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We march deeper into our exploration of the historical account of Nehemiah, a man burdened to help his compatriots, those not taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar, but who remained in Jerusalem, to help them regain their dignity as citizens of Jerusalem.

We have discovered, Nehemiah is a man of prayer. His life and now his entire mission is undergirded (secured and supported) by prayer, which reveals his intimate relationship with his Father in Heaven. His repeated use of the phrase ***I prayed to my God and then I (acted...)***, speaks volumes of his wholesome relationship with God.

As the rebuilding of Jerusalem's city wall gathers pace, the local tribal chiefs increase their taunts and insults, and poke fun at the efforts of the local resident Jews.

Last Sunday we saw, when we persist in doing the work God has called us to, God's enemy is not going to stand by and watch us complete God's plan!

He started by instigating local tribal chiefs to hurl insults and abuse at the community of Jews, to discourage and demoralise them and stop them from building the wall, but he had underestimated Nehemiah's passion for what God laid on his heart to do; he underestimated the quality of Nehemiah's relationship with God.

Sensing the local tribal chiefs posed a growing threat, Nehemiah organised the work force into two groups: one to build, and the other, a fully armed division, to be a lookout for enemy activity.

The enemy is always busy trying to stall God's work. I know someone who directed humanitarian assistance globally, mostly where natural disasters had taken place. Often, aid sent by plane or by ship, would be re-directed

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to places where the leaders' family and friends lived; aid would also be stalled at ports and airports until officials were paid their demands. People in the front line of distributing aid, find it difficult to work, because God's enemy makes every effort to stall them.

Nehemiah's prayer life gives him access to God's wisdom. This is a truth we often miss, that prayer gives us access to God's wisdom. Nehemiah tells those working on rebuilding the wall, "*The work is very spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. (note: recollect the James Bond films and Mission Impossible and others of this nature where the hero scales the walls of the bad guys fortress and takes out the armed guard, one by one - being separated from our family and friends makes us vulnerable). In the event of an imminent attack, a blast of the trumpet will sound. When you hear it, rush to wherever it is sounding. **Then our God will fight for us!***"

Let's pause to understand **TWO** important points in this last sentence. The first seems obvious: *It's not the wall that will protect us; yes, we need the wall, but it is God who protects us.* Our mind's focus is important, because its easy to fall prey into believing, the wall was built with our blood, sweat and tears and our resources. We can build the best fortification in the world, but it is God who fights for us and protects us.

This lesson reminds us once again: it's not our resources, our blood, sweat and tears by which our new church is being built; God has gifted us a new church, free of all debt, that we may focus on giving Him all the glory, and use the building for the plans He has in mind!

The second lesson we learn from the phrase, **our God will fight for us!**, is this:

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What's the point of praying, if we cannot trust God? What's the point of praying, if we cannot depend on God to answer prayer?

When we pray, either we trust God's character that He is always true to His word, *I will never leave you nor forsake you*, or we might as well not pray and leave ourselves to the consequences of *fate*, and the outcome of *luck*.

If there is one lesson worth remembering from this study of Nehemiah's life, it should be this: **prayer is serious business!** Prayer is the expression of an established relationship with Almighty, Eternal, Life-Creating God, who loves us beyond anything we can imagine.

So the work of re-building the wall around Jerusalem continues. The tribal chiefs are frustrated and they stall for a moment, but God's enemy is not sitting by, idly!

Guess what his next strategy might be? He has not been successful in discouraging and demoralising the Jews of Jerusalem by using people from outside their community; so he turns to use people from within their community.

Chapter 5 begins with the words, *There arose a great cry*, language typical of protest under oppression, similar to the Hebrew people's cry in Egypt, that God release them from 400 years of oppression as slaves!¹

Humiliation by the tribal chiefs no longer concerned the people of Jerusalem. They want Nehemiah to address a more immediate and serious problem in their midst: to stop the exploitation of the weak and vulnerable in their community, by their own powerful members, who are ignoring God's rules of society for their own benefit!

¹ Exodus 2:23

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With the men folk busy repairing the wall, or standing by armed and ready, no one was working the fields to harvest food for the community. Women managing the home are desperate. The table is bare, and the King's tax collectors have come around making their demands!

There are always those ready to take advantage of people in difficulty. Against the moral and ethical code handed down by Moses, the rich and the powerful in the Jewish community, did three things they should not have:

- 1) they gave loans when they should have given gifts. In times of difficulty, when people cannot see how they can repay a loan, it is better to give a gift, than a loan.
- 2) having offered loans, the moneylenders took collateral against their loans (mortgaged people's property, including selling their children into slavery);
- 3) they allowed the mortgaged property to fall into the hands of people outside the Jewish community, making the community poorer.

God's enemy attacks first from the outside trying to break their resolve, then from the inside, weakening their economic strength, disposing their assets and breaking up their families. God's enemy is attacking the core of God's character: **compassion**. At a time of national crisis, when people need to experience God's love and compassion, they are being deprived of food, separated from family members, and divested of family assets; God's enemy incites and prompts the enemy within.

There is something different driving Nehemiah, the same thing which drove Jesus. Both are driven to model God's compassion. God builds His kingdom on earth when we model His character for others to see. This is

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what Jesus meant when in the Sermon on the Mount he says to us, *You are the salt of the earth (you are the seasoning in this world that makes life worth living) ... you are (my) light to the world (show them who I am!)*. Our mission is to model God's character to this world.

Nehemiah models God character in several ways: he labours alongside his compatriots whom he had come to help. He refuses to eat the food and take the perks and comforts of his position as Governor, while the people he has come to help, remain in need and without security.

Nehemiah models God's character for all to see.

Nehemiah's prayer is a fitting close to our time today. In the first of six **"Remember"** prayers, Nehemiah prays: ***Remember me with favour, my God, for all I have done for these people.***² Nehemiah is not asking God for praise and commendation. He is asking God to remember what he has done, and in His wisdom, complete what he has not been able to; that God's love and God's justice would correct and complete, where his was flawed, inadequate and imperfect.

I am sure you know families who, like the larger family of the Jews during Nehemiah's time, experience tension in the family because of the pressures of work: sometimes people are driven by a cause, at times it is the need for income, other times when the pressure to perform, pressure to be, pressure to deliver, pressures which cascade down from the top. As a result the whole family suffers: the relationship between husband and wife, and parent and child suffers; each feels neglected and indulges in behaviour to compensate, which does the opposite: leading them into destructive habits.

² Nehemiah 5:19

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Sociologists and economists may blame social and economic pressures, but Nehemiah teaches us, we need to watch out for God's enemy who instigates members of the family, provoking disagreement, creating conflict, and fabricating friction.

Nehemiah's prayer is sufficient for the day, ***Remember me with favour, my God, for all I have done. I have done my best and my best falls short of Your standard. Where my love failed, let Your love fill in; where my justice fell-short, let Yours complete it; where my compassion was inadequate, let Yours be sufficient.***

Prayer is serious business. When we pray, let's mean what we pray, expecting God to answer.

If not, what's the point of praying, if we cannot trust God; what's the point of praying if we cannot depend on God to answer prayer? After all, Jesus did teach us to pray with conviction, certainty and confidence. Lets's pray...

AMEN.