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Nine weeks ago, we embarked on a journey with Nehemiah, and today we come to the end of our journey. We covered the stage in Nehemiah's life when the risk of the daily ritual of sipping the King's goblet of wine to make sure it was not poisoned, paled in comparison to the real threat to his life whilst in Jerusalem.

A song by the 1980s American rock group *Starship* has been an earworm, buzzing at the back of my head called, *We built this city on rock-n-roll*, which was all about performers, singers and musicians being ripped off by the music industry (organisers and promoters).

I found myself comparing the overall tone of the song which is filled with anger and frustration, with the narrative of Nehemiah's documented work. Nehemiah was not just rebuilding a wall which had been broken down, Nehemiah was primarily restoring the confidence of a people whose identity and courage was shattered, who were cowered down by the big-bully nations around them. Nehemiah was singing a different song, ***We built this city on prayer and fasting!***

I trust you have been able to read through the book of Nehemiah as one would a novel. It is filled with bold courage, motivation and effective leadership. It has a great sense of adventure running through it, and it conveys a deep desire to honour God.

The book starts with Nehemiah's brother returning from Jerusalem with news, *Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace.* Then followed news, *the walls of Jerusalem lie in ruins and the gates are destroyed by fire.*

As we started our journey with Nehemiah, the first lesson he taught us was, prayer is not a last resort, it is the first resort! But *effective prayer*,

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depends on the things to which we give importance: are we concerned with the **drama** of a horrific event, or are we concerned about the **people** who suffer as the result of a horrific event. Do events shock and paralyse us into inaction because they are so atrocious beyond words, or does our heart go out to the people who suffer as a result of these events?

Lets compare two news reports¹. One says, *The flames quickly engulfed the towering building. Every floor was ablaze, burning out of control. The acrid stench of synthetic paint and plastic burning, filled the air. Flames lit up the night sky and could be seen for miles, even from the air, and here's a satellite photo of the building burning. Looking around, there seems to be a number of people either dead or dying and scores more seem to be hurt or injured.*

Compare it to this report, *In the rapidly rising flames, casualties are high. Amid reports of a number of people either dead or dying and scores more hurt or injured, the emergency services from miles around are arriving on the scene and attending to those most needing care and attention. Everyone is busy attending to those in need; no one pauses, even to think. There is a sense of urgency to attend to everyone before it is too late. The night sky is lit bright with flames, seen as far as 20 miles away.*

I don't need to expand it further, but both reports give fresh meaning to the saying, *Home is where the heart lies*. What makes our heart beat faster? What makes us choke on our own breath, whilst taking in the incredulity of the event? What brings uncontrolled streams of tears when we least want to be seen crying?

In preparing for this series, I learned a new truth, which I know and believe can transform our prayer life: when in our hearts and minds, we are passionately concerned with the same things which concern God's

¹ These are not real news reports, only for the purpose of illustration.

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heart and mind, God has found a trusted friend through whom He will answer prayer. Both the one praying and the one being prayed for, will enjoy the full, rich blessings of God.

On hearing the news that things were not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah, that these people were in great trouble and disgrace, **and** the wall surrounding the city of Jerusalem was torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire, Nehemiah's response was not to embark on an angry rant against those who had destroyed the wall. Instead, *When I heard this (news about the people), I sat down and wept (for the state they were in, the conditions which caused them hardship). In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven.*

Nehemiah's heart was in-sync with God's heart. Nehemiah's immediate concern was not the state of the broken wall; Nehemiah was moved by the angst of the people who suffered physically (*exposed to harm and danger*), politically (*lived without security*) and emotionally (*suffering the ridicule and taunts of those around them*).

God is really not concerned with physical damage. All four Gospel-writers record Jesus saying, *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my Word will last forever!*²

God's only real concern is the people to whom He has given life; God's main and only concern is us and our well-being: how can we be restored back into the relationship we had with Him, when He created us?

In Nehemiah, God found a trusted friend whose heart's concern, mirrored His own - Nehemiah wept, as God does, for people who are suffering,

² Matthew 5:18 and 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 16:17 and 21:33; 1 John 2:17 (John repeats this severally in his "Revelation")

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some for reasons of ill-health, some for reasons of physical injury or impairment, and some for reasons of emotional angst.

God invites us into this kind of relationship with Him. He doesn't want us to pray for ***situations*** around the world - North Korea, Burma, The Middle East, Yemen, the earthquake in Indonesia and all the other situations around the world. God wants us to feel His pain for the people caught up in these situations. We may not know their names, what they do or what they look like, but God knows every one of them by name, the refugees, the homeless, the sick and the infirm, young and old and in-between, and He invites us to pray for them as His people.

Now, I do realise, praying with tears does not come easily for everyone; it is uncomfortable for many, as is praying and fasting, but we can pray with sincerity of heart, mind and soul for, *God's mercy towards infants dying because their parents cannot access medical care; we can pray for medical staff so stretched in time and effort, they have no time to rest or even meet personal needs; we can pray for people who lost their homes and everything in it, and so on.* We can pray for people in all situations and circumstances.

I was thinking last night, viewing and listening to news reporters narrating events, is really no different from Nehemiah's brother visiting him and sharing news of compatriots, some of whom might have been friends and family.

Everything Nehemiah taught us about prayer, to pray first, to pray specific prayers, to pray focused on the greatness of God, to pray for favour in the eyes of key decision makers, to claim the promises of God, to pray against resistance, to pray for strength, all these prayers God will answer, but He

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will use **us** to answer these prayers, **if** our concerns mirror God's concerns.

Nehemiah taught us several important lessons about prayer, but the entire book can be distilled to this truth about prayer: prayer reflects the quality of our relationship with God. This quality cannot be measured; it can only be enjoyed!

The quality of our relationship with God depends on whether we "trust" God, or we "have faith" in God.

"Faith" and "trust" are very different.

Trust requires evidence; I trust because the evidence tells me what will happen.

So, in my relationship with God, do I want evidence before I place my trust in Him?

But faith is a choice I make which does not require evidence. Why? Because I place my faith in the character of the person; I therefore, don't need evidence.

If our children were here, they would tell you of a visit to my Aunt's home when they were very young! One morning, Auntie announced at breakfast, *Who wants to go to.... the circus!* This news set off an almighty chorus.

The rest of the day, we were plagued with the question, *Is it four o'clock yet?*

My Aunt worked in obstetrics and gynaecology and shortly before 4 pm, she was called away to attend to the obstetrics part of her vocation. **We** had to take the children to the circus, to fulfil **her** promise.

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The next morning at breakfast, the children wanted to know why she had not join them for the circus; it was such fun! What was so important that she could not join them, having promised to take them.

The evidence of the days preceding the circus, when Auntie took the children everywhere, and treated them to several delights, meant they could trust her when she said, *Who wants to go to... the circus!* Would they place their faith in her character, given what happened?

Nehemiah leaves us with this question: Will I trust God only after He provides the evidence he can be trusted, or will I place my faith in Him, in the absence of any evidence, because I know enough of His character, that I can believe He will deliver on His promises, even when I don't have the evidence that he will?

If I do place my faith in God, then like Nehemiah, my concern's will mirror God's concerns, my heart will beat in sync with His, and God will have another trusted friend through whom answers to prayer will be delivered; God's blessings will be shared!

AMEN.