

# Another Brick in the Wall

Preaching series: Return from Exile

Text: Neh 3; Matt 9:35–10:8

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Context: Papanui Baptist Church

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A couple of weeks ago we began a new series called *Return from Exile*. As we return from our own lockdown exile, we're listening to the story of Ezra and Nehemiah, when God brought Judah back to Jerusalem after their long exile in Babylon. When they came back, they found Jerusalem in ruins: the temple was destroyed, and the city and its walls burnt down. So, they began to rebuild. Today we're skipping ahead 100 years in the story, to a later generation led by Nehemiah. He was an Israelite official serving in the Persian government, and he'd been released to lead the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. Chapter 3 gives us a list of who completed the different sections. It follows the wall in anti-clockwise direction around Jerusalem, beginning at the north-eastern section.

*Read Neh. 2:17-3:32*

## Unity in Diversity

This story is all about unity. All the people come together as one to repair the wall. All of them "made repairs"—we hear that action in almost every verse. The only outlier in this long list are the disgruntled Tekoan nobles in v. 5. But their refusal to participate only highlights how much unity there was otherwise. The unity of people of all classes is quite remarkable, and is what enables them to get the job done. Yes, some people like Meremoth and the Tekoites played a bigger role, repairing a couple of sections; but the wall needed all hands on deck, everyone working together.

The unity is impressive, but the *variety* of builders is striking. Sometimes they're identified by family, other times by profession or place of residence. There are priests and lay people; rulers of districts build alongside merchants; goldsmiths and perfumers, women and men, each play their part. We see this most clearly at the Sheep gate, which begins and ends the circuit, showing us that the high priest and his fellows are working side-by-side with the tradies.

We're no strangers to uniting for a common purpose: our "team of five million" has just succeeded in uniting against Covid-19, and we're now enjoying the benefits. The crisis has been a great leveller, with CEOs and city councillors forced into lockdown, while supermarket workers and nurses have been aptly named "essential workers." Now on the other side, we're being encouraged to "unite for the recovery."

In our previous series, the topic of unity came up in Paul's letter to the Philippians. It comes up so often that Alec Motyer says, unity "belongs to the very essence of Christian life, for it is the way in which Christians display outwardly what the gospel means to them." A former student of mine reflected this week that the gospel message is about unity. "If you can't even work with others because you get so offended or threatened by them, you aren't living the gospel. Jesus was united to the Father by the Spirit. We have that same Spirit with us, yet as the 'body of Christ' we aren't even able to relate to each other. Make Paul's joy complete: be of the same mind, same love, one accord."

## United for What?

It's never just unity for unity's sake. Notice how, under Nehemiah's leadership, this diverse group of people unites around a common purpose: to rebuild Jerusalem's wall. And what about our church? What are we united for? I'd like to think it has something to do with mission . . . We've just heard that Jesus sent the disciples with authority to drive out demons and to heal every disease and sickness. We heard a similar story last week when Jesus commissioned the disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." These passages remind us that we the church are a sent people. We've been given authority in Christ by his Spirit to go, to share in the joyful labour of the kingdom of God. In John's gospel Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." In Mark's gospel he says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." And the book of Acts begins with Jesus telling us, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Like a ship that's ready to sail, we've been commissioned for action. The church is united for mission. And if we're not—if we're not all about participating in what Jesus is doing in our neighbourhoods and workplaces, then we can hardly claim to be a church at all. We'd be like a ship refusing to take to the water, like an albatross that doesn't soar, or a tui that doesn't sing . . . The church is made for movement, is united for mission.

## Why Gather?

So, why do we keep coming back here, back to the dock? If our desire is to be a church on mission, participating in what Jesus is doing out there, then why are we still here? Well . . . I think it's because the only hope for a sustained and faithful participation in Christ's mission is built on a sustained participation in Christ's *worship*. The life of the church is like breathing in and out, in and out. We gather, we scatter. We gather with stories to tell. We scatter with The Story to tell. This is the place where we sum it all up—the good, the bad, and the ugly, and present it to God as an offering. This is the place where God makes sense of our lives; where God binds up our wounds from serving on the frontlines; where we recommit ourselves to God and one another. In this way, the church participates in the breathing in and out of God. The Father sends the Son and the Spirit into the world; and by the Spirit, the Son gathers us back into his intimacy with the Father. Our triune God lives in this eternal dynamic of procession and worship, of out-going love and holy embrace. Our hope is that gathering here is a place of rest and refreshment, where we can put down the tools of the week and come and celebrate together. We don't want this to be the main site of your work and mission, but of your being repaired, restored for another week participating in Christ's renewal of communities out there.

## Another brick in the wall

But, as with Nehemiah's wall, what happens here does need many hands to make light work. We need everyone who is able to take responsibility for a section of the wall; like Meremoth, we need some people to take more than one section. Speaking concretely, there are things that need doing every week in order for us to meet this way, and the more people that chip in, the less work there is for everyone. That's the way this church has been able to operate through its more than 60 years of gathering, and that's what we need for this to continue. So that you know exactly how you can help us out, we've created this flyer listing the various opportunities to serve at Papanui Baptist, like moving chairs, playing on the music team, or making barista coffees. We'd like for you to read through this list, and to consider whether you might be able to help us out in one or more of these ministries. If you are able, then we invite you to fill in your name and what you're thinking about at the bottom of the page, and to rip off the tab and put it in the basket at the auditorium entrance.