

TROUBLE AND SHAME

NEHEMIAH 1:1-3 | The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, ² that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. ³ And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

Nehemiah's name means *the Lord comforts*. He lives a comfortable life in the palatial city of

Susa, where Persian kings spend their winters. The climate is fair. The palace is splendid. Fifty thousand square metres of paradise. Exquisite architecture trimmed in silver and gold, ebony and cedar, turquoise and ivory.

Nehemiah works there. He is the enviable cupbearer to Artaxerxes, a king of kings, whose vast empire stretches from India to Egypt. The wine is exquisite. The pay is lucrative. The only thing Nehemiah needs to fear is bad wine. Why bother with a faraway province like Judah, even though his ancestors are buried there? Let them rest in peace.

But Nehemiah was different from many of his fellow Jews in exile. He may have never seen Jerusalem. But he never forgot his roots. When visitors arrived from Judah, he was sensitive enough to ask them about the welfare of the city and the Jews living there. The answer would break his heart and alter his life of ease and comfort.

A hundred and forty years on since the destruction of Jerusalem, its walls and gates still lay in ruins. The exile has ended. The temple is rebuilt. But little else has changed. Judah is just another province under Persian rule. The constraints and reproach of exile persist. Jerusalem

is a city without walls, underpopulated, and surrounded by hostile pagans. *How lonely sits the city that was full of people! ... She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave* (LAM 1:1).

The prophecies of restoration included not only the temple, but also the wall. A previous attempt to rebuild the wall had already been crushed (EZRA 4:7-23). Now, the remnant that holds the key to Israel's future and the world's future is exposed to *great trouble and shame*. Nehemiah was devastated.

Sometimes the need is the call. Nehemiah had neither dream nor vision. He saw no burning bush. He heard no voice from heaven. Just a voice from home. The voice of family. That was enough. Persian wine would never taste the same again.

WALL OF DUTY

■ Is humanity in great trouble? *Progress against the coronavirus pandemic remains 'fragile'* (HANS KLUGE, WHO EUROPE). *The repeated waves of Covid-19 clearly show that no country is safe in a pandemic until everyone else is safe* (PM LEE HSIEN LOONG, GLOBAL HEALTH SUMMIT | MAY 2021). This crisis is a sombre reminder that the world is under the curse of sin. The devastation is gruesome. The need for a Saviour has never been more obvious. Let us stand in solidarity with fallen, suffering humanity. May this crisis break our hearts especially for hardest-hit nations. Ask God to stir his Nehemiahs in every community to know the ground, to shepherd the harassed and helpless.

■ How is Singapore doing? Thank God, we are not reeling in reproach and ruin like so many other nations. But we have our share of woes, including pandemic fatigue: *a feeling of exhaustion from the changes... a sense of dread... with the constant news of the pandemic* (DR GERALDINE TAN, THE STRAITS TIMES | 20 MAY 2021). Ask God to refresh and energise Singapore, especially our Nehemiah experts, doctors, nurses on the frontline.

■ Are we concerned? The need is the call. Pandemic or endemic, how are those in our circles coping? Will you be their Nehemiah? One who cares enough

to ask. Listen with empathy. Comfort them by introducing Jesus: *a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief* (ISA 53:3). *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ* (GAL 6:2).

■ What about nameless others beyond our circles? A national roadmap to transit from pandemic to endemic is one thing. The emotions of a human soul are quite another. The lingering effects of the crisis are real. Put your ear to the ground. Hear the groans of the Singapore Family. Befriend and comfort troubled souls feeling lost, lonely, and lousy. Pray for the weary who mask their sorrows, too ashamed to confess their private pain:

- The Burnt Out. Those emotionally drained and mentally exhausted from work-related or home-related stress.
- The Vulnerable. Those with pre-existing health conditions.
- The Anxious. Those prone to health-related worries.
- The Angry. Those prone to agitation, frustration, and anger.
- The Fearful. Those prone to panic attacks due to heightened anxiety.
- The Depressed. Those prone to low moods of helplessness and hopelessness.
- The Pessimistic. Those prone to negative thoughts, expecting the worst.
- The Broken-hearted. Those stricken with great sorrow over loss.
- The Disadvantaged. Those most impacted economically.

■ Are you numbed? Have you closed your eyes and ears, deciding it's none of your business? *The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity* (GEORGE BERNARD SHAW). In short, *the opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference* (ELIE WIESEL). God is love. Be different. Not indifferent.

■ Pray: *Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God* (BOB PIERCE, FOUNDER OF WORLD VISION).