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We continue our march into the book of Nehemiah, wanting to learn **how** he prayed, **what** he prayed for, **when** he prayed, and **how God responded**. So far we have learned, before he did anything, or acted on anything, Nehemiah prayed. This is the core of Nehemiah's life - not doing what he think is right, not doing what he think should be done, its all about what God wants done, and how can he be in sync with Him.

News of the state of his compatriots in Jerusalem, their despondency and feeling of shame inflicted on them by their neighbours, placed a heavy burden on Nehemiah. As he takes this up in prayer with God, Nehemiah understands he lives under the authority of the King here and now, but he is accountable to God, because he lives under God's law and is governed by God's justice.

It is interesting to note here, God gives people authority to rule nations, or lead companies, organisations and people, but many appropriate for themselves, the power of God, and become despots, tyrants and dictators. They confuse **authority** and **power**, believing that both go hand in hand; they do not know, authority misgive by God and only God has power. The abuse of authority is when leaders think they have power over others, so they abuse their position and mis-rule. Then there are those who overthrow God's appointed people and take control, the well known *coup d'etat*.

Then among **us**, there are many who disregard the authority God has given to His people. The fact remains, each of us, the rulers and the ruled, are responsible to God for our actions.

There are many references in the Bible which teach us that **ALL** authority and power is given by God. Let me pick one, condensing the narrative into a few paragraphs to make the point. In the biography of the prophet

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Daniel (also known as Belteshazzar), we read Daniel was the only one found able to interpret King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, but before he does so, Daniel said, *Your Majesty, you are the greatest of kings. The God of heaven has given you power, sovereignty, strength and honour. He has made you ruler over all the inhabited world and has put even the wild animals and birds under your control.*¹

This went to the King's head. He commissioned a 90 foot tall gold statue be erected and demanded everyone bow down and worship it. Daniel's friends are accused of not bowing down and worshipping the statue and are thrown into a blazing furnace made seven times hotter than usual, and they walk through it. The astonished king says, *Praise to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! He sent his angel to rescue his servants who trusted in him ... There is no other god who can rescue like this!*

Then one day, the king stood on his rooftop, looked around and said to himself, *I have made this great city and great empire.* That night he had a second dream, and again, only Daniel could decode it. It was a terrible dream, which Daniel interpreted as follows: that the King *will be driven from human society, and will live in the fields with the wild animals, eating grass like a cow, ... **until he learns that God Most High rules over the kingdoms of the world and gives them to anyone he chooses.** ... you will receive your kingdom back again **when you have learned that heaven rules.***² Seven years year, he was restored to society.

This is also New Testament teaching. Paul says, *rulers are servants of God*³, but he also tells us, *Every person is subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are*

¹ Daniel 2:37-38

² Synopsis of Nehemiah 4:19-33

³ Romans 13:6

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*established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.*⁴

This is the background of our text today. God appointed Nehemiah to help the disheartened and discouraged Jews in Jerusalem regain their dignity by rebuilding the walls of the city of Jerusalem, but the enemy without, has other plans. They want to keep the Jews remaining in Jerusalem downcast and depressed.

The leader of the opposition is Sanballat, a local tribal chief, who leads a motley band of others like him.

We first encounter him in chapter 2. When *Sanballat ... heard of (Nehemiah's) arrival, was **very displeased** that someone had come to help the people of Israel.*⁵

Opposition to God's will and plan always starts with low-key expressions of displeasure. *Ooo! I'm not sure this is a good idea. Leave things as they are! Don't rock the boat! The status quo is best.* People who try to derail God's plans are not evil in themselves; the problem is, the only way satan can derail God's plans, is by setting people against each other. He did this at the start of the human race, setting man and woman against each other, and he continue to do it.

We then read, *when Sanballat heard (the details) of our plan, **they scoffed contemptuously. "What are you doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"*** they asked.⁶

⁴ Romans 13:1-2

⁵ Nehemiah 2:10

⁶ Nehemiah 2:19

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We can be easily discouraged and back off when the opposition expresses their displeasure and try to stop what God has planned, but if we continue to believe in God's plan and purposes, and carry on doing what God wants done, guess what, the opposition increases the pressure.

The opposition does not sit by idly. They start poking around, asking questions and investigating, finding people sympathetic to their cause, gathering information to support their cause. They challenge and poke fun of "God's Plan" - *Is it actually legal? Was it ever authorised properly by the powers that be?*

Nehemiah persists in doing what he knows is God's will for the people. God has led him all the way up to now, from the time He put the burden of his compatriot's condition in his heart, to making the king agreeable to let him go, grant him safe passage with a military escort (the latter a bonus blessing he had not asked for), and access to the King's resources. Not only did God answer his basic prayer request, God multiplied the blessing many times over.

Nehemiah, therefore, is undeterred and continues to encourage people to build the wall. It is a well known fact, people are motivated when someone encourages them, leads them, shows the way, and progress becomes visible!

We skipped chapter 3 because I wanted to spare you the challenge of pronouncing the names of people who built the wall in front of their homes (!), but chapter 3 is a progress report of how God's plan for the city of Jerusalem was being achieved, one family at a time!

Progress - is - visible, and the opposition is getting more angry. A few words mocking and discouraging the people, has not worked. The opposition

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needs to change gears, modify their tactics to increase the pressure. Chapter 4 opens with the news, *When Sanballat heard we were (actually) building the wall, he was not only very angry, he flew into a rage and jeered and mocked them even more! What does this bunch of poor, feeble Jews think they're doing? Do they think they can build the wall in a single day by just offering a few sacrifices? Do they actually think they can make something of stones from a rubbish heap—and charred ones at that? One of Sanballat's partners-in-crime added to the insults, What they are building, if a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall!*⁷

Nehemiah senses the strength of increasing opposition. Once again, before he does anything else, he is on his knees appealing to the character and promise of God.

*Hear us, our God, for we are being mocked. May their scoffing fall back on their own heads, and may they themselves become captives in a foreign land! Do not ignore their guilt. **Do not blot out their sins, for they have provoked YOU (not me, nor us) to anger here in front of the builders***⁸

In times when the severity of the enemy's attack increases significantly against those working on God's plan, there is nothing wrong in venting our anger **before God** not at each other, nor at God for both are a sin, but **before God!**

Remember what we have been saying for several months now, prayer is the sign of an intimate relationship with God, and in the context of this secure relationship, we are free to vent our frustration and our anger to God. Ultimately, what God does, and how he manages the situation is totally up to Him. We are not suggesting to God what he **should** do; our

⁷ Nehemiah 4:1 & 3

⁸ Nehemiah 4:4

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human frustration against that which is wrong and evil, can be vented before God, but God decides whether any of our suggestions merit His consideration.

Visible progress was seen as the wall being built in front of each family's home, had come up to half the height. Now we read, *the breaches were beginning to be closed*. This was the gap between the wall in front of each person's house. People were motivated to start reaching out towards their neighbours on either side.

*When Sanballat heard that the work was going ahead and that the gaps in the wall of Jerusalem were being repaired, **they were furious**.*⁹

This is serious! The wall is not longer *my wall*; linked up as one continuous wall, it's now **OUR wall**. In our context, it's no longer about me the individual Christian who attends Church, its about **WE the Church!**

When Nehemiah hears that Sanballat and the other tribal chiefs are plotting to fight Jerusalem, once again, he prays before he acts - *we prayed to our God **and then** (those two important words again!) set a guard as a protection against them day and night*. He encourages each family, *Do not be afraid of them (the opposition). **Remember**, the Lord our God who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and our homes*.

So they split the workforce into two, those who worked on construction, and those who acted as lookout soldiers, ready to take on any armed intervention.

⁹ Nehemiah 4:7

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To discern God's will and plan is one thing, to act on it is another, and to persist doing God's will in the face of opposition, is truly commendable, because this makes it exhausting, demoralising and distracting.

Encouragement and strength to carry on, comes only through prayer, prayer which recognises the certainty of God's plans, prayer which appeals to the character of God - *the opposition is provoking You to anger by saying things against You, O God!*

This is our challenge. Perhaps we should change the way we pray when we realise, ***the evil perpetuated in the world every day, is against God, to tarnish His Name; to mock us saying, "So where is your God and why isn't he doing anything about the problems of this world?"***

Knowing this helps us refocus our prayers. We can now appeal to God to preserve His Name and His Reputation. *Do something, O God! Do not let the opposition tarnish Your Name. Teach us, enable us, empower us to be faithful in what what you have called us to do, that our words, deeds and actions honour YOUR Name O God!*

AMEN.