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We recently visited a quaint Italian restaurant. The owner, a roly-poly, vibrant Italian with a very good sense of humour, settled us into an evening of good food and wine. I am not sure how we got onto the subject of religion (I had nothing to do with it!), he said, *I am a Catholic. Therefore I can tell lies. I go to the priest. He asks, "what have you done?"; I tell him, "How much do you want?" We are poor immigrants! Life is a struggle!*

Reading Nehemiah chapter 6, I get the feeling that Nehemiah felt a similar exasperation, of being treated as a *poor struggling immigrant* in his own country, Jerusalem in Judea.

Over the past 4 weeks, we have learned the following lessons from Nehemiah's prayer life:

1. Know to whom you are addressing your prayer. Nehemiah is specific, **"LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God"**.<sup>1</sup> God's enemy lurking in the shadows also responds to the title "Lord", but we are not addressing him. It have not happened in our family and I don't think it would happen, but either of my children would address me as **"Yo!"**, I don't think I am obliged to answer; it works the other way too - if I were to address them as **"Hey!"**, I don't think they are obliged to respond. In either case, someone else may respond, thinking they were being addressed. Know whom you are addressing in prayer and use His complete title.
2. Before you do anything, pray. Prayer is not the last resort; prayer is our first resort, our first response.
3. God delights in short, heart-felt prayers. There is a time and a place for long, liturgical, formal prayers, but God delights in the spontaneous, short, heart-felt prayers.

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<sup>1</sup> Nehemiah 1:5

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4. If you want clear-cut answers, pray clear-cut prayers. Feel free to tell God what is on your mind, **BUT** let God be the judge of what He thinks is best under the circumstances.
5. The habit of prayer is being always conscious, God is involved in everything we do. Nehemiah's habit of prayer is reflected in his steely resolve to do what God has placed on his heart. He is very secure in his relationship with God. Nothing can breach, fracture or break his valued **family ties** with his Father in Heaven.

Right from the start, Nehemiah faced opposition to the work of rebuilding Jerusalem's city wall. He rallied the community of Jews to rebuild the wall, and now (Ch. 6) his *enemies heard (he) had built the wall and there were no breaches left in it.*<sup>2</sup> What was **My wall** in front of my house, is now **OUR wall** all around Jerusalem.

Let's put this in context to appreciate the sacrifice the Jews made to build the wall. Look ahead at chapter 7 verse 4, *The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt!* Not all exiles had returned to Jerusalem to reclaim their houses, some would have died during the exile and their next-of-kin would know where to locate their former homes. Recall pictures in the news of cities in Syria destroyed by indiscriminate bombing; how do you find your former home amongst the pile of rubble! Those exiles who had returned to Jerusalem, rebuilding their houses and restoring their homes, took second place to the activity of building the wall.

Arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah faced taunts and ridicule. *Stones from a broken wall cannot be solid - a fox jumping over it will bring it down*, said his enemies.

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<sup>2</sup> Nehemiah 6:1

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Then came threats, warnings and an ultimatum: *if you don't stop building the wall, we will attack.*

Through all the attacks from the outside, Nehemiah was undeterred, dividing his workforce into two teams, one to build and one armed to fight.

Then came attacks from within the Jewish community. All able-bodied men were involved in re-construction; there was no one to work the fields and harvest crops. Opportunists took advantage, lending (not charitable giving) to families money to buy food by mortgaging their property and selling their daughters as slaves into non-Jewish homes. Nehemiah had to "buy" it all back and restore the families and wealth of the people.

Unable to demoralise people and stop them from rebuilding the wall, satan does not stand idly by. He was plotting and planning his next move.

The leaders of tribes around them are getting really desperate. Four times they sent messengers to Nehemiah, inviting him to a meeting, *Why don't we meet and sort things out between us? Let's meet on neutral territory.* Each time, Nehemiah declined their invitation. Then they send an open letter accusing Nehemiah of plotting against the Persian king, to become king himself! Did they know of the trusted relationship Nehemiah enjoyed with the King

This is where the quality of one's prayer life, the quality of the relationship we build with God, comes into its own.

Nehemiah is reluctant to divert his time between God's call, and a group of subversive, unhelpful people. God gives the gift of discernment to those who have a relationship of trust with Him. Nehemiah smells danger.

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Then, a local priest, knowing Nehemiah held God in high esteem and worshipped Him, suggested he hide in the Temple, behind locked doors, to save His life from a planned attack!

The opposite of **faith** is not *doubt*; the opposite of *faith* is **fear**, and fear introduces doubt. The enemy always uses **fear** to break someone's faith in God, suggesting He cannot be trusted.

The priest thinks he can use fear to break Nehemiah's faith in God to protect him, but once again, the enemy has misjudged Nehemiah's relationship with God. God's gift of discernment makes it clear to Nehemiah that Sanballat and Tobiah are behind this plot.

Very appropriately, it is time for Nehemiah to mutter his second **remember** prayer, *O my God, remember Tobiah and Sanballat. Don't let them get away with all the mischief they've done. And the same goes for the prophetess Noadiah and the other prophets who have been trying to undermine my confidence.*<sup>3</sup>

Prayer as part of a normal conversation is a beautiful vision of a lively, intimate "relationship with God", which is important if prayer is to be effective. Prayer is not a conversation with God to remind Him what he has forgotten to do, nor is it a conference with God during which we sit around a round table, and as consultants, suggest what He should be doing!

The closing verses of chapter 6, tell of the outcome of prayer in the context of our life-sustaining relationship with God.

***The wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of Elul. It had taken fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard the news, and all the***

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<sup>3</sup> Nehemiah 6:14 (MSG)

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**surrounding nations saw it, our enemies totally lost their nerve. They knew that God was behind this work.<sup>4</sup>**

When God calls us to do something, when God invites us to be a part of His plan, when God burdens us with the needs of people, when God assigns us tasks which need to be done, we have a choice, and the choice we make is **TOTALLY** dependent on our relationship with God.

If we have placed our faith in God, given Him our complete trust (not blind trust, our complete trust), we will be single-mindedly persistent, tireless and resolute in doing what God has set before us.

Speaking to His disciple on a mountain top, Jesus taught them, **You are blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. This persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom. Count yourselves blessed every time people put you down, or throw you out, or speak lies about you to discredit Me. It means the Truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable when faced with the Truth. You can be glad when that happens, give a cheer! Although they don't like it, I do!**

Jesus taught us how to get God's attention, **when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place.** This is intimacy with God.

Jesus' invites us, **If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish; it will be done for you.<sup>5</sup>**

**If you take time to develop a relationship with me, a relationship in which you are comfortable trusting me completely (and I can trust you too), ask what you wish; it will be done for you. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.**

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<sup>4</sup> Nehemiah 6:15-16

<sup>5</sup> John 15:7

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This is what God invites us to do: practice and learn to trust Him, because He is waiting to trust you with the work of His kingdom!

**AMEN.**