

WAR WITHIN

NEHEMIAH 5:1-13 | Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.

² For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive."³ There were also those who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine."

⁴ And there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards."⁵ Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards."

⁶ I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.⁷ I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, "You are exacting interest, each from his brother." And I held a great assembly against them⁸ and said to them, "We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!" They were silent and could not find a word to say.

⁹ So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?"¹⁰ Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest.¹¹ Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them."

¹² Then they said, "We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say." And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised.¹³ I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied."

And all the assembly said "Amen" and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

Through prayer and action, Nehemiah has contained every external threat so far. But now the enemy attacks from within. The walls are going up. But the community is going down because of injustice and oppression.

A famine is forcing the poor to borrow from the rich and mortgage their farms in order to pay the imperial tax and to avoid starving. Money lenders are milking the crisis by charging exorbitant interest and enslaving the children of those who can't repay the loans⁽¹⁻⁵⁾. Land-grabbing, slave-trading, and debt-slavery are defiling the Holy Land^(5, 8, 11). Not to mention sex-slavery, as verse 5 implies in the original Hebrew.

Nehemiah is outraged. Pity the leader who is not outraged by injustice and abuse! But the leader who acts in unbridled anger is like a city without walls^(PROV 25:28). Nehemiah keeps his personal walls intact. He first takes counsel with himself. Rare is the man who can trust his own counsel, especially when angry. Nehemiah can! Because he is a man of prayer. And his soul is not sullied by selfish ambition. He didn't leave his lucrative post in the palatial city of Susa for profit, power, or popularity. He came to remove the veil of shame from the City of God⁽⁹⁾. Not just by building a wall. But by reforming the community according to God's standards of justice and mercy^(EX 22:25; LEV 25:35-38; DEUT 23:19-20).

What kind of community will emerge on Nehemiah's watch? Why build walls and gates if only to cushion the elite who suck the blood of the poor? Better for the poor to remain in exile than to be enslaved by their brothers at home. Such abuses triggered the exile and brought contempt on Israel in the first place.

The gates of hell will not prevail against the Church. But sometimes the Church defeats herself through internal compromise. When that happens, the wall is breached. Not on Nehemiah's watch! He acts on his own counsel. He confronts the abuses and redresses the wrongs through legal channels. The internal threat of injustice is removed. Shalom is restored, at least for now.

The Lord of heaven is also the Lord of history. He expects us to love our neighbours as ourselves. He requires us to *love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly* with him^(MIC 6:8).

WALL OF DUTY

■ Singapore faces her worst recession in history due to Covid-19. Give thanks to God for our government's budget measures to help cushion the economic impact on workers, businesses, and households. Pray that we will complement our government's efforts by being our best selves for the common good. Make a stand for Singapore. Revisit our National Pledge. Read it in silence. As you do, unpack its essence. Think about the meaning of each phrase: *We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society based on justice and equality so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.* Now, with your right hand on your heart, recite the Pledge. Then, turn every line into a prophetic declaration of intent. Do this with passion on behalf of this generation. Pray that Singapore will emerge from the pandemic a more equal and cohesive society.

■ Singapore strives to be a *democracy of deeds*^(S. RAJARATNAM). A *'problem-solving democracy' oriented towards solving the problems of the people in practical ways—as opposed to a democracy of words, engaged in empty rhetoric and political confrontation*^(IRENE NG, THE STRAITS TIMES). May we, the people of God, lead the way. May we be other-oriented. May we obey the command to love God by loving our neighbours. May we humbly do what is good, just, and right. May we show ourselves *in all respects to be a model of good works, zealous for good works, ready for every good work*^(TITUS 2:7, 14; 3:1). Pray that in big ways and in small ways, we will all chip in. *Majulah Singapura!*

■ Singapore is home truly. We see much that is right. But there is room to improve. Towards SG100, what kind of community will emerge under our stewardship? Will we stand out as a nation of compassion according to God's standards of justice and mercy and humility? *The moral test of a nation is how that nation treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped* (HUBERT HUMPHREY | ADAPTED). Ponder and pray.

■ Do we welcome People with Disabilities (PWDs) into our communities? A 2016 study by the National Council of Social Services found that 62% of PWDs feel excluded by society and denied opportunities to contribute or reach their potential. They represent a sizeable segment of our population: 2.1% of students, 3.4% of 18-49 year olds, and 13.3% of those above 50. Ask God to forgive us for ignoring them. Pray that we will give them a sense of belonging and minister to their deepest needs, including the pain and shame of being bullied and abused by their own caregivers (SOURCE: NVPC). *Mercy to the needy is a loan to God, and God pays back those loans in full* (PROV 19:17 THE MESSAGE).

■ Do we treasure the Silver Generation? Many seniors feel unprepared for old age. Due to social isolation, more elderly people commit suicide than those in any other age group. Pray for churches to mount a whole-of-church approach in finding practical solutions to bless the ageing community, especially the lonely elderly poor. To pro-actively befriend elderly neighbours in our blocks and neighbourhoods. To partner with our government to create an inclusive, elder-friendly, elder-honouring culture. *It's criminal to ignore a neighbour in need, but compassion for the poor—what a blessing!* (PROV 14:21 THE MESSAGE)

■ Are we hearing the cry of the Vulnerable Children in our city? Are we doing all we can to rescue them? Will we include their safety and shalom, their dignity and dreams in our visionary plans? Below is an appeal from Pastor Lawrence Khong, LoveSingapore Chairman. Ponder. Pray. Act.

Like you, I care deeply about our beloved nation. The shape of things to come. The state of the family. Plus so much more. Amid the pandemic, a lot is going on in our unpredictable, unforgiving world. Here, I would like to draw our attention to Vulnerable Children in Singapore.

I'm saddened. As a father and a grandfather, it breaks my heart that children are being abused, abandoned, or neglected in First World Singapore. Each case is one too many. Every situation is regrettable.

As a pastor, I worry that there are many more cases that go unreported. I am also concerned that, given the Covid impact, the situation might worsen as families battle with stress and anxiety that often lead to emotional and mental disorders.

By law and by policy, Vulnerable Children in Singapore are placed in welfare homes where they receive adequate food, lodging, and supervision. This is good and right. Yet I feel it is not good enough. Much more can be done and should be done.

I believe it is time for the Church to step up with tangible solutions. Jesus said: *Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven* (MT 19:14).

I believe that children-at-risk desperately need the security and stability of a Christ-centred home environment where they can experience a deeper sense of belonging, the nurturing care, and the healing love of godly foster parents.

I believe it is Christ-like for God's community of faith to collectively meet that need. These vulnerable little ones are like orphans. *God our Father is a father to the fatherless and he sets the lonely in families* (PS 68:5-6). And as far as

he is concerned, pure and faultless religion includes looking after orphans (JAMES 1:27).

I believe that caring for Vulnerable Children is a critical part of our Gospel witness. It is faith in action—an act of justice and mercy that reveals Christ to a selfish society and a broken, cynical world.

According to the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), there are about 600 Vulnerable Children residing in welfare homes.

There are about 600 churches in Singapore. If just one family in each church fosters just one child, we can provide homes for most, if not all these 600 vulnerable children. Foster care is discipleship in action. A beautiful and biblical way of loving Singapore together.

Therefore, the LoveSingapore network of churches has launched a fostering initiative called *100 Homes*. To facilitate the process, we are partnering with various MSF-appointed fostering agencies as well as *Home for Good*, a Christian fostering network.

Dear Family, many children in these welfare homes have been waiting patiently for a long time for a family. They often feel that their day may never come. Emotionally, that is tough. So, our decision to do something through our respective churches will greatly assure them that they are not forgotten. And our collective decision to do the right thing has the potential to transform their lives from the inside out—to transform their world in their generation.

Children belong in families. Let's be their Family together. Glory to God!