



# A Modern Nehemiah

Integrity and service are the hallmarks of this modern-day Nehemiah.

By Stephen Ng

**D**r. Nehemiah Lee's voice was clear as he spoke about his company's performance over the past 15 years.

"It is all by the grace of God," says the founder and managing director of Nehemiah Reinforced Soil Sdn Bhd during the company's 15th Anniversary celebrations in November 2008. About 700 people, including suppliers, contractors, developers, fellow engineers, architects and business associates, had attended the function.

According to Lee, the anniversary celebrations the company holds every year is to remember God's goodness.

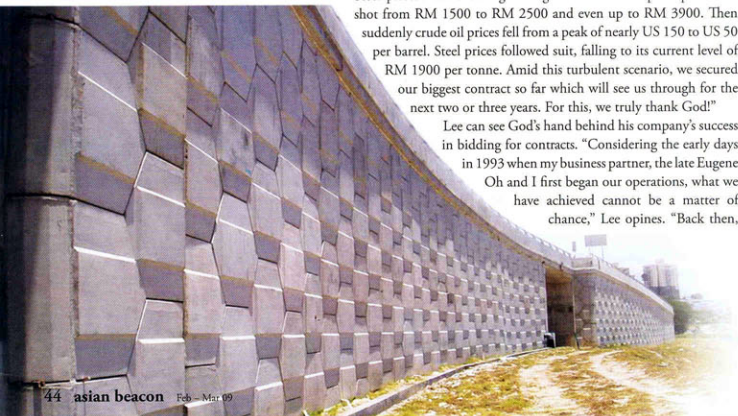
He tells *Asian Beacon* that it's the joy of the Lord (Nehemiah 8:10) that gives him strength when business challenges seem overwhelming. Having weathered the worst of times during the 1997 Asian financial crisis with God's help, he now knows where to place his confidence.

"The biblical character Nehemiah is a great inspiration to me," enthuses Lee. "He fought, he prayed and continued to build in the face of tremendous odds."

"When adversity mounts, God's grace abounds even more," says Lee. "Survival during the current financial crisis testifies to God's abundant grace. Contracts were dwindling and costs were escalating. Steel prices were shooting through the roof – its price per tonne shot from RM 1500 to RM 2500 and even up to RM 3900. Then suddenly crude oil prices fell from a peak of nearly US 150 to US 50 per barrel. Steel prices followed suit, falling to its current level of RM 1900 per tonne. Amid this turbulent scenario, we secured our biggest contract so far which will see us through for the next two or three years. For this, we truly thank God!"

Lee can see God's hand behind his company's success in bidding for contracts. "Considering the early days in 1993 when my business partner, the late Eugene Oh and I first began our operations, what we have achieved cannot be a matter of chance," Lee opines. "Back then,

*"The biblical character Nehemiah is a great inspiration to me," enthuses Lee. "He fought, he prayed and continued to build in the face of tremendous odds."*



44 **asian beacon** Feb - Mar 09

people were taunting us that even if the wall was merely 3m high, it would collapse. By God's grace, we have captured nearly 45% of the market – even overtaking a multinational company to become the market leader. We have indeed come a long way."

To date, Lee has built about 750,000 square metres of what is known as Nehemiah Walls. The highest one he has built is a 20 metre-high retaining wall in the Cameron Highlands. "Our technology is able to shorten construction time by 50%. It is a very cost-effective method to build urban high-way interchanges and protect slopes so as to prevent land slides," explains Lee.

Some projects were completed in record time. For example, when a road embankment along the East-Coast Expressway failed in March 2007, emergency repair works had to be undertaken. "The built-up wall area was 4,500 square metres, and interestingly, the wall was completed in a record of 52 days, from March 26 to May 16. When I turned to the Book of Nehemiah, I noticed the wall of Jerusalem was completed in 52 days as well."

## A history of integrity and service

Lee had ventured into business to prove that it is possible to survive in the construction industry without giving any bribes. His name card says it all: "We pledge to conduct business with integrity. We shall not get involved in any corrupt practice."

Besides God's grace, he attributes his company's success to the hard work put in by his staff and him. "Because we do not believe in giving bribes, we have to work harder to ensure what we deliver has quality and is on time. When our clients want a cost-effective supplier, they will come back to us."

Even the Bumiputra staff in his company appreciate the fact that the company's earnings are legitimate. It is hard to live up to the ideal of integrity in the construction industry where greasing someone's palm has been the common practice for getting jobs. "Thankfully," Dr. Lee tells *Asian Beacon*, "there are



From left: Wee Shin Hoe (Sarawak), Tan Heng Ah (Sabah), Simon Kavanagh (Australia), Dr Nehemiah Lee, Lalitha Jayasinghe (Sri Lanka), Danny Sim (Brunei)

also many uncorrupted people in the government departments who are not on the take."

His first major job came a year after he started business. The Public Works Department (JKR) had assigned him to build a retaining wall for a flyover project in Pantai Dalam, Kuala Lumpur. "We had expected to build walls for houses, not flyovers," he recalls. "It was God's answer to my dream of building a flyover someday. And the approval process by JKR was so efficient that people thought we had a godfather in the department. Obviously, we don't! All I tell them is this: *We have a heavenly Father.*"

*"We conduct our operations with integrity because we want to glorify God in and through business. It's a value we hold dear right from the very beginning."*

There were times, of course, when his company lost some contracts because of his refusal to bribe. In retrospect, had he taken up those jobs, his company would have gotten into financial difficulties. "While we may not understand why we fail to get a certain job, God always has His own reasons. Our part is just to conduct our business with integrity."

Lee succinctly summarises his company's philosophy: "We conduct our

operations with integrity because we want to glorify God in and through business. It's a value we hold dear right from the very beginning."

## Role Model

The Scripture has always been the guide for this 55-year-old engineer-turned businessman. His role model has always been Nehemiah who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem which was in ruins. It was a task which was accomplished amid great opposition. The broken down walls brought shame. But Nehemiah helped restore the dignity of God's people.

Referring to the parallel he sees in Nehemiah, Lee says: "He built walls – we too build walls every day. He faced a lot of opposition – we also face the same heat from our competitors in this cut-throat world of construction business. Nehemiah was a man who prayed fervently. We too have to pray and trust God to help us secure contracts and save us from potentially disastrous situations. Often we are pushed into a corner where we have no choice but to utterly depend on God. He is certainly a biblical character I will always admire and seek to emulate." — (SC)

*A born-again believer since 1974, Dr. Nehemiah Lee, attends Balai Bapris Damansara Utama in Petaling Jaya, together with his wife, Wendy and their daughters, Deborah, Esther and Joanna.*