

Bible study Nehemiah 4 – Jan Wessels

EEA General Assembly - Wednesday

Good morning everybody,

I take it that you are all ready again to face a new day. And as we did yesterday we also want to start with the Word of God today.

Yesterday we looked at Nehemiah and the crisis he faced, what it did to him and with him, and how he reacted. Up to the moment that the people of Jerusalem, their leaders, committed themselves to start working.

Today we continue with his memoirs about the process of rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem as a protection for the people and as a sign of hope.

And we skip chapter 3, about all the builders and their commitment. Actually, a very interesting and wonderful chapter, but we just can't read everything in these 3 days. So I had to choose.

And chapter 4 really helps us to see and think about some of the things that we are going to face if we get or are involved in the process of building/rebuilding the Church in our time.

Although I have my doubts whether we should really think about what has to be done in terms of rebuilding.

Maybe it is more about reinventing the Church, by refocusing on Jesus and on what He has said; By disciplining our people or followers of Jesus. By redefining what their missional identity and calling is: being witnesses of Jesus in the world, and not just church-members or church-members in the first place. And by restructuring the whole organisation of the Church around that mission. People who have read of Alan Hirsch, or who have heard him speaking will immediately hear his words. His slogan is: Re-Jesus, Re-disciple, Re-Mission, Re-organise. But let me not dwell on this any further. Still Nehemiah 4 will help us to understand the challenges that we are still going to face in whatever way we are defining this project in progress: Europe. And the church in Europe.

But let me start again with a personal experience. As I told you yesterday: our church in the Netherlands sent us to Botswana in Southern Africa. It was not something we had desired or looked for. God just called us and we just had to go. We were sent to go and serve a local mission-church that was established by South African missionaries and our task was to equip the Churches in that area, and the believers that were there already for mission-work, evangelism among the San or Bushmen in western Botswana. At that time this people-group was still largely unreached, or rather 'unchurched'. But there was already mission work in the area for nearly 30 years.

When we arrived I asked the Church Council for the churches that I was to equip and they looked a little bit uncomfortable. Eh, moruti – they said – you first have to establish them still. Just go to the bush, pitch up your tent in the evening, and the following morning you will see that people will come and find out, what you are doing there. Take your Bible and tell them about Jesus. Don't bother too much about learning their language, there are always some men who have worked on the farms of South African farmers. They understand Afrikaans and Afrikaans is nearly the same language as Dutch. So basically I had to start at the beginning with Church planting. That is why it also took a little bit longer than we had expected: instead of 6 years, it became 18 years.

But looking back at all these years we feel very blessed: we have enjoyed living among the people in a beautiful and sunny country. Coming from a wet and cold country as the Netherlands, I thanked the Lord every day for the sun that was shining. Until one day the Church Council called me in and said: Moruti, stop thanking for the sunshine, start praying for rain!

The children have prospered there and we have never had any serious health problems. We even got our youngest there: Hanna, our only daughter, after we thought that with 3 boys our family was actually complete already. But then came this unexpected present from our heavenly father. We have seen tremendous things in Africa: people who started to believe in and follow Jesus in their own culture, especially young people. Churches that were just springing up like desert flowers after a spring shower. We have seen how God was at work in the lives of people. And when we left after 18 years we could hand over our work to among others 2 young talented guys who finished their theological education.

Yet, it was not always a smooth ride. There were moments that we really thought that all the work that was done would be swept away in one day. In 1994, just 2 years after we arrived, our colleague, who was also my mentor and a spiritual father, was sent out of the country by the Government. He was ordered to leave the country within 24 hours because he was helping and developing the San. He was not only the senior pastor and senior missionary in our team, but also a great development worker.

It was a very difficult time and we were all constantly monitored by the police and by government officials. They would just show up and ask all kinds of weird questions. And a lot of people were really intimidated. San people are not used to intimidation: they are very soft and peaceful people. So some of them just left the church. Only through personal intervention of President Mandela, who was at that time sharing the presidency of South Africa with President De Klerk, the decision of the full cabinet of Botswana was recalled by the President of Botswana.

But that didn't take the political tensions away around our mission work. So we decided to sit down with government officials to build more trust and understanding among them for the work we were doing. It took a long time and a lot of energy (missional time and missional energy) to normalize the situation. On the other hand: there were also tremendous opportunities. One of them being the problems that were caused by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Because the Churches were involved from the beginning in the fight against the disease and its results, it created a lot of goodwill that helped to spread the gospel in word and deed to even the least-reached people: small bands of remote area dwellers that lived and worked on farms and cattle posts far away from the villages. Botswana is a huge country, with a very small population. I worked in an area as big as the Netherlands. In that area only lived 30.000 people: 30% of them in the District capital, 30% in all the other villages and settlements, and the rest in the bush. Very difficult and very costly to reach. But with all the Aids money coming in churches were able to reach out with all kinds of services and with the gospel to even these far-out people. So threats and opportunities are part of every process. And that is what we also see in the chapter that we have been reading. Yes, there were threats before: the king could have refused and become angry. Then nothing would have been even possible at all. The whole project would have failed, before it even started.

The following threat was that the people in Jerusalem could have refused, out of fear or lack of commitment. Or because they didn't trust Nehemiah. That would have made the project very difficult to materialize. But it all worked out. God helped Nehemiah and he succeeded. So the project actually started.

Exciting to read about that in chapter 3. Despite all the ridiculisation of the enemies at the end of chapter 2. At the start of the project they were still very confident that it would never work and that Nehemiah's plans were a mere pipedream. But at the beginning of chapter 4 things have changed. The enemies start to realize that things were actually starting and that the plans were not just dreams. Let's focus a little bit on these enemies: The first one mentioned here is Sanballat, governor of Samaria. He was married to the granddaughter of the High Priest, so he was not unfamiliar with the Jews. But he clearly sees the Jewish Renaissance as a threat to his position and as a threat for the power-balance in the area. Then there is Tobiah, the Ammonite. All the way through the OT we find these arch-rivals of the people of Israel fighting and hating God's people. Even here they choose the side of the enemies. And then there are the Arabs, lead by a man called Geshem. They are many times mentioned with the Philistines. So it is not just a temporary dislike or political disagreement that we see here. It is a deeply rooted hatred that has a spiritual origin and that all comes together here. It is the world against the people of God. We read that they are very upset, furious, when the rebuilding of the wall is progressing well. And at first they just fight with words. And we all know what words can do, isn't it. They can hurt. They can make people afraid. Words are like swords. Like knives. And in that sense it is significant that a man of action like Nehemiah, doesn't jump to his feet and start to defend what they are doing.

Is that not what happens all the time? People start reacting to remarks and within no time you have a huge riot. Just look at politics.

But Nehemiah reacts in a totally different way: he doesn't talk back to his opponents, but he brings it all to the Lord. He doesn't want to fight. He wants to build. Literally. Nehemiah prays. Throughout his book we find these short prayers that give us a deep insight in his spiritual life: in his faith, his trust in God. As we saw yesterday already: a faithful God and a powerful God. Powerful, because He can mould the hearts of rulers like Artaxerxes to listen to the – somewhat - bold requests of Nehemiah. And faithful: a God who keeps to his Word. Not only of judgment for the sinners, but also of mercy to those who return to Him.

When I think of this faithfulness, I can only think of Jesus. He is the proof of God's faithfulness. Nehemiah prays! That is the Kingdom way of reacting. The question is of course: what would we do? I sometimes feel that we have so much adjusted to the style of this world, that we have forgotten about this. Many times I am asked to make all kind of statements about things that are said in the media about the Church or about Christians. And let's be clear: it is not only hurting, it is also many times based on wrong perceptions. And of course we should not just keep silent about injustice and about oppression. We have to speak up against evil in this world and in society. But should we not put much more emphasis on prayer? For evangelicals prayer should be core business. Or rather for any Christian it should be core business. That is something I have learned also in Africa: people in Africa pray! Is that maybe the secret behind the rapid growth of the Church in Africa? No it is not the end of all the problems: there is still a lot of poverty and injustice and violence and diseases. But people in Africa pray! And God is answering them!

Nehemiah prays too. And in the meantime the work is going on. Now the enemies really become nervous and they plan to come into action and infiltrate the city, overcome the builders and destroy the what has been rebuilt. The threat now really becomes serious.

⁸They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. ⁹But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat – it says in verse 8. Ora et Labora! Pray and work! What a Kingdom style!

But a new threat is looming: fatigue! And when you are tired, you also start to despair about everything.

You are becoming vulnerable for feelings of frustration, fear, hopelessness. You really have to hold on to your faith, when you feel that it is not going to work. It is just too much and too hard! And then, if fear is added to that, people easily give up.

Nehemiah also reacts to that: on the one hand side by equipping the people, giving them the weapons to defend themselves if necessary and on the other hand by encouraging them and pointing them to the Lord.

I believe that that is also a very important line we can draw to our times. What are we doing to equip Christians to deal with the challenges of this world?

In the Netherlands there is a lot of talk about discipleship.

Helping Christians and equipping them to follow Jesus with their whole life.

Not only in their relationship with the Lord or to the Church, but also in how could they live their life as witnesses of Jesus in this world? Not just defensive, but freely and bold.

And I think this is very important. It is a holistic, integral approach that really gives people who want to follow Jesus tools to engage with the world. One more threat that we see in Nehemiah 4. A threat that I also see in our time and our world. Let me call it: isolation. Everybody is doing his own thing: there is no communication, no coordination. Yes there is a common idea, maybe even a common mission and vision, but everybody is working on its own.

Nehemiah saw that this was weakening the project and its defense.

And therefore he puts some measures in place so that people could easily be called to the help of others.

I really believe that today, especially in secularized post-Christian Europe Evangelicals should join hands much more and communicate much more about what is happening: to mobilize prayer-support but also to see how we can help one another. And I pray that the EEA will be a useful vehicle and/or tool in God's hand to do that. Thomas, you are in a same kind of position as Nehemiah. But you cannot do it alone. You will need guards and soldiers on the floor. May you be the one that will help them to connect to one another and communicate with one another.

Brothers and sisters, up to now we have only focused on the threats that Nehemiah and his people faced. I would have liked to have more time to also look at the opportunities they got.

So that has to stand out for tomorrow. But I feel that we can learn a lot from the threats that we have read about in Nehemiah 4 and especially from the reaction of Nehemiah to these threats.

As a man that is clearly led by the Spirit of God, He is not intimidated by the enemies and by their plans. He continues to pray and put his faith in God. And why should we not do the same?

Yes, I know, situations nowadays are totally different. Hostility against Christians seems mounting in post-Christian Europe. And sometimes it is not just hostility from people that are not Christians at all, but even from people that say that they are followers of Jesus Christ also. Brothers and sisters of other churches. We know that these threats are real and that they are also a sign of the end time. Jesus himself has warned us for these things. So we should not wonder or get scared. Jesus has just called us to be alert and prepared. Indeed we don't have to be afraid. The apostle Paul says in Romans 8:31ff:

If God is for us, who can be against us?

³² He who did not spare his own Son,

but gave him up for us all—

how will he not also, along with him,

graciously give us all things?

³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?

It is God who justifies.

³⁴ Who then is the one who condemns?

No one.

Christ Jesus who died—

more than that, who was raised to life—

is at the right hand of God

and is also interceding for us.

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

³⁶ As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;

we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” ⁸

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

³⁸ For I am convinced

that neither death nor life,

neither angels nor demons,

neither the present nor the future,

nor any powers,

³⁹ neither height nor depth,

nor anything else in all creation,

will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

AMEN

Question for reflection:

- What are some of the threats that you are facing in your country, in your ministry, in your EA?
- How do you and/or should we react to that?
- How could we be more in touch with one another on these issues?