

Bible Study Thursday – Nehemiah 6:1-15

Good morning, brothers and sister,

Bear with me. It is the last time that I will bother you with my teaching in the morning.

I said on Tuesday that I felt actually very small and humble to stand there before you, but I want to thank you for your patience and for your ... love with which you have received me and listened to me.

It was wonderful to see also how everything fitted together.

We all have our thoughts when we think of Europe.

We know that there are a lot of threats that are looming ahead.

I think, Jim Memory has given us some very realistic perspectives on the future of Europe

No wonder that a lot of people are afraid and pessimistic. No wonder that nostalgic sentiments are cherished by all kinds of demagogues, mostly right-wing, putting the blame of all the crises we are facing on the Islamist extremists or illegal immigrants, instead of looking for the blame with our selves.

But amidst all stands this early Christian creed:

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.

And because of that, there is eternal hope.

And because there is eternal hope, also the things that we are trying to establish in our countries, in our churches, in our organisations, are not in vain.

And therefore we should not only look at all the challenges and threats that the crises pose to us,

But also at the opportunities God is giving us to show His love to a world in need,

As Jaume testified yesterday also.

So today as we are going to think again about Nehemiah and his memoirs, I don't want to focus too much on the challenges that he faced until the end of the rebuilding of the wall,

But I hope that we will see also some other perspectives in his story.

because I believe that the threats are nothing compared to the opportunities.

I would really like you to go home with that at the forefront in your mind.

I have to say when I came back from Africa to the Netherlands I was initially struck by the negativism of people around here.

Of course I knew that there were a lot of problems.

Africa is not that far away, and social media are developing there in the same rapid pace as it is here.

Therefore, even the people in Africa know that Europe is in a spiritual crisis.

Let me tell you the story of my mission.

As I told you before: we were sent out to Botswana by our Churches in the Netherlands in 1992.

And my job description was: to go and assist the Reformed Churches in Botswana and equip them for their mission work among the San or Bushmen in that area.

And I told you that we have seen wonderful things.

Indeed, our God is an awesome and faithful God.

We saw Him at work in a mighty way.

We saw people coming to Christ.

Young people who gave their heart to Jesus and wanted to follow Him with their whole life.

We have seen wonderful church growth all around the place.

We saw churches being planted nearly every month in our area. Sometimes even weekly.

In our small town of roundabout 12.000 people, there were more than 63 registered churches when we left. But we couldn't count the unregistered churches.
Small missional communities who penetrated into the society;
That were established in the squatter camps, next to the informal bars and drinking places.

We saw how the leadership was developing, slowly but definitely!
In 2009 two young local men finished their Bible college and they took over from me.
They are now working as pastors and missionaries.
They are training and coaching other local leaders in the settlements.

So in 2010 it was time for us to leave.
I was lucky, because I had already a job with the Dutch EA, but I am telling you:
I got my mission from my brothers and sisters in Botswana.

It was during the Global Day of Prayer that all the churches in our small town were together on Pentecost Day 2010. And I am telling you, that is some experience. A combined service in Africa means: loud music, dancing, screaming preachers, and African prayer ...

It would be our last combined service. Even our last Sunday in Ghanzi. Our farewell service.
So the service went on and on.
And in the middle of the service the Chairman of the Pastors Fraternel, who also happened to be the chairman of the Evangelical Fellowship of Botswana in Ghanzi, suddenly stopped the service and called me and my wife to the front.
We had to kneel down and then all the pastors – I believe some 50 of them – laid their hands on us and they started to pray for us.
Do you know how heavy 50 hands can weigh on you when you are kneeling down?
Then the Chairman took over and said:
Moruti and Mmamoruti,
18 years ago you have lived among us and worked with us.
You have come to Ghanzi to assist us, to train us, to stimulate us, to coach us, to help us doing mission work in Botswana.
Now we send you back to the Netherlands, in the name of Jesus, to go and help the Churches over there doing mission work in the Netherlands,
because we hear that the churches are struggling.
People are leaving the church. Churches are closed.
In the name of Jesus: You are not Dutch missionaries in Botswana anymore, but you are now African missionaries in the Netherlands.
We hereby promise that we will always remember you in our prayers. May God bless you!

And so we came back to the Netherlands.
From the warm desert into the cold and windy polder.
And the first thing people said to us, what are you doing here? Are you not missing Africa? Are you not missing that God is working miracles?
Because not only is it cold and rainy here, but spiritually it is a desert. God has left us. The Churches are dying: it is only old people that are still going to church.
It is just a matter of time, then there will not be a church anymore.

Mind you! One of my first public events was the presentation of a Dutch book called: The Church is Dead, Long live the King! I really have to say that I was just shocked. It is a book with a lot of very negative stories. But one metaphor really struck me: it was the metaphor of an old PowerStation, that was long time disconnected. It was just standing there, in the middle of nowhere! Empty, no power lines coming in or going out, useless. Just a monument. Something of the past.

In the whole book there is actually only one chapter that had a more positive perspective.
Written by Evert-Jan Ouweneel, who spoke at the GA in 2011.
He saw a future for the Church in Europe as the wise and experienced mentor for the young Global Church.

And I thought: yes, that might be our new role.
Because we maybe old, but not yet cold – is a saying here.
I believe that we still have a lot to offer to the young churches everywhere: we have experience, knowledge, wisdom.

But that is not the only thing. There is also still a lot of exciting things happening.
When I just consider the new church plants that have occurred in the last 10 to 15 years in the big cities; the emphasis on incarnation missional churches; The attention for discipleship in movements like 3DM in the UK and the US – then I see that God is doing great and new things in Europe.

Yes there are a lot of challenges, but there are also new opportunities.
The position of the church may have changed forever, in the sense that we are not anymore in the centre of the power, but more in the margins – my question would be: how was that in the beginning?
In the book of Acts?
Maybe we need all this pruning to go back to our roots. To go back to our real identity: to be witnesses of Jesus Christ in this world and to this world.

So there are not only all kinds of and multi-dimensioned crises and challenges, but there are also a lot of new and exciting opportunities.
And with that I want to turn to Nehemiah once more.

When we read chapter 6, we read again a lot about challenges and threats. Even life threats for Nehemiah himself.
We read about false accusations, about intimidation.

And I am just trying to think what it must have meant for Nehemiah.
It must have been so tiring.
So energy-consuming.
To see the threats and to counteract them every time and again.
To keep up the faith and hold on to the hope!
And these threats did not even only come from 'heathens', so to say, but also from so-called prophets and priests. Spiritual leaders of the Jews. Brothers.

Indeed only because of his close relationship with God, because of the power of the Holy Spirit, because of his strong prayer life he was able to continue and succeed.
It is significant that in this chapter we find 2 of his prayers.
Maybe this was one of the greatest strengths of this leader.

I really have to confess that I am feeling very small and imperfect compared to Nehemiah. I cannot compare my prayer life to his. Yes, I pray and I try to keep to my quiet time. But this precious being in continuous contact with God ... I am not even coming close to that.

But I really believe that if we want to see breakthroughs in our time, we need to be prayerful people, prayerful organisations, prayerful churches.
And somebody once said to me: that doesn't only mean that we have to organize more prayer-meetings. But praying should be a continuous being in contact with God.

Anyway the wonderful result of this close relationship with God is that Nehemiah is blessed in his work and that in record time, in fifty-two days, the wall was completed.

I don't know whether you have been in Jerusalem, and have walked around the old city.

But this is amazing!

Indeed, a miracle! A supernatural, superhuman effort, that was only possible because of the help of God Himself.

Maybe this is the greatest opportunity, if we may call it for a moment like that: that God is there!

And that He is in control. And that He has a plan with His people. With the Church. An opportunity that we have to seize through faith.

Of course, looking back on the history of Nehemiah there have been several opportunities.

Opportunities that Nehemiah didn't let go, but that he grabbed with both hands:

- There was the golden opportunity when King Artaxerxes asked Nehemiah why he looked so troubled. Nehemiah could have excused himself and say that there was no problem at all, out of fear ... but he didn't. He seized the opportunity and brought the cause of his people to the attention of the King.
- The next opportunity occurred when the King allowed him to go and even asked him what he needed for his mission. We didn't read that, but actually Nehemiah was very bold at that time. Instead of just accepting the permission, he freely requested not only for supporting letters, but also for all kind of building materials on the expense of the tax money.
- Then there was the opportunity to speak to the leaders of Jerusalem and get their commitment and support to the project. Just imagine this was a risky, highly political and enormous project that would cost a lot of money, time and effort. But he managed to convince them.
- And I could go on with mentioning opportunities that occurred and that they seized.

Brothers and sisters, we are many times just looking at all the threats and problems and challenges. But we overlook what opportunities we many times have and get from God to fulfil our mission: the mission of the Church. To be witnesses of Jesus Christ in this world.

Let me give you one example from the Netherlands:

We are complaining a lot about the marginalisation of the Church and the privatisation of religion in the public domain. And yes, it is true. Partly.

But in a way you could say that the current global economic crisis is a blessing in disguise.

Governments have to cut their budgets.

Also the Dutch Government is doing that at the moment.

Until only a few years ago the Government was taking care for everything and everyone. Now they are withdrawing from their responsibility.

The society has to take over more and more.

People have to take care for one another again:

children have to take care for their parents.

The stronger have to take care for the weak.

And is that not what the Church has been doing right from the beginning? Is that not exactly what we see in the book of Acts: care for the poor, for the orphans and widows, for the sick, for foreigners?

But especially in the West we have handed that responsibility over to the Government!

In the Netherlands we nearly do not have any Christian hospital anymore.

It is all Government.

No wonder that the Church has become totally irrelevant for a lot of people!

So the shift to a participatory society – as our King has just pronounced it – i.e. a society where everybody participates in caring for others, is a golden opportunity for Christians and Churches to get engaged again in society.

The question is: are we ready and prepared for that?

I only hear a lot of complaining: not only from people in the world, but also from people in the Church. We tend to be very nostalgic people!

I would say: let's leave the past! It was not all that romantic anyway! Let's look forward. We have a great hope ahead of us!
An eternal hope!

And on the way to that hope, let's spread hope in a hopeless world.

So let's seize the opportunities that occur. I believe that God is opening new doors through which we can go out into the world and spread His love and compassion to people in need. In need of many things, but especially in need of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. How will these needs be ever met, if we just let fear or nostalgia rule our thinking and acting.

Nehemiah and his people seized the opportunities and managed to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. Despite all the opposition and threats. With God's help.

The same God that is still working in this world. In His Church. Jesus told his disciples just before He ascended into heaven:

Don't you worry! You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Wow! That is not a command!

That is a promise!

It is not something we have to do, but something that He will do!

What can we still complain?

How can we still cry about all the problems, and threats and challenges?

Especially as Evangelicals.

As people that not only know about Jesus, but also about His Spirit!

Ok, let's shortly go back again to Nehemiah and his people. How did they manage? What was, apart from God's help of course, their secret? What were their strengths?

Well, let me mention a few:

- The first thing of course is the power of prayer. Ok, we don't know a lot about the prayer life of the people, but we do know the more about Nehemiah's prayer life. It shows his close relationship with and strong dependency of God. Nehemiah knew that he could not do it by himself. Not at all. In everything he was trusting the Lord.
- The second thing that strikes me every time again when I read the book of Nehemiah is the strong commitment and involvement of the people: not only the leaders, not only the men, but of all the people. And every person was playing his role according to his or her possibilities and abilities. I really think that was wonderful
- The third thing is faith and perseverance. Despite all the threats and opposition, they don't give up. Every time, if something comes up, they make a plan. And mind you: faith and perseverance are fruits of the Holy Spirit!

- Last but not least is cooperation: everybody is playing his or her part, but not for their own benefit and not on their own. Especially when the situation was critical, they would look after one another and assist one another.

Prayer, commitment, faith and perseverance, cooperation – just a few things that made Nehemiah and his people succeed.

Of course there were also weaknesses: we have not read everything. But for example in chapter 5 we read about greed and injustice. Apparently not everybody was at the same spiritual level. And Nehemiah also had to attend to those things.

But what is the most important is the end result: the wall around Jerusalem was rebuilt in 52 days. Unbelievable, but true! Through God's help they managed.

Again: I believe God can still do the same today.

His people in Europe may be in great trouble and disgrace. The Church may look finished. And when we look at all the crises that we have to face, we might like to cry. And maybe we should.

We should cry out to God.

But He will never give up on His people that call upon Him.

2 Chronicles 7:14 says:

¹⁴ if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

So let's go back tomorrow to our duties. And all do our part of the job.

There is no doomsday!

We are part of a project in progress.

It is not our project. And its also not us who will finish the project. It is God's project. And He is in control. And therefore we know where it is going! That is our ultimate hope.

Just imagine that we will all enter in that new Jerusalem, with its streets of gold

And its river of life flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb

Where the glory and honor of the nations will be brought in

And where every tear will be wept away from our eyes.

Where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain!

That is our hope!

And therefore I want to close with the words that Jim also mentioned yesterday from 1 Corinthians 15:58:

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters,

Stand firm.

Let nothing move you (no threats, no crises whatsoever)

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord,

Because you know that your labour, your work, your effort in the Lord, is not in vain.

May God bless you all!

Q&A

- Make a SWOT analyses of the situation of the Church in your country
- Think of what your EA can do to help the Church develop and use their strengths, improve on their weaknesses, seize the opportunities and face the threats
- Think of what the EEA can do to support you in that