

Confession and the Future

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[0 : 0 0] Welcome to another Sermon on the Web from St. John's Shaughnessy Anglican Church in Vancouver, Canada.

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The following message is from the April 22, 2001 service at St. John's Shaughnessy. The Reverend David Short delivered his message from the book of Nehemiah, the first chapter, verses 1 to 11.

The title of the message is Confession and the Future. We begin a fresh series today on this Old Testament book of Nehemiah. It's hard to drop into the middle of the Old Testament.

But before we climb on the train of Nehemiah, we've got to climb up two steps. The first step is this. I want you to notice that the book starts thousands of kilometres away from Jerusalem and Palestine, in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire, about 140 years after the most devastating event in the history of Israel.

[1 : 2 5] You see verse 1. These are the words of Nehemiah, the son of Hecaliah. Happened in the month of Chislev in the 20th year. That's the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, as I was in Susa, the capital.

You've read the Old Testament. At the moment you know that God had formed a people for himself. And he had called them by name. And he had given them his law. And he had given them a land.

And he had made his presence to dwell in the temple in Jerusalem. And God had done that for one reason. And that was that Israel was to be a light, to shine to the world around about.

So that the nations would see how brilliant it was to live in friendship with Yahweh, the God of Israel. But you know that Israel turned away from Yahweh very quickly.

They followed other gods. They made idols. They loved wealth and luxury and despised God's word. And there was no justice in the land. And despite repeated warnings from God's prophets, from Jeremiah and Isaiah and Micah and Habakkuk and Zephaniah, in 587 BC, Jerusalem finally fell to the Babylonians, utterly destroyed.

[2 : 4 0] The people put in chains. The king, his eyes put out. His wife killed. Dragged off to Babylon. And the temple itself, the house of God, was sacked and left in ruins.

And it's difficult to express the humiliation and catastrophe that that is. See, this was not like the grizzlies leaving town where they can take up their game somewhere else.

I just wanted to get that in. This is not like the occupation of France by Germany. This is not just the annihilation of a native culture or the brutality of ethnic cleansing.

It is as though Yahweh, the God of Israel, has died. God had attached his name and glory to that temple in Jerusalem. And now it seemed like he was abandoning his promises.

The exile was for many the death of hope. That's the first step. But the second step to recognise is this, that it all happened according to God's purposes and God's will.

[3 : 43] And after 70 years in exile, God began to do a new thing and to draw his people back to Jerusalem. A dangerous and fragile beginning that would require faith and leadership for such a dangerous time.

These two books, Ezra and Nehemiah, mark this new beginning. Ezra is a priest who goes back and then 13 years later we pick up the story here in Nehemiah.

Nehemiah, born and raised in the corrupting influence of the Persian Empire, Nehemiah was very successful. He had risen to the absolute pinnacle, the top of the tree.

He was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, the most powerful man on the planet in that day. He had to look after all the security arrangements for Artaxerxes.

He was the only person in the land who had access to the king every day and several times a day. He had to be utterly trustworthy. A man of intelligence, intuition, the kind of guy who could navigate his way through all the politics and the intrigue of court.

[4 : 50] And he lived by his decisions. He literally lived by his decisions daily. And the first seven chapters of this book are his private memoirs, deeply personal and frank record.

And the first chapter, which we're going to just look at quickly today, gives us two surprises. And the first surprise is this, that his occupation was not his preoccupation.

Look at verse 2. Hanani, one of my brethren, came with certain men from Judah. I asked concerning the Jews who'd survived and concerning Jerusalem, they said, it's a mess.

You know, the people out there, they're in shame, the walls are broken down, the gates are destroyed with fire. Verse 4. When I heard these words, I sat down and I wept and I mourned and I fasted and I prayed.

Despite the opulence and prosperity in Persia, Nehemiah's interest was not his career, it wasn't himself. It was the glory of God and the people of God.

[5 : 50] Very easy to miss this, I think. Now if you look at Nehemiah through Persian lenses, he's got it all. He's got wealth, he's got position, he's got power, he's got unimaginable prestige, but without the difficult responsibilities of kingship.

And in terms of his daily work and relationships, what was happening over there in Jerusalem, 2,000 kilometres away, might as well have been on the moon. But you see, his vision is not confined to himself or his pension or his own immediate family.

It includes the glory of God and the people of God. I think this is very difficult for us. You see, we live in a culture which is carefully devising the worship of a new deity and that is our own private family.

And the worship is led by the advertising industry and it means if we don't bow down and worship our families, we will be in trouble. And of course, God is very concerned for our families.

But you know, the reason that God has given us families is not so that the blessing would stop with us, but so that the blessings might go through our families to those who live round about us.

[7 : 01] Our families are never meant to be the end point of God's blessing or salvation. The reason he's placed us in the lower mainland is not so much for our benefit, but for the benefit of those around about us. And as Nehemiah's heart goes out to those in Jerusalem where there's no walls, his heart beats in time with God's.

Much easier for him to forget about Jerusalem. He's the one person in Persia who's got, I think, the best excuse. But what occupied him and what preoccupied him was not his occupation, but the name and glory of God.

That's the first surprise. And the second is this, that his lack of action is actually action. You see, despite being a decisive man, despite having the ear of the king, what does he do first?

He prays. Here is the man who lives by his decisions. He's got where he is by his native wit and ability. And his immediate reaction is not to organise a task force or go into the presence of the king, but to go into the presence of God.

Of course, this is irrelevant for us because we have email and technology and frequent flyer points. We don't need to pray. But here he is faced with something that's too big for him. He's powerless to help.

[8 : 14] And he turns to God in prayer. I read a wonderful quote by Abraham Lincoln this week, who I understand had a fairly busy job. He says this, I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.

My own wisdom and that of those around me seemed insufficient for the day. Great quote. You know, as you read through the book of Nehemiah, we read no less than nine prayers by Nehemiah.

He's a man deeply engaged with God. And here in chapter one, as he goes out, goes about the busy round of important work, there is something else going on for him.

He's doing his work with diligence and yet for weeks and even months, he weeps and pours out his heart to God in prayer. And what a remarkable prayer it is. You know, he doesn't prattle on and give God an endless shopping list.

He doesn't say to God, please bless Ezra and the exiles over in Jerusalem. Look at how he starts. Turn to verse five, please. He says, O Lord God of heaven, the great and terrible God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.

[9 : 27] He mounts up to heaven and he immediately addresses God and he addresses God in a kind of a double-sided way, in a two-sided way. He begins by calling God, Yahweh, the great and terrible God, the holy God before whom the mountains tremble, the three times holy God before whom the whole host of heaven bows and worships, the sovereign one who alone rules with all might and majesty and dominion and sovereignty.

But secondly, there is the other side of Yahweh, God who is our lover, the God who keeps covenant and steadfast love, who's made us for himself and who reveals his kindness and mercy and gentleness that are beyond imagining.

You know, that's exactly the same two-sidedness that Jesus teaches us at the beginning of the Lord's Prayer. We pray to our Father, the one who loves us, in heaven, who rules all things. And out of that two-sidedness of God comes Nehemiah's prayer.

Firstly, confession. Just cast your eyes down verses 6 to 8. Confronted with the holiness of God, Nehemiah is exposed and he doesn't try and hide.

He says to God, the reason we are in exile is because of our sin and disobedience. This is very helpful. You see, sin and disobedience is almost always at the core of our problems.

[10 : 54] Nehemiah could pray for God to restore Jerusalem. The king of Persia could make it into a Disneyland, but it wouldn't make any real difference. Without repentance, there would be no intimacy with God, no blessing, no real joy.

See, the problem for us with sin is not that we've disobeyed some external standard, but somehow every time we disobey God, what we are seeking to do is to break away from him and to put a barrier in our fellowship with him.

And repentance and brokenness before God is the only path to intimacy and communion with the God of heaven. If you feel the absence of God and you wonder where he is, look to his holiness and look to his loving kindness and confess your sins to him.

I don't know if you're new here with us this week, but every week, week by week by week, at every service, we confess our sins. Very important. The only prerequisite for being an Anglican is that you're sinful.

And it doesn't really matter whether the sin you bring is arrogance or adultery or greed or lack of love. It all creates a barrier between us and God and until we confess it as sin, it remains between us.

[12 : 05] The key to ongoing communion and intimacy with God is ongoing repentance and confession. That's why Nehemiah confesses. And then secondly, the second part of Nehemiah's prayer stems out of God's steadfast love.

And if you cast your eyes down verses 9 and 10, you can see Nehemiah quotes from the promises of God in Deuteronomy. And he says, even in exile God, you've promised that when we turn back to you, you will gather us to Jerusalem.

And he finishes in verse 11. Lord, let thy ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servants and the prayer of thy servants who delight to fear thy name. Give success to thy servant today.

Grant him mercy in the sight of this man. Now I was cupbearer to the king. The wonderful last lines of the prayer. He's got to make a very dangerous request of King Artaxerxes.

Artaxerxes had already put a stop work order on Jerusalem. Yet before the God of heaven, Artaxerxes is just this man. And Nehemiah is just this cupbearer.

[13 : 12] It's a wonderful thing. You step away from this chapter. Nowhere does Nehemiah take a clear decision to get involved with Jerusalem and to help them.

But as he prays about the situation, the decision is made for him. And it becomes clear that he must act and it becomes clear that he is part of the answer to his own prayer, which is a very worrying thing.

And we must wait next week to see how that works. So as we finish, I just want to step back and I want to draw four lessons from this chapter for us this morning.

And the first is this. There is no more accurate indicator of the true nature of the health of our spiritual lives than prayer.

There are a host of other indicators, of course. You know, whether we're more generous or greedy, whether we cultivate humility or arrogance, whether we're genuinely thankful or complaining, whether we seek to serve others or be served, these are all signs of growth.

[14 : 15] But if you truly want to measure what is genuinely happening, the only true measure really is our prayers. And I know it's easy for us to make one another feel guilty in this area and we all have room to grow.

But I think this is a mirror of our deepest concerns. And what is true for us as individuals is also true for us as a congregation. If prayer is the most eloquent expression of our priorities, if it's in prayer that we confess our dependence on God, if prayer is the way primarily that we love one another and that we express our faith, I fear at St. John's we are in great danger because we pretend inadequacy.

But we're not really convinced of our own inability. You know, the poorest meeting, the poorest attended meeting at St. John's month by month is the prayer meeting. And I want to make a prophecy which is not allowed in an Anglican church but I'm going to do it anyway.

And that is that at St. John's we will never come close to the blessing that God intends for us until we become serious about prayer. But you can't organise prayer or legislate prayer, it has to come from God.

A genuine spirit of prayer descends from the Spirit himself. We are of little use to those in need around us here in this city. Now we can, without prayer, we can oil the wheels and we can produce services Sunday by Sunday but without deep ongoing prayer we're basically wasting our time.

[15 : 49] Please pray that God would give us a spirit of prayer like Nehemiah. The first thing. The second thing is that prayer is the primary vehicle that God uses to enable us to grow.

I think that's why the book starts with this chapter. It's through prayer that God moulds Nehemiah and he changes him from just being a success into being a godly leader.

Again, there are a number of instruments that God uses to make us grow. He uses his own word, he uses suffering, he uses incredibly difficult people but there's nothing God uses that better shapes us than our own prayers.

The reason the prayer is so difficult is that when we make ourselves present to God suddenly his concerns become more important and it's difficult for us because we're much more at ease running our lives and making our decisions by what we see and what we think we should do than depending on God.

That's why Nehemiah's template, his prayer, is a great template for our prayers because he comes to God so that God's concerns are more important. Again, that is exactly how Jesus taught us to pray.

[17 : 00] Do you remember in the Lord's Prayer there are six petitions? The first three concern God, your name, your kingdom, your will. Only after we've prayed that does Jesus speak about praying for ourselves.

In Jesus' mind prayer means God first then our needs. Prayer is not magic trying to bend God down to do what we want. It's bringing ourselves and realigning ourselves and seeing things as God does.

It's the opposite of technique. Do you know what the number one bestseller on the New York Times list? This is a special category, Advice, How-To, and Miscellaneous.

I've never actually looked at this list before but it's a book called The Prayer of Jabez. It's sold over three million copies. It's written by an evangelist from Atlanta and it quotes The Prayer of Jabez in the Old Testament and turns it into a kind of an evangelical mantra.

The prayer goes like this, O that thou wouldst bless me and enlarge my border, thy hand might be with me and that thou wouldst keep me from harm so it might not hurt me. And on the back of the book it says, Do you want to be extravagantly blessed by God?

[18 : 11] The Religion Editor at Publishers Weekly says this, It's very evangelical and very American, this whole notion, that if you know the right technique, the right form, prayer will be efficient and effective, kind of like golf.

We are not heard for our many words or for our eloquent words or for a formula. Biblical prayer, you see, is not overcoming God's reluctance but it's laying hold of God's willingness.

Let me say that again. Biblical prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance, it's laying hold of God's willingness. Thirdly, prayer is the way that God changes his world.

We'll see this as we go through the book. In Nehemiah's life as in ours, prayer is the hinge, the axis of God's activity. It's through prayer that the world is changed because in prayer we have the privilege of speaking to the great and terrible Lord, the one who is kind and loving, who keeps his covenant.

Where can we turn when we have nowhere else to turn? Where does Nehemiah turn in an impossible situation? Where does Jesus turn? Sovereign Lord, the Holy God.

[19 : 24] And there, what seems insurmountable and seems irresistible is seen in its true proportion. We don't know when we pray how God will change things but we know that he hears and he acts and he directs them according to his loving purposes.

And we miss all this if our prayers are too narrow or if our prayers are just for us or if our prayers are just hand to mouth or if we do not pray. And finally, fourthly, what does this mean for us who live this side of Jesus Christ?

And what are the covenant promises that we can repeat back to God? What's at the heart of God's purposes for his world today? And the answer very simply is that we are now under a new covenant and God's purposes no longer devolve on the physical city of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel.

They now devolve on the person of Jesus Christ and on his gospel. If we are concerned with what God is concerned about we will be concerned about Jesus and if we are concerned about Jesus we will be concerned about the gospel, the good news.

As Jesus says, whoever is ashamed of me and of my word in this sinful and adulterous generation will him, the son of man, be ashamed when he comes in glory.

[20 : 43] So I invite you this morning pray for one another, pray for the people of God that we will not be ashamed of the gospel and that we will live our lives to adorn the gospel so that others hear the gospel and come to believe and that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ will receive the glory that he deserves.

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We hope that this message has helped you and that you will share it with others. Thank you.