

GROUNDING HOPE

NEHEMIAH 9:32-37 | Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. ³³ Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. ³⁴ Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them. ³⁵ Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works. ³⁶ Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. ³⁷ And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.

Biblical and liturgical prayers overflow with confession, gratitude, and glory to God. In twenty lines of prayer you might find one veiled request. The actual petition found in the long prayer of Nehemiah 9 is so muted that the Lord used a hearing aid to catch it: *Please don't underestimate our suffering. We are in great distress* (:32, 37 PARAPHRASE).

This is the chronic reproach that broke Nehemiah's heart at the beginning of this story. God's people have been bullied by foreign powers for too long. First by Assyria, then Babylon, and now Persia. Greece and Rome stand next in line. Does this long dark tunnel have an end? Can Israel hope for a better future? Yes, they can. On what grounds?

First, their hope is grounded in the character of God. Like the father of the prodigal, God is unreasonably merciful to all sinners, including repeat-offenders who can't help themselves. Over and

over again he showed mercy to Israel's recalcitrant ancestors. His track record of compassion gives Nehemiah's generation reason to hope that he will have mercy on them too. His mercies are from eternity and new every morning. Never despair. *Great is his faithfulness* (LAM 3:23).

Second, a profound humility undergirds their hope. They identify with the good, the bad, and the worst of Israel's past. It's all or nothing. To claim Abraham's blessings without taking responsibility for past and present sins would be one-sided and presumptuous. By confessing the sins of their fathers as well as their own, Nehemiah's generation stands to receive God's forgiveness and covenant promises.

Third, their hope rests on the conviction that God himself will finish what he started. They long for the golden age of freedom and self-rule promised by the prophets. But neither Ezra nor Nehemiah nor Artaxerxes can deliver that promise. The people of God are slaves in their own land, paying taxes to the king of Persia (:36-37).

But the end is not yet. Beneath all their confessing, repenting, and groaning stirs a mighty undercurrent of hope for a better tomorrow. For a kingdom that will transcend the likes of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and all the regimes of this world. And of this kingdom there will be no end. Never fear. God will finish what he started. *The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this* (ISA 9:7).

WALL OF DUTY

Covid-19 is a long dark tunnel. Can this generation hope for a better future, post-pandemic? We can and we must. We have every reason to hope. We have no reason to despair. Simply because God is for us and God is with us.

■ On behalf of Singapore, let us confess with our mouth and believe in our heart that *neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers can separate us from God's love* (ROM 8:38). Declare: We set our hope fully on God our Sovereign Lord who is far greater, far stronger, and far wiser than our good, strong, and wise

government. He makes his ways known to our leaders and his acts to the people. He crowns us with compassion and satisfies us with good (PS 103:4-5) so that we will thrive, not just survive—for God's glory!

■ On behalf of Family, let us ground our hope in the Everlasting Father who *showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners* (ROM 5:8). *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things* (ROM 8:32). Let us return wholeheartedly to our loving Father. He forgives all our sins. He heals all our diseases. He redeems our life from the pit of hell and the dungeon of despair. He knows our frame. He remembers that we are dust. He is slow to anger. He does not keep his anger forever. He is merciful beyond reason (PS 103:3-13).

■ On behalf of our respective churches and ministry organisations, let us anchor our hope in the unchanging character of our covenant-keeping God. Not in the next great talent who promises the moon and the stars by the trendy things he has to offer. New blood and cool ideas do not guarantee continuity with the Ancient Path. Return. Plead with the Ancient of Days to protect us from misplaced trust in man and novel ideas that can delay revival and derail our destiny. Heed the warning: *Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?* (GAL 3:3 NKJV)

■ On behalf of the Singapore Church, let us declare: *I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ* (PHIL 1:6). Arise, O Antioch of Asia! God has set you apart from the 'womb' to be a blessing to the nations. It's not enough just to love Singapore Godward. I am setting you up as a light to the nations, to spread my salvation to the ends of the earth (ISA 49:5-6 | ADAPTED).