

## TEARS AND PRAYERS

NEHEMIAH 1:3-4 | The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.<sup>4</sup> As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

LAMENTATIONS 2:18-19 | O wall of the daughter of Zion, let tears stream down like a torrent day and night! Give yourself no rest, your eyes no respite!<sup>19</sup> "Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the night watches! Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the LORD.



Why so much weeping and wailing over a wall? Jerusalem's walls and gates were pulverised

in 586 BC. Now it's 445 BC. Why is Nehemiah so devastated about something that happened some 140 years ago? Is he nostalgic? No. He's not crying about the past. He's weeping over the present and the future. He knows what walls stand for. He knows what happens to a city without walls. Especially now, that a remnant of Israel has returned to Jerusalem. So what's behind the wall?

God is inclusive. But without clear boundaries, inclusion can end up in confusion and compromise. Walls establish and maintain identity. Walls create and sustain community. Walls determine and secure destiny for present and future generations. Walls create a healthy separation from the world. God is not against walls as such. The New Jerusalem has walls of jasper, 2,400 kilometres high. Outside are dogs (REV 21:16; 22:15).

So what about the seeker-friendly church? The church without walls? Yes and No. YES to inclusion and welcome. Jesus is a friend of sinners. But NO to the watering down of the distinction that God himself makes between the holy and the unholy, between those who serve him and those who don't (MAL 3:16-18). The Church is set apart from the world for the sake of the world. We are called, not to blend in with

the world, but to bless the world with salvation (GAL 3:8, 14).

Nehemiah takes no part in the politics of nationalism—*Make Israel Great Again*. He laments the wall because without one, the conditions of exile persist right there in the Holy Land: distress, disgrace, and compromise with pagan neighbours. The future of Israel hangs in the balance. *If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?* (PS 11:3).

Nehemiah's greater mission, beyond building a physical wall, is to secure the spiritual boundaries of a people belonging to God. *In the world. For the world. But never of the world!*

## WALL OF DUTY

■ Recall the past. Invasion. Occupation. Expulsion. Communal conflict. Economy crisis. SARS. And now Covid. To a certain extent, we can identify with the cry of Nehemiah and the pain of ancient Jerusalem. But, looking back, we have so much more to be thankful for than to wail about. Recall God's favour and providence. Give thanks: For recovery after occupation. For 56 years of good governance and national transformation after expulsion. For peace and prosperity. For effective management of SARS and Covid. Let us also repent for taking these and many other blessings for granted. For failing to appreciate God's gift of good government. For finding fault instead of praying for them and giving honour to whom honour is due (ROM 13:7). Lord, have mercy on us.

■ Cry for the present. Look within. This is a moment of reckoning for the Church, a people belonging to God. God is disciplining us *for our good, that we may share his holiness* (HEB 12:10). To purge us of worldliness. To remake us into his radiant Bride, holy and without blemish (EPH 5:27). Not *of* the world, but *in* the world and *for* the world to proclaim Good News.

• Let us examine ourselves. Confess our personal and corporate failures. Have we let our guard down? Have we allowed the spirit of this present evil age to twist our thoughts and taint our values? Are we deceived by the notion that we can win the world by mimicking the world? Are

we soft on sin? Do we, in the name of inclusion and diversity, tolerate the intolerable? Do we, in the name of love, pander to narcissists who think with their feelings, calling evil good and good evil (ISA 5:20)? Do we, in the name of relevance, water down Truth and compromise God's standard to suit the prevailing mood of society? Wake up. Draw the line. *What one generation tolerates the next generation celebrates* (JOHN WESLEY | ADAPTED).

• Let us search deep within and weep in repentance. Pray: Lord, forgive us. Deliver us from deception. Cleanse us from sin. Purge our worldly thinking (ROM 12:2), worldly wisdom (JAMES 3:13-16), worldly habits, and preoccupations (1 PET 2:10-11, 1 JN 2:15-16). Strip away all hype and hubris, vanity and false security. Revive us, O Lord! Rekindle our first love. Renew our minds. Restore us to the distinctives of our faith and the values of your kingdom.

• Let us think deep and look far. For the sake of those who come after us, fear the Lord, flee the world, fulfil the Word: *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever* (1 JOHN 2:15-17).

■ Contend for the future. What is the outlook for Singapore? As a trade-driven economy, we are extremely vulnerable. The pandemic has plunged vast swathes of the world economy into a deep freeze. When the markets thaw, we can expect seismic shifts. Will Singapore beat the odds, emerge stronger, and shine brighter? Will we become Ezra-intercessors and Nehemiah-builders—pouring out our hearts like water before the presence of the Sovereign Lord? Appeal for divine grace and mercy.