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It's the start of back-to-school season, so we too return to school, back to the word of God to learn more about Him. We shall spend the next nine weeks in the book of Nehemiah.

In 586 BC King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Jerusalem by breaking through its fortified walls, destroyed the magnificent Temple built by King Solomon, and took the Jewish people into exile in Babylon. (Psalm 19 & 137, "By the Waters of Babylon" - Boney M song).

Forty-seven years later, King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon, and a year later issued a decree that Jewish exiles were free to return to their ancestral home.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were part of one scroll documenting the history of the return of the Jewish diaspora to Jerusalem. Ezra's main concern was to restore peoples' faithfulness towards God,

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both in worship (by rebuilding the Temple) and to living God's Law.

Nehemiah comes on the scene 13 years later, and we shall soon learn of his concern.

These two books are rich in history and if we are not careful, can easily side track us with its details. To put this history further in context, this record of Nehemiah's history took place 100 years before Alexander the Great of Macedonia invaded Persia.

The book of Nehemiah is often used to extract lessons in management and organisation, how to, and how not to do things. Our purpose in exploring Nehemiah's historical account, is to discover the significance of prayer, when things happen, which are not in keeping with our plans.

This is the story of life for all of us - we make plans and when we are working through the plans, things happen which disrupt and upset and threaten our carefully made plans.

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We think God is interested in the **how** of things - *how will I achieve this, or do that.* As a result we become focussed on **how** God wants things done.

The first thing we should learn is that God being God is really not interested in **how**. He can do and achieve anything, any way He wants to. God's **only** interest is people. When Saul, the first king of Israel broke God's heart by consulting with a witch, God said to Samuel, *"Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as humans see, for the human tendency is to look at outward appearance, but I the LORD God look at the heart."*¹

This is a very important starting lesson. **We** are always looking for better people who have better methods, techniques, strategies and mechanisms, but God is looking for people, willing to work with Him.

¹ 1 Samuel 16:7

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Very early in human history, we read in Genesis, *God was grieved when He saw that every intention of the heart of men and women was only evil continually, ...but Noah found favour in the eyes of the LORD.*² God found a man who was different from all others, a person whom God could trust because His heart was in the right place - focused on God.

We could go through each book in the Bible and find this - that God is looking for persons with the right heart, mind and spirit through whom He will bless families, communities and nations.

Asa, King of Judah, relied on the strength of neighbouring Kings to protect him; God said to him, *My eyes search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to Me.*³

God is not looking for perfect people, people who know everything and seem to lead perfect lives; He

² Genesis 6:5 & 8

³ 2 Chronicles 16:9

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is looking for people, men, women and children, whose hearts are fully committed to Him.

Nehemiah is such person. Nehemiah's character is revealed through his prayers. We learn a lot about a person by listening to their prayers, and that's what we shall do over the next nine weeks - listen how Nehemiah prays and how God uses his prayers to accomplish His will, to bless a people and a nation.

At the outset, Nehemiah teaches us two lessons on prayer: First, **Pray Before You Do Anything Else!**

We are part of a culture which requires us to be doing something, all the time; if we are not doing something, there is something wrong with us. I was brought up that way, *don't just sit there! get up and do something!* Doing something which everyone else can see us doing, is more important than doing something like praying, which others do not see us doing. This is how prayer is put on the back-burner.

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This creates a big problem: the less we pray, the more insensitive we become to other's needs. We are busy doing things to satisfy ourselves and we become less sensitive about others' needs and requirements.

Over the next nine weeks, we shall discover Nehemiah to also be a man of action. He cannot sit still. To build the wall around Jerusalem in 52 days, Nehemiah has to be a great manager, organiser and motivator, who can overcome great difficulties.

But Nehemiah is a man of prayer, one whose relationship with God is such, as we shall see, he converses with God. And it is in the context of this intimate relationship with God, that Nehemiah's heart is as tender and compassionate towards the plight of his people back in Jerusalem, as God's is. This is a trusted relationship between God and Nehemiah, so God directs people to bring news to Nehemiah that, *the remnant there in the province*

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who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are destroyed by fire.⁴

I would wager, if we had been the one to receive such news, our first repeses would have been to “rally the troops” and start a **Wall Rebuilding Fund** on Face Book or Instagram, to tell every one to contribute generously for the resources needed, and find ways of getting the money there into the hands of those whose walls had been broken and whose gates were destroyed by fire.

Nehemiah's response? *As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting **and praying** before the God of Heaven.*

If in all sincerity, out of compassion for people we know or feel for, we want to do what is right in the

⁴ Nehemiah 1:3

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eyes of God, then our first response should be **to pray before we do anything else.**

*You might well ask the question, *what is the use of fasting and praying with tears and lament? What will this achieve when people are suffering and dying?**

If our intention is to do what God wants done, we must first clear our hearts and minds of all personal plans and ambitions, schemes and achievements. We have to surrender our motives, we must admit our weaknesses, we must concede our inability to take on a task for which we do not have all the knowledge, wisdom and resources. Knowing this, Nehemiah's first response was to get alone with God, and pray.

The second lesson Nehemiah teaches us is this, **When We Pray, We Need to Depend on God.**

The author writes, ***Then I prayed...*** in other words, after Nehemiah had fasted and prayed for God to cleanse his heart and mind of any personal

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aspirations and selfish thoughts, ***then he prayed...***
Hear how Nehemiah **appeals to God's character**
when he prays:

"O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands, listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for Your people Israel. Nehemiah appeals to the character of God, and then he admits his own deficiencies: I confess that we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned! We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses. Nehemiah again appeals to the character of God: "Please remember what you told your servant Moses: 'If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are

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exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honoured.'

"The people you rescued by your great power and strong hand are your servants. O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honouring you.

Finally, Nehemiah prays for a personal favour,

"Please grant me success today by making the king favourable to me. Put it in his heart to be kind to me."

If you have ever thought, prayer doesn't work, you are right, it doesn't. In Penny and Marian's skit last Sunday had a powerful message, that prayer for prayer's sake, doesn't work.

We think we can handle most of life by ourselves. We think we can do most things using our God-given wisdom, strength and resources. So it is only natural, when we have a problem, our natural

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human reaction is to think, "*So what am I going to do about this?*" instead of asking like Nehemiah, "*God, what do **YOU** want to do?*"

Jesus says to His followers, "*Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.*⁵" That's the only way we bear fruit, which is another way of saying, *That's the way prayer works!*

God honours prayer that comes from a genuinely concerned heart. He longs to hear us say, "*Lord, I can't handle this. I don't know how to do it. Help me!*" That's prayer God likes to answer.

Isaiah hits the nail on the head when he says, "*...those who trust in the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.*⁶"

⁵ John 15

⁶ Isaiah 40:31

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The first and most important lesson Nehemiah teaches us is that **Prayer works**, but only when surrender to God's leadership and let Him answer it the way He thinks and knows best.

AMEN.