



TIME TO BUILD DAILY READING NOTES



Newlife Uniting Church 4 Greenwich Court Robina 4226
Ph 55 789322 e admin@newlife.unitingchurch.org.au
Copyright
Rev Stu Cameron



NOTES _____

Read Nehemiah 1:1-11

Key Text

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. (Nehemiah 1:4)

Reflection

Nehemiah has heard the devastating news of Jerusalem's shame. How he responds is fascinating. He stops. He weeps and mourns. He fasts and he prays. He does all of this for days and weeks. He does not run either to Jerusalem or to despair. He quietens his soul and he listens for God. His subsequent prayer (vv. 5-11) shows he is reminded in this time of God's covenantal love for Israel and the hope that is inherent in it. Out of this season of prayer and fasting, weeping and mourning, arises a growing faith and steely resolve.

I tend to act first, think second – to be impulse driven. While there are times where God directs me to quick action, more often than not my first action when confronted with crisis should be to fall to my knees. Sometimes the best form of action is what seems to be inaction. Sometimes it is important to be still and to know that God is God, especially in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Questions

What social issues on the Gold Coast move you with compassion?

What situation or circumstance in your life do you need to experience stillness in?

Prayer

Thank you Lord that you reveal yourself in silence and stillness. Thank you that you are never far from us.

Further Reading

1 Kings 19:9-18



NOTES _____

Read Ezra 9:5-15

Key Text

What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet our God, you have punished us less than our sins have deserved and have given us a remnant like this. (Ezra 9:13)

Reflection

Ezra recites the long litany of Israel's stubborn rebellion against God. Again and again, God's chosen people have deliberately ignored God's direct commands. Again and again they have gone their own way rather than God's way. The recompense for their rebellion is judgment and misery. The exile, humiliation, poverty, war, death and destruction they have experienced, is of their own making.

But even in the midst of yet another example of Israel's breathtaking ingratitude towards God, Ezra is able to seek and acknowledge grace. God has heard the cry of his people. He has given a remnant another chance. God has not forgotten his covenant promises. While the people are stubbornly unfaithful, God is graciously faithful.

Time and again as a community we have stubbornly ignored God. We have chosen our comfort over faith-fuelled risk. We have given God our leftovers rather than our first and our best. We have failed to love each other out of the love we have experienced through Jesus Christ. In the end we are a big, (happy) dysfunctional family. But the fact we are still a family is one of the many signs that God's gracious hand is upon us.

'Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.' (Romans 5:1-2) What a promise! We stand on the grace of God. This is the sure foundation of our faith; that through Jesus Christ, despite our many weaknesses and failures, God holds us secure.

Question

Where has God's grace been made perfect in your weakness in your life?

Prayer

Jesus, your grace is sufficient for me. Thank you that your grace deals with my past, empowers my present and fills my future with hope.

Further Reading 2 Corinthians 12:1-10



NOTES _____

Read Ezra 9:1-4

Key Text

When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. (Ezra 9:3)

Reflection

This is one of those difficult to comprehend passages. To our 21st century mindsets, and in our multicultural world, the practice of cultural and ethnic separations seems both xenophobic and racist. The practices of the surrounding (non-Jewish) tribes are described as 'detestable' (verse 1). Ezra's reaction to the news of inter-marriage (tearing his beard, hair and clothes) evokes images of Islamic fundamentalists.

When reading the scripture we always should humbly name and recognise our own cultural biases. Standing back a little, we recognize that nothing short of Israel's very cultural and religious identity as the people of God – God's chosen people – is at stake. After years of exile and desolation, corporate memory and practice needs to be recovered. And so there is a necessary separation from the surrounding people and cultures in order that this identity can be reclaimed. After all, Israel cannot be a light to the nations unless it has an identity distinct from other nations.

In Christ, we are a chosen people, a holy nation and people belonging to God – all for the purpose of declaring the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light. We are called to be in, but not of, the world. We are blessed to be a blessing.

Question

What practice or practices in the world has infiltrated the life of the church that we should repent of?

Prayer

Thank you Father that through Jesus Christ you have chosen us to be your people. Forgive us for when we live of rather than in the world. Help us to shine your light until that light kicks the darkness so that it bleeds daylight.

Further Reading 1 Peter 2:4-12



NOTES _____

Read Nehemiah 2:1-10

Key Text

"If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favour in his sight, let him send me to the city of Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it." (Nehemiah 2:5)

Reflection

Nehemiah is both shrewd and skilled. He uses the king's familiarity with him to communicate his distress over Jerusalem's predicament. He does not approach the king directly, but through his unexpected behaviour provokes questions that allow him to then present his requests.

Nehemiah knows that he cannot achieve the rebuilding of Jerusalem without patronage. He will only succeed with the king's patronage. So with great skill he obtains permission to go (verse 6), letters of introduction (verse 7) and an open cheque book (verse 8) as well as a protective detail (verse 9). In the end though, Nehemiah knows where ultimate favour rests - with God. "And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests." (Verse 8) The king may have assisted Nehemiah, but Nehemiah's God was ultimately in control.

Throughout our building program we will be consulting with other stakeholders outside our church community – like neighbours, facility hirers, local council and church bodies. We will require permission from the last two to proceed with our project at various points. To succeed, we will need their favour. But in the end, the favour that matters most is that of the God whose vision we are following.

Question

Where have you experienced God's favour over the last year?

Prayer

Father, we pray for your favour as we negotiate with council and other church bodies and seek various permissions as we seek to fulfil your vision for our church.

Further Reading

Psalm 127



NOTES _____

Read Nehemiah 2:11-20

Key Text

I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. (Nehemiah 2:18)

Reflection

Nehemiah is a brilliant tactician. He thinks through each step before he takes it. He approached the king with care (2:1-10) and was successful in gaining his release to travel to Jerusalem. He arranged for letters from the king (2:7-9), knowing that so much would depend on his patronage. After his arrival in Jerusalem, Nehemiah surveyed the walls over three days to determine the magnitude of the job before him. There is so much to learn from Nehemiah regarding leadership. In casting the vision to rebuild the walls, he is able to testify to God's gracious provision already. This is God's vision, not Nehemiah's.

I am reminded of God's gracious provision for our church in so many ways, especially as we have sought to live out His vision for our community. God has provided unexpected funding for our church planting dreams and people with just the right expertise for our building vision. In so many large and small ways God has provided.

Question

List in your mind, or even better on a piece of paper, the ways which you have seen God provide for our church.

Prayer

Thank you Father for the small and large ways you have provided for our church. Help us to live lives of grateful obedience in response.

Further Reading

Hebrews 11

NOTES _____

Read Ezra 8

Key Text

There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. (Ezra 8:21)

Reflection

Ezra assembles the exiles and they prepare to set out for Jerusalem. Just imagine for a moment what that moment must have been like. Most (all?) would not have seen Jerusalem. Their imaginations were full of expectations as well as fears. What would the future hold? Would the uncertain life of Jerusalem be better than the certainty of life in exile?

Ezra and the people prepare for the journey home with a fast. Even though he has the favour of the king, he does not ask for protection for the treacherous journey to Jerusalem. He has bragged of Yahweh's provision and protection to the king; that God's gracious hand is on all who look to him. Ezra knows that his actions must match his rhetoric.

We are on the eve of a project (Time to Build) that only in and through God can we be successful. This Sunday (June 26) we will announce the total of pledges and donations for the vision. Will we achieve what we hope for and need? This is, without doubt, an 'only God' moment in the life of our church. With the effects of the Global Financial Crisis still being felt by many of us, in a city with unemployment much higher than the national average, we are seeking to raise more money than ever before by a Uniting Church congregation. We cannot do this in our strength; only in and through God.

Questions

What is your hope and expectation for the final amount of money we will raise through 'Time to Build' in donations and pledges?
What figure will cause you to declare, 'Only God'?

Prayer

Father, we thank you that your gracious hand is upon us. Help us to always our eyes fixed only on you.

Further Reading Roman 8:28-39



NOTES _____

Read Ezra 7:11-28

Key Text

Because the hand of the Lord my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.(Ezra 7:28b)

Reflection

The walls had been rebuilt. The temple constructed and dedicated. The favour of the King was on Ezra and the exiles. God’s favour was on them. And so Ezra and the exiles return from captivity for the freedom of life in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a place of return.

Buildings and facilities are not important except in the ways they provide a place of return for people who are experiencing exile – distance from God. In extending our facilities we are not providing for our comfort or security, but for those to come. Every empty chair represents the potential and possibility for a friend, neighbour, family member or colleague to find their way home to God.

Under Ezra and Nehemiah’s leadership, Jerusalem once again became a sanctuary – a place where people could come to worship, honour and experience God. Like Israel, God’s gracious hand is upon us at Newlife. He has provided us with an incredible piece of land right in the heart of the Gold Coast. The water that surrounds us reminds us of the Living Water that God offers to all and which will quench the driest of spiritual thirsts. This land, these facilities, are not for us, but for God and His purposes. They form a sanctuary, a place of spiritual security and peace, where those far from God can draw near and discover restoration.

Question

Name three things that you are most thankful for, that brings you the most joy from your experience of Newlife.

Prayer

Thank you Lord for the wonderful provision of the land that our church has the use of. May we use it wisely and well so that it will become more and more a place of sanctuary and restoration for those to come.

Further Reading Luke 15

NOTES _____

Read Nehemiah 3

Key Text

‘The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but the nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.’ (Nehemiah 3:5)

Reflection

This prosaic chapter of names of families and clans who were part of the rebuilding project raises two interesting observations for reflection:

The writer repeats the phrase ‘next to him’ to link one clan of builders to the next. While each person had their role, their part of the wall to rebuild, they were all linked in the project together. It was one vision and one team.

The only negative comment in the whole chapter is about nobles who refuse to work. It seems labouring on the walls is beneath them.

“For those to come” will require every person in our church doing what they are able and are called to do, in prayer, sacrificial generosity, practical work and so on. Eventual success will depend on it. Those of us with any leadership role (small group leaders, Kidzlife, Elders etc.), of which there are hundreds in our community, must lead the charge to pray, give and serve. Our action (or inaction) will be observed and will influence and shape the actions of others.

Question

How is God calling you and your family to serve the vision of “For those to come?”

Prayer

Thank God for and pray for those who provide leadership in our own Newlife community

Further Reading

Romans 12:1-8



Read Nehemiah 4

NOTES _____

Key Text

So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart. (Nehemiah 4:6)

Reflection

Nehemiah leads a remarkable effort to see the walls rebuilt to half their eventual and restored height. It is now that opposition already present becomes far louder and more sinister. Surrounding tribes plot war, workers become tired and disheartened and the people become overwhelmed with hopelessness.

Nehemiah does not ignore the threat; he responds to it with faith-building words and practical action. He reminds the people that the battle is the Lord's and that God will win it. He divides the people between workers and warriors. Even the workers go about their tasks with a weapon in their hand; a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other.

In the journey ahead of us as a church, we will face doubt, uncertainty and fear. There may well be opposition from without, and even murmuring from within the community. There could be occasions when we wonder if it is all worth it, where we feel overwhelmed by the size of the challenge ahead of us. But God is with us! This is God's vision, not ours! This battle is the Lord's, as is the victory!

Along the way we will need leaders like Nehemiah who steadfastly rely on God and His strength. Following their example, we are called to be strong and courageous, looking to God to for success.

Questions

What are you most fearful or concerned about regarding our "For those to Come" vision?

Prayer

Lord, we confess that at times we lack the faith necessary to fulfil the call you have placed on our life. Increase in us the gift of faith, we pray.

Further Reading

Joshua 1

Read Ezra 7:1-10

NOTES _____

Key Text

Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its laws and decrees in Israel. (Ezra 7:10)

Reflection

Ezra has made the four month journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. The text notes that the gracious hand of God was on him twice (vv. 6, 9) and seems to link that with Ezra's dedication to, and knowledge of the Law of the Lord. While in exile, with Jerusalem and the temple in ruins, the law that God had written on the hearts of Israel's people was treasured above all else. Exile threatened Israel's very existence. In the end though, it was the refining fire through which Israel emerged with a stronger sense of its identity and God's faithfulness towards them.

Ravi Zacharias tells the story of a Vietnamese friend who was imprisoned for his faith by the Communists. In prison he was on the verge of giving up and renouncing his faith. He was assigned the job of cleaning out the latrines. One day, as he slopped out the buckets, he discovered some used toilet paper with writing on it. The words were the words of scripture – from Romans 8 – that in all circumstances, those who are in Christ Jesus are more than conquerors. One of the guards had been using a discarded New Testament as toilet paper. And so every day as he cleaned out the toilets, the man would recover and then lovingly clean small portions of scripture which he read over and over again.

I take the gift of the Bible for granted. Most of us do. But in the bible is the Sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God (Ephesians 6) with which we can take on and defeat any enemy.

Question

How many Bibles do you have in your house? How could you use them more fruitfully?

Prayer

Lord we pray for our brothers and sisters who through persecution do not have access to the Bible. We pray for those dedicated to translating your Word into the languages of our world. Strengthen and bless both groups, we pray.

Further Reading Luke 4:14-21

Read Nehemiah 6:1-15

NOTES _____

Key Text

I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you? (Nehemiah 6:3)

Reflection

Nehemiah's work was beset with distractions – internal and external. Here he is responding to the approaches of the surrounding rulers who present as 'friends' but really are opponents. Then there were the two-faced nobles who were colluding with Jerusalem's enemies. (Sometimes even those presenting as friends and supporters can be our most dangerous opponents)

Nehemiah's response to this was to remain committed to the vision and to ask God to strengthen his hands in the midst of his trials (verse 9). And God did, enabling the walls to be completed in 52 days (verse 15), a staggering feat that could only be interpreted as a work of God.

Over coming months (years?), there will be many distractions seeking to drag us away from the vision God has laid on our hearts.

Over coming months (years?), there will be those who even support us and the vision, but in reality have doubts.

Over coming months (years?), there will be occasions when we are tempted to give in or give up.

In these moments Nehemiah's prayer needs to be always on our lips, 'Now strengthen my hands.'

Question

Name those things that might distract us from the vision God has called us to.

Prayer

God, grant us soft hearts – hearts always responsive to your grace.

God, grant us sharp minds – minds renewed by your Spirit and Word.

God, grant us hard feet – feet prepared to go wherever and to whomever with the Good News.

Further Reading

Hebrews 12:1-12

Read Ezra 6:13-18

NOTES _____

Key Text

So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo. They finished building the temple according to the command of God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia. (Ezra 6:14)

Reflection

After all the challenges, internal and external, the temple project is completed. In this one verse are reminded that God's purposes are achieved in part through the direct assistance of foreign kings. In our project to extend our worship facilities, we will discover allies in unlikely places. This is all part of God's gracious provision.

The Word of God, mediated through the prophets of God (Haggai and Zechariah) was critical. As the people of Israel sat under the Word of God, they prospered, and out of this prosperity, they completed the temple project. God's Word nourishes and sustains us. Just as meat, fruit and vegetables is necessary for physical life, a regular and steady diet feeding on God's Word is fundamental to a healthy spiritual life.

As I reflect on my own spiritual walk, I can readily mark the seasons where I fed regularly on God's Word, and those where I did not. During those seasons where I have fed on God's Word, my life has not necessarily been free of challenge or difficulty. However, even when life has been tough, when I have been feeding on God's Word, I have learned the joy of prospering in God in all circumstances.

Question

Dream ahead to when we will open our new worship facilities. What Bible passage should we preach from on that day? (Feel free to email me with what comes to you!)

Prayer

Lord, we pray for all those who have the responsibility to preach your word at Newlife – both at Robina and our new Northern Campus. Lead them deeper into your word, and may the words of their mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight.

Further Reading Psalm 1



NOTES _____

Read Nehemiah 7:1-3

Key Text

I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do. (Nehemiah 7:2)

Reflection

The walls have been completed but critical work continues, including the appointment of key leaders. Nehemiah appoints two men in particular to lead the new Jerusalem, one a relative and other a warrior. Interestingly it is not Hananiah's military skills that commend him, but his character. Nehemiah elevates him because he is a man of integrity.

Pastor and author Bill Hybels speaks of the 'three C's' of Christian leadership – Character, Chemistry and Competence. Before appointing someone he assesses them on these criteria. Do they have the right skill mix for the role? (Competence) Will they fit into the team? (Chemistry) And do have they have integrity? (Character) While competence and chemistry are vital, character is non-negotiable. Leadership is where character is demonstrated and grown, not where it is first formed.

Question

What character trait (fruit of the Spirit) does God need to form more in you?

Prayer

Lord, fill me with your Holy Spirit so that I might demonstrate a more Christ-like character in all that I do and say.

Further Reading

Galatians 5:16-26

NOTES _____

Read Ezra 5:6-17

Key Text

This is the answer they gave us: "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, one that a great king of Israel built and finished."

Reflection

It seems the resolve of Jerusalem's inhabitants has been strengthened through the word of God they have received via the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. When challenged by surrounding governors about their rebuilding program they unashamedly acknowledge that they are servants of no earthly king or leader, but of the 'God of heaven and earth.' Such acknowledgement is accompanied by a sober assessment regarding why there is even a need to rebuild (verse 12).

Back in 1979 Bob Dylan famously sang, 'Gotta serve somebody':

You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride
You may be a city councilman taking bribes on the side
You may be working in a barbershop, you may know how to cut hair
You may be somebody's mistress, may be somebody's heir.

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

Whether we recognise it or not, we all serve something, or ultimately, somebody. Our life can serve our ambitions, other's expectations, our pride, our comfort or our security. Or we can live a life of service towards God. Every day we make a choice to do so - or not.

Question

What are some of the 'masters' that compete with God for our time, attention and service?

Prayer

Thank you Jesus that in view of your great mercy towards us, we are able to live joy-filled lives of service towards God as a spiritual act of worship. (Romans 12:1)

Further Reading Zechariah 8



Power (Part One)

May 16th

Read Nehemiah 8:1-11

NOTES _____

Key Text

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. (Nehemiah 8:5)

Reflection

What an epic time it must have been. After decades of exile, a generation that had never experienced corporate worship came together to celebrate the provision of God. Central to the celebration was the reading and exposition of the Word of God.

It is almost too much for the people gathered. Standing under the word spoken and preached they know they are on holy ground. 'Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.' (Deuteronomy 8:3) Do we stand/sit under the Word of God with reverence and awe? Does hearing it cause us to bow and worship (verse 6)? Does it cause us to weep at the state of our souls and our need for God? Perhaps it's very familiarity sometimes causes us to take the Word for granted.

The security and space created by the rebuilt walls enabled the people of Israel to drink in again the Word. Expanding our worship auditorium will create more space for people to sit and stand under God's Word. And the Word of God does not return empty, but accomplishes what God desires. (Isaiah 55:11) Imagine with me the hundreds (dare we believe thousands?) of people hearing God's Word for the first time and responding to it with their lives!

Questions

What is your favourite passage in Scripture? Why? What passage of Scripture troubles you the most? Why?

Prayer

Pray that everyone who calls Newlife home will look to the bible for guidance for daily living. Pray that our hunger and thirst for God's word may increase.

Further Reading Isaiah 55



Reputation

June 8th

Read Ezra 4:6-24

NOTES _____

Key Text

I issued an order and a search was made, and it was found that this city has a long history of revolt against kings and has been a place of rebellion and sedition. (Ezra 4:19)

Reflection

Jerusalem had a reputation. As Ezra continued to rebuild the temple, opposition bubbled along in the form of a letter-writing campaign by surrounding tribes to the Persian king, Artaxerxes. The essence of the complaint lodged was that Jerusalem had a history of rebellion and sedition, that it had consistently resisted the yoke of those who sought to conquer it. The king checked the historical records and found the accusations were born out by the facts. Jerusalem's history of resistance lead the king to immediately halt the rebuilding of the temple lest its completion fuel yet another uprising, this time against him.

Jerusalem had a feisty and deserved reputation, which perhaps continues to this day! It consistently refused (and refuses) to bow to the oppressor. At its worst, Jerusalem was weak-willed, double-minded and forgetful of God. At its best, it was strong, courageous and God-honouring.

Organisations, like individuals, have reputations. I wonder what the reputation of Newlife is in our city? Is it important what others think of us at all? Deeper still, what is our reputation with those spiritual forces that would seek to thwart the purposes of God in our city?

Question

Imagine you are writing an article for the Gold Coast Bulletin about our church. What would the headline be?

Prayer

Lord, may all we do and say as a community bring honour to you and your name. May our boast be only in what you have done, for, in and through us.

Further Reading 2 Kings 18 – 19:19



NOTES _____

Read Ezra 4:1-5

Key Text

They hired counsellors to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia. (Ezra 4:5)

Reflection

Opposition to Ezra and then Nehemiah was persistent, unrelenting and devious. Surrounding people attempted to trick the Israelites into believing that they were 'on their side'. They were not. Once this tactic was thwarted opponents went to the extraordinary lengths of hiring professional lobbyists to wear the Israelites down. This went on not for a few weeks, months or even years, but for decades! God's purposes were not to be thwarted.

As we step out and plant a new campus on the northern Gold Coast and extend our Robina worship facilities, we will strike opposition. Some of that will be simple resistance to change. Some opposition we will encounter will be more sinister. Satan does not want any church, including ours, to grow. And healthy churches will over time grow – both in faith and numbers. Satan will attempt to deceive, discourage and thwart us as we seek to fulfil God's plans and purposes for our community.

We are in a spiritual battle. Forces opposed to God seek to oppose us. And so we need to daily put on the full armour of God and prepare to engage in the spiritual battle before us, knowing we are equipped with all that is necessary to triumph.

Question

Where and how in your spiritual walk have you been aware of spiritual forces seeking to drag you down and away from God? How have you triumphed in these times?

Prayer

Thank you Jesus that you have won the victory over sin, death and the forces of evil! Help me to live in and out of the victory you have won for me and the whole creation.

Further Reading Ephesians 6:10-20



NOTES _____

Read Nehemiah 8:12-18

Key Text

Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly. (Nehemiah 8:18)

Reflection

It is all rather poignant. The priests, Levites and family heads gather with Ezra to explore God's Word. There they discover the commands to celebrate certain festivals tied to the rhythm of the agricultural seasons and anchored in Israel's history. In just a few decades of ruin and exile, these festivals, had it seemed, been largely forgotten even though they formed a central foundation to Jewish life. And so, for the first time in many years, the people of Jerusalem celebrate the Festival of Booths.

How easily we forget. How easily we discount the lessons and traditions of the past as we rush headlong into the future that seems to come rushing towards us. But we cannot ignore our history. While we can't live in the past, we must live out of it. We must know our stories, most especially as they narrate God's faithfulness towards us. This is why incorporating key traditions of the church into worship are so critical (like Prayers of Confession, saying the Lord's Prayer, Communion Liturgies). Jaroslav Pelikan has said that while traditionalism is the dead faith of the living, tradition, rightly applied, is the living faith of the dead.

Questions

What Christian festival (e.g. Christmas, Easter, Pentecost) do you enjoy celebrating the most? Why? What traditions should we carry into our new worship sanctuary?

Prayer

Thank you God for the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us and who now cheer us on as we run the race you have set out for us.

Further Reading

Exodus 23:14-19



NOTES _____

Read Ezra 3:1-6

Key Text

On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord, though the foundation of the Lord's temple had not been laid. (Ezra 3:6)

Reflection

Temple Mount is still covered in rubble. The surrounding nations treat Jerusalem as an object of ridicule. Fear is palpable in the city's inhabitants. And yet in the midst of such desperate circumstance the people assembled in Jerusalem, built a makeshift altar and made burnt offerings to God. They observed the festivals that were central to their religious life. While all around them still lay in ruins, while there was not even a foundation laid for the new temple, they made a sacrifice of praise.

The miracles recounted in Ezra and Nehemiah is not so much about the rebuilding of Jerusalem, its walls and the temple. These re-construction marvels were not ends in themselves. The greater miracle and end was the re-establishment of the worshipping life of Israel. This broken and dispirited people who only knew exile and/or ridicule found their identity again not in their engineering feats, but in their worship of God.

Buildings come and buildings go. Nations rise and nations fall. Only God remains steadfastly the same; yesterday, today and forever. God, the everlasting one, longs for us to offer him a sacrifice of praise.

Question

Where and how are you able to offer God a sacrifice of praise most readily? (E.g. In church, with others, on your own, singing, praying)

Prayer

Thank you God for the freedom I enjoy to worship you. Strengthen my brother and sisters in other nations who do not enjoy the same freedoms.

Further Reading Hebrews 13:1-16



NOTES _____

Read Nehemiah 9:19-28

Key Text

For forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen. (Nehemiah 9:21)

Reflection

As the people are led in corporate confession, the history of God's faithfulness contrasted with Israel's faithlessness, is read out. Israel's story is of repeated rebellion against God and his decrees. This rebellion results in judgment that is painful, the latest manifestation of which was Jerusalem's destruction. Even though through the great Exodus the people were stiff-necked idol-worshippers, God did not abandon them. Rather, out of his grace, God sustained them with manna from heaven and water from a rock.

Israel's story is our story. More often than we would like and will admit, we are stiff-necked people who ignore God and his word. This is true of us as individuals and as a community. There have been times in Newlife's history when we have failed to live out God's vision for us. As true as this is, God's grace is even more prevalent. It is by this grace that we stand and are sustained.

Question

Where have you experienced God's gracious love over the last week?

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your gracious love lavished on us through the person and work of your son, Jesus.

Further Reading Exodus 16-17:7



NOTES _____

Read Nehemiah 9:29-37

Key Text

Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress. (Nehemiah 9:37)

Reflection

At the end of the long narration of Israel's history, a stark observation is made. The precarious political and economic situation they find themselves in is a direct result of their sin. The cause is sin, the effect is suffering. Put another way, the wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23) Sin has consequences. Every lie has the potential to wreak havoc in relationships. Every betrayal can cause irreparable damage. Even in experiencing the forgiving grace of God, often we will still live with the consequences of our past rebellions.

John Wesley famously stated 'Give me one hundred men who hate nothing but sin and love nothing but God and we will shake the gates of hell.' For good reason the bible pleas with us to run and flee from sin – to escape its desperate clutches. But we are adept at tolerating sin by minimizing, rationalizing, ignoring or even accommodating it in our lives. Sin robs and steals the life God longs for us to enjoy. Why would we settle for any less?

Question

Where might you have tolerated sin in your life? Ask that the Holy Spirit brings divine conviction as you reflect.

Prayer

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. (Psalm 51:10-11)

Further Reading

Psalm 51

NOTES _____

Read Ezra 2

Key Text

When they arrived at the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, some of the heads of the families gave freewill offerings towards the rebuilding of the house of God on its site. (Nehemiah 2:68)

Reflection

The temple was not rebuilt with good intentions. The walls were not re-established with hope alone. Along the way sacrifices were made by the people to see God's purposes fulfilled through them. And so as they returned to Jerusalem, stood on Temple Mount amongst decade-old ruins, family heads made financial contributions to the rebuilding program 'according to their ability' (verse 69).

Everything we have and enjoy is a gift from God. Everything good in our life has its origin in God. For a follower of Jesus every skill, ability, financial resource, hour of time, is a resource given to us by God that we in turn can honour him with. My time is not my own, my skills and abilities are not my own, my money is not my own – my life is not my own – it is now the Lord's (Romans 12:1)

God calls each and every one of us to contribute to his reconciling work in the world 'according to our ability'. For some of us to whom much has been given, much is expected by God. This gospel truth should not be experienced as a burden, but a liberating joy, as our life is caught up in the life of God.

Question

How is God calling you/your family to give 'according to your ability' to the "For those to come" vision?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, please place or confirm in my heart the amount you are calling me to give to the "For those to come" vision. Thank you for the incredible generosity of your grace towards me.

Further Reading

Exodus 25:1-9



Read Ezra 1

NOTES _____

Key Text

Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites – everyone whose heart God had moved – prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

(Ezra 1:5)

Reflection

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah make the best sense when read together. In the Septuagint, the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament, Ezra and Nehemiah are combined into one book. Ezra and Nehemiah recount actual historical events that began with Cyrus, the King of Persia, in the year 538BC, making a decree under God’s inspiration to rebuild Jerusalem’s temple. Supporting the historicity of Ezra and Nehemiah are archaeological studies that support an influx of people into Judah in the 5th century and extra-biblical sources that confirm events recorded in each book.

Most importantly, behind all that occurs - the remarkable return from exile and the rebuilding of a city and its walls and temple – is the God who inspires and shapes events. It was Yahweh – God – who moved in the life of a foreign King to not only let God’s people return, but also empowered them to do so (1:1-4). It was Yahweh – God – who moved in the hearts of an exiled people such that they left the comfort and security of what they knew, to return to uncertainty and risk, as they committed to rebuilding the house of God (verse 5).

God moved the people’s hearts; the people had the freedom to respond or not. As it was for them, so it is for us. When we came to faith, God transplanted our hearts, hardened to stone by sin, with hearts of flesh – hearts that beat with his resurrection life. God communicates with us through these new hearts softened by his grace. But we will always have our freedom to respond to his messages and promptings or not. More and more I am convinced that God is always speaking to us. The question is not whether God is speaking, but if we are listening.

Question

What specific task has God asked you to do over recent months? How have you responded?

Prayer

Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to thee.

Further Reading 1 Samuel 3



Read Nehemiah 9:38-10:29

NOTES _____

Key Text

In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it. (Nehemiah 9:38)

Reflection

Through my life I have made some important binding agreements. For example, Sue and I have a mortgage with a bank; they provide us with money and we agree to repay them. A little over 22 years ago I stood before family and friends and God and made some vows to Sue, and she to me; we are bound by the covenant of marriage. In this passage, with the misery of Jerusalem’s destruction fresh in their minds, the people of Israel seek to make a binding agreement that they will not revisit their rebellious past and so offend God and thereby live with the consequences of their sin.

Here is the thing; the people are only able to make such a declaration because God has not abandoned them. Too easily they have forgotten previous covenantal promises they have made – but God has not forgotten his commitment to them. While still in exile in Babylon, before Nehemiah leads the people in rebuilding the city walls, God addresses the people devoid of any real hope through the prophet Isaiah. ‘I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessings on your descendants.’ (Isaiah 44:3b)

While there are times when we might forget God, God never forgets us.

Question

How have you experienced God’s commitment to you over the course of your life?

Prayer

Thank you Lord that though we forget you, we are never forgotten by you.

Further Reading

Isaiah 44



NOTES _____

Read Nehemiah 10:31-39

Key Text

We will not neglect the house of God. (Nehemiah 10:39b)

Reflection

Chapter ten details the commitment of the people to bring their tithe and first fruit offerings to God. The fact is striking that this action involves all the people (verse 34), not just some. Nehemiah and Ezra have re-established the primacy of the law and worship in Israel's life. It is everyone's responsibility to see this commitment is maintained. The people have already given their time, talents and money to see the walls rebuilt and the city restored. It would be easy to sit back and assume that this level of sacrifice was no longer required. But in many ways the real work now begins.

In a few years time, God willing, we will move into wonderful new facilities. In that moment it would be easy, understandable even, if we sit back and think our work is done and that the level of commitment we have made can be wound back. This will be a time full of opportunity for incredible fruitfulness as well as failure. We will fail in this moment (as we will see later the people of Israel did) if we settle for the success of a completed project rather than pressing on in faith as we participate in God's mission in the world.

Question

Do you believe the practice of tithing (giving the first part of our income – usually 10%) is still the biblical standard for our giving to God's work?

Prayer

Pray that we would never become so comfortable and complacent that we neglect to share the good news of the gospel with our families, our workmates, our neighbours, our friends and our community.

Further Reading

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 Exodus 16-17:7

NOTES _____

Read Nehemiah 13:12-31

Key Text

When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day. (Nehemiah 13:19)

Reflection

Sabbath rest was fundamental to Israel's life. Following the Creation account (Genesis 1-3), there were to be six days of work and toil to be followed by one day of absolute rest. 'There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the Lord.' (Leviticus 23:3) Sabbath rest was a fundamental way that marked Israel as God's unique people; a people set apart.

So soon after the rebuilding of the wall and the celebrations that followed, the people of Jerusalem fell into old, destructive patterns. They ignored the Sabbath injunctions and traded with neighbouring clans, failing to stop, rest and assemble to honour God and his covenant with them. In barricading the gates, Nehemiah takes drastic action to ensure this sin does not continue.

The sad reality of modern church life is that leaders such as myself assess a person as a regular church attendee if they come one week in every three. I have to tell you, I don't get it. If I truly believe that God's saving grace extends to me, that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has liberated me from the power of sin and death and that the same power that raised him from the dead lives in me – why would I not want to gather at least once a week to give thanks to and honour that God? You may well be thinking, 'Stu, you are a pastor – you're paid to go to church!' It is true that I have a particular role and responsibility. But even before this calling I am a child of God called to honour my heavenly father with my worship – the first and best of my life, including my time.

Questions

In an era of 24/7 shopping, weekend sport and frantic lifestyles, how best do we honour Sabbath principles? Where do you need to find rest in your life?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, help me to come into the rest that you offer me through the completed work of your life, death and resurrection.

Further Reading

Hebrews 10:19-26



NOTES _____

Read Nehemiah 13:1-11

Key Text

So I rebuked the officials and asked them, "Why is the house of God neglected?" Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts. (Nehemiah 13:11)

Nehemiah had returned to Babylon to serve the King and in his absence Jerusalem and its people had returned to their bad, old ways. Only a little earlier they had declared, "We will not neglect the house of God." (10:39) Yet now they were desecrating it, the Sabbath and themselves. They were ignoring the very law they had wept over as Ezra had read it to them. They were people with very short memories.

Nehemiah must have been both disappointed and disillusioned. After the triumph of the walls being rebuilt, now the people were prostituting themselves and their restored city.

After the triumph comes the test. After the victory come the choices.

Will we continue to honour the God who has and will miraculously provide, or will we descend ever so slowly into selfishness and sloth? The journey to the latter is never quick; it is usually made one small compromise after another. May we choose the road less travelled!

Questions

Where do you believe our church will be most tempted to compromise in the future?
How do we guard against such compromise?

Prayer

Pray that we will never compromise the gospel. May our dealings with people in and outside of the church family always bring honour and glory to God.

Further Reading

Romans 7:7 – Romans 8:17



NOTES _____

Read Nehemiah 11

Key Text

From the descendant of Benjamin: Sallu son of Meshullam, the son of Joed, the son of Pedaiiah, the son of Kolaiah, the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ithiel, the son of Jeshaiiah. (Nehemiah 11:7)

Reflection

God was doing a new thing in the rebuilding of the walls and the re-establishment of Jerusalem. But this was a new thing rooted in the past. As Nehemiah names the citizens of the rebuilt Jerusalem, they are listed by their name and ancestral ties. Each person is anchored to the story of Israel's past in the story of God's faithfulness to an often faithless people.

As we step into an exciting (and scary!) season for our church we are reminded that we are connected to our past as well as committed to God's future for us. Our past as a community is littered with signs and stories of God's provision, even when we have been lacking in both faith and commitment. Our future will be the same. Names will change, people will come and go (even Pastors) – only God remains the same. Praise Him!

Question

In what significant ways has God provided for Newlife over its life?

Prayer

Thank God for those who came before us to Newlife and laid the foundations of the faith community that is here today.

Further Reading Psalm 139



