

WHO'S BOSS?

NEHEMIAH 1:4-11 | 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. ⁵ And I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. ⁷ We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. ⁸ Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, ⁹ but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.' ¹⁰ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. ¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." Now I was cupbearer to the king.

Nehemiah has the king's favour. And the king's ear. But he doesn't strut into the court waving a wish list. Vain is the help of man without the help of God. To get a successful audience with the king of Persia, Nehemiah first seeks a favourable hearing before the God of heaven. He starts praying in December, when he hears about Jerusalem's plight. He continues praying *day and night* until April, before speaking to the king (1:6,11; 2:1).

Nehemiah is a man of action. But his most important work is prayer. He spends four months on his knees before two months on his feet, rebuilding Jerusalem's wall; and 12 plus years reforming the remnant of

Israel. Tears and prayers before bricks and mortar. Confession and repentance before revival and reformation. First things first.

Nehemiah's opening prayer is a virtual blueprint for rebuilding the wall and reforming the remnant (MANFRED OEMING). Both the prayer and the work are God-centred through and through. The pronouns *you* and *your* (referring to God) appear 21 times in just seven verses of prayer. *Your ear. Your eyes. Your outcasts. Your servant. Your power. Your hand.* And so on. Nehemiah first appeals to the character and faithfulness of God. Then he confesses the sins of Israel, the sins of his family, and his own sins. And finally, he makes his petition to God.

His first request is implicit: that Israel's return from exile would now be crowned with the restoration of the dwelling place that God has chosen for his name (:9). His second request is explicit: *give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man* (:11). *This man* happens to be the most powerful man in the world: Artaxerxes, King of the Persian Empire. That's Nehemiah's other boss, second in command to the LORD God of heaven. We have much to learn from Nehemiah. About prayer. About faith. About God.

WALL OF DUTY

■ First things first. Turn to the God of heaven and earth. Appeal for mercy. *The world remains in the thick of the pandemic, but this will neither be the last, nor the worst pandemic that we encounter. Sooner or later, something more transmissible or lethal will emerge and hence, we must take every opportunity to learn from this pandemic, to prepare ahead for the next one* (PM LEE HSIEN LOONG, GLOBAL HEALTH SUMMIT MAY 2021). Ask God to favour his Nehemiahs in global positions. Far-sighted leaders of faith and action. Prayerful and pragmatic.

■ Fast and pray. In these days of prolonged uncertainty and heightened anxiety, may we centre on God. May we weep and worship like never before. Prayer with fasting and tears is a mighty act of worship. An outward expression

of inward desperation. *Prayer is the very way God has chosen for us to express our conscious need of him and our humble dependence on him* (JOHN STOTT). Check yourself: What is your inward state? Whom do you rely on? Who has the last word? Humble yourself. Submit to God. Renew your covenant relationship with him.

■ Pray for personal revival: Lord, be the centre of my life. I want to rightly represent you in my generation. I want to re-order my life, alter my eating habits, limit my screen time, in order to pursue your purpose. I will quit binge watching on Netflix. I will start watching and praying. Grip my heart with a profound sense of duty for Singapore's shalom. You alone can make her a city where you are pleased to dwell. I volunteer to be your ally, whatever it takes. Use me in whichever way you please. I am no longer my own, but yours.

■ On behalf of your generation and a people yet to be born, declare:

• Rejoice! No matter how chaotic things get, we will fix our eyes on our *great and awesome* God. For he is our Saviour and Sovereign King. All-knowing. All-present. All-powerful. All-wise. All-loving. All-merciful. His steadfast love never ceases. His mercies are new every morning. Great is his faithfulness (LAM 3:22-23).

• Repent. No matter how badly we fail, we will not excuse ourselves or accuse others. In identificational repentance, we will confess our nation's sins as our own. We will humble ourselves, pray, seek God's face, and turn from our wicked ways. For he will hear from heaven, forgive our sins, and heal our land (2 CHR 7:14).

• Remember. No matter how grim our spiritual challenges and no matter how dim our economic prospects, we will remember that *the future is as bright as the promises of God* (ADONIRAM JUDSON). *For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you* (ISA 60:2).