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I have just had a hectic week. My mother was visiting my brother in Toronto and planned to be there until after Christmas, enjoying the antics of her great-grandchildren, but as the weather turned cooler, she wanted to be closer to the comfort of her doctors and carers. My brother, who in January this year, was appointed General Director of the Canadian Bible Society, was unable to take leave. So we decided to run a relay race, with Mum as the baton: he would bring her to Amsterdam and I would take her forward to Bangalore. While it was a privilege to help Mum in this way, my days of being a "jet-setter" are long past, although I am grateful for certain habits, like being able to sleep anywhere at anytime, which was a great help during two 12-14 hour flights.

The journeys gave me time to explore further on the life of Nehemiah and the challenges he faced.

The example of Nehemiah's life of prayer has taught us much. His was not life of prayer rituals, rather he had cultivated a relationship with God, which stood him in good stead, to act on the burden of compassion God had placed on his heart, to lift the plight of indignity and insecurity felt by the people of Jerusalem, whose city wall and city gates were destroyed, leaving them defenceless.

Despite acrimonious taunts and insults and a plan to assassinate Nehemiah, the wall around Jerusalem was completed to the amazement of all the trouble makers, who acknowledged a miracle had taken place, because the peoples' efforts were sustained by the Living God. When we work alongside God, according to His plans, miracles **DO** happen!

Last week we saw the start of a revival when Ezra the priest led the community of Jews, in reading aloud the Law of Moses. Those who understood what was being read, explained it to those who didn't, who were mostly those born during the exile, when the Law of God was hidden away for safe keeping.

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It's not only refugee families or displaced peoples who because of their status, are alienated from their "Law". Children visiting grandparents, are often let off the hook for not following "the Law", because the routines of settled life are disrupted.

The reading of God's Word has a powerful effect. It is a declaration of the Awesomeness and Sovereignty of God.

What follows is an object lesson to us as a church (and churches all over).

Prayer is worship, and true, God-centred worship begins with a declaration of praise to Almighty God. 400-500 years later, Jesus taught us: ***Our Father, Whose home is Heaven. All praise and glory be to Your Name!***

So the people's worship begins with, *"You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you"*<sup>1</sup>, followed by a potted narrative of the Jewish peoples' history, *"You are the Lord, the God who chose Abraham...."*<sup>2</sup>, through to the account of the Exodus, followed by an extended narrative of how they settled in the land God gave them and enjoyed the good life, then were disobedient to God's laws, were punished, and ending with *"Yet, in your great mercy You did not make an end of them, or forsake them, for You are a gracious and merciful God."*<sup>3</sup>

What an assurance to declare in our worship, that we are secure in our relationship with God. This walk down memory lane sets worship in its context: to stop us from a *gimme, gimme, gimme* relationship with God. True worship recognises our Awesome God, Master of all Heavens (universes), and sets up the question, ***If this is the Awesome and True***

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<sup>1</sup> 9:6

<sup>2</sup> 9:7

<sup>3</sup> 9:31

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**God, if this is the Loving and caring God we read about, are we really worthy of His unconditional, unrestrained, intentional love?**

Nobody needs to tell us, but each of us, deep in our hearts, knows the extent to which we do not live up to what God expects of us. God does not want perfection from us. Nowhere does God say, *be perfect as I am!*

When we stand at the age of Heaven, it won't be St. Peter standing there with a clip board (or an iPad) to tick off how many of the 618 laws we obeyed and observed. All those who have come into a relationship with the Father, through His Son, will be greeted with the words, **"Well done! Good and faithful servant!"** That's how we will be addressed at the door of Heaven, as good, and as faithful to the One who called us to serve Him!

Don't we all struggle with being good and staying faithful to the Author of life? This is where forgiveness comes in: *"You have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for You have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly."*<sup>4</sup>

It was then not necessary for the people to do what they did next, but for the sake of all their bad judgement calls in the past, including the self-serving rulers and leaders, they decided to make a firm commitment, **in writing.**

This written covenant was a serious undertaking. They put themselves under the penalty of curses upon them if they broke it. Clearly, it was their intention to renew their relationship with God by stating the principles of God's law.

This covenant placed worship at the centre of the Temple setting up **how** it would be funded, **who** would be responsible for the various tasks, ending with a solemn and powerful declaration, **We will not neglect the house of our God.**

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<sup>4</sup> 9:33

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The House of our God! Not the house we have dedicated to God. The House where God dwells!

The Temple (to us the Church), is not about the grandeur of the building, nor the pride of skilled workers who have accomplished a spectacular buildings .

A Church is a place of Worship, where the world may see and witness for themselves, the True and Living God being worshipped by His faithful and obedient followers. Everything we do in the building must ultimately serve this goal.

Let me close with this: we don't live in the past, nor do we hang onto the rituals and habits of the past; the past is consigned to history and serves only as a reminder not to repeat our mistakes. The only reality is the present, and how we live in the present, determines our future.

When we meet people, we do so in the present. Believe me, most will not remember us for the eloquence of our words, nor any attractive qualities. People remember how we spoke to them, how we related with them. Were we genuinely concerned about them and their lives? Did we convey a sincere interest in what they do and challenges they face?

Where do we learn to do this? Here in the place where we gather to worship God, where we encounter the living God and learn of His selfless, unconfined, abundant love, of His generosity, of His care and His concern for us.

This is what Nehemiah teaches us: our prayer life leads us into the House of our God where worship takes place! In the secure confines of the House of our God, God wants to hear how we feel, what difficulties and challenges we face, what gives us joy and what doesn't, people with whom we are having difficulty.

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As we noted several weeks ago, Nehemiah modelled “constant prayer”, an approach to life where every thought and word and deed is a spoken even unspoken word. This is prayer which leads to worship! Where there is this kind of constant prayer, there is constant worship!

**Lets pray:** May this the place of our gathering, be the place of our worship of you every day, and may everyone who steps into this place, feel the presence of God, in this place, **and** in each of our lives! **AMEN.**