

Bible study Tuesday- Nehemiah's prayer

Good morning everybody,

I hope you all had a very good night and that you are all refreshed and eager to start with the conversations that we are going to have today?

It is really nice to meet you all here in my, in our country. And you may have wondered why of all places in Stadskanaal?

Well, I have to say it has also startled me. Because it is so far out! Stadskanaal, Groningen, of all places! Isn't it? But I am sure: you are going to be blessed in this place. In the Netherlands we have the saying: Er gaat niets boven Groningen! No better place to be than in Groningen or 'Groningen is the best'. Is the top! Well, I would say: just let it come and enjoy and see for you on Friday when we leave again.

Addressing you this morning really makes me feel somewhat insecure and very humble with all you big shots from all over Europe. And especially when I think back of the past two GA's that I was able to attend, and the Bible teachers we had there, I just feel very small compared to Daniel Bourdanne who led the Biblereadings in Bad Liebenzel about the book of Daniel. Or compared to Samuel Escobar who did the same thing last year in Barcelona about the gospel of John.

I am just a local pastor, one could say. I actually started ministering just around the corner – so to say – in a very small village not far from here, just next to the city of Groningen with the name Thesinge: around 500 inhabitants, 3 churches (all reformed), a small primary school and of course a windmill.

Urbanisation and secularisation were hitting hard and the small congregation of simple people actually could not afford a fulltime minister. So they asked me and my wife Beppie to come over and help them after our Theological education. We actually hadn't finished our studies, but with a starting family, we could use a little bit of income. And a house. Although it was very far away from everything, and especially from the family.

We had a wonderful time while serving there. Very soon the congregation started to grow out of the blue. We didn't do anything: it was just the Lord who added every time new people. When we started, we had a congregation of 150 people, children included. In the first month a family with 9 children left for Canada. So everybody was keeping his or her breath and fearing that this was the beginning of the end. But then the people came, and after 2 years we were at 200. And so they called me to be fulltime pastor.

Because of the growth of the congregation we had to focus our attention to Church Development. And we saw some pretty awesome things happen. Here I got also my first experience with Church planting, one could say, because we soon started with having church services in another place, as our building just became too small.

Churches in the area were quite liberal or very exclusive. So there was really a need for a warm place for seekers.

So we grew even more. Soon we passed the 300 mark.

Maybe this rocked the boat a little bit too much and so the congregation sent us after another 2 years to Africa. Go and do your thing over there – they must have thought, although they have never said that. Go and assist the churches in Botswana to do mission work among the San or Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert.

They sent me to Ghanzi, in the heart of the Kalahari Desert, where we worked nearly 18 years as church planters, church developers, youth workers and development workers. – and when we came back in 2010 they didn't want me back anymore so they just put me up with the EA. No, of course it was not like that. I will tell you more about that later.

I just want to highlight that Thomas must have been quite desperate to ask someone like me. I don't even have the right age! Because the main speaker at the GA should at least be 60 or otherwise under 30! At least people will still forgive you if you say stupid things. But unfortunately, I am neither! I am actually from the danger zone: 50plus years. Part of the so-called Generation X or lost c.q. slacker generation.

So bear with me the coming few days. I will try to do my best to lead you in these few moments of Bible teaching through the book of Nehemiah. That was the request: can you do something about Nehemiah.

And actually that made me say 'yes' to Thomas, because I have something with the book of Nehemiah. In my first congregation I preached a whole season about the book of Nehemiah. And we also had small-group bible-studies about Nehemiah, because we felt that the lessons of that booklet were very applicable to the situation of our small congregation that had to be built up from the rubble.

Actually that was typical! Nehemiah is not persé a missional booklet – in the sense of Murray. Church planters may not deem it very important. But Church Developers definitely do. It is more about maintenance than about mission. I think it is important to note that at the beginning as to position the book a bit.

It doesn't mean that we should not expect much of it. It just relativizes things. And helps us on the other hand not expect too much of Nehemiah. Having said this, I want to emphasize that I am actually very excited to be able to read that Bible book again with you and just try to draw some lines to our own lives and to the life of our churches in Europe.

Introduction

It is an intriguing character: Nehemiah, son of Chakalyah. We don't know much about his background, except that he was a descendant of the Jewish population that had been taken captive to Babylon in 586 b.C. In 539 b.c. Cyrus the Persian gained control over all of Mesopotamia. He permitted the Jewish exiles to return to the city of Jerusalem.

Some did, but many Jews remained in the Diaspora. They had settled. They had built up a life. They had adapted, though history was never forgotten and family-ties were still maintained. Nehemiah lived nearly a century later: under the Persian ruler Artaxerxes I Longimanus (ruled 465-424 b.c.).

And again: he is a typical Diaspora guy. He sees totally integrated in the Persian society. Well connected. Very high in the government: cupbearer of Artaxerxes. Now we must realize: that was not some barkeeper in the royal ballroom, but a cupbearer was one of the top security details of the ruler. He had to protect the king against poisoning, which was a continuous threat. So Nehemiah was one of the trustees of the King.

Totally integrated. Well connected. But he never forgot his roots. And his roots never forgot him. He still had good contact with his relatives. Some of them who had gone back to Jerusalem. When they visit their relatives in Persia, for support – because life must have been harsh and developments in the province were slow – and for family business, they would also visit Nehemiah and brief him about the situation 'back home'.

And so – we are now in the year 445 b.c. – 140 years after the deportation – long after the first Jewish exiles returned to the city of Jerusalem – Nehemiah receives some disturbing news.

“Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire” Verse 3.

I have to admit: this verse and the strong reaction of Nehemiah has always puzzled me.

Why did Nehemiah break down about this information? For this was old news, wasn't it?

The walls had been down for more than 140 years already. So what was the disturbing part of it?

Well to find the answer to that question we probably have to go to Ezra 4:23, because it may shed some light over the situation.

Some historical background: under Zerubbabel the exiles that returned to Jerusalem before, started with the rebuilding. But they met immediately with fierce resistance from the people in the land.

They wrote to king Artaxerxes, accusing the builders of planning rebellion against the Persian empire.

Artaxerxes immediately orders the rebuilding to stop. And of course, the enemies now seize the opportunity and force the people to stop, even breaking down what had been done already.

“As soon as the copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read to Rehum and Shimshai the secretary and their associates, they went **immediately** to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them by force to stop” (4:23). Just the word ‘immediately’ underlines the aggression and enmity of the people.

They cannot wait to do what they wanted to do: to stop the builders!

And I think that is something we recognize also in Post-Christian Europe.

It is not so much the situation of the Church that is the most disturbing part of the crisis.

Yes, there is a lot to say about that too.

We can point at the division of the Church, liberal theology that has permeated the historical churches, Churches that are declining in numbers ...

But I think the most disturbing part is that the Church and that Christians are more and more marginalized. Religious freedom is under pressure and is easily trumped by other human rights. When Christians speak up in politics as Christians they are many times at best ridiculed, but more often even scolded at. So what is the crisis?

Anyway: Nehemiah's reaction is very strong on hearing this news: I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven”, he tells in his memoirs.

He totally breaks down.

Physically, emotionally and spiritually.

All pride and all strength has left him.

The only thing he can think of is to cry out to God.

The God of Heaven. Israel's mighty God, Jahweh.

And to humble himself before God.

That makes me wonder sometimes: how does the abovementioned situation affect us? In what way has the crisis of the Church really broken us? Has it brought us to our knees already, or even flat-face to the ground? Have we really cried out to God like the psalmist:

Out of the depths I cry to you, o Lord;

O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.

If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?

And I am really addressing ourselves as Evangelicals. Because, - yes, we do pray: prayer is one of the essentials of Evangelicalism. And we do fast, or at least some of us do – but, we also have a tendency to be proud.

I see many times an attitude of: The crisis of the Church is not our problem, not to say our fault.

Many Evangelicals have actually left the Church because they saw the crisis coming.
The historical churches because of their traditionalism on the one hand and liberalism on the other.

I believe that that is not real Evangelical.
When in 1846 the Evangelical Alliance was formed, it formed as a movement within the churches.
It was a revival movement, not a separation movement.
Therefore I would like to state that if evangelicals today dissociate themselves from the mainline churches, whether protestant or Catholic, they are still far from being really broken.
They are still full of pride. And full of nonsense.
No wonder that their influence remains so small!

In the Netherlands we had last year in October a big manifestation in The Hague where 3000 Christians, mainly Evangelical, but also Roman Catholics and other protestants, came together and really humbled themselves before God and before one another. People really cried out to the Lord and went to their knees in prayer. Together.

I am telling you: it was a spiritual break-through!
Not in the sense that all the churches were there and Christians of all denominations.
It was basically an evangelical party.

But something changed radically.
Evangelicals openly confessed their sin in breaking away from established churches and even proselytize.
And instead they committed themselves to choose unity instead of division.
They took responsibility for the fact that Liberalism could take over so much of the Church.
They started praying for the other churches.

Nehemiah also breaks down before the Lord and he confesses the sin of his people.
I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. ⁷ We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.
Wow, what a prayer: honest (we have sinned), personal, and inclusive.
We have not obeyed your commands, decrees and laws! We have not obeyed you!
Disobedience: the original sin! The principle sin. Disobedience! That was what the prophets warned about all the time.
Disobedience that became manifest in idolatry, formalism/legalism, injustice. In greed and lack of care for the poor and the weak.

We have not obeyed your commands! Can we say that also when we look at all the crises that we are facing today? And it is not only the crisis of the Church that we look at. I am also thinking of the economic crisis and the social crisis with all its different faces of loneliness, discrimination, inequality, oppression etc.

Nehemiah really helps us to look in the mirror. Can we confess our sins and are we doing that then also? What are our sins? In what way have we not obeyed God's commands? We: that is me and my forefathers. My brothers and sisters.

I believe that this is very crucial for us all today. We really have to become concrete. We cannot just be satisfied with general descriptions. We need to face our sins! So that might be something we can talk about a little bit later.
What exactly has brought this ordeal over us?

In the meantime: this is a very spiritual matter. For it is the Spirit that convicts the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment – Jesus says in John 16:8.

The Spirit – He says.

That means that we should never despair if we feel that we are not yet ready to confess our sins.

Rather we should pray that He will come in our hearts and fill us more and more.

With His truth, and not our analyses.

So Nehemiah humbles himself before the Lord and confesses the sin of himself and his people.

But then he also appeals to God's faithfulness and to His promises.

As God has fulfilled His threat that the people would go into exile if they were disobedient, He will also be faithful in showing mercy to His people if they return to Him and obey His commands.

This is basic to the whole Bible: God is faithful!

That is what we especially see, when we look at Jesus.

At what He has done for us.

God's faithfulness is visible in His sending of His Son to this world, to pay for our sins.

And it is the basis for Nehemiah's petition for success in bringing his people's cause to the attention of the King.

Indeed a very risky enterprise: the King had to reverse his own decision as we have seen from Ezra 4:23.

A request in this sense could easily be seen as inherent criticism to his reign.

Indeed as treason.

It could mean: death for Nehemiah.

So Nehemiah could really use some help and some protection. But he doesn't prescribe the way how God should help him and protect him. He just leaves it in His hands.

It doesn't mean that he is not doing anything. Or that he is just waiting. First of all he will have continued praying for his people. Secondly he continued to do his job, looking for the right time and the right opportunity. Knowing, believing that his God is faithful!

I would like to say that this is also a very important lesson from Nehemiah: his faith in a faithful God, who remains faithful for ever – as the psalm says.

Maybe this is our biggest problem in Europe: we have lost faith!

We don't believe anymore that God is faithful.

And that He can and will build, rebuild and protect His Church. That He is in control and that we only have to look for what He is doing and for where He is working. For doors that open.

Not because of us, you and me. Or because we want it badly. But because He has a purpose for His Church! As Christopher Wright says it so strongly: God doesn't have a mission for the Church, but a Church for His mission.

God has a plan. A plan for the Church. Just like He had for the people of Israel and actually still has.

So that may also be a question for our discussion just now.

I want to finish. Nehemiah is successful in bringing his cause to the King and he is sent to Jerusalem. We have read what he does when he is arriving there. I want to emphasize two things:

1. He doesn't start with creating all kind of high expectations. People must have wondered. What is he doing here? Why did he come? But he keeps quiet for the first three days. Just going around, listening, observing, building relationships. And then he starts a thorough inspection of the walls and their situation. He doesn't rely on stories and on presumptions. He is looking for facts, based on proper research.
2. He doesn't start with doing everything alone. Though he did have all the resources and could have mobilized a laborforce with tax-money, he involves the people themselves. By sharing the results of his investigations and by sharing what God has done for him and with him, the leaders are convinced that rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem is the right thing to do.

Again this has some very important lessons for us as European Evangelicals:

1. We should not base our plans, our strategies on all kind of assumptions. I know we evangelicals are somewhat suspicious to academic research. But we really need factual information: about the crisis of the Church, about the strategies. So that is the first thing: more evangelical research! European evangelical research.
2. We need to share and to work together. We will not be able to curb the crisis in our different nations alone. Europe doesn't have borders anymore anyway. So let's share more and especially about what God is doing and how He is working in our nations. I believe that the EEA is a very powerfull instrument and platform for that. But that also requires commitment, leadership, vision, trust and faith.

Well, I have said enough for today. Maybe some of you would add something or comment to what I have said, or just ask a question. There is some Q&A time before we go into groups.

- Draw a problemtree for the crisis of the Church in Europe: what are the causes cq root cause, what are the symptoms of results
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Discussion

- What lines can we draw from Nehemiah's situation to the crisis of the Church in Europe today?
- What should we learn from Nehemiah's way of dealing with it?
- Draw a problem tree for the crisis of the Church in Europe/your country: what are the causes cq root cause, what are the symptoms or results > what is necessary to heal the tree again?