

WALL OF PRAYER

EZRA 9:5-9 | At the evening sacrifice I [Ezra] got up from my fasting, with my garments and my mantle torn, and fell on my knees, spread out my hands to the LORD my God, ⁶ and said, "O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. ⁷ From the days of our ancestors to this day we have been deep in guilt, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as is now the case. ⁸ But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the LORD our God, who has left us a remnant, and given us a stake in his holy place, in order that he may brighten our eyes and grant us a little sustenance in our slavery. ⁹ For we are slaves; yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to give us new life to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judea and Jerusalem." NRSV

Ezra's lineage qualifies him to serve as high priest (EZRA 7:1-5). But he seeks no such honours. As a true intercessor, he represents God to Israel and Israel to God. His humble posture at prayer foreshadows the ministry of Jesus our High Priest, who was *numbered with the transgressors* and ever lives to intercede for us (ISA 53:12; HE B 7:25).

Ezra prays. He is an advocate, not an adversary. He identifies with Israel's past and present sins. He abases himself on his knees with torn clothes and outstretched hands. He takes full ownership of his nation's failures, making their guilt and shame his own (:5-7).

Ezra prays. Moving from confession to gratitude, he thanks God for sparing a remnant of Israel and giving them a breathing space *to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judea and Jerusalem* (:8-9). God is not against walls. The prophecies of restoration included both the temple

and the walls of Jerusalem (ISA 54:11-12). Ezra and Nehemiah are one book in the Hebrew Bible, with the rebuilding of the wall at the centre.

Ezra prays. He wrestles with God concerning Israel's present predicament. A remnant has returned. The temple is rebuilt. But the humiliation of the exile persists. Judah is just one of Persia's 127 provinces (EST 1:1). The returned exiles live as slaves in their own land. They are a people without walls, literally and spiritually. They are exposed to hostile neighbours. They are tempted by pagan practices. Israel's future hangs by a thread: *Shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practise these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you destroy us without remnant or survivor?* (:14)

This is not about race, but purity of faith. God had to be exclusive at this stage of salvation history so that he could be fully inclusive in the next. He chose Israel to be holy as he is holy, and to spread his holiness and salvation to every other race. In order for this to happen, Israel must remain Israel and not disappear through inter-faith marriage and compromise with the world.

Ezra prays. The guilty repent. And God does the rest. The next phase of Jerusalem's restoration, the rebuilding of the wall, is good to go.

WALL OF DUTY

Leadership matters. Leadership is important at all times, and especially during a crisis. Prayer matters. Prayer is very important always and everywhere, and most of all, in a time of crisis.

■ Will you imitate Ezra? A prayerful leader is a first-class asset. A prayerless leader is a high-risk liability. Prayerlessness is pride—a loud and proud declaration of independence from God. *God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble* (JAMES 4:6). Dear Leaders, how are you faring? Has Covid-19 taken a toll on your prayer life? Is ministry becoming more a management of operations than a spiritual rhythm of prayer and Word? Have you relied more on your own

resources than on God to do church and manage crisis? If so, confess. Recalibrate. For your own good and the good of all, return to God. Seek his face. Model a life of intercession. Throw your weight behind the prayer ministry of your church. Lead upfront. Scale up prayer.

■ Dear Fathers, will you show your family what it means to love Singapore *from the knees up*? The prayer level of your family may never rise above or go beyond your visible example and personal passion as the head of household. Keep the fire on the family altar burning (LEV 6:12).

■ Will we be an Ezra-Church for Singapore? Ask God to school us in Ezra's posture of intercession, humility, and honesty. The pandemic is God's way of resetting the Church for his greater purpose. Open your heart to the Holy Spirit's conviction (JOHN 16:8). Don't sweep things under the rug. Stand in solidarity with the sin and shame of God's people, the flaws and failures of the nation. Discern the times. Let God's promise of a new beginning infuse your soul. Seek the welfare of our city.

■ Pray: Lord, I'm no Ezra. But I want to become one. My prayers seem strangely repetitive. My words sound more ritualistic than relevant. More religious than relational. More mundane than missional. More routine than radical. More wish list than warfare. I desire to be both pastoral and prophetic like Ezra. Teach me. Shape me. Stir my spirit.

■ Do you love the Singapore Church, despite her flaws? Numbers matter. Purity of faith matters more. Envision a new norm: A Church pure and passionate, tried and true. A chosen people. A royal priesthood. A holy community of faith. God's prized possession to proclaim Good News and to do good works. To testify of the night-and-day difference he has made for us: From rejection to redemption. From mourning to dancing. From nothing to something (1 PET 2:9). To God be all glory!