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Last Sunday, we started our journey into the life of Nehemiah, not to study his management techniques, his organisational style, nor his approach to motivation, all of which is valid material for study, rather to learn how he prayed and how God responded to his prayers. There are seven references to Nehemiah praying and we shall examine each one and learn from it.

Forty years after the Jews were taken into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar, King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon, and issued an edict (an Act of Parliament) freeing the Jews in exile to return to their homeland - Jerusalem. Ezra the priest in Babylon, mobilised the first return of the exiles to Jerusalem and established the reading of God's Word in public, and 13 years later, Nehemiah, a nobleman in the court of King Artaxerxes in Persia, comes on the scene to start the rebuilding of the Temple.

Although the book of Nehemiah is situated in the middle section of most Bibles (third book back from the Psalms), and is followed by other material such as worship liturgy, wisdom literature and prophetic proclamations, in terms of the chronology of Bible history, Nehemiah offers us a last glimpse before the 400-year silence of God descends on human history, broken only when a choir of angels in Heaven could not contain their joy, and broke out in song at the birth of the Messiah.

After a war, a nation sets about rebuilding its landmark buildings to restore its national pride, and so did the Jewish people under Nehemiah. At that time, and even now, the restoration of Jerusalem is all about restoring national pride - a place where the majesty of buildings and the magnificence of the Temple can be seen.

What Nehemiah did not know was, he was instrumental in preparing Jerusalem as the Jewish capital city, to play its role at the right time, when

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God would come as His Son, not to die on the cross, but to deal satan a fatal blow by breaking the chains of death which held us back from eternal life with God.

Jerusalem was central to God's plan: Jesus was born very near Jerusalem, and dedicated in the Temple at Jerusalem. He lived as a Jew among Jews visiting the city several times in His life. It was also the city in which Jesus was betrayed and crucified, and where he defeated death by His resurrection.

Jerusalem was ultimately destroyed in 70 AD, 35 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, but Nehemiah, 400 years prior to Jesus' arrival, was instrumental in rebuilding it, for it to remain intact for the final act in God's plan of redemption, the birth of Jesus the Christ.

There are times when we feel God is absent and nowhere to be seen, but God is at work in the background of our lives. Nehemiah did not know anything about future events, but he knew God, with whom he had a relationship, God whom he trusted and worshipped. Nehemiah knew he must always act in obedience to God, when prompted to do so.

Nehemiah's relationship with God was such, before he did anything, he prayed. God was Nehemiah's personal companion, with him all the way.

In Shakespeare's play, *As you like it*, in which the melancholic character Jaques says, *All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances*, which echoes the narrative of Nehemiah's life. Each of us plays our part in God's history, totally unaware of what lies ahead. Each of us is called to faithful obedience for that which God places on our hearts to do.

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We ended our reading in chapter 1 last Sunday, which in our pew bibles read, *I was the King's wine steward*, which sounds like Nehemiah was in charge of the King's wine cellar, choosing and pairing wines for the food served at every meal.

In fact, it was very different. Nehemiah was **cup bearer** to the king, which meant, he had to taste the wine before it was served to the king. The king would keenly watch the **cup bearer**, esp. his face, to make out if the wine was **"safe"** to drink.

Wouldn't it make a big difference to the lives of young people at music events and rave parties, if someone would sample in front of them, the drinks and drugs being sold, for them to see the effects of what they were buying?

Now, in chapter 1:1, we read, Nehemiah received news of the conditions of people in Jerusalem, **in the month of Chislev**. Then in the opening lines of chapter 2 we read, **In the month of Nisan**, which is four months after Chislev; Nehemiah mourned and prayed **for four months**, the summary of his prayers we find in chapter 1.

This kind of sustained prayer, accompanied with fasting, is possible for anyone, as long as the desire of their hearts and minds is in sync with God's. Last week we noted, when we make the conscious effort to cleanse our hearts and minds of our own motives, of the objectives we want to achieve, of the recognition that might give us a sense of satisfaction, only then can God trust us to do what He wants done. It is quite possible for us to live life doing what **we think** needs doing, which may not be what God wants done.

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Having cleansed his heart and mind of any personal agenda, four months from the day Nehemiah first heard the news of the sorry state of his compatriots in Jerusalem, God opens the door for Nehemiah's most important role in his journey of life.

As normal, at mealtime, the wine is brought and set before the King. Nehemiah tastes the wine and takes it up to him. What happens next, has never before happened. The King says, *Why is your face sad? There is a look of pain on your face. You are not feeling sick, are you?*, which could mean only one thing - ***is there something wrong with the wine?***

Remember Nehemiah's specific prayer, *Grant me, your servant, success today; allow this king to show kindness and compassion to me¹?*

The answer to this prayer is in the King's words, *If there is nothing wrong with the wine, then tell me, the sadness on your face, could it be because you carry a burden in your heart?*

Nehemiah is frightened; "frozen with fear" might be an appropriate expression, and when in fear, we say things, our choice of words, our tone of voice, all of which can be misunderstood.

Nehemiah blurts out, *May the King live forever! Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins and its gates have been completely destroyed by fire?!*

It would be wrong to think, God works in mysterious ways, because what we are about to see is, God works in answer to prayer! God can, has done and still does, change the heart of people in positions of power, even make people in power and authority, do what He wants done!

¹ Nehemiah 1:11 (EXB - Expanded Bible)

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So the king asks, *What are you asking for? What exactly do you want?*

Didn't Nehemiah pray, *Grant me, your servant, success today; allow this king to show kindness and compassion to me.*² Here is answer to specific prayer!

The next line is the most important statement in the story of Nehemiah's life and reveals his true character.

***So I prayed to the God of Heaven,
and then I said to the King....***

Last Sunday, Nehemiah taught us, ***Before you do anything about anything, PRAY.*** This sentence, *So I prayed to the God of Heaven, and then I said to the King...*, is proof of the lesson. Nehemiah practices what he preaches; Nehemiah talks the talk, **and** he walks the walk.

The rest of the chapter and book, is based on practising this relationship with God: before I do anything, and before I utter a word, I will pray. There may be no time for a long drawn out prayer, but a few simple words in thought, ***Lord God of Heaven, HELP me!***, is sufficient.

The Baptist preacher C.H. Spurgeon once said, *"Prayer pulls the rope down below and the great bell rings above in the ears of God. Some scarcely stir the bell, for they pray so languidly; others give only an occasional jerk at the rope. But he who communicates with heaven is the man who grasps the rope boldly and pulls continuously with all his might."*

Spurgeon reverses the Downton Abbey image of ropes being pulled to summon the attention of scullery staff, to one where we the scullery staff summon the God of Heaven by pulling the ropes which ring in the ears of God, an image and metaphor appropriate for his time, but we should not

² Nehemiah 1:11 (EXB - Expanded Bible)

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think that God needs to be woken up, or be summoned to our attention, because God is ever present with us. Jesus made sure of it when He said, *I will ask the Father to release the Holy Spirit to be with you always, as your guide and your counsellor.* God is **ALWAYS** present in His world and with us.

*"O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honouring you. Please grant me success today by making the king favourable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me."³ So I prayed to the God of Heaven and **then** said to the king... and the king said, *How long will you be gone? What a lovely accolade! A testimony of Nehemiah's character. How long will you be gone? Hasten back; I need you here!**

God is waiting for each of us to enjoy this relationship with Him, a relationship of absolute trust, that He can and will do things which will be a blessing to us, **AND** to those around us.

And it is Jesus' resurrection which makes this relationship possible. Try it, and I can assure you, you will never regret it.

AMEN

³ Nehemiah 1:11