their greater vulnerability. Just as the exiles returned to Jerusalem in phases, ours will be a phased return too, and in all our rebuilding we must keep all God's people in our hearts and

minds. And we will all share an uncertainty about what the next few months hold; and uncertainty too about what being back together again will really be like - particularly knowing that we can't all meet every week together, we can't sing, we can't enjoy tea and coffee together after the service!

Bishop James, in his message at the beginning of Lockdown, talked about how out of a period of exile came the discovery of new ways of worshipping of God; how it's thought probable that it was in a time of exile that the Jews gathered together the stories of faith and the Hebrew scriptures in the form that we now know; how new patterns of worship and prayer developed based around the psalms, the stories of their faith and offering of prayer.

As we emerge from our enforced exile from our church building and gathered worship, I think we'll find that we're in a different "place", that we've discovered some new ways of living in the land, new ways of praying, relating to God, supporting one another. There'll be stories of experiencing God's faithfulness, his being there for us; answered prayer. Some of us will have got to know people in our fellowship in a deeper way than we ever knew one another prior to the Lockdown, and may be talked with fellow members who we'd never spoken to before. New ways of praying together (The Prayer Circle), studying the Bible together (via Zoom) etc; we've discovered gifts and talents that we weren't aware of.

So, as we begin our return to our church building for Sunday worship, we're not returning to the building and just continuing from where we were before March 16th! Yes, there will be many things that continue, of course. But actually, as well as the things that will be different in how we worship and pray together again because of current restrictions, we are different too. And so, as we return and rebuild in this new phase of our life together, within the challenges that we still face, there is also great opportunity to grow and develop and discover new things of God together.

As we return, it's not about rebuilding physical walls (although we are going to have to do some re-pointing, we know that!) but it does involve practicalities in ensuring we can safely and confidently gather together - and therefore be liberated to engage in and enjoy worship together. As we'll think more about later in our series on Nehemiah, rebuilding involves using our gifts and talents perhaps in a slightly different way, certainly it involves team work, each playing their part, and serving God's purposes together in this new phase of our journey.

But at the heart of everything we are and do over these coming weeks and months, we need to follow Nehemiah's example of seeking God wholeheartedly, praying with persistence for God's wisdom, strength, power and love. Growing in our love and concern for his glory and honour. May our aim and purpose not be limited to "getting back in the church again", nor even limited to "let's grow in our worshipping life together" but may the vision of our hearts and minds be to glorify our God, to see his name glorified and lifted up high through us, so that those who "pass by our walls" may recognise our great God and King.