

A photograph of a rustic stone wall built from large, dark, irregular stones. The wall is set in a lush, green forest with tall trees and dense foliage in the background. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day. The text is overlaid on the image in a stylized, green font with a black outline.

To Build a Wall

Devotions from

Nehemiah

Louis Nel

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Dualism – the Absurdity!

Introduction to Nehemiah

Dualism is unacceptable for a believer! You've probably heard someone say: "I can't believe it of Ken!" He is such a nice man, how is it possible then that he can be such a rude fellow when he's at home? He abused his poor wife and children!"

Yes, often someone is kind at work and a jerk at home, or vice versa a good-hearted family man at home but a real bully at work, who gives his employees a hard time. This is definitely not something that suits a believer! You are not the devout Christian at church on Sunday and the one who swears and tells dirty jokes on Monday night with your pals. You are consistent. A fountain can't bubble out fresh and bitter water at the same time?!

This is what we see with Nehemiah - he remains consistent under all circumstances! In the king's court he is the skilled butler who carries out his work with dedication, and later he builds walls in Jerusalem with exactly the

same dedication, all for the sake of this God whom he serves with full dedication.

Nehemiah's story took place while Artasastah was king in Persia, between 465 and 424BC. He was also known as Artaxerxes I. It was a time of great political instability, with uprisings throughout the Persian empire, even in Egypt. Nehemiah was the king's butler, and therefore a high-ranking official and the king's confidant. It would therefore be to the king's advantage to send someone like Nehemiah to Jerusalem to establish stability there.

Although this book deals, among other things, with Nehemiah's personal memories of the rebuilding of Jerusalem, it was not written down until more than 100 years later, probably by the same priests who processed and compiled Chronicles and Ezra. It could even have taken hold as late as 330BC, in the time of Alexander the Great. Some theologians are of the opinion that the original writing was not done by Nehemiah, but rather by Ezra.

We can divide the book into four main parts. The first seven chapters deal mainly with how the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, often

under great resistance. The second part, chapters 8 to 10 deals with Ezra's reforms. Part three, chapters 11 and 12 describe some matters that Nehemiah dealt with, such as the dedication of the wall, as well as compiling a list of who had to stay in Jerusalem, and who had to go to other settlements. The fourth part, chapter 13 tells of his second visit to Jerusalem.

Who was Nehemiah? We do not know much about his person, apart from the fact that he was a Jew who was taken away from Judea during the exile. He eventually ended up in the king's court, where he held a high position in the city of Susan. Incidentally, it's the same city where Esther was also queen!

After being sent to Jerusalem, he now worked together with Ezra, where they did pioneering work to rebuild the city not only physically, but also spiritually. Although they worked together, their personalities differed widely. Ezra achieved his goal with his task with nice words, consultation and persuasion. Nehemiah was again the strong leader who chose to do his job without asking others' advice. He did not

tolerate opposition, and he certainly knew what he wanted!

Despite this, he had the people behind him, because everyone fully trusted his leadership! They knew that what he did was not in his own interest, but in their interest. This inspired them to throw their full weight into the task with great zeal.

We get to know Nehemiah as someone who loved the Lord. We see a long, heart-moving prayer when he learned of the condition of Jerusalem. Later, however, we also see on a few occasions that he sent up a "shooting prayer" when the need arose.

On the surface, the book of Nehemiah looks like it is a story about a wall being built, but it is much more, and each of us can learn from this book today, which is still relevant today, more than 2000 years later!

Prayer:

Lord, our prayer is that you will open this book that looks like just another piece of history to us so that we will clearly hear your voice in it!

Bad News!

Nehemiah 1

"Jerusalem's walls are in pieces! And the beautiful old city gates – all burnt to ashes!"

How would you feel if someone came running out of breath and told you that there was a violent protest and your beautiful old church building was completely destroyed? The building is of course not sacred, but there is so much history attached to it. It is also the centre where a thousand activities take place. Apart from the worship services on Sundays, it is a place where people gather to run a feeding scheme for the poor. Work is being done in the Kingdom, Bible study is held and many other things. It's a disaster! Everyone is shocked!

Then Andrew stood up and he silenced everyone: "Friends, a great disaster has befallen us! But that's definitely not the end. If we all work together, we will rebuild it. I ask that one and all will participate to make a success of our project!"

Today we can be sure that the Lord repeatedly gives the right people at the right time to resolve a hopeless situation. This was also the case at the time when the exiles began to return to Jerusalem.

Nehemiah, a Jew who was born in Persia, made great progress there, and he was one of King Artasastah's (also known as Artaxerxes) high-ranking officials. A few of his fellow officials were released from exile, and it was certainly a happy day when they were able to return to their beloved Jerusalem. Ezra returned 13 years before Nehemiah, and there were already enough people who returned, so that they had already rebuilt the temple. However, their joy was short-lived, because what they found there filled them with horror. The once proud city was in total decay. The impenetrable walls fell down, actually dismantled by the enemy to make the city and people vulnerable. And where the city gate once stood majestically, there were now only blackened holes that no enemy could withstand. One of the men, Ganani hurried back to Susa to tell the terrible news. By the way, Persia had four important capitals, of

which Susa was one. Babel was still such a fortress city.

When this distressing news reached Nehemiah, he was greatly troubled. He sat down and cried non-stop and lamented over the dire situation for days on end. Like one in mourning, he mourned and fasted. In his memory he still had the picture of the wonderful city he had to leave behind when he was taken away from there. Now there is nothing left of all the beauty, and all the security has gone with it. It's open to any enemy to come and go as he pleases!

Did Nehemiah just surrender himself to his fate? No! After the shock subsided a bit, he took the bull by the horns and PRAYED!

Nehemiah's prayer grabs your heart: "*LORD God of Heaven! You are great, and we stand in fear of you. You faithfully keep your covenant with those who love you and do what you command. Look at me, LORD, and hear my prayer, as I pray day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess that we, the people of Israel, have sinned. My ancestors and I have sinned.*"

We clearly see that there is a relationship between Nehemiah and the Lord. God is faithful - after all, He made a covenant with His people, and He brings His side of the covenant! We see in his prayer his love for the Lord, as well as his complete dependence. Nehemiah is also firmly convinced that the Lord answers prayers.

Please also read Daniel 9:4 and 7, where Daniel's moving prayer is almost word for word the same as that of Nehemiah. Both are men who loved the Lord deeply and served fully!

Nehemiah realizes all too well why his people were taken into exile - they sinned! In his prayer he now confesses the sins on behalf of his people. But he also considers himself part of them, so he includes himself and his family when he asks for forgiveness. They all broke God's law and His precepts!

Someone who prays like this stands naked before God, stripped of all your falsehood and embellishment. You stand powerless, totally exposed before the great, all-knowing and all-powerful God who sees right through you!

Nehemiah realized very well that the Lord would scatter the people if they were unfaithful to Him. But He is a merciful and loving God, and when they would repent and turn back to Him, He would gather them again and bring them back to Him. After all, they are His property!

At the end of his prayer, Nehemiah asks the Lord that He will please let him succeed in what he must do. He therefore not only asks the Lord to do something about the situation, but he declares himself willing to be the Lord's hands and mouth. He is willing to put the shoulder to the wheel and work himself!

Prayer:

Lord, I learn so much from Nehemiah's prayer. Please make me willing to stand up and do what is necessary!

Before the King

Nehemiah 2:1-10

One usually wears one's state of mind on one's face, it's only natural! However, you can learn not to do this, but instead radiate kindness and love. It certainly does something to the people you meet, but it also does something to your own mood, even when you're feeling down.

Nehemiah tried his best never to show his worries when he was in front of the king. However, the news about Jerusalem's decline was just one too many for poor Nehemiah, and even though he tried very hard, the concern showed on his face when he had to pass the king his wine that day. "What's wrong, Nehemiah? I can see that something is bothering you! Are you sick? You look sad!"

Nehemiah's knees simply went numb - he was startled! How could he allow himself to show his concern in front of the king? But it was too late to try to hide it, so he blabbed out the

secret and told him about what was going on in Jerusalem.

"Nehemiah, is there perhaps something you want to ask me?"

Suddenly Nehemiah saw the Lord's answer to his serious prayer from earlier. The Lord threw a big door wide open for him, and now he had to think von his feet! The king wanted to know what he wanted, and he had to grab it very quickly with both hands. There was no time now to sit down and plan exactly how he should handle the matter. Of course, the right thing would be to first pray about the matter to consult the Lord, but there was no time for that either! So Nehemiah does the only thing that was right for him - he sends up an emergency prayer!

At that moment, Nehemiah knew exactly what to ask the King! "If it pleases the king, then please send me to Judah so that I can rebuild the city where my ancestors' graves are." By speaking of his ancestors' graves, he elicited the king's sympathy, for the Persian custom was to leave people who died simply

to the scavengers! Only royalty got a proper burial.

The king didn't even object: "When are you going to be back?"

When Nehemiah saw the gap, he took it and simply asked for letters to the governors so that he could travel where he needed without difficulty, as well as letters to give him permission to get wood from the royal forest for all the building work. Then Nehemiah comments: "The king gave me the letters, because the good hand of my God was upon me." (Neh. 2:8b).

Through this whole conversation we see how Nehemiah trusts God in everything. Before he asks the king to send him, he first consults the Lord, even if it is only in a prayer. And then, when everything works out exactly according to plan, he gives all the glory to God, because after all it is the Lord who made it so! Note that he does not ask leave to go, but he asks the king to send him! He therefore goes as an official of the king, and therefore with the king's authority. But more than that, the king even sent the commanders of the army and a

cavalry with him to assist him. How much more could he ask for? God's provision in everything takes your breath away!

The question is: why did everything go so smoothly? The king didn't even question his request! There are several reasons, the most important of which is that God's hand was upon him, and that He made things work in Nehemiah's favour. In the first place, Nehemiah was a confidant of the king. On top of that, the king was in a very good mood on that specific day, he even had the queen by his side (verse 6). This was only allowed when the king was in a good mood. Was it just a coincidence? Definitely not! "The good hand of God was upon him!" (verse 8).

From the course of the story, we would expect that everything else would go smoothly. But it wasn't that easy, because the Evil One would never allow it!

Sanballat from the town of Beth-Goron, northwest of Jerusalem, was the Regional Governor of the province of Samaria. Along with him, Geshem the Arab and Tobiah the Ammonite official were certainly not happy

when they heard about the state of affairs. They had extensive economic interests in the region, and the dilapidated state of Jerusalem suited them very well. This meant that they had no real competition. Should Jerusalem be restored and become financially viable again, it would mean competition for them and cut their profit margins. They wanted to avoid this at all costs!

Nehemiah could expect a lot of trouble from these three men, so he had to do his planning extremely carefully. However, Nehemiah knew that he was acting on God's instructions, and that he only had to trust in Him.

Prayer:

Lord, I stand in wonder every time when I see how You provide in miraculous ways when everything seems hopeless. Then I just realize once again that You are the almighty God!

Resistance!

Nehemiah 1:1-7

"When Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem heard...."

Right there Nehemiah's problems begin! In verse 10 we read: "They considered it a disaster that someone came who wanted to do something good for the Israelites." You must be happy that good is being done to someone, but these three men were angry about it! This forced Nehemiah to proceed with extreme caution!

Nehemiah had barely been in Jerusalem for three days when he already had his plans lined up. Of course he listened very carefully to what the Lord layed on his heart. In the utmost secrecy, he called together a small handful of trusted men. They waited until it is pitch dark, then they mount their steeds and under cover of night they sneaked out of the city through the Valley gate without anyone seeing them. Carefully, in dead silence, they rode along the outside of the city wall past the

Jackal well to the Dung gate. As they rode along, they carefully inspected the condition of the walls and the burnt-down city gates. From the Dung gate they continued to the Fountain gate and the King's pool. But there they could not continue, because their way was blocked. They were obliged to return to where they started at the Valley gate.

Nehemiah didn't know who he could trust, so he didn't tell anyone except the few who went with about his doings, not even the city leaders!

Only when he had finished his inspection and determined the extent of the damage to the city wall did he call the city leaders together. "Surely you realize that we are in big trouble? Our walls are in ruins and the city gates are all burnt down! We are a mockery of everyone around us! Let's rebuild the walls!"

Then Nehemiah told the leaders about his experiences with God, and how He guided and provided for Nehemiah in the most breathtaking way. He also told them of the king's wonderful reaction when he heard what was going on. Not only did he agree that

Nehemiah could go, but he officially sent Nehemiah and also gave him permission to get wood for the building from the king's forest!

Everyone was immediately very enthusiastic, and as one they agreed to start rebuilding the walls.

But.....

Sanballat of Goron, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of their decisions! These three cunning businessmen were not at all impressed with the state of affairs: "We have to nip this mess in the bud right away!" they decide. Their first tactic is to make fun of the men, because hopefully this will stifle their desire for the work very soon: "What are you trying to do now? Surely you don't think you'll be able to rebuild these giant walls? And on top of that - does the king ever know about this scheming you're up to? It's rebellion, isn't it? If he hears about this, he's going to crush you!"

Nehemiah simply answered them: "The God of heaven, He will make us succeed. We, his servants, will prepare and rebuild. But you

have no share in, no right to, or no inheritance in Jerusalem." (Neh. 2:20).

The opposition that Nehemiah encounters is repeatedly introduced by the word "hear." It begins in 2:10: "When Sanballat and Tobiah heard it..... it was a disaster for them." "But when Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem heard it..... they mocked." (2:19). "When Sanballat heard..... he was troubled" (4:1). "When Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, Ammonites and people of Ashdod heard that it was progressing, they became very angry." (4:7). "Our enemies have heard that their plan is known to us." (4:15).

Their strategy followed a pattern: First they considered it a disaster. Then they mocked them. Later, their opposition became so severe that the builders had to work under armed escort (chapter 4). When nothing worked, they tried to eliminate Nehemiah permanently (chapter 6).

It is still interesting that Nehemiah does not invoke the king's mandate, even though it was the king who officially sent him. For Nehemiah, however, it was of crucial importance that

everyone would know that he only appealed to God "because the good hand of my God was upon me!"

The question is: where does my strength lie as a believer? With God alone!

Prayer:

Lord, I want to praise and worship You because I can always call on You. You are my Light and my Strength!

Jump in and Start Building!

Nehemiah 3

When we read Nehemiah, we usually read the first few lines of chapter three, and then we simply turn to chapter 4. Chapter three is just a long list of names of people who helped to build the wall. Now what's interesting about that? This morning I want to scratch a little in that list, because just at first glance I was struck by some very interesting things. But let's start at the beginning!

After Nehemiah informed the inhabitants of Judea about their great dilemma, everyone was fired up to start building immediately. However, a lot of planning had to be done to make the classification of who would build where. It would become a task that was far too great for only the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so people from all over Judea were called up to come and help. It is not mentioned in the book, but I can imagine that it must have been a huge logistical operation to arrange accommodation and food for everyone!

Building materials had to be provided. Stones for the wall were the easy part because they could reuse the stones from the demolished wall. However, the gates were another matter, and wood had to be found and processed. As well as all the ironwork for latches, hinges and the like.

There was probably a planning meeting where Nehemiah took the lead. Nevertheless, it was a spontaneous decision of the entire community and everyone participated, priests, craftsmen, officials, leading citizens and ordinary people. At the meeting it was probably determined who would work where, based on their abilities.

First on the list of builders was none other than Eliashib, the high priest and his fellow-officials, the priests. Their task was to rebuild the Sheep Gate. Nehemiah wanted to set an example for everyone. However, there was a hitch somewhere, because later in the book we read that Eliashib's grandson was married to a daughter of their great enemy, Sanballat. Sanballat was probably on good terms with Eliashib. Nevertheless, Nehemiah allows

Eliashib to take a leadership role in the building work. It was possibly a very smart and tactful decision by Nehemiah!

By the way, this Sheep gate is the one we read about in John 5, where the bath of Bethesda was where Jesus healed the sick man.

When we scroll through the list of names like this, some very interesting facts emerge. The first one that caught my attention was Shallum, the son of Hallohesh. He was a distinguished man, commander of half of the Jerusalem district. This man had a team of daughters who were not afraid of hard work, because his daughters repaired part of the wall with him. Packing giant stones is definitely not a job for soft feminine hands!

There were people who simply did "repair work", such as Gananja the ointment mixer, Jedaiah and Hattush. It was laborious, tedious work that would involve packing giant stones into the wall. Definitely back-breaking work that peeled the skin off your hands. Others again did very specialized work, such as the sons of Hassenaaah who rebuilt the Fish gate.

They laid beams and put in the gate doors, sockets and deadbolts. Of course, we must consider that they did not have the modern tools that make such work easy today!

There were also people from all walks of life, yet no distinction seems to be made. Rephaiah, the commander of the other half of the Jerusalem district worked shoulder-to-shoulder with ordinary Jedaiah. There were Levites, temple servants, priests, ointment mixers, goldsmiths and merchants. Everyone worked together to repair the walls and gates.

But as it happens everywhere, there are a few men who were not willing to help. A group of builders from Tekoa joined Nehemiah's team, but the dignitaries from their area decided that it was beneath their dignity to perform such hard work!

Today we often have a similar situation in our church community. The problem, however, is that there is usually only a small handful that is willing to do the work. In a congregation there is room for practically every kind of trade. However, you often have to struggle to find someone who is willing to perform a certain

task. In most congregations, there is a constant shortage of people who are willing to work as ward leaders, and when something like a men's meeting is held, for example, only a small handful show up!

But there are also quite a few willing ones who just come forward time and time again and work hard just where they see a need, no matter how humble the task. They are the wall builders of Nehemiah!

Prayer:

Thank you Lord, for everyone who is willing to work in Your kingdom!

Threat from Samaria

Nehemiah 4

It often happens that when you perform a task that the Lord has given you with heart and soul, then there is opposition of one kind or another. Usually this is in the form of mockery, but it can get even worse! The question is, how does a believer deal with it? Your first line of defence is prayer confidence. But hand-in-hand with prayer, there also goes an actual counter-action, without it distracting you from your task. At the same time, you focus even more on completing your task to the best of your ability.

The Judeans enthusiastically set to work to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and right from day one the work progressed quickly. But..... their good progress had reached the ears of their opponents!

Sanballat heard of the success Nehemiah and his team were achieving, and he was deeply troubled. His first reaction was to mock the men and women of Judah who were working

so diligently. "What are the miserable Judeans doing? ... Do they really want to reuse the stones from the piles of rubbish while they are charred?" His Ammonite ally Tobiah was present when he made this cutting remark before a select group of Samaritans and the army of Samaria. His response was: "Whatever they rebuild, if a fox jumps up against it, he will make a hole in their stone wall." I'm sure the whole meeting roared with laughter at his joke! But it wasn't really funny at all!

Nehemiah's first reaction, when he heard Sanballat mocking them, was to pray. He realized that they were not only trying to make a mockery of the Judeans, but that they were actually taunting God! This only spurred him on to work even harder, and the construction progressed well beyond expectations, so much so that within a short time they had already progressed to half the height of the wall. This group of Judeans were heart and soul in their task to bring the city back to its full glory!

With great concern and anger, Sanballat had to watch how the construction progressed. He

has to make a plan to protect his profitable industry! Then he gathered Tobiah, the Arabs, Ammonites and people of Ashdod to discuss the crisis. Everyone was furious at the state of affairs because it affected them all. This turned into a conspiracy to destroy all the Jews' hard work in Jerusalem.

Of course, Nehemiah and the Judeans heard about the conspiracy, and psychologically it put a lot of pressure on them so that the work finally started to become too much for them. The threat of an overwhelming force of enemies from outside badly affected and discouraged them. Again Nehemiah turned to God, and he prayed very earnestly.

Finally, Nehemiah was forced to take security measures, because Sanballat became a great threat. They even tried to infiltrate the Judeans, and their plan was to kill people to thwart their construction. So Nehemiah began to set out guards to stop the enemy. At the same time, he encouraged the Judeans that the Lord would protect them: "You must not be afraid of them. Think of the great and awesome Lord!" Ultimately it meant that they

had to build with a weapon in one hand. It was certainly not easy!

Everyone was told to keep their ears open for the sound of a ram's horn because if someone was in trouble, everyone had to go and help. But then Nehemiah very quickly added: "Our God will fight for us!" If they were willing to go, the Lord would give them the victory. After all, it was to His glory!

Of course, this required sacrifice from everyone, because at night the men could no longer go home to sleep, it would mean that everyone would have to stay in Jerusalem day and night to prevent the enemy from attacking them. During the day they had to build with weapons in hand and at night they had to stand guard!

The Judeans were on the verge of despair with Sanballat beginning with his threat. They saw themselves as a handful of threatened Judeans who were far too small for this superior force from the outside. They were certainly no match for their enemies. However, Nehemiah completely reversed the situation. Suddenly the Judeans began to realize that

they were under the protection of the Most High.

Romans 8:31 puts it so beautifully: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" and verse 37: "But in all this we are even more than conquerors through him who has shown his love to us." In verse 38 Paul says that absolutely nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God! These Judeans realized this, and today, when we get discouraged about our own situation we must realize it too! We must regain true trust in God and stop facing our problems with helpless hands. The great cause of God's Kingdom must again become the main goal of our faith community!

Prayer:

Lord, please help us to turn our eyes away from our problems and see You so that we will be able to serve Your cause with full confidence!

Economic Crisis

Nehemiah 5:1-13

While Nehemiah and the Judeans were busy building the walls of Jerusalem, a threat of a completely different nature suddenly appeared. No, it was not Sanballat and his followers, but it came from their own ranks.

Judea suffered from an economic crisis. On the one hand, the construction work on the wall began to take its toll, because practically all the men were involved in the construction and defence of the city, as a result their farming deteriorated. The necessary income to keep their families alive was no longer there and people began to impoverish. Furthermore, the tension with their neighbouring peoples affected their foreign trade very adversely, and the income was simply not there anymore!

The result of this condition was that they had to buy food because they could not produce it themselves. But there was no money for that either, because they no longer had an

income from trade. To make matters worse, they still had to pay taxes on their cultivated lands and vineyards even though they produced nothing. So they were forced to borrow money. For such loans of course, security had to be provided, so they had to mortgage their land.

The situation got so out of hand that some of them even had to give their children as slaves to the moneylenders. Others again lost their property. It was a hopeless situation! The sadness of it all, was that these moneylenders were their own people! It was the wealthy Judeans who could afford to lend money to their countrymen, but now they took advantage of the situation. However, they were completely within their rights according to the instructions of Moses. The stipulation was that if a fellow-countryman became your slave for one reason or another, then you could remain his/her owner for six years, after which the person had to be freed (Deut. 15:12-15).

However, the circumstances here were such that they could not afford to let such a

situation continue under their current circumstances. Everyone had to stand together for everyone's benefit. Therefore, to leave a part of their workforce burdened under an unfair burden of slavery and debt while the economy was in a dire state, would only be to the detriment of the entire nation. In addition, it could damage the construction work and cause great damage to the essential food production.

Nehemiah was upset when he realized what was going on, and he talked to the culprits, but it didn't seem to have the desired response. He was therefore forced to convene a public meeting, where he spoke harshly to the rich. What they were doing was unheard of! It was certainly not to the glory of God, and it would mean that their enemies could point fingers at the people!

Then Nehemiah pleaded with them. He does not exclude himself and he confesses that he and his associates had also lent money and wheat to people. He was willing to set an example and write off all the debts. Then he appealed to the other moneylenders to follow

his example and return their debtors' properties to them. In addition he asked that they also had to write off the interest on their debt.

This was certainly not a small matter that Nehemiah asked of the rich, yet every one of them agreed. Nehemiah then called the priests to confirm their undertaking with an oath. It would therefore not only remain a friendly promise, but become a serious matter before God! Nehemiah concludes this pericope with the words: "The whole assembly said "Amen!" and they praised the Lord. The people kept their word."

What a wonderful, breathtaking moment in the history of a nation!

The difference between rich and poor has caused a lot of tension over the centuries and caused an ever-widening gap between people. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Moreover, the rich use the legal system to increase their wealth while the poor lose more and more of their rights. It's a giant snowball effect that tears a community apart!

The faith community is called upon to set an example and do something about the increasing poverty. For a start, it is our duty to alleviate the distress of our fellow-believers. But it must also spread much wider than just our "inner circle", because there are thousands out there who are in great need!

Not only is it the "right thing to do", but it is also part of our testimony to magnify the Name of the Lord. It is a way to introduce the love of the Lord to the world out there!

Prayer:

Lord, please give me an open heart and hand towards people in need so that I can spread Your wonderful love in this way!

Example

Nehemiah 5:14-19

We must remember that the king, Artaxerxes of Persia sent Nehemiah to Judah, and that he was one of the king's high-ranking officials. Nehemiah was therefore there in the capacity of regional governor for a full twelve years. He had every right to levy taxes on the people to pay for his maintenance. After all, his predecessors did this, and besides the hard cash they also demanded wine and other products from the Judeans!

However, Nehemiah decides not to ask for anything from the Judeans and to give up his right to taxes. Moreover, he even entertained visiting officials of the Persian king and other Judean dignitaries with food out of his own pocket without demanding it from the local people, even though it was perfectly within his right. In fact, he dedicated himself to the building work. He did fully realize how many material sacrifices this required from the citizens and he could not place even more burdens on their shoulders!

Actually, it took Nehemiah personally a lot to keep everything going. He had no less than 150 people at his table daily and gave them food. This alone must have been a huge project, because every day there was "one cattle, six selected flocks and birds, prepared at my expense" (v. 18). And every tenth day he entertained them with an abundance of wine of different varieties.

Nehemiah gives proof that he was there for one purpose only. It was certainly not to impress the king or gain his favour. Even less was it to try to get into the good books of certain local residents, or to enrich himself. After all, he paid for everything out of his own pocket! His only motivation was to serve God!

A leader in a faith community's character must be unimpeachable at all times! A leader does not dare to expect others to do what he himself is not prepared to do. He must set the example for all to follow.

Years ago I was at an army camp near Potchefstroom, when a terrible storm broke out that night. The floodgates of heaven were open and the torrents of water threatened to

wash away our tents. While the storm was at its fiercest, I heard the familiar voice of the camp commander: "Men, are you safe?" He was walking from tent to tent in the pouring rain to encourage us all. He disregarded his own comfort and did what no one else was willing to do, while he was fully entitled to sit in the comfort of his own tent!

That man's sacrifice struck me very deeply, and every troop in the camp had only the greatest respect and appreciation for him! What you preach and what you expect from others must function visibly in your own life.

Of course, Jesus set the greatest example of how a leader should act. We see this in absolutely everything He did during the three years of His public ministry. Not in the miracles He did or all the beautiful things He said, but in His general actions.

- He talked to the Samaritan woman while everyone avoided her, not only because she was a Samaritan, but also because of her reprehensible past.

- He went to eat with Matthew the publican and his wretched sinner friends despite all the criticism and accusations.
- He touched a leper despite the fact that it could have brought Him into great trouble.
- He not only preached love, but He practically lived it every day.
- He went to Jerusalem, knowing that it would cause His crucifixion and death.
- He faced death on the cross to pay for the world's sins, knowing that most of the people He paid for would reject Him and His gift of life and even despise Him for it!

To follow Jesus' example perfectly is totally impossible! But at least we can try! By living out love to the best of my ability, I reflect the wonderful light of Jesus!

Prayer:

Lord, I must confess that I do not always set a good example as a leader. Please help me to live out Your love practically every day at all levels of society!

Nehemiah's Life Threatened

Nehemiah 6:1-19

The construction started to come to an end. Nehemiah could watch with satisfaction that all the walls were restored to their former glory. All that had to be done now were the doors that had to go into the gates, then everything was finished.

Slightly north of Jerusalem, however, there was a man who was not at all happy about the situation - Sanballat. In fact, Sanballat and his friends, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and all the other enemies of Judah were seething with rage! They conspired to get rid of Nehemiah for good!

It was then that one day a messenger arrived at Nehemiah with a note: "Come, let us gather at Kefirim in the Onovalley."

Nehemiah immediately smelled a rat! He then wrote a note himself and sent it to Sanballat and his henchmen: "This is a great work with which I am engaged; I can't come down to you. Why should the work stop because I have

to leave it and come down to you?" (6:4) Four times Sanballat sends the same message, and each time Nehemiah very diplomatically rejects it "because his obligations do not allow it."

When Sanballat saw that sweet talk did not work to lead Nehemiah into a trap, he changed his tactics. Again he sends a letter to Nehemiah, but this time he makes allegations about a rumour circulating that Nehemiah intended to make himself king of Judea, and that he and his Judeans would then rebel against the king from Persia! This was the real reason why they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem! According to rumours, Nehemiah even went so far as to appoint prophets who would proclaim that he was already king! Sanballat writes that these rumours were already on their way to the Persian king, and that great trouble was on the way! "Come on now, let's get together!" he concludes his plea.

Nehemiah simply answered him that Sanballat was inventing these stories! This was clearly psychological warfare to try to force Nehemiah to stop the work. However, he does

not succumb to this, and he turns to God to make his hands strong.

When nothing worked, Sanballat and Tobiah hired a false prophet named Shemaiah to make a "prophecy" that Nehemiah had to flee to the temple because someone was planning to kill him! Because Nehemiah was not a priest, it would be a religious offense if he did so, and he would incur the wrath of the clergy. Moreover, it would be a humiliation if he, the governor, were to flee! What kind of example would that be to the people? It was very clear that this prophet had been bribed to scare him with a false prophecy in order to try to destroy his credibility with the people!

From verse 14 we learn that this was not an isolated case, but that there were attempts from various sides to try to get rid of Nehemiah. For example, there was a prophetess by the name of Noadja as well as a few other prophets who tried to scare Nehemiah and hinder his work.

Nehemiah saw through all their schemes and paid no attention to them. "Who, in my situation, will enter the temple that he may

live? I will not go!" (v. 11) He stuck it out and simply continued with his task!

In less than two months, a mere 52 days, this huge, almost impossible task of completely restoring the dilapidated walls of Jerusalem was completed. Everyone who worked on it was motivated. Moreover, their need was very great, and the sooner it could be resolved, the sooner everything could return to normal and their economy could recover. It took the wind out of their enemies' sails! Many of the people's enemies began to realize that Nehemiah and his team had completed the work under the banner of God and with His help!

Still, it was not the end! The Samaritan hostility still continued. For example, there were close ties between certain Samaritans and Judeans. It was not only trade relations, but also intermarriage, and this caused tension. So was the high priest Shecaniah Tobiah's son-in-law. However, there was no question of any reconciliation, and Tobiah continued to try to scare Nehemiah!

We must realize all too thoroughly, that if you do the Lord's work fully, then the opposition will become more and more fierce! However, there is only one advice for that: to live even closer to the Lord and immerse yourself in His work! Do not pay attention to the twaddle of evil-doers, but delight in the Lord!

Prayer:

Lord, I thank You that sometimes there is opposition to the work I do for You, because it reminds me that I am on the right track. Strengthen me Lord, so that I will be able to do Your work with distinction!

Residents are resettled

Nehemiah 7

It was a happy day when Jerusalem's walls were completed. Everything was finished - the walls were as good as new again and the gates rebuilt with their doors in place. The next step was now to appoint people who would be responsible for guarding the gates, the so-called Gatekeepers. It was extremely necessary that highly responsible men would serve here, because the enemies of the people were cunning! Nehemiah still did not trust the Samaritans at all and he did not want to take a chance with them. They therefore received the clear instruction that Jerusalem's gate should not be opened until "the sun is hot" (v. 3). It had to be closed and bolted again for the night before sunset so that no one could sneak past the guards!

At the same time, however, the spiritual is also taken care of, and singers and Levites are appointed.

However, it was of utmost importance that responsible persons had to be appointed to handle the city's management. Hanani, probably the person who told him about the dire state of the city walls at the time, is given this task. Along with him, Hangniah is appointed. He is described as a very reliable man, and that he had great respect for God. It is important that persons in such responsible positions not only have strong leadership qualities, but also have a close relationship with God!

When the riots hit us in KwaZulu-Natal in July 2021, my neighbours and I were forced to stand watch at night to ensure that our homes would be safe. The conditions were very unstable! In Jerusalem, conditions were also very uncertain, so it was not only the gate guards who were on duty, but the other inhabitants of Jerusalem also had to stand guard, most of them in front of their own homes. These were certainly not easy times!

With this, Nehemiah's primary task was completed. Still, he couldn't sit back and relax, because there was still a lot of work to do. The

walls were indeed built, but inside the city it was dull and drab! Many of the houses were in a terrible condition and the city was largely depopulated because many of the old inhabitants moved to smaller towns around Jerusalem due to the terrible conditions. Jerusalem had to be developed again into a full-fledged city. Nehemia would have had to make a proper survey of the families in order to resettle people again.

Meanwhile, Nehemiah discovered a list of all the people who had returned to exile at the time. It had been more than 100 years before that the retreat took place under the leadership of Zerubbabel. This list was to serve as a means for Nehemiah to determine which families should be resettled in Jerusalem. We also read in Ezra 2 of this same list. For later readers of the books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, this list emphasized the important leadership of these three persons, Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra was of course responsible for restoring the temple service, while Nehemiah again focused on restoring the faith community and the city. So here we

see the connection between the work of the three leaders in perspective.

This is a long list of names of people who are totally unknown to us. This is just one of several similar lists that appear in the Bible, not only in the Old Testament but also in the New Testament. For an outsider, it is just another boring list, but for someone involved, it is a comfort and encouragement. Some time ago I was at Dingaanstat, where there is such a long list of names on a monument of all those who died when Dingaan massacred the Voortrekkers. To an outsider it is just a list of names, but for me it was heart-warming, because I saw names of my own family, even my own Great-Grandfather! It was especially comforting when the old Zulu minister's words that afternoon were, that they should urge us to reconciliation!

What kind of comfort can we draw from this today? For a start, it gives us the assurance today that God does not forget a single one of His children! The name of everyone who belongs to the Lord is written - not in a list like this, but in the great Book of Life. Already from

the time of creation, names are written in this book, so we read in Revelation 13:8. We must realize very thoroughly that God, who rules over the world through all the ages, is faithful down to the smallest details about all the names of His children! And that includes me and you as well!

Prayer:

Lord, when I read this list of names, it wants to discourage me until I begin to realize that Your wonderful grace is depicted in it!

Reading of the Law

Nehemiah 8:1-13

The city was rebuilt and the inhabitants of Judah were resettled. Now it was time to pay serious attention to the spiritual well-being of the people. This was the task of Ezra, another giant leader in Nehemiah's time. Ezra was already responsible for restoring the temple service, and the time had come to start teaching the people again about God and what He expects of them.

The whole nation went up to Jerusalem with great excitement. It was the seventh month - somewhere between September and October, and the bonfires were burning high! Ezra decided to have the people gather in the square in front of the Water Gate. The meeting could not be held at the temple, because only the men were allowed there and he wanted everyone who could understand, men, women and children to hear from the Lord!

A wooden stage was specially built for the occasion. With great anticipation and excitement, the entire nation gathered in front of the stage very early on the morning of the first day. Immediately Ezra set foot on the stage and with him thirteen men. In his hands he held a giant scroll. All attention was focused on Ezra. He was not only a priest but also a scribe, someone with a thorough knowledge of the Bible of that time.

With great dignity he unrolled the scroll with the Book of the Law of Moses before him while the people gasped for breath. Like one man, the whole nation stood up in reverence for the Word of God. Then Ezra began with a prayer of praise to praise and worship the Lord while the whole congregation held up their hands in the typical manner of the time and agreed with his praise with "Amen, amen". After that, everyone knelt down in worship before the Lord with their faces towards the ground.

I think the people were so moved by what Nehemiah and Ezra had been able to do recently through God by lifting up a broken nation again, that a new reverence and awe

for God began to form in this congregation. We see it in the way they act.

After this touching opening, Ezra began to read from the Law of Moses. The Book of the Law is of course the Pentateuch or the first five books of the Old Testament. It would be impossible for Nehemiah to read through all five books in such a short time span of only half a day, so we can assume that he only read a small part of them. When he began to read, a deadly silence fell over the congregation as they listened to him attentively with ears pricked.

Meanwhile, thirteen Levites dispersed among the people. Everyone probably gathered a group of people around him, and while Ezra was reading they explained to the people what it all meant. In this way the law was not just a bunch of instructions, but they could learn what it's true meaning was and how it had to be lived practically.

We can possibly explain this with the commandment that you shall not kill. This is only a guideline and it has a much wider meaning than that you may not physically "kill"

someone. It also means that you should not harm anyone, either physically or mentally. Gossip is also a way of "killing!" However, the commandment must be lived positively by showing love to people.

The reading of the Lawbook struck a deep chord with each and every one, so that everyone was shocked and deeply aware of how far they had strayed from God's instructions. Emotions ran high and they wept in deep mourning over their sins. However, Ezra pressed it on the heart of the congregation, that it was indeed a holy day for God, but that it was definitely not a day to cry but rather a day of great joy for everyone! Now was the time to celebrate! They had to go back to their places of residence and distribute delicacies to their families. But they were not to keep it for themselves, they also had to share with other people who didn't have anything to celebrate with.

In our congregation we have the habit of having a "bread-breaking meal" after every Holy Communion event, where everyone brings a loaf of bread and spread, and then

we share with each other. And those who brought nothing are invited to eat with the others. This is a big festival, time and time again and everyone stands around chatting, and no one wants to go home because it's so nice to be able to hang out together like this!

The law of God is not something to mourn over. Yes, indeed it gives you an awareness of your shortcomings. But actually it is a source of true joy for you. After all, Jesus paid for all our sins and we are absolved! It's enough to make any believer burst into bubbling joy!

Prayer:

Lord, I want to burst out bubbling in a joyful song: "It's bubbling in me, because I am so happy: Jesus loves me!" I realize this morning how big my debt is, but that You have already written off everything. Thank you Lord!

Big celebration!

Nehemiah 8:14-19

I hope this past Easter was as breathtaking an event for you as it was for me! Last week we had an "adoramus service" every night. These were worship occasions where the congregation could be silent before the Lord with a view to the approaching Easter. The church building's lights were all off, except for three illuminated crosses in the front of the church. Furthermore, there were only a number of candles. A solemn silence was maintained throughout. The service consisted of readings from various passages of Scripture and the recitation of some striking poems by well-known poets. The singing was sacred and almost muffled. All this created a wonderful atmosphere of devotion, which made Good Friday and Easter Sunday two great highlights in my life!

After the Law was read to the people, the leaders of the people gathered with the priests and Levites to talk about what they had heard and experienced. Of course, Ezra was

also there, and he led their conversations. Then they made an interesting discovery, that there was a specific festival that everyone had forgotten about, one that Moses had instituted during their wanderings in the desert. On the seventh month, everyone had to build themselves booths from tree branches and stay in them for seven days! It had to remind them of the time when they had to survive in the desert after their exodus from Egypt.

It was now precisely the seventh month, and it was a golden opportunity to introduce this festival again. But because no one knew about this festival anymore, everyone throughout the country had to be told about it very quickly. Of course, there were no modern means of communication such as TV, radio or mobile phones, so messengers had to go throughout the country to tell the news. Every person in Judah had to know about this, and everyone had to be given clear instructions about what they had to do. They had to go to the mountains and collect branches to build their booths. These could be olive trees, wild olives, myrtle trees, date palms or any lush growing plants. The goal was to build

something that could provide protection from the elements.

It wouldn't really matter where they build these booths. In a densely built city like Jerusalem, they could simply build it on the flat roofs of their houses. These booths were to remind them of God's protection and preservation during their desert journey. But it also had to give them hope for the future because they trusted in God to continue to protect and preserve them!

With great zeal the whole people went into the mountains to look for branches, and then the building work began. There was a festive atmosphere, and very soon every niche in Jerusalem was filled with green booths. The forecourt of the temple was built from side to side and all the city squares, especially those at the Water Gate and the Ephraim Gate were covered with booths and more booths! There was a jolly celebration and the bonfires were burning high. I can imagine how there must have been merrily singing and dancing, and how the merry laughter rang out around the campfires in the evening.

However, it wasn't all just fun and pleasure, Ezra read to everyone every day from the scroll of the Law of God. After all, that was what it was all about! It was about the wonderful God who saved and preserved them and brought them back to their native land. Furthermore, it must have connected them to God in a very special way, by spending the eighth day of the festival as a dedicated day of rest.

Nehemiah tells that since Joshua's time when he led the people into the promised land, there had never been such a big festival of booths celebrated again!

It takes me back to the time when I was a young boy. We celebrated the Day of the Covenant Festival every year at Waterval Boven. It was also a jolly festival that lasted a full week each time. There were campfires and Boere sports and folk dancing. It was a big happening that everyone tackled with great enthusiasm and joy. But then, when December 16 arrived, everything suddenly changed into a quiet, harmonious, sacred atmosphere. The whole neighbourhood was

gathered on the festival grounds in the field diagonally across from our school. The festival hall was packed to the brim to commemorate the Day of the Covenant, the day when God miraculously saved and maintained us!

Actually, every day today should be a "booth festival day" for us. The exuberant joy of our deliverance from the slavery of sin must bubble up from our hearts, and it must be on our lips and radiate from our faces. At the same time, there must be a dedicated seriousness with us to do the will of God. Actually, it is not that difficult to combine these two thoughts, because they go hand in hand with each other!

Prayer:

Lord, my heart overflows with joy today because You made me Your child and that I can now experience all the privileges of being a true child! Thank You for keeping me in Your protection. Help me to be able to share my joy with everyone who crosses my path!

Humiliation

Nehemiah 9:1-37

The old man – I (thankfully) can no longer remember who he was – watched in annoyance as us children jested and laughed merrily and made jokes. His frustration levels at our exuberance rose even higher, until he burst out: “Now, stop that silliness! From laughing comes crying” We were put off completely, and sneaked away to look for another place where we could be happy in peace!

The older generation will probably still remember the communion occasions of yesteryear. In my younger days it had at least cooled down a little from the week-long communion from Grandpa's time. and was "just" a weekend. Everything started on Friday evening at the "preparation service", a stiff event where there was a lot of serious conversation, especially with the young men in our railway village. They were just a naughty bunch and the pastor seriously reprimanded them! Saturday evening it was another "dark"

humbling service. Sunday morning was Holy Communion and Sunday evening was followed by "contemplation", which was often also such a sad affair.

But it's actually the Lord's Supper that struck me the most. In those years, the vicar and the church council wore black suits, mostly dress coats. The pastor also wore a pitch-black toga with black tassels. Funny that their clothes looked extra black to me on Holy Communion Sunday when the church council pushed open the vestry doors on either side of the pulpit at exactly 9 o'clock and walked solemnly and slowly into the church. The pastor stood extra long and prayed at the bottom step of the pulpit. There was an awkward silence in the church, and if someone coughed, everyone looked around at the culprit!

The sermon was then usually one of those brimstone and fire sermons that made you feel terribly guilty, and the whole service was one big torture. When the communion was finally served, it was a long, drawn-out affair, where some people first prayed for a long time

before passing the cup to the next person. And our children? We were totally excluded. We just had to sit there and watch what the adults were doing! Communion was torture!

In Nehemiah's time, the Day of Atonement was such a gloomy day where everyone put on mourning clothes, made of coarse goat hair. As a sign of humility, they sprinkled dirt on their heads, and they fasted and confessed their sins as well as their ancestors' sins.

It is strange that this day occurred after the merriment of the festival of booths. Later, however, it was held before the booth festival, which made more sense.

Once again, the event was paired with Levites who read from the Law of God to the people. The people humbled themselves before God and bowed before the Lord to confess their sins.

After that, seven Levites entered the stage and sang a long, touching song. It started as a song of praise to God about all the wonderful things He has done for the people over the years. It turns into a song of penance to ask for forgiveness for the way they strayed from God.

What does this event want to say to the later readers of the book, and also to us today?

This emphasizes the necessity that a believer must measure his life against the demands of God! When you experienced Jesus' salvation that day, it does not mean that you can now live lawlessly - your sins are now forgiven and you can do as you wish! No! This means that you are now going to try to live according to God's will as far as possible. Therefore, it is necessary that we do introspection from time to time to see if we are still on track.

Sin is certainly not a trivial matter! It's so important that it often determines history! Still many believers often dismiss sin as trivial. This passage from Nehemiah's book should encourage every believer to see ourselves in the light of God's Word so that we can get away from the licentious stranglehold of so-called "cheap grace" and live fully as freed citizens of the Kingdom of God!

I began with the communion of yesteryear, and I would like to conclude with the communion of today. I thank the Lord that the Lord's Supper has experienced a complete

turnaround since my childhood. Today it still has an element of humility in it, because surely I must know that God's grace is definitely not "cheap grace." He paid the price for my salvation, and therefore I must also do my part. But I fall far short so often. But then the Lord's Supper is a festival full of joy to once again experience God's great love, grace and sacrifice! And on top of that, everyone is included, even the children!

Prayer:

Lord, I stand guilty before You, because I often fail to live as You expect me to. Thank you for the salvation that You bought so dearly for me! I so much want to live according to Your will and to Your glory!

The Undertaking

Nehemiah 9:38-10:39

After the great penance, Nehemiah decides together with the leaders of the people that, based on what has just happened here, it would be the right thing for this people to sign a written undertaking, or perhaps rather a binding agreement in which they pledge their allegiance to God.

It reminds us rather of the vow that the group of Voortrekkers made on December 16, 1838. Many people today question that vow. Can it ever still be binding on us today?

Even closer to each of our lives: my bride and I stand in front of the pulpit and promise eternal fidelity to each other. We solemnly promise that we will love each other through all the obstacles of life - until death do us part! It's a binding agreement!

The agreement that the people now make with God is indeed called a covenant, but it is of course not the same as the covenant that God makes with Abraham. God's covenant is

one-sided: He will be a God to Abraham, but Abraham must serve Him. In this covenant, however, the people bind themselves to maintain a certain lifestyle whereby they will obey God.

In Nehemiah 10 we see a long list of names of the persons who solemnly sign the enterprise on behalf of the entire nation and then seal it to make it an official and extremely important document. First on the list of signatories is the name of Nehemiah, the administrator. Then the names of 22 priests and 17 Levites follow, and after them all the leaders in the people. So it was an important document! These people take a dire oath on behalf of the entire nation to live according to the law of God. However, there is a clear stipulation, that it is only the persons who separated themselves from the heathen peoples who are affected by the agreement

What does their agreement involve?

First, not to inter-marry with the heathen peoples. During Ezra and Nehemiah's leadership, this matter comes up again and again. When we read the Bible, we must

realize that certain guidelines were made under certain circumstances. How should we understand and deal with such guidelines today? It's of course an open question!

The second provision is that there will be no trading on the Sabbath. It was a great sacrifice, because all the peoples around them normally continued with their activities on the Sabbath, and this would certainly affect their trade! In our own context, we must maintain a certain lifestyle in the midst of the unbelieving world in which we live!

Next, they lay down an obligation for themselves to make monetary contributions for the upkeep of the temple service. They would also provide wood for the burnt offerings. Is it a priority for me to make my contribution to my congregation's functioning?

Then there was a special contribution that they would make once a year, of the first fruits of their harvest, be it fruit, grain, livestock etc. to God. In our congregation, we give a "tithe of thanksgiving" every year, which is above and beyond our normal monthly contributions.

Then there are still the tithes of their land that they set aside for use by the Levites who do the work of the Lord. That's how we support our pastors today so that they can give their full attention to their task in the congregation.

These were only a few provisions, but we must remember that the Law of God is much more comprehensive than just a few provisions. These were just some of the matters that were highlighted that were important in their own time. These were matters related to the maintenance of the service of God, or in today's terms the administration of the congregation or church. However, keeping God's Law is much more comprehensive. You live according to the Law of God so that He can be served by it! In other words, my motive for keeping the law should not be about myself but about my devotion to the Lord.

The question is, what does keeping the law mean to us as believers today? Our circumstances are totally different from that time. Actually, it already started to change with the coming of Jesus, and He initially described law-keeping as love for God and

your neighbour. Love for God is simple, it means a relationship with Him and doing what He asks. Neighbourly love is more complicated, and Jesus went into it in more depth by describing how that love had to work practically, such as for example His parable of the good Samaritan. He also said that we should love one another just as He loves us, and that you should love even your enemy. However, it must be more than a feeling-love, it must be practical! Let's live God's law as Jesus described it!

Prayer:

Lord, I want to make a commitment today to serve You as You ask of me, in love for You and my neighbour!

Big Festivity

Nehemiah 11 and 12

There was a little problem - the leaders of the people resettled in Jerusalem, but a city populated with only the leaders was not a city! There was a big void, and the city needed residents. Most of the people lived in the villages around Jerusalem, even the temple staff, possibly because the city was in such a terrible condition. In the meantime, however, the city was rebuilt and ready to welcome it's inhabitants with open arms.

Nehemiah saw it as his task to repopulate the city so that it could come to it's full potential. We already see in chapter 7 that he investigated the returnees from exile. Now his great task was to recruit enough people from among them to populate the city satisfactorily.

It almost seems like most people were reluctant to return. Those who did want to go back were praised! So there was only one way out, and that was to appoint people to live in

the city. It would not have been fair of Nehemiah to appoint people left and right, so it was decided to appoint people by lot. One out of every ten families had to pack up their belongings and move to Jerusalem.

In the previous chapter we saw how the people undertook to give their tithes of the harvest to the Lord. However, something much bigger was happening here, when they realized that it was not just the tenth of the harvest that had to be given to God, but a tenth of the people themselves.

God does not only ask for your money and talents, but He asks for you yourself!

The lists that Nehemiah drew up of people who had to go to Jerusalem consisted first of Judeans, then Benjaminites, priests and Levites. The Levites naturally had specific tasks that were mostly spiritual in nature. They had to oversee the work outside the temple and they also had to handle the music and singing.

In chapter 12 we now read about the dedication of the wall. We have already read in chapter 6 and 7 that the wall was completed. However, there could not be a

meaningful inauguration until the city was properly repopulated and organized. Now it was all settled, and the inauguration could take place. It would also be a very big occasion, because here was a huge task that had been completed. Levites from far and wide were gathered from all the hamlets to make this a glorious event. After all, it was a very joyful day! They were there with all their cymbals, lyres, harps and trumpets, and there were also large groups of singers. When everyone was gathered, there was first a ritual cleansing of all the priests and Levites as a sign of their dedication to the Lord.

After the Levites and priests, the rest of the inhabitants followed, and they also had to be cleansed for the big day. They had to fast, abstain from certain things, wash their clothes, bathe and make sacrifices. Even the wall and the city gates were cleansed and dedicated to the Lord. It was as if a sanctuary had been consecrated, and here we also now see that Jerusalem is called the "holy city".

The people were divided into two large groups, and in two processions they moved

along the wall from two sides to meet each other at the temple. Ezra and Nehemiah each led a procession, followed by the musicians and choirs, and after them the rest of the people. I think it must have been a breathtaking spectacle! Psalm 147 may have had its origin here. Just listen - verse 2: "The Lord rebuilds Jerusalem, He gathers the scattered of Israel." And verse 12: "Praise the Lord, Jerusalem, praise your God, Zion, for He has strengthened the bars of your gates!"

Then they gathered in the temple while the priests blew the trumpets and the choirs sang. The joy was very great and the crowds - men, women and children cheered loudly! Over the ravines and ridges of Jerusalem the cheers of the crowd resounded, and you could just hear the exuberance from afar! In verse 43, Nehemiah writes: "for God has given them a reason for great joy!"

So the city was dedicated to God and it became the city of God, the holy city! (11:1)

We also see here that everything started to come into motion around the service to the Lord. Priests and Levites were organized to

perform specific tasks, so that the temple began to become the centre around which the entire city revolved.

As it would be appropriate on such a joyful day, there was once again a reading from the book of Moses while the whole people listened attentively.

Jerusalem became the symbol of God's presence with the faith community, and church (temple) and city became intertwined. Today we are called to also let our being a church and being human become one. Your Sunday and Monday life should be the same.

Prayer:

Thank you Lord for the wonderful message that flows from this event. Help me to continue my Sunday life also in my Monday life!

Dedication

Nehemiah 13:1-14

You will remember that Nehemiah was sent by King Artaxerxes, king of Persia to Jerusalem to serve as an administrator after Nehemiah learned of the decline of the city. He was there for twelve years before returning to Babylon.

After he had been in Babylon for a while, he decided that he wanted to see how things were progressing in Jerusalem, and he asked permission from the king to pay a visit to the city. Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Nehemiah immediately saw that things had gone badly wrong, and that all Ezra's good work in the temple had been undone!

You will also remember that we mentioned Eliashib, the high priest and that his grandson was married to a daughter of their great enemy, Sanballat. Sanballat was of course in cohesion with the Ammonite Tobiah. So it happened that Eliashib did the unheard of thing and gave Tobija a room in the temple

complex. We know of course that Ammonites were not even allowed in the temple! This was a horrible violation of the Judeans' earlier enterprise. They had totally strayed from maintaining their religious purity.

We can ask the question, how deep then was the great enthusiasm of the religious leaders we read about? Was it just skin deep? And if this was the sentiment of the leaders, what was the situation with the common people? You usually see that when there is decay in the leaders, then it spills over to the common people! I don't need to elaborate on this!

We then also see that it was not only religious rules that were violated, but that especially people such as the Levites and singers were affected by Eliashib's corruption, and that they no longer received the rations that should have compensated for their services. The result was that they were forced to stop their services and return to their land to make a living there. And of course the whole temple service suffered because there were no more singers and the temple service was neglected without Levites to do the work!

When your religious actions do not truly come from the heart, and are a personal conviction, it will at one time or another suffer a shipwreck! It's an age-old problem that people agree to do something nice without being truly convinced from the heart. Later, when the situation changes, they conveniently forget about the enterprise! To serve God simply because it is expected of you is purely a method of life. The true service of God comes deep from the heart.

Nehemiah was forced to take drastic action. Tobija's belongings were all thrown out of the temple room he occupied so that there was room again for the temple equipment that had originally been stored there. He rebuked the persons responsible for the management of the temple for their negligence. "Why is the house of God neglected?" he asked them, upset.

However, he did not sit down and brood over the damage that had been done, but he acted proactively. The first step was to bring back all the people who were in the service of the temple so that they could perform their

task again and restore the temple service. However, such a temple service could not take place without the necessary supplies, so the people were requested to contribute. Throughout Judah tithes were collected from wheat, wine and oil so that the temple could function properly again.

The next step was to appoint persons to manage the temple service and see to it that there were always enough supplies as well as that the Levites and singers would get their rightful allowances.

We can learn a lot from the life of Nehemiah. His devotion to the Lord was truly remarkable. When he learned of the decline of Jerusalem, he abandoned his peaceful and probably comfortable life in the palace to spend twelve years rebuilding Jerusalem under difficult conditions. Even after he went back to Babylon, he still didn't stop caring. He once again undertook a very long and arduous journey to make sure that everything was still running smoothly in Jerusalem.

In addition, we constantly see that he put his trust time and again only in the Lord. For

everything he did, he always asked God's approval first. A dedicated life before God is the only way that reform will truly stand. We do not see in Nehemiah the strong man who fixes everything that is wrong. He is totally dependent on God and he only does what the Lord asks of him. The Lord also asks for our total dependence on Him!

Prayer:

Lord, I fall far short as a leader, and I often follow my own head without first seeking Your will. Please help me to be dedicated in everything I do for You, in total dependence on You alone!

Desecration of the Sabbath

Nehemiah 13:15-22

I drive through Durban one fine Sunday to a church meeting. Suddenly I see something I've never seen before: shops that are open and selling their goods! Shocked, I hit the brakes to take a closer look. No, it wasn't my imagination! Has our government sunk so low that they allow trading on Sundays? I shook my head and drove on. Within a few months there was hardly a single shop that wasn't open on Sundays, because those who didn't open their doors wouldn't make it financially! Today, Sunday is the busiest day for most shops!

Nehemiah was just as shocked when he arrived in Jerusalem, because what did he see? A farmer who was busy treading a winepress to make wine! A little further on he came upon someone who was driving his donkeys, and the animals were loaded with sheaves of grain. "But isn't today the Sabbath?" he wanted to know.

Nehemiah had to watch with horror as rows of donkeys were on their way to Jerusalem, all loaded with products such as grapes, figs and wine. "Where are you going with this stuff?" Nehemiah asked.

"We're going to sell it in Jerusalem, sir!" was the answer every time.

"How can you!?" Nehemiah shouted. "Today is the Sabbath! You should know that you don't trade on the Sabbath!"

"But sir, if we don't do it, then the heathens will steal all our business!"

In Jerusalem, Nehemiah saw the stalls of the inhabitants of Sidon selling their fish. Then he began to realize where the problem began.

He immediately called together the leaders of the city and all the nobles. Nehemiah was certainly not a happy man. He had barely been gone a year or two, and here everything was falling apart! "What is this evil thing you are up to? You desecrate the Sabbath day!" Nehemiah pointed out to the city leaders that their ancestors had also disregarded God's instructions. And what were the

consequences? A great evil came upon them! "You are going to get the wrath of God over Israel because you desecrate the Sabbath!"

Remember, this people made a sacred covenant with God that they would uphold His precepts. No sooner was Nehemiah gone than they disregarded their own enterprise!

Nehemiah immediately stepped in and stopped the biggest cause of the problem. He ordered that the gates of Jerusalem were to be closed and bolted on a Friday afternoon before sunset and not to be opened before sunset on Saturday afternoon. This would prevent any foreigner from entering the city to trade.

Of course, these merchants were not happy, and many of them camped outside the gates on a Sabbath, probably hoping that they would be able to get in by luck, or that the strict measures would be relaxed one day or another. However, Nehemiah chased them away and threatened them with severe measures! After all, they were the major cause of the problem!

The question is, how should we apply this scripture to ourselves today? Actually, I am reluctant to talk about it, because there are different views on this among Christian believers. There are believers that say that we must today observe the Sabbath exactly as it was then. Then this would mean that the Sabbath is not celebrated on Sundays, but from sunset Friday evening to sunset Saturday evening. The Seventh-day Adventists still celebrate it this way today, and I don't want to say for a moment that they are wrong, because this is how they interpret the Scriptures and I respect them for that. However, I interpret the Scriptures differently. After all, Paul did say that some people believe that one day is more special than the other, and others that all the days are equally important. However, we must respect each other for the different views!

I personally believe that the Sabbath was replaced with Sunday with Jesus' resurrection. I do not want to go into detail here about the reasons for my view, as well as the view of the church in general, because that would entail a long discussion. However, I also believe that

it is different from the original celebration of the Sabbath, and not just a replacement!

In short, I see a Sunday as a much needed rest day from your weekly work. At the same time, it is also a day that I dedicate to the Lord and His work. It is therefore not a day of doing nothing, but a day on which I will go to church to serve the Lord with other believers and learn more about Him. Furthermore, it is also the time to do things for the Lord and my fellow man that I don't have time for during the week. So it would not be wrong at all to hang out with friends.

And if Sunday is a normal working day for you? Then any other day is also good enough (according to Paul) to devote to God as a day of rest.

Prayer:

Thank you Lord, that in your great grace you gave us a day of rest to rebuild our strength and at the same time spend time with you!

Mixed Marriages

Nehemiah 1:1-7

The law on mixed marriages caused great grief to some people at the time. For others, it was a very serious matter that was biblically based. Some people reacted with great fury against the law, while others reacted with equal fury towards those who violated that law. The church defended the law on biblical grounds that it was indeed justified, while other church groups protested vehemently that there were no biblical grounds for it. They were considered rebels and "communists"! Who was right?

I don't want to dwell on who was right and wrong, because today the debate is still going on, mainly based on social considerations. I certainly don't want to get involved in a debate! But in Nehemiah's time it was a very tender matter. However, we cannot, based on what was a very important consideration at that time, make a judgment that would kill mixed marriages today.

Let's take a look at what is written in the Bible about this to understand what the problem was in Nehemiah's time, as well as how we should interpret it today.

When we think of mixed marriages, the first person that comes to mind is the wise King Solomon and his thousand wives. Although he is considered the "king of love", his marriages were mainly due to political reasons. He married daughters of kings of other nations in order to forge bonds so that he would not be attacked by them, and not out of love. That was all well and good, but eventually he was seduced into idolatry by his wives, and that's where the big problem came in!

A second example is the strong man, Samson. The Philistine Delilah was ultimately his undoing. David was also seduced by a Hittite woman, and this led to murder!

But then we also have to see the other side of the matter. Rahab was not only a prostitute but also a Canaanite. However, she married an Israelite, Salmon. The great King David was born from her offspring, and so was eventually Jesus, the Saviour. Her son, Boaz later married

another pagan girl, the Moabite Ruth. All mixed marriages!

In Nehemiah's time, however, there were other factors that led to the Judeans having to sign an undertaking that they would not get involved in mixed marriages. The danger was always there that the spouses could tempt them into idolatry as was the case with Solomon.

However, there were other factors as well. Nehemiah encountered people whose children could no longer speak their own language, Hebrew, they spoke Ashdod or some other pagan language. So they could not grow up as part of the people!

However, there were other, more serious consequences. One example was the grandson of the high priest, Eliashib who was married to Sanballat's daughter. He would eventually become high priest, and because he was married to a heathen, it would violate the sanctuary because he was permanently unclean. Worse still, was that his son would also become high priest after him! This would mean that a half-heathen would have to do

the work of God in the temple! It was unheard of! Nehemiah was furious! He chased the man away!

We close the book of Nehemiah with some comments.

We must realize that we will never get rid of sin and its consequences in our present life. Nehemiah realized this very soon! No one is immune from it, not even the church. The only advice is that we believers must constantly guard against it and encourage and support each other.

Ezra and Nehemiah had a great influence on later generations. They were largely responsible for the "Law of Moses" becoming the authoritative standard for life. It was also the beginning of the acceptance of specific books which eventually became the Word of God, and which we still accept today as the Old Testament.

It is precisely also in their time where the Jewish community's very characteristic attributes began to take shape. Here the basis was formed of purity of descent as well as their

faithfulness to the Torah and especially the upkeep of the Sabbath.

Unfortunately, this also led to a very literal interpretation of the law, which was ultimately legally interpreted and lived out. This came to the fore especially later in the lives of the Pharisees and Scribes in the New Testament era. And of course, this ultimately set the stage for the coming of the Messiah.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are extremely relevant to us as modern believers today. We will also tackle Ezra at a later stage.

Prayer:

Lord, it is often so difficult to understand Your Word correctly. I ask for wisdom to hear from Your Word what You want to say to me!