

WAR OF NERVES

NEHEMIAH 4:7-23 | But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. ⁸ And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. ⁹ And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.

¹⁰ In Judah it was said, "The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall."

¹¹ And our enemies said, "They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work." ¹² At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, "You must return to us." ¹³ So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. ¹⁴ And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes."

¹⁵ When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. ¹⁶ From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, ¹⁷ who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other.

¹⁸ And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. ¹⁹ And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. ²⁰ In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."

²¹ So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out. ²² I also said to the people at that time, "Let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem, that they may be a guard for us

by night and may labor by day." ²³ So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.



he first brick is easy. The last brick is exciting. It's the middle brick that can break your back. Just

when the wall reaches half its height, Judah's enemies close in from all sides. Samaritans in the north. Arabs in the south. Ammonites in the east. Ashdodites in the west (:7). All collude and conspire to attack Jerusalem.

Characteristically, Nehemiah responds with prayer and action: *We prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night* (:9). But some of the enemies' taunts have already found their targets. The builders are losing their nerve: *There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall* (:10). Doubt takes a hold. Morale dips. Despair spreads throughout Judah by word of mouth.

This halfway point marks a crisis in Nehemiah's career and the acid test of his faith and leadership. His response is a dramatic application and outworking of Psalm 127:1, which he may have read: *Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.*

This Psalm is attributed to Solomon who built the temple and the wall in the first place (1 KINGS 9:15). Now, five centuries on, Solomon's wisdom provides the solution to Nehemiah's predicament and the secret of his success: Pray, work, and watch. Divine providence and human effort go hand in hand. *Without us, God will not. Without God, we cannot.*

Although his confidence is fully in God, Nehemiah leaves nothing to chance. He turns his work force into a fighting force. They work by day and watch by night with sword and trowel at the ready. Nehemiah and his entourage stay in the trenches with the troops. His trumpet blower is at his side, ready to rally all to arms, anywhere, anytime (:16-23). Faith involves risk. But faith is not rash.

Our God will fight for us, Nehemiah assures (:20). *But you also must fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes* (:14). A mind to work also needs a will to fight. *The fear of God compels us to fight against evil; and when we fight against evil, the grace of God destroys it* (MARK THE ASCETIC).

WALL OF DUTY

Face it. The Covid-19 pandemic *has been described as a bomb-free World War III, in which the virus is an enemy that cannot be eradicated* (FOCUSTAIWAN.TW).

■ Leave nothing to chance. With the constant stream of bad news, morale is a fragile commodity that we must fiercely guard. *Morale is the amount of confidence felt by a person or group of people, especially when in a dangerous or difficult situation* (CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARY). Plead for divine protection over our nation's morale in this prolonged uncertainty. Pray for young and old, top down and bottom up. With each twist and turn of the battle, no matter how much rubble, ask God to renew our minds to work and stir our wills to fight. A fresh dose of zeal and zest, courage and confidence. A fresh wave of godly patriotism and civility to build and bless Singapore together.

■ Leave nothing to guesswork. Too much is at stake. Pray for pastors and church leaders: To be upfront about spiritual warfare. To stare the facts squarely in the face and discern the tactics of the enemy. To forewarn God's people. To equip them for the worst. *The devil never sleeps, neither is the flesh yet dead; therefore you must always be prepared to do battle, for you are surrounded by enemies that never rest* (THOMAS À KEMPIS).

Pray: Lord, we return to prayer as our first line of defence. We pray from a position of victory. In the authority of your name, we

confront doubt, discouragement, and despair. We will pray as if everything depends on you and we will work as though everything depends on us. We acknowledge there is no room for sloth or indifference or cowardice in this raging battle for the future of Church and Nation. We will *stay dressed for action and keep our lamps burning* (LUKE 12:35). Until the war of nerves is won!

■ Leave nothing to rugged individualism and random volunteerism. In this pandemic war, Church unity is critical. D.I.Y. is dangerous. Pray for our leaders:

- For insight to strategise down to the last detail: the what, why, who, where, and how. For foresight to scenario-plan. For decisiveness to put plans into action.
- For fortitude to communicate clearly, comprehensively, and constantly—to keep everyone on the same page.

- For commitment to lead by example. Like Nehemiah, who did not call the shots from a safe distance, but stayed in the trenches, working side by side with the builders. Exhortation and example go hand in hand.

- For vigilance to sound the trumpet and mobilise the troops to counter the enemy, moving as one!

- For wisdom to turn every setback into a comeback, to serve God's greater purpose.

■ Leave nothing to hearsay. With all the online noise, misinformation runs rampant in the fight against this stealthy, mutating virus.

- Pray for Christians: To log off. To be still and know that God is God. To exercise self-control and stop circulating unverified news that confuses the public.

- Pray for our health experts: To refute false claims and expose fake science in wise and winsome ways, clearly and convincingly.