

Well good morning folks. We are starting a new series this morning as we look into the life of Nehemiah. But as we begin I have a question to start. Can you remember where you were when significant events in the world happened. For example, can you remember where you were when Princess Diana died? Can you remember where you were on 9/11 – 21 years ago today when 2 commercial airlines hit the twin towers in New York? I suppose we all will now remember where we were on Thursday afternoon when the news broke that Queen Elizabeth was extremely ill and subsequently died. We were actually in Aberdeen, leaving our Josh off to University. As the news came through at 6:30 that she had died peacefully, even though she was a very elderly lady, tears ran down all of our faces. And then on Friday morning, it was such a natural response for us as a family to drive the 1 hour journey across to Balmoral and lay flowers like many others. We stood for such a long time in the relative quietness as people in their own ways mourned the passing of an incredible monarch.

Do you remember where you were at certain key moments in history? Whilst the thoughts about the Queen's death, the King's accession and this period of public mourning are fresh in everyone's minds, I actually want you to think back a little about the moment in history that we are in right now coming out of a global pandemic. We have all experienced grief – it has taken from us so many loved ones without very little opportunity for goodbyes, it has made many people across all denominations not return to church. And we have now entered into the most terrifying period of financial hardship where fuel poverty will be at a level like no other. And therefore have you considered, as people will look back in this period of history and see what God's people have done as a result of it all.

Put yourself into the shoes of Nehemiah from our reading this morning. Nehemiah hears from one of his brothers these words, *“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”*. And so it brings him to tears.

So today begins the start of a teaching series for Autumn where we are going to examine this book of Nehemiah. And so to help us, I'm going to give a very brief history lesson. So to set some context, Nehemiah lives about 500 years after the death of King David, and then David's son Solomon took over as king. After Solomon's reign, the kingdom of Israel is split into a northern Kingdom called Israel and a southern kingdom called Judah. The northern kingdom fell into the Assyrian's hands in 722 BC and Jerusalem and Judah fall 136 years later in 586 BC to the Babylonians, who also then conquer the Assyrians. The city of Jerusalem is destroyed, the walls are broken down, and those living in the city are carted off to Babylon where the job of inculturation begins. They stay there 70 years, long enough for a generation to die, a new generation to be born in a different culture, a pagan culture, and hopefully they will forget where they came from.

The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar dies in 562 BC. 4 more kings then reign over the next 30 years, and then under the direction of Belshazzar (whose name is mentioned in the book of Daniel), Babylon falls to Cyrus of Persia in 539 BC, which opens up the opportunity in the following year for a first group of Israelites to return home under the direction of Zerubbabel. That's what we read at the beginning of the book of Ezra. After a series of Assyrian kings, Xerxes becomes King and he marries Esther whose story is also in the bible. Then after Xerxes' death his son Artaxerxes began to reign in 465 BC. It was under his reign that the 2nd group of Israelites return home under the guidance of Ezra which you can read in the second part of the book of Ezra. Then we arrive in the year 445 BC where the

beginning of the book of Nehemiah takes place. So I hope that helps to set some context to how we've got here, but if you want to do any reading on this, read Ezra first where we see the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and the Torah is retaught, and then read Nehemiah who takes a group to rebuild the city walls. You can probably already see that large parts of the Old Testament are devoted to this piece of history.

For the exiles in these books, it is an incredible time of change. And for us we are in a crucial time of change – people have no faith in government, people have become focused on other things and not the church. And so personally this for me is also a crucial opportunity for our church to decide on its future direction. All of us have been impacted by the global pandemic, and all of us are being affected by this period of financial instability. So the figure of Nehemiah is someone that we can learn a lot from, and be inspired by as he took hold of what God had for him to do in the midst of incredible change, and I believe that if we capture a glimpse of God's heart for us in this moment, then this becomes a pivotal opportunity for his church for these times. The story of Nehemiah took place 2,500 years ago, a long time ago, and yet it is so relevant for today's church.

You see it's so relevant, because I believe God wants to use you and me, all of us, so that in decades to come we can say, 'that's where I was in this moment of change'. What if we can build now for a different kind of future in which the name of Jesus is declared loudly from all of our voices into the streets and neighbourhoods and workplaces around us? That the broken are made whole, and families are reconciled, where people look upon us – not for our programmes and all that we do, but more about who we are – that people look on us and say 'they carry hope and life in them'.

So there's 3 key things in this opening chapter that I want to explore further.

- I. Change comes from a place of desperation.

We begin in chapter 1 with Nehemiah discovering some hard truths about his city Jerusalem. Things are not good for God's people. They have made some progress in getting back to the city through Zerubbabel and Ezra, and so Nehemiah is standing on the shoulders of giants but there is so much more to be done. And the sheer rawness of what he hears impacts him greatly – verse 4 "When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven".

He sees what's going on and he weeps. He is so desperate for God's way that he weeps for his city for days. And that weeping turns to prayer, crying out desperately for God to help. I don't know about you, but I long for that within my heart for Ballynure and Ballyclare because that's where true change begins, when our heart breaks for what we see around us. Do we care, or are we not really bothered?

I wonder for the moment that we are all in right now, in our lives, and in our nation, is there a desperation of what God wants to do in us. For some that resonates deeply. I for one don't want this Church to just exist week after week, I want it to be a raging river of the Holy Spirit flowing from here into the streets and neighbourhoods offering life to everyone. So where does it begin? Well Nehemiah teaches us all that it begins on our knees in desperation before God. Martyn Lloyd Jones, the great Welsh preacher said this "*The inevitable and constant preliminary to*

*revival has always been a thirst for God, a thirst, a living thirst for a knowledge of the living God and a longing and a burning desire to see Him acting, manifesting himself and his power, rising and scattering his enemies...the **thirst for God** and the **longing for the exhibition of HIS glory** are the essential preliminaries to revival”.*

Folks, if you have got that thirst and that longing for God in this community for this time, then now is the time to get on your knees and call on God to fan that passion into flames seeking his Holy Spirit’s power – seeking for revival. But often, very often, certainly in my life, I don’t have that fire of desperation that brings me to my knees, and so if that is you at the start of this new teaching series pray that God will give you eyes to see your community, your workplace, your neighbourhood, that your heart would be broken in the way that Nehemiah’s was.

2. But then it’s very interesting where Nehemiah’s prayer then takes him, because secondly we discover that change just doesn’t come from a place of desperation but it also must start with me. This is how Nehemiah starts his prayer in verse 5, “*Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments,* ⁶ *let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. **I confess** the sins we Israelites, **including myself** and my father’s family, have committed against you. ⁷ **We** have acted very wickedly toward you. **We** have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses”.*

Do you see where Nehemiah doesn’t start. He doesn’t begin with a Wishlist of what he is going to need to get the people returned to Jerusalem, or the things he will need to repair the city with, or even pointing the finger at all those who caused the mess in the first place. No, he begins by recognising who God is (Verse 5 ‘*Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments*’) and the problem that is within himself (Verse 6 ‘*I confess*’). You see lasting change begins not when we see the need for change around us, but when we see the need for change in ourselves first.

In the role as pastor, it is a regular occurrence to have conversations with people who say things like, ‘why don’t you do this Jonny’ or ‘why is such and such happening like that Jonny?’. And that’s a great way of someone else making it my problem and issue so that it doesn’t have to sit on their shoulders. But what Nehemiah teaches us in his confession is that it starts with oneself, not someone else. As a church with this passion to bring life to many, if we think that everyone else needs to fix their bit then we are on slippery ground folks. You see, Nehemiah came from a place of humility. Yes he sees the problems but he knows the problems start here. And so he goes to God in confession saying change me Lord, forgive me Lord. All corporate renewals must begin with personal renewal, which is why in this past week of prayer I began the week with a night of personal repentance. Folks, we can’t move into a new phase or term as a church with all our thoughts on what needs to happen, if we don’t commence with ourselves.

Very soon we will be joining together in an act of communion. And there is no better place to start as a church in this new term where we come before God recognising what God has done for us individually. Thank you God for the overwhelming grace shown to **me**, a sinner, through Christ.

3. So change comes from a place of desperation in our hearts, change comes when we recognise it starts with me, and then finally, change is the work of God. In verse 8 we read *“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations,’⁹ but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’*

What Nehemiah is doing is he is recognising who God is. And he’s recognising that no matter how far away the people are, God is still able to gather them back. Nehemiah knows his own sin and weaknesses, and therefore it is God’s covenant that is relied upon. Nehemiah recognises that it is God that is at work and not him. For as we read through the book of Nehemiah in the weeks ahead you are going to be very disappointed when you come to the end, because it kind of finishes with a bit of a downer. Nehemiah does not achieve what he thought he would. And actually that might be the very point of the entire book. Because so often we read the Old Testament as if it’s a story of heroes that we need to emulate, and yet it’s a snapshot of ordinary people who fail in so many ways, but need a saviour to rescue them and a deliverer to do what he needs to do.

Thank goodness folks that it is God who is in the business of change and he will work his purposes out according to his perfect will. I am glad that in my weakness God’s strength shines. In the coming weeks, I am going to share with everyone of you some thoughts for the year ahead. There may be questions that may have from it, but we do know that God is building his kingdom, therefore we will discover as we go along, and be confident that it is not totally on our shoulders – our future is in his hands.

So let’s come with a posture of openness through this series, saying God use me, help me have a heart that breaks in desperation for the things that sadden you, help me to see if there is any offensive ways in me which hinder the work of your kingdom, and may I walk confidently knowing you go before me. In this past week we have seen the appointment of a new Prime Minister, we have seen the death of our Queen, and we have seen the accession of a new King. So what about us? In the midst of such change it is my sense that God wants to do new things in and through us to impact deeply the world we are living in today, and to provide hope for the future. May God bless us in this series, and may God bless you as he challenges us through Nehemiah’s life in how we should respond to the things around us.