

Reflection delivered at Gisborne, 24 October 2021

*Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.*

Nehemiah 1:1-4, 11-12, 17-18

The Book of Nehemiah begins 15 years after the Book of Ezra ends, almost 100 years after the first captives came back to the Promised Land, and some 150 years after the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. After this long time, the walls of the city of Jerusalem were still in rubble.

By the time invaded by Babylon in 597 BCE, Israel had already been divided into two kingdoms: one is the northern Jewish kingdom of Israel, and the other is the southern Jewish kingdom of Judah. When Babylonians invaded Israel, the city of Jerusalem - the capital city of the kingdom of Judah was completely conquered by Babylonians. The once-glorious temple of Solomon was destroyed. But it's not the end. Babylonians deported almost everyone from the city and the region for some 70 years. Jerusalem was like a ghost town, with the potential to end up like many ancient cities – completely forgotten except to history.

In Babylon, Israel, people began to make homes for themselves there. They settled down, and many still followed the God of their Fathers. But they did it from Babylon, with no desire to return to the land God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

After 70 years of captivity in Babylon, however, the Jews were allowed to return to their homeland – the Promised Land. Out of two or three million Jews deported from the land, only 50,000 decided to return to the Promised Land. That's only something like 2%. But they did return. In the days of Ezra, they rebuilt the temple and laid a spiritual foundation for Israel once again. But their attempt to rebuild the walls were stopped by their enemies. No one thought this obstacle could be overcome, so the walls lay in ruin, and the people stayed in trouble. It is where the book of Nehemiah began.

After listening to the state of Jerusalem and its people, Nehemiah wept, prayed to God, and decided to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. As the story unfolds in the following chapters, God was about to begin the work through a leader, namely Nehemiah. But there is no way Nehemiah could do this alone. As it unfolds, Nehemiah is a book all about leadership – something we need today. Since leadership means active care for the wellbeing of the community, leadership applies to everyone. Everyone has an area of leadership. In some way, each one of us is a leader. In chapter 3, in particular, we see how this everyone's leadership is exercised. Under the subtitle of 'Organization of the work,' it illustrates how each individual – small or big, participated in the repair of the walls. Chapter 3 describes all the names of individuals and their

work in detail. The list continues till verse 32. That is, Everyone identified something they could do in rebuilding the walls. For this, leaders had to prepare themselves for difficult work. Also, leaders must have had a big vision that sustained them till they reached the goal. Where do you see yourselves as individuals in this story? When it comes to restructuring/rebuilding GPP, what is your specific role here? Indeed, the book of Nehemiah gives us insight and vision for us as the spiritual temple of God. May God help us offer ourselves as spiritual building stones so that GPP will be renewed to be a live faith community once again. Amen.