

**SUCCESS?**

NEHEMIAH 13:30-31 | Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; <sup>31</sup> and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

**N**ehemiah spent the best years of his life calling Israel back to the Ancient Path that would ensure their shalom and survival from generation to generation. After a leave of absence, he returns to find Jerusalem's wall intact. But everything else he had achieved is threatened with extinction. Eliashib the high priest has been succeeded by permissive and compromising heirs. Ezra the scribe, Nehemiah's greatest ally in revival and restoration, is probably deceased (13). And the community has broken its solemn pledge to keep the Law. Israel is back to square one. Humanly speaking, it appears that Nehemiah has failed.

So how do we define success? Our brand position? Our social media status? Our performance currency? And profit margin? What the world calls success is often a failure in God's eyes. And what the world deems a colossal failure may in fact be a great achievement in heaven's eyes. By worldly standards, even Jesus Christ died as a failed messiah in a long line of pretenders and wannabes—humanly speaking.

How would Nehemiah define success? Pray without ceasing. Do all the good you can. Right all the wrongs you can. Give all you can in loving service to God and neighbour. Seek the shalom of your community, city, and nation. Do your duty and help others do theirs. But even if all others fail and forsake you, remain faithful to the bitter end. And entrust yourself to the tender mercies of your God.

So then, was Nehemiah a success? A hundred years after his reforms, Alexander the Great conquered Persia. In 168 BC, one of Alexander's

successors, Antiochus Epiphanes, plundered Jerusalem, destroyed Nehemiah's walls, and desecrated the temple. He then did all he could to eradicate the Jewish faith and impose Greek language, culture, and religion on Israel. This was the ultimate test of Nehemiah's reforms.

Obedience to God became a crime punished by extreme torture and death. Many Jews apostatised and sacrificed to idols. But not all. A Holy Remnant took up the mantle of Ezra and Nehemiah and remained faithful to the God of Israel until *the fullness of time*, when Jesus of Nazareth entered the stage of history to fulfil the Abrahamic Covenant and the Law of Moses once and for all.

It's hard to imagine how this could have happened without Nehemiah. His *work was the making of his people. His reforming zeal, partnered by the educative thoroughness of Ezra, gave to post-exilic Israel a virility and clarity of faith which it never wholly lost. This would have been the memorial most to his liking* (DEREK KIDNER). Success? Absolutely!

**WALL OF DUTY**

What is success? How should God's people in First World Singapore define success? Are we aligned with his KPIs? His Kingdom Performance Indicators?

■ First up. Renounce worldly notions and measures of success. Surrender your life to God. *To live out the purpose for which [you are] born—to be in God's will, is success... every action in surrender to God is success* (DEBORAH ADE). Give God first rights and full rights to do according to his good and pleasing and perfect will in your life (ROM 12:2). Pray: *Lord, I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low by you. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen* (JOHN WESLEY).

■ Wise up. Find the Ancient Path in the new norm. Nehemiah, a wise master-builder, knew how to build new walls with old stones on ancient foundations. In our zeal to revitalise our churches mid- and post-pandemic, may we not forget that when God does a new thing, he does not abolish the old. He fulfils it and builds on it. Pray the Word: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them* (MATT 5:17). *Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old* (MATT 13:52).

■ Wake up. Through social media, Covid has ushered in a new era of lone ranger gurus who roam to and fro pitching their ideas and quick fixes. Scripture is not their reference point. Ask God to protect the Singapore Church from such stealthy infiltration. Earnestly pray for a divine reset: A thorough purging of all things sensational, strange, and subversive. A wholehearted return to the Ancient Path, a way of life that conforms to God's universal and unchanging standard. An unwavering commitment to the pristine salt-and-light distinctives of discipleship in community. Watch and pray.

■ Keep up. *Loving Singapore Together, Turning Singapore Godward*. Let us do our part with holy passion and leave the results to God. Keep on praying. Never give up (LK 18:1). Keep on sowing. *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase* (1 COR 3:6 NKJV). Remember this: *Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously* (2 COR 9:6 NIV). *One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much* (LK 16:10). Nothing succeeds like faithfulness. *In the final analysis, we do not and cannot know the measure of our success as God sees it. Wisdom says: leave success ratings to God, and live your Christianity as a religion of faithfulness rather than an idolatry of achievement* (J.I. PACKER).