

Sermon Series January – March 2023

Ezra – Nehemiah

Why?

Ezra and Nehemiah are about the restoration of God's people to the land following a period of devastation. The nation has lost its land, its temple and its sovereignty. Yet this is the Lord's nation, and the righteous prophets have been clear that this is the Lord's doing.

God is now looking to restore his people, but he will not give them back sovereign control of the land.

Today the Church has lost the nation, which neither honours nor worships as it once did. While traditional denominations are shrinking, and some look to be set to all but vanish, the nation as a whole will not mourn this loss nor even notice that it is happening. The Church no longer influences the morality of the nation as it once did.

Some have reacted by seeking to conform to the pattern of the world in terms of adopting the norms of society, the attitudes of society and tailoring worship in a way that pleases society, for example by concentrating on music, art, architecture and popular festivals (eg Harvest, Christmas, Mothering and Palm Sundays). Cathedrals have become historic attractions and entertainment venues; the Church of England is the custodian of over 40% of Grade One listed buildings. Is that really our mission to the nation? How do we recover a godly identity in a secular age?

Restoration and Renewal

Ezra and Nehemiah are about the Church of the future. They lead us towards a Church shorn of social popularity and political influence, where conformity leads to oblivion and spiritual death, but non-conformity leads to social exclusion. In these books we can see opposition from the status quo, attempts at exploitation from within, and a spiritual journey from belief and faithfulness to renewal and holiness.

The Lord is calling us on this journey.

The Series

January 2023

Ezra is to do with returning to the land, the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of the identity of the people. Ezra himself is not introduced until chapter 7. There are four key people driving the foundational work to renewal: Zechariah, Haggai, Zerubbabel and Joshua. To get the background it is worth reading Haggai, and Zechariah chapters one to eight.

1 Ezra 1:1-7, 2:68-3:6

8 Ezra 3:7-13

15 Ezra 4:1-5, 24-5:5

22 Ezra 6:1-5, 13-22

29 Ezra 7:1-10

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5 Ezra 9

At the end of Ezra, the nation has experienced a renewal of spiritual leadership and identity. They are being renewed in their sense of uniqueness and are beginning to separate themselves out from the world around them in terms of identity and behaviour. The spiritual core is being renewed, but the nation lacks security and the walls of the new Jerusalem have yet to be rebuilt. It is helpful to look at how the new (spiritual) Jerusalem is treated in the New Testament in understanding the relevance of this book for us. The spiritual meaning of walls and gates (see eg Isaiah 60:18 and Matthew 16:17-19) is important in our understanding of Nehemiah as a spiritual message to today's Church.

Nehemiah is the key person but note he is not the high priest and never holds himself out as a religious leader. His role is to enable the ministry of God to happen, but without him (and Zerubbabel in Ezra) it would never have happened. The qualities of Nehemiah are well worth noting as there are many, for example:

- he was a man of prayer;
- he used his place of influence that he had gained in his employment to obtain permission to rebuild the walls and gates of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:1-2:10)
- he oversaw a major rebuilding project, dealing both with construction management and political opposition (Nehemiah 2:11-7:4)
- he researched statistics concerning population, ethnicity and heritage (Nehemiah 7:4-73)
- he created conditions for a religious revival among the people through the ministry of Ezra (Nehemiah 8 + 9) including organising the catering!

I expect that you will be able to add to this snapshot as you explore this book.

12 Nehemiah 1

19 Nehemiah 2:1-6, 11-12, 16-20

26 Nehemiah 4:1-20

March

5 Nehemiah 5:1-12, 14-19

12 Nehemiah 6:1-16

19 *Mothering Sunday*

26 Nehemiah 8:1-12

The last session is very important so leaders will want to plan to ensure that we don't miss it out. The whole of Ezra-Nehemiah leads up to this moment. What we are reading about is what in Church history is described as a holiness revival.