

ARISE AND BUILD

NEHEMIAH 2:16-20 I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

¹⁷ Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision." ¹⁸ And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work. ¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" ²⁰ Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem."

The reproach of exile seems endemic. The remnant of Israel has lived with it for nearly a century. But for Nehemiah, the new norm is totally unacceptable. His rationale is neither political nor economic, but spiritual and theological. It is absolutely disgraceful for Jerusalem, God's chosen dwelling place, to be held in contempt by the nations any longer. *Come, let us build the wall* (:17).

Nehemiah's posture is incarnational. He holds the highest position under the most powerful king in the world. Yet he leaves that lucrative post to seek the welfare of a city that looks like a landfill. He stands in complete solidarity with the despised remnant of Israel. Like Jesus, he pours himself out into that human mess of misery and pain. He takes their suffering and shame upon himself: *You see the trouble we are in* (:17). This goes way beyond what we normally call 'servant leadership'. This is *sacrificial servanthood* as we seldom see it. But we see it clearly in Nehemiah and in Jesus the Suffering Servant (PHIL 2).

Nehemiah's credentials are impeccable: One, the hand of his

God (:8). Two, the word of his king (:18). Spiritual authority plus imperial authority. But throughout his career as governor, Nehemiah never once flashes his royal credentials, not even before his enemies. Nor does he assume the petty posture of an insecure control freak. His confidence is *always in the good hand of God* that is on him. He meets every challenge with prayer and faith (:15-11; 2:6; 4:4-5; 6:9). *His prayer determines the quality of his work, and his work reflects the quality of his prayer* (J.I. PACKER | ADAPTED).

Nehemiah's confidence is contagious. God didn't send Israel a dabbler in dreams, but a wise master builder of men and women, city and nation. Like the nation builder who once said to a fledgling Singapore: *Never fear! A few words spoken from a heart of faith and hope galvanises Israel's leaders to act as one and at once: Let us rise up and build.*

Not so fast, chimes the enemy (:19). Sanballat and Tobiah are now joined by King Geshem of Qedar in Arabia. This completes the ring of foes around Jerusalem. But their threats only serve to prove Nehemiah's point. The only way to end the endemic of reproach is to rebuild the wall. Nehemiah answers the enemy in characteristic faith: *The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build* (:20).

WALL OF DUTY

This pandemic is the opportunity of a generation to become a better people and build a better world.

■ Say NO to the status quo. We can get so used to a sorry state of affairs that we hardly notice it anymore. We live with things that were once glaringly unacceptable. We no longer hope for change. Arise! Pray for spiritual eyes to see things differently. Assess the damage done: at home, at church, at work. Spiritual. Relational. Moral. Organisational. Stand up! Call out every ounce of sloth and lukewarmness. Call out every stronghold of pride and unbelief. Call out every broken trust and toxic relationship. Call out every *fatal attraction and addiction that distract, defile, and destroy life and leadership*

(EDMUND CHAN). Call out every sacred cow and outdated idea in the policy playbook. Be ruthless. Leave no stone unturned. List them one by one. Confess. Repent. Enough is enough! Lead the change. Overthrow the status quo. Put an end to the disgrace. Watch and pray.

■ Say YES to sacrificial servanthood. Pray: Lord, we stand in solidarity with the people and the Government of Singapore. Through thick and thin, Singapore's plight will be our plight. The Government's burden will be our burden. Our neighbour's pain will be our pain. We pledge ourselves as one united people of faith, regardless of history or heritage, to rebuild lives and livelihoods together from the ground up. We will incarnate ourselves among the forgotten and despised, the disadvantaged and marginalised—regardless of race, language or religion. We will shepherd them so that they too can live a life of shalom, *godly and dignified in every way* (1 TIM 2:2). Yes and Amen.

■ Say YES to godly leadership. Humble. Wise. Trustworthy. Pro-active. Pray for bishops, pastors, elders, and church leaders by name:

- Their confidence and self-worth are not in their institutional credentials, but in God who called them, and whose good hand is on them to prosper the work of their hands. *Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit* (ZECH 4:6).

- They meet every challenge with faith in God through prayer. They motivate and mobilise God's troops out of a passionate honour for God and his glory. *My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work* (JOHN 4:34).

- They inspire vision, godly imagination, hope, courage, obedience, tenacity, and a tremendous sense of camaraderie among those they lead. *From a wise mind comes wise speech; the words of the wise are persuasive* (PROV 16:23).