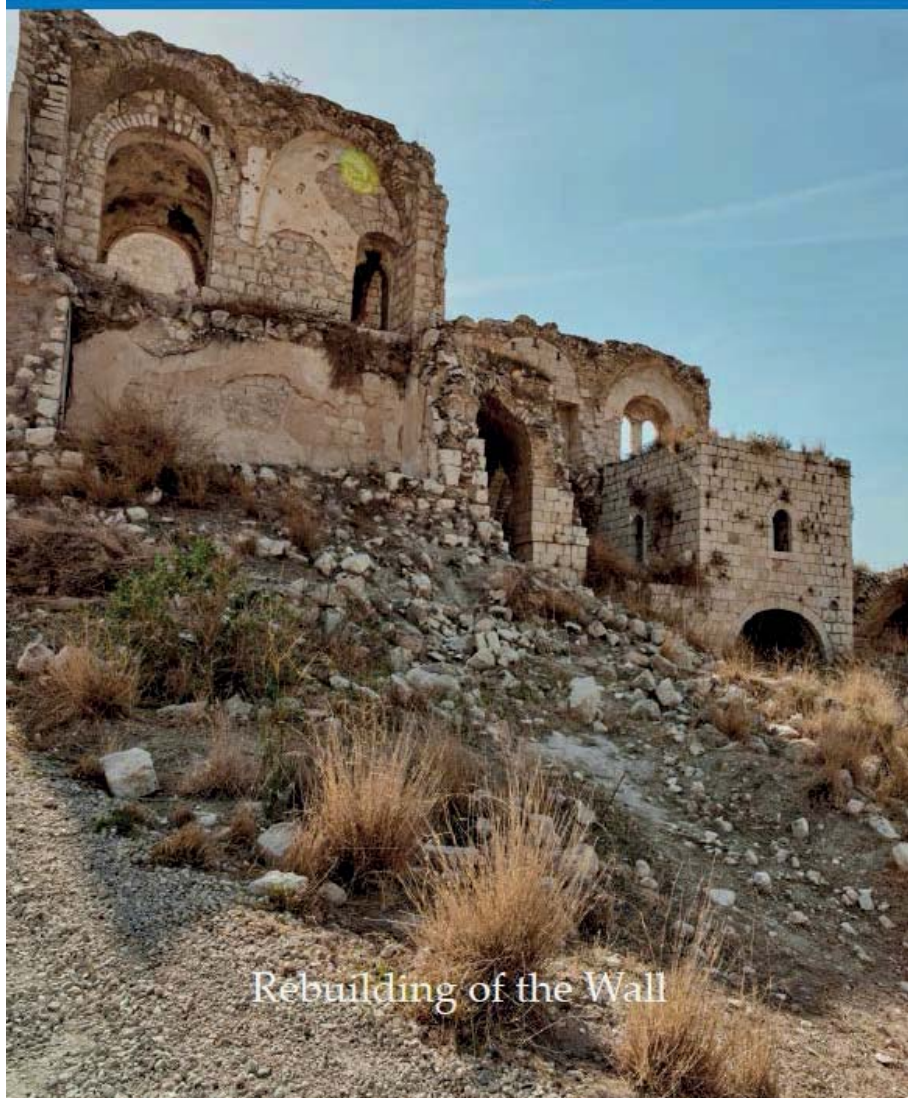


Nehemiah Explained & Applied 16

Ger de Koning



Rebuilding of the Wall

Nehemiah

Explained & Applied

NEHEMIAH

Explained & Applied

The Wall Rebuild

Ger de Koning

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Abbreviations of the Names of the Books of the Bible

Old Testament

Gen	Genesis
Exo	Exodus
Lev	Leviticus
Num	Numbers
Deu	Deuteronomy
2Ko	2 Korinthiërs
Jos	Joshua
Jdg	Judges
Rth	Ruth
1Sam	First Samuel
2Sam	Second Samuel
1Kgs	First Kings
2Kgs	Second Kings
1Chr	First Chronicles
2Chr	Second Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh	Nehemiah
Est	Esther
Job	Job
Psa	Psalms
Pro	Proverbs
Ecc	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Songs
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Lam	Lamentations
Eze	Ezekiel
Dan	Daniël
Hos	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Oba	Obadiah
Jona	Jonah
Mic	Micah
Nah	Nahum
Hab	Habakkuk
Zep	Zephaniah
Hag	Haggai
Zec	Zechariah
Mal	Malachi

New Testament

Mt	Gospel of Matthew
Mk	Gospel of Mark
Lk	Gospel of Luke
Jn	Gospel of John
Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Rom	Letter to the Romans
1Cor	First Letter to the Corinthians
2Cor	Second Letter to the Corinthians
Gal	Letter to the Galatians
Eph	Letter to the Ephesians
Phil	Letter to the Philippians
Col	Letter to the Colossians
1Thes	First Letter to the Thessalonians
2Thes	Second Letter to the Thessalonians
1Tim	First Letter to Timothy
2Tim	Second Letter to Timothy
Tit	Letter tot Titus
Phlm	Letter to Philemon
Heb	Letter of the Hebrews
Jam	Letter of James
1Pet	First Letter of Peter
2Pet	Second Letter of Peter
1Jn	First Letter of John
2Jn	Second Letter of John
3Jn	Third Letter of John
Jude	Letter of Jude
Rev	Revelation

Explanation of general format

PERSONAL PRONOUNS are capitalized when pertaining to Deity.

BRACKETS [] are used in this commentary in the Bible text to indicate words which are not found in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek but implied by it.

SHARP BRACKETS < > are used in this commentary in the Bible text to indicate words possibly not in the original writings.

When **ASTERISKS** * are used in New Testament quotations, it is to mark verbs that are historical presents in the Greek which have been translated with an English past tense in order to conform to modern usage. The translators recognized that in some contexts the present tense seems more unexpected and unjustified to the English reader than a past tense would have been. But Greek authors frequently used the present tense for the sake of heightened vividness, thereby transporting their readers in imagination to the actual scene at the time of occurrence. However, the translators felt that it would be wise to change these historical presents to English past tenses.

ALL CAPS in the New Testament quotations are used in the text to indicate Old Testament quotations or obvious references to Old Testament texts.

Preface

As has happened several times before, the reason to write this commentary is the giving of sermons about this book of the Bible. In Gummersbach, Germany, it was with great joy that I was able to share the rich lessons from this book with the believers who attended the sermons. What I have been able to gather in the preparation, I have edited in such a way that the whole, now as a commentary, can be offered to anyone who wants to take knowledge of it.

The book contains rich lessons for those who are leaders in the church of God. By this I do not mean by people appointed leaders, but believers who show in their lives that they want to live according to the norms of God's Word and are examples to others (Heb 13:7). They are more mature believers who take care of God's church (Heb 13:17; Acts 20:28). Such believers will not rule, but serve (1Pet 5:1-3). Their great example is the Lord Jesus, who was in the midst of the disciples "as the one who serves" (Lk 22:26-27).

That does not mean that this book would not have lessons for those who are not leaders. The Lord Jesus is the example of service for every believer. Every one of God's children is called to learn from Him as the Exemplar Servant. Because Nehemiah is so similar to Him, this book is full of applications for every believer.

The history and person of Nehemiah provide a variety of situations that we can translate into our time. In every situation we see Nehemiah act in a way that suits that situation. It seems as if he is present everywhere and has an appropriate answer to everything. He also knows how to step back in time. We will discover that the secret is his intense prayer life.

Being subservient does not mean being a 'softy'. Nehemiah is not a weakling. For God he makes himself small; that is why he is fearless in his actions before people. He acts with authority and, if necessary, harshly, no matter who he has in front of him. In this way he puts a stop to evil practices and brings about a reversal in wrong situations.

What a blessing this man has been for God's people! May God grant us to be like Nehemiah and to take to heart the lessons of this book.

I have tried to give as much as possible a verse by verse commentary with the emphasis on the application. In the study of Nehemiah 1-2 I base each verse on questions I can ask about the text. There will certainly be other questions to think of. I will gladly leave that to the reader for the next chapters. It can be a tool to better understand and apply the text. The question is followed by an explanation or clarification, with applications interwoven into it. In the first two chapters, as a kind of summary, I close each verse with some lessons I see in it. I hope it will be a stimulus for the reader to discover these lessons for themselves in the following chapters.

Ger de Koning

Middelburg, revised 2017 / translated February 2020

The book of Nehemiah

Introduction

The book is written by Nehemiah himself and is therefore an autobiography. Yet he tells no more about himself than is necessary to see his connection with the people of God and his service to them.

The subject of the book of Nehemiah is the rebuilding of the city wall around Jerusalem. The city is the area where the life of every day takes place. The book deals with the civilian life of the Israelites, but in a situation where they are subject to the nations.

Nehemiah appears in the twentieth year of Artahsasta in Jerusalem. That is thirteen or fourteen years after Ezra's return to Jerusalem, who arrived there in the seventh year of Artahsasta. Between the return under Cyrus, mentioned in Ezra 1:1, and the arrival of Nehemiah in Jerusalem is about ninety years. With the arrival of Ezra and later that of Nehemiah, God has His own intentions. Nehemiah respects the place that Ezra has. Nehemiah has an eye for it, as shown in his book (Neh 8:1-2,10; 12:27-43). There is no jealousy.

Ezra is a scribe and also a priest. He is an examiner of the Word of God, in which he has his sources that provide him with strength to act. Nehemiah is more of a practical man, a man who is busy with everyday things. They both have the same mind. How is it that the situation has become so that a Nehemiah is needed while Ezra is in Jerusalem? Has Ezra's energy faded a bit?

The people we meet in the book of Nehemiah are those who have returned in the book of Ezra, but then some time later. The decay has come. Nehemiah is characterized by a deep sense of the decay of God's people. On the other hand, Nehemiah is also characterized by an awareness of the faithfulness of God. Fortunately the Lord can send men like Nehemiah when Ezra's service is no longer so emphatically present.

In Nehemiah it is about building a wall around the city of God, in which the temple of God stands. He dwells with His people. The personal ap-

plication of the book is that we build a wall around the city of our souls, realizing that our "body is a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1Cor 6:19). As we build this wall, we meet resistance. We must overcome this resistance. This gives rise to struggle and requires vigilance. When the people say "let us rise and build", the enemy says "I will rise and resist".

The book of Nehemiah is perhaps the most fundamental book of the Bible when it comes to personal service to God. For man in general, and for the believer in particular, there is no right to choose one's own fulfilment of life. To start a study for a profession or to set up a career in business or to engage in any other work, without asking for the will of God, is not only foolish, it is also sin.

The Lord's claims must be fully acknowledged. He needs to occupy the first place in all things. Our prayer must be: "Lord what do you want me to do and how and where and when do you want me to do it?" To this end, all areas of our lives must be handed over to Him: family, profession, church. Then God can reach His goal with us and our lives will be successful in the true sense of the word.

A division of the book:

1. The servant and his special commission (Nehemiah 1-3).
 - a. The servant is prepared, the hidden exercises of the heart (Nehemiah 1).
 - b. The way is prepared, the circumstances controlled (Nehemiah 2).
 - c. The rebuilding of the wall and the gates (Nehemiah 3).
2. Resistance and measures against the attacks of the enemy (Nehemiah 4-7).
3. Restoring the authority of God's Word (Nehemiah 8-10).
4. The government of the city (Nehemiah 11-13).

Nehemiah 1

Verse 1 | Nehemiah, Ancestry, Time and Place

1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, [in] the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol,

Name and origin of Nehemiah

Nehemiah means ‘comforted by Yahweh’. As an exile he is far from the place chosen by the LORD to let His Name dwell, but he experiences the comfort of the LORD. That means that he has sought that comfort. We need comfort when we are sad. The cause of sorrow can be very different. To be a Nehemiah it is necessary to know the comfort of the Lord.

He is the son of Hacaliah. Hacaliah means ‘wait for Yahweh’. Before he receives a task from the LORD for the sake of His people, he must learn to wait for the LORD (cf. Lam 3:26). Patience is often a big stumbling block in the work for the Lord. Having a desire to do something for the Lord is one thing. It is another thing to wait for His time.

The time in which Nehemiah lives

We write “the month Chislev, [in] the twentieth year”. On the Jewish calendar, the month Chislev is the third month of the civil year, the beginning of winter. With us, November/December is then on the calendar. From about 165 BC. onwards, on the twenty-fifth of this month, the “[feast of] the consecration of the temple” (Jn 10:22) is celebrated. This feast, also called “Chanukah Feast”, is celebrated to commemorate the restoration and cleansing of the temple by Judas the Maccabee. The latter nullified its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes and rededicated the temple to God.

“The twentieth year”, is the twentieth year of the reign of King Artaxerxes (Neh 2:1). Artaxerxes became king in 465 BC. So something is told about the life and work of Nehemiah in the period from 445 or 444 BC. The year is named after the time when a foreign ruler has control over Israel.

We can call the indication of the year a ‘rough’ dating and the indication of the month Chislev a ‘fine’ dating. Both time indications are important for

the servant. He must know God's calendar (Chislev) and the calendar used in the world (the twentieth year of Artaxerxes). He must have the awareness that God rules, while satan is still "the ruler of the world" (Jn 14:30). The servant has an eye for what the world leaders decide. Yet he does not allow himself to be guided by those decisions, but tests those decisions against the Word of God.

Where Nehemiah is

The description of Nehemiah's service begins when he is "in Susa the capitol", the residence of the Persian kings. This means that he is completely surrounded by enemies of God's people. He lives in the midst of people who do not take God into account, while he does take Him into account. His heart is constantly in the land where he belongs.

He is at the court of the most powerful man of that time. In it we see that God has a remnant for His Name in all places. So we also know of a God-fearing Obadiah in the court of Ahab (1Kgs 18:3) and of saints in the house of Caesar.

Some lessons

1. Anyone who wants to do something for the Lord should be able to tell who he is in his relationship with the Lord, how he experiences it, Who the Lord is for him and what the Lord expects of him.
2. He must feel the spiritual climate of God's people. Winter is approaching. The church, God's people now, is for the most part in a lukewarm "Laodicéa" condition, not yet completely cold, but no longer warm either. Nevertheless, the faithful believer can devote himself completely to the Lord at that time. His desire will be that the temple, which in the New Testament means both the church and the body of the believer (1Cor 3:16; 1Cor 6:19), will again fulfill God's purpose. This is what he wants to do.
3. He must know that he has no rights in the world. He depends on the favor of those above him.
4. He should also be aware of the spiritual climate of the world in which he lives. The enmity against God and His Word manifests itself in an ever bolder way.

Verse 2 | Visit From Jerusalem

2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped [and] had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem.

The reason for Nehemiah's work is not a voice from heaven or a miraculous apparition. The reason is an ordinary event: Nehemiah is visited by his brother and some men from Judah. Nehemiah seizes this exquisite opportunity to get current news about the situation there. He wants to know how the Jews and the city of Jerusalem are doing.

Nehemiah's question shows his great interest in the situation of the remnant of the people of God. Nehemiah has a responsible task in the palace of the king (verse 11). He occupies an influential position. However, this is not what concerns him. His interest is not in the expansion of the Persian empire and an increase of his influence. He does not take advantage of his brother's visit to tell him about his magnificent position and his chances of promotion. Nor does he want to be updated by his brother on all kinds of family matters.

While performing his earthly activities, his heart goes out to those who once returned from Babylon to the promised land. In direct connection with this he also asks about the city of Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God. Through this he shows that he has the same spirit as Moses, whose heart also went out to his people, to seek them out and set them free (Acts 7:23). Moses also gave up a prominent place for this.

The question may be asked what our interest is in receiving visitors from another country. Are we curious about the beautiful nature, the building of houses, prosperity and the like, or about the situation of God's children and how the church is doing as God's house?

Some lessons

1. The reason for doing a work for the Lord often lies in everyday events. The way in which we react often reveals what our real interest is. A comment, a visit, a letter, an event (birth, death, accident), and much more, are all tests that reveal our real interests. They can cause our life to take a radical turn.

2. Someone who is truly open to the will of God is interested in every member of His people and in His dwelling place, the church. He does not care about a position in the world. He is prepared, if the Lord asks, to give it up.

Verse 3 | Report on the Situation in Jerusalem

3 They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire."

In sober terms, his visitors tell him that the remnant is in great distress and that Jerusalem no longer has a wall and gates. The fact that the city walls are badly damaged means that the inhabitants are without the necessary protection against enemies. The walls represent the separation from evil. There is no more separation between holy and unholy. The gates speak of letting in the good and removing the wrong. The gates speak of exercising Divine care or discipline.

God wants the walls of Jerusalem to be called salvation and its gates praise (Isa 60:18b). Separation from evil means salvation, salvation for God's people and assures their continuance as God's people. To be a people that sings His praises requires care and discipline. Unjudged sin prevents praise.

We might have expected that after the return of a remnant, this remnant would have experienced God's special blessing by giving them the evidence of His approval. On the contrary, they are "in great distress and reproach".

We can apply this to the situation that has arisen after believers from all kinds of denominations discovered in the beginning of the nineteenth century what the church is according to God's thoughts. They have separated themselves from man-made systems according to the Old Testament model, where the Lord Jesus is not given the place He deserves or where evil teachings about Him are proclaimed without exercising God's discipline (Heb 13:13; 2Tim 2:19-22). Thereupon they came together in the Name of the Lord Jesus (Mt 18:20).

This movement can be compared to what is taking place under Ezra. In Ezra we read about the restoration of the altar – applied: renewed view

of the Lord's Table – and the rebuilding of the temple – applied: renewed view of what the church of the living God is. But the fire and characteristic dedication of this movement has been extinguished. Love for the Lord and His Word and care for one another has faded away. The receiving at the Table of the Lord of all God's children who do not live in sin or are associated with sin has disappeared. Those who grew up in the tradition of that movement have largely fallen prey to liberalism on the one hand and sectarianism on the other.

The walls have been badly damaged, the gates burned. The movement resulting from a work of the Spirit has come to a standstill. What is left floats either on traditionalism or on emotion under the influence of charismatic teachings or on worldly thought patterns – products of postmodern thought – or on a mixture of these trends. The Word of God remains closed in many cases. It does not need to be opened if we find our certainty in tradition, feeling or reason. If the Word is opened, it is used to underline one's own right or to make it clear that nothing can be said with certainty.

However, we may ask ourselves how it is in our personal lives with the wall of separation from the world, with the wall of prayer and reading the Bible, with the wall of faithful imitation of the Lord Jesus, with the wall of personal surrender and living testimony, the wall of being a Christian every day. Are these walls in ruins?

Some lessons

1. When we ask about the situation of God's people, we will discover that there is great unfaithfulness.
2. The walls, picture of separation, have been demolished. The separation between the church and the world has disappeared. At first hesitantly, the world has now been let in with great enthusiasm. She is taken in to tell how things should be done in the church, both in her meetings and in her preaching of the gospel.
3. The gates, picture of justice, have been burned. The evil that has entered is not judged. In the church everyone does what he or she thinks is right. A possible voice of protest is silenced.

Verse 4 | The Reaction of Nehemiah

4 When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Nehemiah's reaction to his brother's account is moving. The message strikes him like a bomb. Nehemiah will have been raised by God-fearing parents. They will have taught him the history and the law of the Jewish people. This explains why he is so touched when he learns from his brother how defamatory things are with Jerusalem and the people. Such expressions of feelings, that show us the workings of his heart, we regularly come across in his book. Each time he gives air to his feelings during a description of the work.

When we receive or read a message, we can accept it as a notification. That way we will not deal with a message that comes from our own brother. Nehemiah knows him. He's not a man of dramatic stories. If he says something, it's completely trustworthy. Nehemiah doesn't kindly thank his brother for the message. He's not going to ask critical questions either. What he hears makes an enormous impression on him, he is overwhelmed by feelings of great dejection.

Through his brother's message he gets a different view on his life. Inwardly involved as he is with the people in Jerusalem, he feels the defamation in which the remnant is as his own defamation. Nehemiah knows God's plan towards his people. Now he hears how far away the practical situation in which the people find themselves is from it.

Instead of immediately making feverish plans to change that situation, he sits down. Overwhelmed by intense grief about the situation in which the remnant of God's people find themselves, he is incapable of anything but crying and mourning over several days.

It does not stop at this expression of sorrow and shame. He also fasts and prays. Fasting means giving up everything that is lawful in itself, but now has to make way in order to give himself completely to a certain cause. The legitimate needs of the body are not met for a time in order for the mind to concentrate fully on a matter that transcends bodily needs. We see this in prayer, which is almost always inextricably linked to fasting. Also here.

Nehemiah fasts and does not pray out of control. He knows himself before the face of “the God of heaven”. If that is not the case, all the exercises of his soul will be useless torments. The awareness of God’s face makes such exercises valuable experiences. What is hidden from the eye of men is perceived and rewarded by God with great pleasure (Mt 6:17-18).

The expression “God of heaven” is significant. God has withdrawn into heaven. He no longer lives on earth in the midst of His people, a people that He has had to surrender into the hand of their enemies. He no longer acts in power for His people because they have rejected Him. But faith knows how to find Him, and He allows Himself to be found.

The same goes for us. The church has no external power or glory. It is connected with a rejected Lord Who is now in heaven. But she knows that He is there and that “all power is given to Him in heaven and on earth” (Mt 28:18). Therefore we will turn to Him in our need.

Some lessons

1. All the inner exercises of this dejected man find their way out in prayer. Many have experienced that their work for the Lord has begun with fasting and praying because of the desolate situation of which they have been informed. We can only help reduce a need when we have felt the misery in our own souls. We only receive an instruction from the Lord when He has opened our eyes and we see things as they really are, that is, as He sees them. Nehemiah is called to rebuild the walls, but first he weeps over their ruins.
2. Serving God is not a hobby. He who thinks so, inevitably suffers shipwreck. Before, for example, doing children’s work, we must first see the appalling lack of Christian education in the schools and the outrageousness around us. The recognition of this situation on our knees before God is the beginning.
3. The Lord Jesus is moved with compassion over the flock like sheep who have no shepherd and in this He involves His disciples. For this He calls to prayer (Mt 9:36-38). What does it do to us when we see the many people on the street? Do they care about them?

4. When we look at the walls with the eyes of the Lord Jesus, we first have to experience grief that so many people and especially so many so-called Christians do not show the Lord Jesus in their lives.

Verses 5-11 | The Prayer of Nehemiah

5 I said, "I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, 6 let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned. 7 We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses. 8 Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; 9 but [if] you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.' 10 They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand. 11 O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man." Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

The pleading ground (verse 5)

After the message, Nehemiah will have felt powerless. What can he do? Pray! He prays to "the God of heaven." His prayer is based on the revelation of God, as he has come to know Him. Although he does not know God as we may know him, as Father, he prays to Someone He knows, to Someone of Whom He knows where He lives.

There is not any bravado. There is confidentiality and at the same time respect. Nehemiah knows God as the "great and awesome God". In the face of God's overwhelming greatness, he feels small. In front of the awesome God he is filled with awe. In His holy presence he feels how sinful he is

(cf. Isa 6:1-5). But instead of getting out of his way, he resorts to that God in his need (cf. Isa 5:8).

Nehemiah is not afraid of God. Someone who gives God the place that belongs to Him and takes the place that suits him to God does not need to be afraid of God. He not only knows Who God is, but also how God acts. God's "covenant" and His "lovingkindness", which is inseparable from it, form the argument for Nehemiah. The LORD spoke about this to Moses (Deu 7:9). This is also the plea for the prayer of Solomon (1Kgs 8:23).

The blessing of God's covenant and His lovingkindness is for those who love Him and keep His commandments. Love and obedience always go hand in hand. They are the two characteristics of a person born of God. They have to do with the nature of God. "God is light" (1Jn 1:5) and "God is love" (1Jn 4:8,16). The nature of God is manifested in His children through brotherly love and the keeping of the commandments of the Lord Jesus (1Jn 2:3-11).

For Whom Nehemiah Prays (verse 6a)

Nehemiah made a passionate appeal to God to hear his prayer and to see him, the supplicant. He calls himself "Your servant". There is no feeling of exaltation, of belonging to God's chosen people, which the name "Israelites" would suggest. He begs for his brethren, the Israelites, whom he also calls "Your servants ". He unites them with himself to appear before God together with them. He prays for them, but not with exclusion of himself.

Day and night he intercedes for them. Feelings of grief and defamation have not subsided over time. What he prays has occupied him constantly, even during his daily work, which he has simply had to do. He has not put his grief up for sale. That it will eventually be visible to him (Neh 2:2), is inescapable and underlines the fact that he is constantly busy with God's people, his people and their circumstances.

Confession (verses 6b-7)

As said, Nehemiah does not only bring his fellowmen before God. He realizes that whoever prays for another person and thus brings that other person into God's presence, thereby also comes into God's presence himself. Then you cannot remain upright yourself. He who thinks so, resembles the

Pharisee about whom the Lord Jesus tells in Luke 18 (Lk 18:11a). That man prays, even mentions the Name of God, but does not stand in the presence of God. He is completely surrounded by his own presence. Then you don't manage to intercede, you can't possibly be an intercessor. To intercede presupposes to be aware of another person's need, without feeling better than that other person.

Nehemiah is standing before God. When he starts praying for his fellow people, he first sees his own sins and the sins of his family. Before he confesses the sins of the people, he first confesses those of himself and those of his family. In this way he paves the way spiritually to become a true intercessor.

Then he does not pray for 'those others', but speaks of "we" who have sinned heavily against God and disobeyed Him. God has made His commandments known, but the people do not care. He acknowledges that as a result they have forfeited every right to a blessing.

God's Word in the prayer (verses 8-9)

Nehemiah quotes God's Word to agree with its truth. God has acted, as He has said. The people have been unfaithful, and God has had to scatter them among the nations. Nehemiah justifies God's actions and acknowledges their own unfaithfulness. But he does not leave it at that. He also knows what else God has said. He pleads with God that where He has fulfilled one word, He will also fulfill the other. This is real living "on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4).

This is how we should pray: in the awareness of what God did for us when He sent His Son to die for us on the cross, and what He did in His resurrection and ascension, and what He is going to do on His return. As we look at Christ on the cross and the blood shed, we will experience the power of active prayer. His actions in the past guarantee the fulfillment of His promises in the future. Here it is true that results from the past are a full guarantee for the future.

Nehemiah's words are not a literal quotation of what is in God's Word. They are a summary of what God has said will happen, both in unfaithfulness and in conversion (Deu 4:27-31; 30:4-10). We may remind Him of

this and draw courage from it, as Nehemiah did. The Word gives hope (Psa 119:49).

Nehemiah emphasizes in his prayer what God has said about Jerusalem: "The place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell." That's what he's about, that place. Nehemiah's heart is full of the same thing that God's heart is full of.

Your servants and Your people (verse 10)

By what right does Nehemiah speak of "Your servants and Your people"? Because God Himself delivered these people from Egypt and made them His people. Nehemiah reminds God of what He did many centuries ago. And even more recently, even though it is only a remnant that has left, He has delivered His people from exile. Everything has shown that God did not abandon His people. Wouldn't He look at their misery in which they ended up again after their return to the land?

Nehemiah knows the heart of God. God has done too much for these people not to care about them now. Again we see a parallel between Nehemiah and Moses. After the sin of the people with the golden calf, God speaks to Moses about "your people" (Exo 32:7), as if His people were the people of Moses and not His people. But Moses knows the heart of God and speaks to God about "Your people" (Exo 32:11). Faith sees and maintains the connection that exists between God and His people.

Other intercessors (verse 11a)

Nehemiah does not imagine that he is the only one who cares about God's people. Though he is alone, he knows that there are more who pray if God wants to bring a turn in their fate. He does not make the mistake of Elijah in believing that he is the only faithful one left (1Kgs 19:10,18; Rom 11:2-5). God always provides a remnant, consisting of several faithful who remain faithful to Him at a time of general unfaithfulness.

When our hearts are weighed down by a heavy burden, we should not think that we are the only ones who feel this burden. Maybe we are alone, but we should know that God also makes others feel the same burden (cf. 1Pet 5:9).

Prayer in view of his position (verse 11b)

The goal and the task for his people have become clear to him in prayer. But it is not yet clear when he can begin. For this he depends on the king's permission. Time and permission lie human speaking in the hand of the king. Nehemiah acknowledges in his prayer that he is dependent on the king. That is why he asks God to let him have mercy on the king "today". His task now is to wait for God's answer.

Why would he mention that he is the king's cupbearer? It seems that he does so because it is necessary for the report of his conversation with the king in the next chapter. He could have started to bring this up when he had a visit from Jerusalem. But he doesn't see his social position as something to boast about. Nehemiah always gives the necessary information, without putting himself in the spotlight.

By stating "now I was the cupbearer to the king", Nehemiah emphasizes his complete dependence on the king. Cupbearer is a position of great trust and responsibility. But Nehemiah does not use his position to influence the king and thus seek enlightenment for his people. Nehemiah might also have thought, 'What happened to Israel is all their own fault. Nothing can change that. I have a good job and God Himself will take care of His people, He doesn't need me for that.'

Nehemiah doesn't do either. He makes himself one with the people and confesses the sin of the people as his own sin. Like Moses, he prefers to suffer defamation with the people of God rather "than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin" (Heb 11:25). We can only serve God if we are willing to bring sacrifices.

What we find with Nehemiah, who lives at the end of Israel's history, we also see with Moses, at the beginning of Israel's history. Moses also enjoys special privileges. He is at home in the court of Pharaoh, but he too does not use his position for the benefit of his people. As the son of Pharaoh's daughter, he could even have waited a while until he himself ascended the throne. He could have said that God's providence put him in that position. But he loves God above the people and wishes to do only what God asks of him.

Some lessons

1. In the prayer of Nehemiah we are being taken into the deep feelings of a man burdened by the defamation of God's people and the dishonor inflicted upon God with it. Thus we may speak to God with confidence and reverence from the fullness of our hearts. Boldly, but not irreverently, we may make God a partaker in our distress. God has known that for a long time, of course, but He wants to be prayed for. He wants to use the prayer of His own in the fulfilment of His plans. That gives prayer a special value and meaning.
2. In his prayer Nehemiah does not put himself above the people, or next to them, but he makes himself one with the people. It is necessary that we know ourselves to be inseparable from the people of God in order, as it were, to come together with them before God's face. This profound awareness leads us to confess our own sins, the sins of our family and the sins of the people.
3. He justifies God. God has rightly scattered them. The people have broken their allegiance, and God has no choice but to act this way. However, we also know that God can gather again what He has scattered, albeit on the condition of repentance. We may appeal to God's faithfulness to His Word and to His past actions.
4. When we have thus set our hearts free in prayer, we can ask God to clear the way for us to go and help His people. Nehemiah depends on the permission of the king to go. Acting on his own power is strange to him and it will have to be the same with us.
5. He has placed everything in the hands of God. Now it is waiting for His answer, for His time, an important point for anyone who wants to do something for the Lord.

Nehemiah 2

Verse 1 | Nehemiah Busy in His Service

1 And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine [was] before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.

In the month Chislev, the third month of the civil year, Nehemiah heard the message concerning Jerusalem (Neh 1:1). Here we are in the month Nisan. That is the seventh month of the civil year, with us March/April. Four months have passed since his prayer and still he has not received an answer.

He does not know in advance how long he has to wait for the answer. Yet he patiently waits. He leaves time in God's hand. He is content that God determines the right time. He does not rush into the task he sees before him. In the meantime, he continues to do his work faithfully in the place where the LORD has brought him.

It may happen that one hears of a need. Overwhelmed by pity some go straight to work without waiting for God's voice and time. That is not the way God makes His work happen. Seeing need is not a vocation. First a need must have penetrated deep into the heart. Then we become aware that it is not we, but only God Who can provide for that need. First, need must become a burden so heavy that the only way out we see is the Lord Jesus, Who has said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). This verse is certainly important for the gospel, but it is also very important for those who want to be servants.

Perhaps Nehemiah prayed that God would remove the burden from his heart. Maybe he has prayed or God wants to make that burden even heavier, so that all that remains for him to do is to act. This is how we may do it if we are told something about a need. The need has remained in his heart. We can imagine him wondering if he should talk to the king about his need and if so, when, or if he still has to wait for God.

He will have had peace of mind at the thought that God can bring him into the king's favor by a miracle when he calls him to do a work in Jerusalem. God turns the hearts of kings like channels of water (Pro 21:1). We will get these deliberations of faith if we increasingly perceive that the Lord wants to use us for a particular work.

Nehemiah has never been sad in the presence of the king. This indicates that he is now and also that this is visible. Showing sadness does not fit in the presence of mighty rulers who see themselves as distributors of blessing. These people only want happy faces in their immediate surroundings. As an exile Nehemiah will always have had sorrow in his heart (Pro 14:13), but will always have been able to keep it hidden. However, the traces of fasting and praying cannot be denied.

Nevertheless, Nehemiah will also have done his work with pleasure. The Lord brought him there and charged him with this work. That is how he will have seen it. It is important for us to be able to say the same of our job in society. We may also enjoy our daily work while thanking God the Father through the Lord Jesus (Col 3:17).

Nevertheless, at the same time we realize that the earth is not our ultimate goal. We do not belong here, heaven is our home. As a cobbler, who whistled, once said: "I am on a journey to heaven and on the way I make shoes. The Lord Jesus was known as "the carpenter" (Mk 6:3). Before He began His travels through Israel, He worked as a carpenter. You can be sure that He loved His work and did a good job.

Until the Lord calls us to do a work for Him, we must remain faithful in our earthly profession and find full satisfaction in it. Dissatisfaction with our job in society or the reward for it, or a difficult relationship with colleagues in the workplace, should not be a reason to give up that job in order to serve the so-called higher things. That is a great self-deception that will certainly result in great dishonor for the Lord Jesus.

Some lessons

1. When we have brought a matter before the Lord in prayer, we must learn to wait patiently for further instructions from Him. That does not mean that we should sit and wait with our arms crossed. Each of us must "remain in that calling in which he was called" (1Cor 7:20)

and do what belongs to that calling. While we are busy like this, we may look forward to His answer to our prayer (Hab 2:1).

2. That time of expectation is a time of inner exercise in which many questions will impose themselves on us. It is good to undergo such exercises, which often involve struggle. If they really are exercises of faith, they will throw us upon the Lord. We will be purified by them.

Verse 2 | The King's Question

2 So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid.

It doesn't escape the king that his cupbearer doesn't look as glad as usual. He notices that it is because of something that hurts his heart. He asks Nehemiah about it. The king's question is the introduction to the radical change in Nehemiah's life that he so fervently desires. The king must have often asked Nehemiah something or said something to him. Not once, however, has this made his heart beat faster, because these are general questions or remarks that do not touch his heart. What the king asks now does make his heart beat faster.

The reason for the king's question and remark is what he sees on Nehemiah's face. The king then sees the effect of prayer and fasting. On his face the condition of his heart can be read (cf. Gen 31:2). The king notes this. He has an eye for his staff.

Do we also have an eye for what is going on around us? We easily ask: 'How are you?' We answer just as easily: 'I am well.' In doing so, we are more polite than expressing real interest or allowing others to share in what concerns us. Reading faces is important. Eyes can tell a lot. The eye is the mirror of the soul. Real attention for people makes us look deeper than the surface.

The king's remark means a great danger to Nehemiah. As said, kings do not tolerate sad faces in their presence. It could cost him his job and even his life. Hence his fear. There is another reason for his fear. That fear relates to God. Is this the moment God gives to reveal what has occupied him for four months?

Nehemiah doesn't have to think long about the answer. He doesn't have time for that either. He can't retreat for a moment to reflect. He immediately realizes that the king's question has to do with his prayers. On the one hand he is overwhelmed by the question, on the other hand he sees that God might open a door. When God sees that we are ready to take up a service for Him, He opens the doors.

Some lessons

1. Can we 'read' faces? Do we look deeper than the surface? Do we listen between the lines what someone really wants to say? Do we listen behind someone's story his real need?
2. When we, like Nehemiah, are busy day and night with a particular work in our minds, we will immediately notice when the Lord begins to answer our prayers.

Verse 3 | Nehemiah's Answer

3 I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?"

With words indicating that he knows his own place and showing respect for the king's position, Nehemiah speaks to him. In almost passionate terms, he makes the king a partaker of what occupies his heart and what can be read on his face. From the fullness of his heart, he tells about the city to which the heart of every Israelite goes.

It is as if Nehemiah can finally give air to a secret that he has carried with him for so long. His feelings for 'the city', instead of becoming weaker, have only grown stronger. His love for 'the city' does not depend on the fame and wealth it once possessed, the great kings who ruled it, the impressive past that the city has. His love concerns the city itself because it is the city of *God*, because he knows and believes in the future of this city.

That is why he speaks of the city as "the place of my fathers' tombs". His pious ancestors all wanted to be buried in the land of promise, because they believed in the resurrection. They believed – and so does Nehemiah – that God will fulfill all His promises. They all died in the faith that He will do so (Heb 11:13).

Nehemiah is concerned about the present situation in which the city finds itself because he believes in the future of that city. He sees God's plan for that city before him. He also sees how sharp the contrast is between the glorious future and the present situation. His desire is to work to ensure that the present and the future are more in harmony.

If we want to do a work for the Lord, we can only do so if we have a view of the future. What is important is that we see the church as it will be blameless before God in the future. The difference with the current situation of unfaithfulness, lukewarmness, and worldliness of the church on earth will affect us. There will be a longing in us to be used by God to make believers committed to Him again.

A lesson

1. View on the future of the church puts the present state of the church in the true light. The Lord Jesus has given Himself for the church in order to sanctify and cleans her. He wants to present to Himself the church having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing (Eph 5:25-27). His love for the church must fill us to be used.

Verse 4 | Question and Prayer

4 Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

After the moving testimony of Nehemiah's love for Jerusalem, the king asks another question. He does not ask any further about the circumstances, but asks the question that for Nehemiah is God's answer to his prayers. The king will have noticed in Nehemiah's answer a deep desire to do something for Jerusalem. God controls his heart and gives him the question in his mouth. In this way Nehemiah is, as it were, given his answer to prayer on a silver platter.

Nehemiah receives the hearing of his prayer in the daily circumstances of his life. This also often happens to us, for example when the Lord allows us to meet certain people. Sometimes He also lets us hear certain comments that are not even addressed to us personally, but in which we hear God's voice.

For months now Nehemiah has been carrying the burden of what he has heard from his brother on his heart. He knows that he can only go if the king allows it, and this will only be the case if the Lord wants it. The answer to his prayer comes in a way and at a time when he might least expect it. It can be the same with us.

Although Nehemiah knows what he wants, he does not immediately answer the king's question. First Nehemiah speaks to God, then to the king. God is here, as in the book of Ezra, "the God of heaven". Because of the unfaithfulness of the people He no longer lives on earth in the temple.

Some lessons

1. A sincere, moving testimony of what is in us for the Lord Jesus and His church is never without consequence. It opens doors, brings about changes in circumstances and in people's hearts. The same goes for John the baptist who, when he sees the Lord Jesus, wholeheartedly says: "Behold, the Lamb of God" (Jn 1:36). As a result, two of his disciples leave him and follow the Lord Jesus (Jn 1:37).
2. It remains necessary, even as the door opens further and further, to remain dependent on the Lord and ask Him what to do or say next.

Verse 5 | Nehemiah Makes His Wish Known

5 I said to the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it."

Full of confidence, but with due respect, he addresses himself to the king. What he says shows his acknowledgment of the king's position and his own position. He asks for the king's benevolence. Without his benevolent consent, he can forget his purpose. The fact that God seems to open the door does not make Nehemiah so overconfident that he wants to open the door with a wild move. He remains the servant dependent on the king.

Yet he is also so bold as to point out to the king his behavior as a servant. He asks in so many words if the king is satisfied with him. He can do so because, as a dutiful man, he has always served his lord to his full satisfaction. Without self-exaltation Nehemiah points this out to the king as a possible reason to grant him his request.

Nehemiah is open about his purpose. He has sketched the ruins. But he is not someone who stands on the sidelines shouting all kinds of cries about how bad things are, while he is not prepared to roll up his sleeves. No, he's sketching a real picture, but he's also determined to give all his strength to the city that's in ruins, no matter what it costs him. He wants to rebuild the city, which he again connects to "my fathers' tombs". His heart is full of it.

Some lessons

1. When people to whom we are subject invite us to make a request, we may do so boldly. We may see it as a work of God in their hearts.
2. We do not need to present things more beautifully than they are.
3. We do not have to present ourselves worse than we are, as long as we can sincerely point out the quality of our work. Those who have always been honest in their work can say this quietly if the situation demands it (cf. 1Sam 12:3-4)..

Verse 6 | Nehemiah Gets Permission to Go

6 Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, "How long will your journey be, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time.

God also uses external circumstances to fulfill His plans. The remark that the king has his wife sitting next to him seems such a circumstance. Men among themselves can be harsh and insensitive. It is often noticeable that those same men behave much more courteously in the presence of their wife. As far as Artaxerxes is concerned, it seems that the presence of his wife makes him mild-mannered and therefore even more inclined to grant Nehemiah's request.

The influence of women on the decisions of prominent persons can be for the better, but also for the worse. We see an influence for the better in the case of Esther (Est 7:1-10). An influence for the worse is seen in Herodias (Mt 14:1-12). A case in which someone wants to use her influence for good, but to whom her husband does not listen, we see in Pilate's wife (Mt 27:19).

What influence does our wife have on us? It may be useful to find out how we behave in the presence of our wife and how we behave when she is not

there. If honest self-examination reveals a difference, let us confess it to our wife and the Lord and change it.

The king's questions make it clear to Nehemiah that God is opening the door further and further. His questions concern the duration of the journey and when he will be back, so how long he thinks he will be absent. The absence of Nehemiah is, of course, of great importance to the king, because there has to be a new cupbearer for that period of time.

The "definite time" that Nehemiah has given is twelve years (cf. verse 1; Neh 13:6). The building of the wall is finished in fifty-two days (Neh 6:15), but that is with much help. Has Nehemiah assumed that he should not count on much help for the work? God has given it to him in his heart, but what about the remaining ones? Are they as full of zeal as he is? He doesn't know that.

In our calculations, we too shouldn't include dependence on others. God can give helpers, but He is not obliged to do so.

Some lessons

1. A woman's influence on her husband's decisions is great. The husband should also be open to it. He has to judge whether that influence has a good effect or a wrong one.
2. In a work that the Lord asks of us, we should depend only on Him and not on others. He calls persons, not groups, although He may form those persons into a group.

Verses 7-9 | What Other Things Nehemiah Asks for

7 And I said to the king, "If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors [of the provinces] beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah, 8 and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city and for the house to which I will go." And the king granted [them] to me because the good hand of my God [was] on me. 9 Then I came to the governors [of the provinces] beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.

Nehemiah has permission to go. This permission does not make him overconfident, but bold. All his thoughts are with the work that awaits him in Jerusalem. The fact that he can go, however, doesn't put him in a rush, making him busy to leave as soon as possible. He remains pragmatic. He doesn't leave on the off chance. Not only does he think about Jerusalem, he also thinks about the journey to Jerusalem and the problems he may encounter during the journey. He asks for things he will need, both for the journey and for his stay in Judah. He gets what he asks for and even more than that.

So he thinks that when crossing borders one will ask what he is planning to do. Letters from the king will guarantee him a free passage (verse 7). So he asks for a valid passport. He also asks for a letter that will assure him of the necessary materials for reconstruction (verse 8). He also thinks of his own accommodation. After all, he comes to a country where he has no possession whatsoever. Nehemiah asks with great boldness for everything he thinks he needs. He asks in faith. He does not ask too much. He recognizes the king's possibilities. Thus we may ask God to provide a solution to practical problems.

It is good to realize that Nehemiah does not know what the king will answer to his questions. For us the tension is gone because we know the outcome. But to learn from Nehemiah's actions, we will have to realize how exciting it must have been for him to ask all this.

Nehemiah gets everything he asked for. He sees in it "the good hand of my God". He doesn't forget that God works behind the scenes. He knows God as his personal God. This personal bond with God is necessary to notice His hand. After the deep soul-exercises and a door that opens more and more, he gets a view on the way God wants him to go. God uses the king to provide Nehemiah with what is necessary for the journey. If we are dependent on the Lord, we will see what we need and may count on Him to provide for it.

Nehemiah goes on his way, straight to his goal. The letters are doing their work. With everything Nehemiah has asked for, he also gets something he has not asked for. He has not asked for accompaniment, but if the king wants to send it along, he accepts this escort (verse 9). Perhaps the officers

of the army and horsemen should reassure more the king that Nehemiah will return safely, rather than that it is about Nehemiah personally and the task he has to perform. God can use anything to carry out His plans, including the possibly selfish motives of a king, and thereby protect His servant.

Some lessons

1. Not only the goal is important, but also the way to that goal. What we need on that path, we may boldly ask the Lord. He has everything ready and will gladly give it in answer to our prayer. When He gives it, it is another proof of “His good hand” over us.
2. In order to do the work we want to do, the Lord also wants to give us what we need. When we think about that work, we will see what we are lacking. The Lord wants to provide for this.

Verse 10 | Opponents of God’s Work

10 When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard [about it], it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.

Between the preparations for the journey and the arrival in Jerusalem, we hear something about people who are not particularly happy with Nehemiah’s action. Sanballat is Nehemiah’s main political opponent. The addition “the Horonite” indicates that he comes from Horonaim. Horonaim is a city in Moab (Jer 48:34). In his footsteps we find Tobiah, from Ammon. The place of origin of these two opponents lies in the darkness of a cave. Their origins are as dark as the cave: begotten by a drunken Lot from his two degenerate daughters, who invented this way of conceiving offspring in their depraved minds (Gen 19:30-38).

Nehemiah has made his first steps toward the work that God has given him in his heart. We can be sure that wherever someone wants to do God’s work, the enemy will also become active. Opposition in the work for the Lord is often the proof that we are indeed working for the Lord. Otherwise the devil would not be trying so hard to obstruct that work and try to prevent it.

The enemy knows exactly what Nehemiah is planning. Nehemiah does not seek his own benefit, but the welfare of the Israelites. In doing so, he is causing the anger of the enemy. The enemies want to keep Jerusalem in misery. The inhabitants of Jerusalem are not harassed by the enemy. They are no threat to the enemy. All the time they live there they are content with the situation as it is, insensitive to the defamation inflicted upon the LORD. That is to the taste of the enemy. But when Nehemiah comes, a living declaration of war against the prevailing conditions appears in him, in his attitude and intention.

Satan does not worry about the church in general. But if there are those who want to dedicate themselves completely to Christ and to do His work for the benefit of the church, then he comes into action. Similarly, following the Lord Jesus also gives rise to opposition (Mt 8:19-27).

The opposition of the enemy is there even before Nehemiah has announced any of his plans and while there is still no reaction on the part of the people. The enemy has more feeling for the work of God than God's people. Does the devil also have to work overtime because of our dedication? If our goals are the same as God's, his opposition will be noticeable. If our goals are different than God's, the enemy will leave us alone.

Some lessons

1. If we want to do a work for the Lord, opposition can be one of the proofs that we are really engaged in a work for the Lord.
2. An open door and opponents belong together (1Cor 16:9).
3. Sometimes unbelievers are more aware of the importance of God's work than believers, and are more active in disrupting it than believers in promoting it.

Verses 11-12 | Arrival in Jerusalem and First Action

11 So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. 12 And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding.

When some six hundred thousand Israelites and their families leave Egypt (Exo 12:37) to go through the wilderness to Canaan, God accompanies

them with perceptible signs. This is very different in the days of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. They too travel from the land of captivity to the promised land. But no outward signs accompany them as proof of God's presence. They must be content with the means of travelling customary for that time and under those circumstances.

Not only the accompanying signs are less conspicuous. Also the numbers are decreasing. Zerubbabel returns with just over forty-two thousand persons; with Ezra about eighteen hundred persons return; Nehemiah goes by himself. As church history continues, there is less and less of the original manifestations of God's presence. However, God still wants to be with the individual who wants to work for Him.

Nehemiah will have seen Jerusalem in the distance with mixed feelings. There he sees the city of God to which his heart has gone out. The more he approaches it, the faster his heart starts beating. At the same time he is aware that this city does not correspond to God's thoughts about it. That is precisely why he went there, full of longing to dedicate the city to God again.

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he does not immediately set to work. He waits three days. It is good to first calm down from the journey, which has been an undertaking in itself. It is important to have peace of mind before starting the actual task.

Nehemiah is a born leader, but has a withdrawn nature, someone who does not act in a hurry. He wants to calculate the costs well. If he goes to work, there will be no return. Then he doesn't withdraw his hand until the work is done.

In order not to cause a sensation, he goes to inspect at night (verse 12). He doesn't make a publicity stunt out of his research. He only takes a few men with him, without telling them why he's travelling at night. He doesn't want to be influenced by people's various opinions. The Lord's commission is a personal one, and he does not allow anyone else to interfere. It is a command that "my" God has given in "my" heart.

Who, by the way, should he take with him? All those who live in Jerusalem can apparently sleep peacefully. When it comes to research, they don't have to come along. They've seen the ruins so many times. Instead of mak-

ing them pray and fast like Nehemiah, they have reconciled themselves to the sight of it.

He can't use anything or anyone from the king's escort on this inspection trip. He has his own riding animal. That is all he needs. It is not a matter of impressive display or something customary among people. That doesn't fit the job he's doing. His method of working is not the result of busy deliberation. It's not a question of the right number of people to make an inventory. Without being conspicuous, without striking actions, Nehemiah goes out to survey the state of affairs. It is a matter between his own heart and God. Because God has given it in his heart, he will also be able to carry out this work.

It is good to have spiritual friends, but it is dangerous to have the heart on the sleeve. Sometimes it is good to consult first, but if a matter is clear to the Lord, consultation will only make the Lord's work more difficult. There will be well-intentioned counsel, but just as many objections: Is it the right time, is it the right way, do we have the right means, what are the chances of success? These considerations lead to doubt, which in turn results in the cancellation of the enterprise that God has commissioned.

Some lessons

1. A person who is entrusted by the Lord with a work need not advertise it. Several times the Lord Jesus avoids the crowd if they want to follow Him because of a miracle (Mk 1:38,44; Jn 6:15,26). The Lord has not sought the support or admiration of the crowd; neither should a worker for the Lord.
2. Before the actual work begins, it is good to take 'three days' of rest. These 'three days' are a reminder of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Only from that perspective, in which all trust in one's own ability disappears and everything is made dependent on Him, will we succeed in our task.
3. When personal faith is asked for, it must be acted upon. Others do not have this faith and will only create obstacles if they are asked to cooperate. When the time comes to work, helpers may be asked. Until then, faith will keep its secret between itself and God.

Verses 13-15 | Inspection of Walls and Gates

13 So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and [on] to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire. 14 Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass. 15 So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned.

Nehemiah wants to familiarize himself with the extent of the destruction of the walls, and to take it in. The natural heart would give up courage at the sight of so much ruin. For Nehemiah it only makes the necessity of rebuilding clearer, while at the same time he knows that only God can enable him to do so. He goes out at night. When the others are asleep, he is wide awake. He does not go dreamily along the ruins. In full awareness of what he sees, he is goes along the walls. As he drives on, the extent of the work will come towards him more and more. It will all have looked even bleaker in the night.

Whenever there is a work to be done for God – a solid and not superficial work – the servant, like Nehemiah, must undertake such an inspection trip beforehand. He must spend the night mourning amid the ruins. It is foolish to deny the ruin and not to see the hopelessness of the situation as it is. The full extent of the task must come to us. Have we ever sacrificed an hour's sleep for the spiritual state of the church or our surroundings? Have we ever consciously stayed awake while others slept soundly and peacefully? Do we ever become restless from the fact that countless people are lost forever?

Before God gives a revival, He wants to break our hearts. That happens on the route Nehemiah takes. The "Valley Gate" speaks of lowliness, humiliation. This is where the investigation begins: with humbling oneself "under the mighty hand of God" (1Pet 5:6). The "Dragon's Well" is a reminder of satan, "the great dragon" (Rev 12:9). He is the instigator, the source of all misery among the people of God. The "Refuse Gate" is reminiscent of what has no value whatsoever. Through this gate, all useless and dirty objects are brought out of the city. In the same way we have to clear out of our

lives what has no value and what fills our lives. These are the first stations we have to pass on our way to examine the walls and the gates.

Once all the useless and harmful things in our lives have been removed, we can proceed to the "Fountain Gate ". Here we may think of the power of the Holy Spirit. He is the fountain of living water. Everyone who believes in the Lord Jesus receives Him (Jn 4:14; 7:38-39). Through the Holy Spirit, the Word of God becomes a "King's Pool", the next station.

We will discover in the Word of God, of which the water of the pool is a picture (Eph 5:26), through the working of the Holy Spirit, the glory of God's King, the Lord Jesus. When He comes to our attention, everything that we still trust in will disappear. There is no room left for anything else. We are then ready to give our full attention to the task that the Lord has given us in the heart.

After this inspection tour, Nehemiah returns to the "Valley Gate". Humiliating himself stands at the beginning and at the end of his investigation. In order to be used by God it is necessary that humility constantly characterizes us. That is not to say that sometimes it is not necessary to take firm action. We will see that in Nehemiah.

Some lessons

1. Before we can begin a special work for the Lord, we must have proven that we do not like our rest. Are we always open to people who are really in need? Are we prepared to sacrifice a night's rest or a meal for them?
2. Following the Lord Jesus begins by denying ourselves (Mt 16:24). Then we are able to humble ourselves.
3. We have to get rid of what is hindering the work of the Lord. This includes sins, but also things that are not sinful, but which nevertheless take up so much of our lives that they are an obstacle (Heb 12:1).
4. It is necessary to humble ourselves, see the power of the enemy, and do away with everything in our lives that is not good. However, it should not be limited to that. Then we would only be focused on ourselves and on the enemy. Then the Holy Spirit must be given the room to present the glory of the Lord Jesus to us.

5. The greater He becomes, the more everything that could still give us some carnal support falls away.
6. Humility can be learned from the Lord Jesus, who says: "Learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart" (Mt 11:29). He always is.

Verses 16-18 | Nehemiah Communicates His Findings

16 The officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials or the rest who did the work. 17 Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach." 18 I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us arise and build." So they put their hands to the good [work].

Nehemiah has already told them that he did not inform any man of his intentions (verse 12). He did not seek any support from the people or their leaders of any rank or standing (cf. Gal 1:16b-17a; 2:6). He does not wish to bind their influence to the work he wants to do. In this way he remains free, without in any way committing himself to them.

However, as soon as he feels the time has come to inform them, he seeks their cooperation. He is not so stubborn as to think that he does not need them. His request for cooperation is proof that he acknowledges his brothers in their position and appreciates them in the capacities they have. A personal vocation is the starting point, but this must never degenerate into individualism. God wants to use each one in connection with others. We are all fellow workers of each other (1Cor 3:8-9a).

Nehemiah has three motives for his penetrating appeal for their cooperation. First, he points to the condition of the city and the walls. They know about it, but so far they have done nothing about it. He doesn't say this in a patronizing way. In his voice there are no reproaches. He uses the word "we" twice. He makes himself one with them. The misery of Jerusalem is the misery of her lovers. Secondly, he can bear witness to the good hand of God over himself. Third, he refers to the King's support.

His moving speech comes across. The people are convinced. They declare that they will prepare to rebuild and add the deed to the word: "They put their hands to the good [work]." Godly thoughts and understanding are not enough. They have to get to work. So do we. The encouragement of faithful people who carry a burden of God on their hearts is a great incentive for others to get to work.

Nehemiah has given them courage (cf. Heb 12:12-13). His conviction has come across. They have heard a man who believes in his mission. That task is no less than building a wall around Jerusalem. Nehemiah's compassion and commitment are contagious to his listeners. They are being won for the work of the LORD by the work of God in their hearts following the speech of Nehemiah and thus become fellow workers in this work. If we are engaged in a work for the Lord, He will also give us the necessary helpers.

The temple, the house of God, has already been rebuilt, but stands in a ruined place, the walls of which have largely been broken down and the gates burned. The day mentioned in Zechariah 2 has not yet come (Zec 2:5). That is why a wall is needed. When it is rebuilt, the city will once again be seen as a place where God has established His Name. Through the wall His house, in type, will be separated from the impurities of the surrounding world (Eze 42:20).

Some lessons

1. A calling is personal. You do a job with several people. Each has his own part in it for which he is responsible.
2. Someone who is convinced of his task and wants to go all the way for it, is able to make a warm plea for the necessity of his task. That appeals to others. They are motivated to cooperate.

Verse 19 | The Enemies Make Themselves Heard

19 But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard [it], they mocked us and despised us and said, "What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"

Of the opponents mentioned here we have already met Sanballat and Tobiah (verse 10). The Arab Geshem has joined them. In the enemies we find

next to the representatives of Moab and Ammon now also a representative of Edom. These three nations, who are all brother nations of Israel, are the most hostile nations of Israel (Dan 11:41; Isa 11:14).

They are fiercely displeased with the coming of Nehemiah (verse 10), but they have not yet made themselves heard or taken any action. This does not mean that their enmity and opposition have diminished. Their displeasure is not transient. Now that Nehemiah begins to build, they are making themselves heard.

Their first pinpricks with which they treat Nehemiah and his co-workers consist of mocking remarks. As much as Nehemiah's speech encouraged the people, so much so the mockery of the enemies is meant to take power away. It takes a great deal of faith strength to continue a work for the Lord under constant mockery.

A lesson

1. When engaging in an activity for the Lord, we must take into account the "hostility by sinners against" us (Heb 12:3).

Verse 20 | Reaction of Nehemiah to the Mockery

20 So I answered them and said to them, "The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem."

The first clash between Nehemiah and his enemies sets the tone for all further clashes. Nehemiah does not appeal to the king's permission in the face of his enemies. He seeks it higher up, He involves "the God of heaven" in the work. Mockery is only effective if we see ourselves in connection with the mockers. It has no effect if we see ourselves in connection with God. Nehemiah sees himself and those who help him in connection with God (Rom 8:31).

Nehemiah acts very firmly and leaves no room for compromise. He does not sell hotcakes, but speaks with authority. He places the mockers outside the work of God and draws a sharp line between himself and his opponents. He openly declares where his opponents stand: they have "no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem".

1. They have “no portion” in Jerusalem, because the portion of the enemies is in this life (Psa 17:14a) and not in the things of God.
2. They also have “no right” to have a place in Jerusalem or a say in what needs to be done – their opinions and thoughts are worthless.
3. Finally, there is also “no memorial” of them in God’s city. They have contributed nothing that has any lasting meaning and is remembered by God. They will be outside forever.

Some lessons

1. It is important not to give in to opposition from the start. The strength to resist lies in the conviction to be called by God.
2. Measure the strength of your opponents by the strength of God and not by your own strength.
3. See the opponents in their relationship with God. They have no relationship with God and therefore no interest or share in God’s work. If they do not repent, they will be without God forever.

Nehemiah 3

Introduction

This chapter radiates warmth and enthusiasm. The whole population responds to Nehemiah's call to build. Each is satisfied with his place, without being jealous of another. Hardly anyone avoids his task, no one grumbles about his task. Because of this there is care for every part of the wall. How impenetrable is a church with such collaborators.

The Spirit takes us by the hand and goes with us along the wall. We are allowed to watch with Him the progress of the building. We see people busy. We are not inspectors, but students. The Spirit is the Inspector. He says what the people are called, what they are doing, where they are doing, why they are doing it. He shows who's diligent and who's doing nothing. He sees the motives that lead a person.

Everything that is done is recorded. Not to have a nice evening later with a slide presentation or a video presentation and to talk about the performances. There doesn't have to be anything wrong with that. But what is recorded here, is recorded on indelible paper, in the register of God. Impeccably the Spirit records the names of the employees and their activities.

The enumeration of the workers is reminiscent of the enumeration at the end of the letter to the Romans (Rom 16:1-16). It is also reminiscent of "the right seat of Christ" (2Cor 5:10). There each one will "receive his own reward according to his own labor" (1Cor 3:8). This also applies to us. That is why it is so instructive to walk with the Spirit of God. Of every worker in God's kingdom, in which each has his own task and field, is now recorded what he is doing.

However, we are not all working on our own, for our own little kingdom. We do not work alongside each other when we are working together towards the same goal: the rebuilding of the wall. Shoulder to shoulder they are busy, which is so nicely indicated by the recurring words "next to".

Nowhere is it more important than in the church of God to have the right person in the right place. For this purpose "God has placed the members,

each one of them, in the body, just as He desired" (1Cor 12:18). To this end the necessary gift has been given to each member by the Spirit (Rom 12:6-8). Service is not only serving with the Word. Service is being engaged in the work that the Lord has ordained for each person. It is about doing His will. He rewards according to the faithfulness with which one is engaged and not according to the gift one possesses.

Everyone has a personal and unique share in the restoration of the wall of Jerusalem. No one does the same work, no one imitates another. Each has a share that is different from all the others. We see this in the disciples of the Lord, in the co-workers of Paul, in the warriors of David.

There is work enough. Everyone can get to work, no one needs to be unemployed. Those who have nothing to do may ask themselves whether it is because of laziness, jealousy, or pride. If you're lazy, you don't want to work. He who is jealous only wants a certain work, but that has already been assigned to someone else. He who is proud does not want work that he considers to be beneath his dignity. Everyone has a work that suits him and is given the grace to do so.

Building the wall is not an afterthought, but a necessity. A wall is intended for separation, it is a means of defense against external attacks by the enemy. This also makes the wall a means of security for society within the wall. The presence of the wall allows the inhabitants of the city to concentrate on the values of the city. The values of the city are determined by the temple, the house where God dwells. The wall also makes the city a whole.

The wall is not meant to isolate the city from her surroundings. Separation does not equate to isolation. It is beautiful to see how in this wall there are no less than ten gates. This makes it possible to enter and to leave. It is necessary that the gates are guarded. In the new Jerusalem guarding is no longer necessary (Rev 21:25,27).

The ten gates are:

1. The Sheep Gate (verse 1)
2. The Fish Gate (verse 3)
3. The Old Gate (verse 6)
4. The Valley Gate (verse 13)

5. The Refuse Gate (verse 14)
6. The Fountain Gate (verse 15)
7. The Water Gate (verse 26)
8. The Horse Gate (verse 28)
9. The East Gate (verse 29)
10. The Inspection Gate (verse 31)

Verse 1 | Eliashib – the Sheep Gate – Two Towers

1 Then Eliashib the high priest arose with his brothers the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors. They consecrated the wall to the Tower of the Hundred [and] the Tower of Hananel.

The account of the building begins at the Sheep Gate in the northeast and runs counterclockwise to the north (verses 1-7), west (verses 8-13), south (verse 14), and east (verses 15-32) to end up again at the Sheep Gate in the northeast.

Eliashib

The first to be mentioned as someone preparing to start the building work is the high priest Eliashib. His name means ‘God restores’. The fact that he is mentioned first is unfortunately not because of his devotion to the work, but because of his position. He is not faithful. A comparison with the building of the next gates shows that he does not provide the doors in the Sheep Gate with beams and bolts and bars (verses 3,6,13,14,15).

By omitting the beams and bolts and bars, the door is only a symbolic barrier. Everyone is free to open it, and those who wish to do so will not encounter any resistance. But that is not the purpose of a door. People who have nothing to do in the city must be stopped by it. The door may only be opened to people who belong in the city and who keep to the rules of the city.

Is this negligence perhaps due to the fact that he is a blood relative of Tobiah (Neh 13:4) and that his grandson married a daughter of Sanballat (Neh 13:28)? Those who have family ties with enemies of God are particularly exposed to the danger of not being so concerned about separation. This is an understandable difficulty. Therefore, we must take care that family relationships do not affect the position of separation before God.

The Sheep Gate

The first repair work is done at the Sheep Gate, by the priests. Through this gate the sheep are brought into the city to be sacrificed in the temple. In this way we are immediately reminded of the most important reason for the existence of the city and the temple: the worship of God. All believers are priests. Restoration of the wall is first and foremost necessary for the progress of priestly service. It is said only of this gate that they consecrate it, i.e. they separate and dedicate it especially to God.

The Sheep Gate is also a reminder of the Lord Jesus. He is the true Sheep Gate. He says of Himself: "I am the door of the sheep" (Jn 10:7). And a little further on He says: "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture" (Jn 10:9). Our personal life can be compared to a city. We can admit all possible sins in our lives, we can even enjoy sin. As long as we are of the world, we do the same. But enjoying sin gives a bitter aftertaste and the end is death. Then we must resort to the city of God.

The Sheep Gate is the entrance we must have. The real restoration of our life begins when we are saved from judgment by the Lord Jesus. As a result, we are allowed to "go in", which is to come into the presence of God in faith to approach Him as priests (Heb 10:19). We may also go "out", that is to go out into the world to testify of the Lord Jesus and to work for Him. We will also "find pasture", which is rest and food.

We can also see the local church as a city. If there is no wall around it, if the separation of the world is bad, then the thoughts and actions of the world can find their way in unhindered and unrestrained. Anyone who is concerned about this development should start by rebuilding the Sheep Gate. The Lord Jesus must once again be given His place as the One to Whom we owe our salvation and through Whom we may come into the presence of God. Through Him we may also do our service in the world and with Him we will find rest and food.

The builders at the Sheep Gate are the high priest and the priests. Priests are people who are used to the presence of God. They know His holiness and His goodness. Such people are needed to present the Lord Jesus as the door of the sheep. Whoever knows God, who knows what is His due and what His desires are, will gladly point out the door that leads to that God.

Two towers

Near the gate there are two towers: “Tower of the Hundred [and] the Tower of Hananel”. A tower is a watchtower, where a guard can see far outside the city what the city is approaching. This is reminiscent of vigilance. The gate is only allowed to open for sheep. For wolves the door must remain closed. Paul warns that after his departure “savage wolves will come in ..., not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:29). What we must be especially careful of are “the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Mt 7:15).

The name ‘Tower of the Hundred’ is remarkable in connection with the shepherd and the sheep. It recalls the parable the Lord Jesus pronounces about a shepherd who had a hundred sheep, of which he lost one (Mt 15:3-7). The intention is that all one hundred sheep should be brought to safety and not just the one lost sheep. From this tower the whole flock is watched over. No sheep should be missed.

Verse 2 | The Men of Jericho – Zaccur

2 Next to him the men of Jericho built, and next to them Zaccur the son of Imri built.

The men of Jericho

The subsequent people we see “next to” are the men of Jericho. The name Jericho evokes memories. It is the first city that Israel conquers when it enters the land. When Israel enters the land and comes to Jericho, the city is surrounded by a thick wall. The gate is closed. The city is completely closed for the Israelites. The wall around that city has to be demolished. This is done by faith (Jos 6:1-6,20; Heb 11:30). God pronounces His curse on that city and on everyone who will rebuild it and set up its gates (Jos 6:26). What God has said is fulfilled (1Kgs 16:34).

The men we are now watching are from the city of the curse. However, they want nothing more to do with it. They are aware of their origin, but there has been a change in their lives. Isn’t it wonderful that they are not building on the wall of Jericho, but on the wall of the city of God?

Every builder for God has been a builder for the world. We have built our own territory where we had the power and made everything our own.

For the people of God, we kept the gates closed. However, God has broken down the self-built walls of our hearts and all around our lives, and we have come to faith. Now we may take our place in building the wall around His city.

Zaccur

Next to Jericho's men, Zaccur is at work. Zaccur is the abbreviated form of Zechariah. He is a Levite and is one of those who have signed a covenant made with the LORD to be faithful henceforth (Neh 10:12). This indicates that his heart is turned toward the LORD, and his mind is such that he wants to do what is pleasing to God.

Levites, like priests, are connected to the temple. They help the priests to perform their service. Zaccur realizes that there can never be a holy service in the temple that is pleasing to God, if the city is not surrounded by walls. That is why he participates in the rebuilding of the wall.

Verse 3 | The Fish Gate – the Sons of Hassenaah

3 Now the sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate; they laid its beams and hung its doors with its bolts and bars.

The Fish Gate

This is the second gate we encounter. The Fish Gate is known in the days of the first temple as one of the main entrances to Jerusalem (Zep 1:10; 2Chr 33:14). It owes its name to the merchants who bring in their fish for the fish markets from Tyre or Lake Galilee (Neh 13:16).

The Fish Gate is reminiscent of the gospel. The Lord Jesus turns His disciples into "fishers of men" (Mk 1:17). Through the preaching of the gospel, people are brought into the city of God through the Fish Gate. The gate speaks of supervision. Care must be taken to ensure that a biblical gospel is brought. Only through the preaching of a Biblical gospel people come to repentance and new life.

If the preaching is adapted to people's tastes, only feeling or reason is addressed. The conscience remains untouched. People who believe because of the benefit the gospel gives them (cf. Jn 6:26; 2:23-25) do not belong in

the city of God. Those who work at the Fish Gate must see to it (cf. Mt 13:47-48).

There are also people who offer the gospel as merchandise. They suppose that “the fear of God is a profit [source]” (1Tim 6:5), a matter of financial gain. These are the bread preachers; they preach because it is their profession, not because the Spirit urges them to do so. Following a theological education is open to everyone. One does not have to be converted. On the basis of their diploma they moderate the right to participate in the building of the Fish Gate. The city of God is not waiting for such builders. They must be excluded from the building site.

The sons of Hassenaah

The sons of Hassenaah are mentioned among those who have returned from exile (Ezra 2:35; Neh 7:38). In number, it is the largest group that has returned from Babylon. They are rebuilding the Fish Gate. We do not hear how many sons are at work. However, it is mentioned that they meticulously finish every part of the gate. Of them it is mentioned that they provided the Fish Gate with beams and bolts and bars. This is what is neglected by Eliashib when building the Sheep Gate (verse 1).

Verse 4 | Meremoth – Meshullam – Zadok

4 Next to them Meremoth the son of Uriah the son of Hakkoz made repairs. And next to him Meshullam the son of Berechiah the son of Meshezabel made repairs. And next to him Zadok the son of Baana [also] made repairs.

Meremoth

Some work in groups such as the sons of Hassenaah (verse 3). Others work alone, such as Meremoth. Yet those who work alone also know they are connected with the others. The words “next to” indicates that well.

Meremoth doesn't have to rebuild his piece of wall from the ground up. He is busy with “repair work”. The part of the wall he has taken care of is still standing. But that piece is damaged, its function has been damaged. Maybe it's a piece of wall with holes.

Repairing is as important as rebuilding. Maybe we think our wall is still intact, while a closer inspection would show that there are some holes here

and there. Then we need to work like a Meremoth to repair the damage. We may have allowed in our thinking ideas about the functioning of the church that we do not derive from God's Word, but from the world. Expressing and implementing those ideas will make a hole in the wall. Repair is necessary.

We come across his name again and again. It is possible that Meremoth will finish his work sooner, because it is only repair work and he does not have to rebuild from the ground up. In any case, he is so diligent that after this work he starts working on another part of the wall (verse 21). His name is also mentioned among those who sign the covenant (Neh 10:5).

Meshullam

Like Meremoth we also encounter Meshullam twice during the building of the wall. After first completing a piece for others, he goes to work "in front of his own quarters" (verse 30b).

Like Eliashib (verse 1) Meshullam is connected to Tobiah through family ties. His daughter is married to a son of Tobiah (Neh 6:18). That does not plead in his favor. Such a connection is wrong. Scripture is clear about this (Ezra 9:1-3; 10:1-3; 2Cor 6:14). Yet the Spirit records his commitment to rebuilding. Perhaps he has realized that his consent to this marriage is wrong, making him useful to God. His name also appears in the list of those who sign the covenant (Neh 10:20).

Zadok

The name Zadok is worn by several people. The only thing known about this Zadok is that he is the son of Baana. Zadok means 'justice'. Baana means 'son of suffering'. Whoever does justice must count on the suffering that comes with it. On the other hand, there is the "blessed" that Peter, guided by the Spirit of God, pronounces to all who suffer in this way (1Pet 3:14a).

Verse 5 | The Tekoites

5 *Moreover, next to him the Tekoites made repairs, but their nobles did not support the work of their masters.*

Tekoa is located south of Bethlehem. The place is known as the abode of Amos, the prophet (Amos 1:1) and of a wise woman (2Sam 14:2). People from that city have now come to Jerusalem to help rebuild the wall. In doing so, they are siding with God like an Amos and showing true wisdom like the woman.

Unfortunately there are people among the Tekoites who do not help to build the wall. This is not because they have become ill or something like that. The reason is that they find themselves too great for this kind of work. They are people of prestige. This work doesn't suit their position. They can put others to work, but they don't allow themselves to be put to work. Giving orders to others, fine, but receiving orders, no way. They don't like the idea of obeying a 'master'.

Too often it turns out that a prominent place in the world prevents people from cooperating in God's kingdom. They do want to talk and rule, but don't roll up their sleeves and bend their necks under the work. They do not cooperate in something where man loses his importance and only God's honor counts.

Paul does not feel too good to work with his own hands and provide for his own needs and the needs of others (Acts 20:34). And is not the Lord Jesus the perfect example? He, Who is the Master of all, is in the midst of His disciples as One Who serves (Lk 22:24-28). The lesson He teaches is that everyone who has been given a prominent place in the church should learn from Him what serving means.

Verse 6 | The Old Gate – Joiada and Meshullam

6 Joiada the son of Paseah and Meshullam the son of Besodeiah repaired the Old Gate; they laid its beams and hung its doors with its bolts and its bars.

The Old Gate

The third gate in the wall is the Old Gate. It can also be translated as "gate of the old [city]" or "gate of the old [wall]". In any case, the gate reminds us of the past, of the glory days of the city.

For us, the rebuilding of this gate is also important. In the work on the wall of the city of God to protect what is of God, we have to go back to what was

from the beginning. God has given us His Word to show how the church came into being and how she functions in the beginning. We see this in the book of Acts. For the problems that hinder the functioning, He has given directions through His Spirit in the New Testament letters. These instructions have lost nothing of their present-day relevance. It is not for nothing God's eternal and lasting Word.

In the time of Nehemiah there is only the memory of the glory of the past. Solomon's days do not return. It is the same for the time in which we live with regard to the church. We can think with melancholy of the glory time of the beginning of the church, but that time does not return.

However, God has not changed. He has foreseen how the church would go. He has given us the letters of the New Testament. In them we find everything that is necessary to be able to come together as a church and to live together in the last days. It is not necessary to invent new ways of fellowship that are not based on Scripture. It is even wrong. We are allowed to restore and enter the Old Gate. We may ask about the "old paths" and find "rest for your soul" (Jer 6:16).

Joiada and Meshullam

Two builders are working on the Old Gate. Fellowship in building this gate is indispensable. You cannot put the ancient principles of the church into practice on your own. At least two are needed: "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst" the Lord Jesus says with a view to the local church (Mt 18:20).

Of the two builders, nothing is revealed except their names and those of their father. As a result, the emphasis is placed on the work they do. Important is what they do, not who they are. This also applies to us.

Verse 7 | Melatiah and Jadon

7 Next to them Melatiah the Gibeonite and Jadon the Meronothite, the men of Gibeon and of Mizpah, also made repairs for the official seat of the governor [of the province] beyond the River.

In some cases the father is mentioned by a name. Sometimes it goes even further back in the ancestry and the names of even more ancestors are

mentioned. This is not the case with Melatiah and Jadon. They tell us where they come from. The education that each undergoes is not only determined by his family, but also by his environment.

From a spiritual point of view it is not only important that someone is converted and becomes a child of God. That is the most important thing, but it is also important in what spiritual climate a person grows up.

As an extra peculiarity we read under whose authority they are. It seems that they are not directly accountable to Nehemiah, but that with the permission of the governor they help to rebuild.

Verse 8 | Uzziel and Hananiah

8 Next to him Uzziel the son of Harhaiah of the goldsmiths made repairs. And next to him Hananiah, one of the perfumers, made repairs, and they restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall.

The next builders introduced to us are men whose professions we also know. Uzziel means ‘power of God’. He is a goldsmith. Hananiah means ‘Yahweh has favored’. He is a perfumer.

A goldsmith works with the most precious metal and has to be accurate. A perfumer works with all kinds of oils and fragrant spices. A goldsmith decorates people and materials. A perfumer provides means of care for the body, making it smell good and also help in healing sick parts of the body.

From a spiritual point of view, such people are indispensable. They are the ‘fine’ workers, with an eye for detail. They are capable of decorating and caring for the members of the church. We recognize them in the shepherds and teachers.

There is a piece of wall to which they don’t have to do anything. The Broad Wall has remained intact. This wall has defied all attacks. In the lives of believers or churches there can be weak spots as well as strong spots. Some truths are unknown. Then there must be upbuilding, education, or else the devil will use ignorance to penetrate. Other truths, on the other hand, are well known and one is well able to defend that truth against attacks (1Thes 5:1-2).

Verse 9 | Rephaiah

9 Next to them Rephaiah the son of Hur, the official of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs.

We come to Rephaiah, which means “Yahweh healed”. He occupies a prominent position. He is in charge of overseeing half of the area that belongs to Jerusalem. It is an area outside Jerusalem. He knows that area and will have known its dangers. This will have been an extra incentive for him to make Jerusalem a safe area.

Those who have special responsibilities outside the city of God and therefore know social life well will not withdraw from their part in the building of the wall. They know better than many others the dangers from social life that threaten the life in the city of God, the church.

Verse 10 | Jedaiah – Hattush

10 Next to them Jedaiah the son of Harumaph made repairs opposite his house. And next to him Hattush the son of Hashabneiah made repairs.

Jedaiah

A special feature of Jedaiah is that he “repairs opposite his house”. This important characteristic is also found in verses 23,28,29,30. Repairing opposite his own house is about caring for his own family. Every father’s first concern should be to separate his family for God. Anyone who wants to be faithful personally will be aware of this. The blessing for the church of families dedicated to God cannot be overestimated. A church is as strong as the families of which it is made up.

The name Jedaiah means, among other things, ‘one that invokes the LORD’. Jedaiah is a worshiper. Prayer is the foundation on which he builds his house. Is the wall of our family prayer or the prayer for our family in ruins? Shouldn’t repairs be started there?

Maybe we started the first years of marriage this way, but we no longer pray as husband and wife and as a family. Now there are often harsh and bitter words, there is an unpleasant atmosphere, the children no longer feel the security of the past. Perhaps the children have felt this for a long time and have become indifferent to spiritual things.

Then let us go back to the wall of prayer. Let us begin and end the day again by calling upon God. Maybe husband and wife should tell each other that they have not prayed together anymore. Then let them get down on their knees and find each other again before God.

Hattush

Hattush is just another one of those people whose only thing we read is his father's name. But he's in God's memorial book. It is written of him with indelible ink that he also contributed to the construction of the wall.

Verse 11 | Malchijah and Hasshub – the Tower of Furnaces

11 Malchijah the son of Harim and Hasshub the son of Pahath-moab repaired another section and the Tower of Furnaces.

Malchijah and Hasshub

Both men come from families who came with Zerubbabel from Babel (Ezra 2:6,32). They repair a second part of the wall. Probably it does not mean that they have already done a first part, but that the wall is divided into several parts and that they are working on the second part.

Not everyone is called to start a work of the Lord. Some may be called to continue a work. One is no less than the other. In this example we see how much we complement each other. Not only are we doing a work together with others, but we are also ensuring the progress of a work that the Lord wants to uphold.

The Tower of Furnaces

It is not inconceivable that the Tower of Furnaces is located in the bakers' street. That is the street from where Jeremiah gets one loaf of bread a day when he is in prison (Jer 37:21). In the tower are several furnaces where bread is baked for the city. It is a beautiful work to restore that tower.

It is important that there is a tower in the wall where food is prepared for the inhabitants of the city. This tower serves on the one hand as a lookout and thus speaks of vigilance in view of an approaching enemy. On the other hand, this tower speaks of food supply for the inhabitants of the city.

Verse 12 | Shallum and His Daughters

12 Next to him Shallum the son of Hallohesh, the official of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs, he and his daughters.

His prominent position (cf. verse 5) did not prevent Shallum from getting his hands dirty and taking part in the building of the wall. He is not only socially a colleague of Rephaiah (verse 9), but also spiritually he has the same interest. He does not visit the parties with his colleague where good business can be done. They are not looking for better facilities in their own district. Together they are convinced that they serve their district best if they help to ensure the safety of the city of God.

A Christian who, as a highly educated official, is responsible for many disciplines, serves his business best if he is first and foremost committed to the city of God.

As a peculiarity it is mentioned that his daughters also help to build the wall. This is the only time we read of women helping. Women have their own task in the building, which cannot be done by men. There are women who serve the Lord with their goods (Lk 8:2-3), who prophesy (Acts 21:9), who struggle in the gospel (Phil 4:2-3), who are servants of the church (Rom 16:1-2).

In addition to himself, Shallum does not consider his daughters too good to play their part in this heavy work. We do not read of anyone who is working together with his sons. The only time there is talk of someone working on the wall with his children is here.

There's no indication of the age of these daughters. The impression is that they're young women. There may be an application here. There are complaints here and there that there is not much youth. It is also not easy for a young believer to have no one in a local church in their own age group. For these daughters, however, the absence of other young people did not prevent them from helping their father with the building. If young people see their parents faithfully doing their part in rebuilding the wall around the city of God, they will join in.

If there is sincerity, the Lord will bless that faithfulness. It will attract others who also want to live with and for the Lord.

Verse 13 | The Valley Gate – Hanun and the Inhabitants of Zanoah

13 Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired the Valley Gate. They built it and hung its doors with its bolts and its bars, and a thousand cubits of the wall to the Refuse Gate.

The Valley Gate

We're approaching the fourth gate, the Valley Gate. We have also looked at it before (Neh 2:13-15). That gate has also been destroyed and must be rebuilt.

Spiritually speaking, the Valley Gate speaks of humility, humiliation, humbleness. If we are going to boast, the Valley Gate will be destroyed. That happens when we start using the things God has given us to make ourselves important. That's what the people of Jerusalem have done, that's what the church is doing now. In the church in Laodicea we find the spirit of pride in full (Rev 3:15-17). It is a representation of the spirit that is everywhere present in the church. The rebuilding of the Valley Gate can begin when we humble ourselves, both toward God and toward one another (1Pet 5:5-6).

The third gate, the Old Gate, is reminiscent of what is from the beginning (verse 6). Rebuilding that gate is important. Equally important is that the rebuilding of the Valley Gate follows. If we think of God's ideal ('the Old Gate'), of how He wants the church to be, and we see how far we have deviated from that, it will bring us to the rebuilding of the Valley Gate. It will lead us to humble ourselves.

Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah

The Valley Gate is restored by Hanun, which means favored, and the inhabitants of Zanoah, which means rejected. In these names we find what is needed to restore the Valley Gate. We may be engaged in the awareness that we stand in the favor or grace of God (Rom 5:2). We are gifted or made pleasant in the Beloved (Eph 1:6).

When we realize something of the grace that has been given to us, there is no room for any boast of our own. We will not glory in our "arrogance", which is called an evil boasting (Jam 4:16). We will not boast of our gifts while we are blind to the sin found in the church. That boasting is not good

(1Cor 5:1,6). On the contrary, there will be besides the awareness of being gifted, also be the awareness that everything that is our own must be rejected by God. This does not only concern our sins and iniquities. We will see this for ourselves as well. But precisely all our righteous deeds “are like a filthy garment” (Isa 64:6).

These men are also building a large part of wall, no less than a thousand cubits. It is possible that the wall has not been torn down to the ground here and that more can be repaired in the same time than the time needed for other parts to be repaired from the ground.

Verse 14 | The Refuse Gate – Malchijah

14 Malchijah the son of Rechab, the official of the district of Beth-haccherem repaired the Refuse Gate. He built it and hung its doors with its bolts and its bars.

The Refuse Gate

The fifth in the row of gates is the Refuse Gate. Through this gate all the garbage of Jerusalem is brought out to the garbage dump in the valley of Hinnom. There it is burned.

From a spiritual point of view it is understandable that the Refuse Gate follows the Valley Gate. If we have to humble ourselves, it is accompanied by confession of sins. By confession, sins are removed and we are cleansed. We must “cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit” (2Cor 7:1). All filth must be removed from our lives.

The rebuilding of the Refuse Gate does not seem at first sight to be a pleasant occupation. It stinks there. Nevertheless, it is important that the Refuse Gate also starts to function again. This means that what does not belong in the city of God must be removed from it. We can apply this to our personal life as well as to our collective life.

Malchijah

The restorer of the Refuse Gate is called Malchijah, which means ‘king of (appointed by) Yahweh’. He is an official. Yet he is not ashamed to do this humble work. We build the Refuse Gate if we remove sin from our own lives. We build the Refuse Gate when we help our brother or sister remove

sin from their lives (Mt 18:15). We can only do this by identifying with him or her (Gal 6:1). We build the Refuse Gate when we get rid of sin out of the church (1Cor 5:13b).

We only build the Refuse Gate in the right way if we look to the Lord Jesus and are at work in His mind. In the name of Malchijah we recognize the Lord Jesus, Who is not ashamed to do the least work, slave work (Jn 13:1-17). Above all, we see that in Him when He takes our sins upon Himself on the cross and is made sin on our behalf. There He has received the judgment of the sins of everyone who believes, and so has removed them.

Verse 15 | The Fountain Gate and Shallum

15 Shallum the son of Col-hozeh, the official of the district of Mizpah, repaired the Fountain Gate. He built it, covered it and hung its doors with its bolts and its bars, and the wall of the Pool of Shelah at the king's garden as far as the steps that descend from the city of David.

After the Valley Gate and the Refuse Gate follows immediately, as the sixth gate, the Fountain Gate. The restoration of this gate was undertaken by Shallum, in daily life official of the district of Mizpah. The usual, necessary work being done on it is mentioned again. But in connection with the restoration of this gate, some details are also mentioned. There is talk of "the wall of the Pool", of "the king's garden" and of "the steps that descend from the city of David".

The Fountain Gate is reminiscent of water that rises in freshness from a fountain. This is reminiscent of what the Lord Jesus says in John 4 and John 7. There He speaks of a fountain of living water "springing up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14) and of "rivers of living water" (Jn 7:37-39).

Just as in spiritual application there is a connection between the Valley Gate and the Refuse Gate, so there is also a connection between the Refuse Gate and the Fountain Gate. When the wrong has been removed from our lives, when we have cleansed ourselves of it by confession, there will be room to enjoy the living water. The Lord speaks about this with the woman at the well of Jacob (Jn 4:10). There will also be room for the Holy Spirit, Who fills our hearts with the glory of the Lord Jesus (Jn 7:39).

In order to ensure the supply of water, the pool must be protected. The connection with the fountain must be maintained. If the supply is hindered, the life of the inhabitants of the city will be over.

The pool is at the king's garden. The water belongs to a garden, a court, which belongs to the king. This reminds us that drinking this water, which speaks of being busy with God's Word, brings us into the presence of the Lord Jesus. To be with Him in the Spirit is the greatest joy for the believer.

If we have been in His presence like that, we may go down the steps of the city of David. What we have enjoyed we may share with others who live outside the city. In it we can see those who are believers but do not have an eye for the church of God as His city. In this way we will be a refreshment for other believers who, as it were, do not prefer to live in the city.

Verse 16 | Nehemiah the Son of Azbuk

16 After him Nehemiah the son of Azbuk, official of half the district of Beth-zur, made repairs as far as [a point] opposite the tombs of David, and as far as the artificial pool and the house of the mighty men.

We come to Nehemiah the son of Azbuk. This man also controls an area in daily life. He is official of half the district of Beth-zur. Also in this verse some details are mentioned. With the part of the wall he builds, three places are connected: "the tombs of David", "the artificial pool" and "the house of the mighty men".

This Nehemiah ensures that "the tombs of David" – i.e. of David and his descendants (2Chr 32:33) – are protected. As mentioned earlier (Neh 2:3), when we think of a tomb in which God-fearing people are buried, we may think of the future. These believers have not received in their lives what God has promised. But they have died believing that God will fulfill His promises. This Nehemiah ensures, as it were, that this faith is preserved.

He also takes care of the protection of "the artificial pool", possibly an extra water supply next to the waterworks mentioned in the previous verse. It is important to have sufficient water in reserve to be able to drink from it when the enemy lays siege to the city. Whoever learns biblical texts by heart will build such a pool. Sometimes you do not have a Bible at your

disposal. Then it is life-saving to know the Word of God and to know a text that you can apply to the situation that arises.

Also “the house of the mighty men” needs to be protected. This has probably been a residence of the heroes of David. The memory of people who fought in faith for their king when he was still being persecuted should remain. Hebrews 11 is such a ‘house of the mighty men’. The believers introduced to us there form a “great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us” (Heb 12:1). Their example calls for imitation. Above all, we may look to the Hero, the Lord Jesus, Who has gone all the way before us in faith (Heb 12:1-3).

Verses 17-18 | Rehum – Hashabiah – Keilah – Bavvai

17 After him the Levites carried out repairs [under] Rehum the son of Bani. Next to him Hashabiah, the official of half the district of Keilah, carried out repairs for his district. 18 After him their brothers carried out repairs [under] Bavvai the son of Henadad, official of [the other] half of the district of Keilah.

Rehum

After the priests mentioned in verse 1, we now meet Levites. They too are busy helping to rebuild the wall. They work under the leadership of Rehum, the son of Bani. The usual service of the Levites is to help the priests with the sacrifices. For their usual work it is therefore important that Jerusalem as the city of the temple is well protected again.

Levite service in the spiritual sense takes place, among other things, when the believers are taught from the Word of God. The Lord Jesus should always be central to this. And if He is seen, it will make hearts happy and thankful. As a result, priestly service will be performed: believers will offer sacrifices of praise and thanks to God.

Keilah

The officials who together have oversight over the whole area around Keilah are also present at the building work. Keilah did not show its best side in David’s time. It is a city “with double gates and bars” (1Sam 23:7) which is under heavy attack from the Philistines. Then David comes. He defeats the Philistines and liberates the inhabitants of the city. However, there is no gratitude. They are willing to deliver David to Saul (1Sam 23:12).

Hashabiah and Bavvai

Another spirit is found here with Hashabiah and Bavvai . With their part in the rebuilding, they ensure that Keilah also gets a positive mention in Scripture. This is how it can be in the life of a believer or a church. Things may have happened in the past that we are now ashamed of (cf. Rom 6:21). People who know us from the past may remind us of them. It is to be hoped that these people will also notice that we have changed by the grace of God.

Verse 19 | Ezer

19 Next to him Ezer the son of Jeshua, the official of Mizpah, repaired another section in front of the ascent of the armory at the Angle.

On our way around the wall we arrived at Ezer. In the meaning of the name 'Ezer' the word 'help' is enclosed. Think of the stone Samuel sets up between Mizpah and Shen: He "named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the LORD has helped us"" (1Sam 7:12).

As Official of Mizpah, Ezer is not too dainty to be of help. His help consists of building the next part of the wall. This part of the wall is important from a tactical point of view. It is opposite the ascent of the armory. It seems that this part of the wall also forms a corner in the wall. This means that the armory has to be protected by the wall in two directions. A difficulty factor which Ezer does not avoid.

Building a corner is always more difficult than building a straight part of the wall. Protecting the armory is often more difficult than protecting other objects. The armory can be compared to the armor of God (Eph 6:10-20). If we leave the armor house unprotected, if we don't put the armor on, we are defenseless.

A man who had to stay in an environment hostile to God told me that he put on the armor of God every morning. He did so by memorizing the armor (Eph 6:14-18) and reciting it every morning. In this way he protected the armory and therefore himself. He was able to repel the enemy's attacks with the weapons God had given him.

Verse 20 | Baruch

20 After him Baruch the son of Zabbai zealously repaired another section, from the Angle to the doorway of the house of Eliashib the high priest.

We arrived at Baruch. His name means ‘blessed’. His special characteristic is that he is “zealously”, repairing. This extra mention indicates that his degree of zeal is special. The Spirit, in every mention of names, notes certain peculiarities, things which make some more striking than others.

There is, also in the work of the Lord, a distinction in quantity and quality. All the differences are due to causes which are not mentioned here, but which will become visible before the judgment seat of Christ. Behind all the deeds of men there are motives.

Verse 21 | Meremoth

21 After him Meremoth the son of Uriah the son of Hakkoz repaired another section, from the doorway of Eliashib’s house even as far as the end of his house.

Meremoth is one who builds in front of the house of another, in front of the house of Eliashib the high priest (verse 1). He does this as an extra work, because he did restore another part of the wall first (verse 4). Eliashib helps to build the Sheep Gate (verse 1), but it seems that he neglects his own house. It is to Meremoth’s credit that he takes on a task that is actually for Eliashib himself. He does not say: ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ (Gen 4:9). Instead, he makes an extra effort in favor of his failing brother. He makes an effort to do what the other is failing to do. This does not diminish Eliashib’s responsibility, especially since he is so prominent among the people.

It is to be wished that there are also men in the church who want to make extra effort for those who fail in their own family. It is necessary that such men have their own house in order. In 1 Timothy 3 are the conditions to be met by someone who aspires to be an overseer (1Tim 3:1-7). The work of an overseer is called “a fine work” (1Tim 3:1). This fine work which the overseer aspires is nothing less than the keeping of God’s flock (Acts 20:28; cf. 1Pet 5:1-4). It is a work because it requires an investment of energy.

The aspiration to be an overseer should not be to want to be something, but to want to do something. It is not extending to a position of authority, but to the task of a servant. Service is done for God (He is the commissioner) and to the church (cf. Ezra 7:10; Neh 2:10).

The motive for this aspiration can be nothing more than surrender to and love for the Lord Jesus and the desire to serve Him in dependence and obedience.

Verse 22 | The Priests

| *22 After him the priests, the men of the valley, carried out repairs.*

Here we meet priests again (verse 1). Since verse 15 we are on the eastern side of the wall. If we look closely, we can already see the temple. It is as if, as we approach the temple, we meet more and more temple servants. We have already passed the Levites in verse 17. We have passed the house of the high priest. Now we are at priests again. In verses 26,31 we will find more temple servants busy and in between, at the Horse Gate, another number of priests (verse 28).

The priests we find busy here, live in “the valley”, that is the Jordan Valley. It will have been a joy for them to be able to work so close to the temple. The prospect of being able to perform their service in the temple again will have encouraged them.

Verse 23 | Benjamin and Hasshub – Azariah

| *23 After them Benjamin and Hasshub carried out repairs in front of their house. After them Azariah the son of Maaseiah, son of Ananiah, carried out repairs beside his house.*

Benjamin and Hasshub

This is the second time that people are building in front of their house. The names of these builders are Benjamin, which means ‘son of my right hand’ and Hasshub, which means ‘caring’, ‘concerned’. The right hand is the hand of strength and represents protection and guarding. What protects a house? How do we take care of what has been entrusted to us in our home (family)? When it comes to the material side, we can arrange all

conceivable insurances for all kinds of calamities, such as fire and theft. We can implement all kinds of protective security measures, such as alarm systems and security services. However, none of this offers a certain level of protection.

But there are far worse enemies than those who can cause us material damage. These are the enemies who are constantly trying to harm us mentally. How can we protect ourselves from them? How do we erect a protective wall against them?

From Benjamin, the son of Jacob, we read that he will dwell by the LORD, and there he will live safely (Deu 33:12). Only God is our security. How rich is a house that finds its security in the protection of the Lord, where one trusts in the Almighty and knows himself secure in His arms. This is not about the certainty that sickness, poverty, suffering or death cannot affect our house, but that living with the Lord will always save us from evil, strife and fear.

If we no longer trust in the power of the Lord, that part of the wall will be in ruins. If we notice how our families are increasingly falling apart because the protection is gone, we must seek it again. The power of the Lord is always available to those who call upon it.

Azariah

Azariah is busy "beside his house". It seems that the part of the wall opposite his house is still intact. It is rather meaningless to start next to your house and leave the part in front of your house open. Azariah means 'Yahweh has helped'. He is not satisfied with the fact that the wall in front of his house is still standing. He also wants the open part next to it to be closed. With the help of the LORD he excludes, as far as it depends on him, any risk that the enemy can even come near his house. It is important to keep the enemy as far away as possible.

Any interest in the enemy out of curiosity may give him the opportunity to attack. We shouldn't give him that chance. Our interest should only be in the Lord Jesus and the things in which He is central. To the extent that we have to concern ourselves with the enemy as a task of the Lord, for example in order to be able to warn others of his wiles, we may count on the protection of the Lord.

Verse 24 | Binnui

24 After him Binnui the son of Henadad repaired another section, from the house of Azariah as far as the Angle and as far as the corner.

Where Azariah has stopped, Binnui continues to build. He builds “as far as the Angle and as far as the corner”. The name Binnui means ‘someone who builds’. His father is Henadad, one of the returnees from Babylon (Ezra 3:9). His sons helped build the temple. Here we see a son helping to build the wall. His father gave him a name that has to do with building. It seems that Henadad is involved in everything that has to do with building for God. Binnui lives up to the name his father gave him.

What name do we give our children? I mean, what expectation do we have of them? If we seek for ourselves a position, honor and prestige in the world, we will wish the same for our children. In our minds we give them the name of a great scientist, of a famous athlete, of a celebrated musician or of any other celebrity. But if our interest is in God’s house and city, in the glory of God in all things, we will wish that it will be the same with our children. Then we will pray that they will be in the service of the Lord Jesus in His kingdom.

Verse 25 | Palal – Pedaiah

25 Palal the son of Uzai [made repairs] in front of the Angle and the tower projecting from the upper house of the king, which is by the court of the guard. After him Pedaiah the son of Parosh [made repairs].

Palal

Palal is busy near the king’s house on the side of “the court of the guard”. It is very likely that Jeremiah was locked up there (Jer 32:2,8,12; 33:1; 37:21; 38:6,13,28; 39:14). He was locked up there because he warned about the coming of the king of Babylon. He also pointed out that surrender was the only possibility of salvation. But the king and his counselors did not want to hear about it. Jeremiah lost his freedom and Jerusalem was conquered and destroyed.

Maybe Palal is thinking about this when he is working on the wall at “the court of the guard”. His name means ‘judge’. A judge knows when the law has been broken and which punishment belongs to the transgression. He

will agree that God has done justice by placing the guilty Jerusalem in the hands of the Babylonians. They have earned this judgment. Jeremiah is liberated, the people have been taken into captivity.

Will that not have made him a praying builder? We can imagine that he prayed: ‘Lord, give that your people will now faithfully serve you, listen to you, so that the city will not have to be destroyed again’. Such a prayer also suits us, who live in days in which the decay of the church increases hand over hand. If we can then experience restoration by God’s grace, we should never forget how much we have failed as a church.

Pedaiah

Next to Palal, Pedaiah is busy. Pedaiah means ‘Yahweh redeemed’. This fits nicely with the ‘judge’. God is righteous when He judges, but He redeems those who bow under this judgment. Pedaiah represents someone who is conscious that he is redeemed to dedicate himself for the safety and security of all who are to the city of God.

Verse 26 | The Temple Servants – the Water Gate

26 The temple servants living in Ophel [made repairs] as far as the front of the Water Gate toward the east and the projecting tower.

The temple servants

In between all the activity a remark is made about the temple servants. They live on the Ophel, a height just before the Water Gate on the south side of the temple. Temple servants, also called Nethinim, are always mentioned in plural. They are connected to the service in the temple. Their tasks lie on the terrain of all kinds of simple work. Most likely, they are descendants of the Gibeonites, who joined the people of God by deceit (Jn 9:3-15). Joshua curses them for this and determines that they will never cease to “being slaves, both hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God” (Jos 9:23).

In connection with the name Pedaiah, we see how the LORD has delivered them from the curse. They have conformed to the judgment of Joshua and therefore the curse has become a blessing for them. The wall also serves to protect and preserve them for the service that has been imposed upon them.

The Water Gate

The Water Gate, the seventh gate mentioned in this chapter, is not part of the wall, but, like the Ophel, lies within the wall. It does not say that the Water Gate is being restored. However, it does say that the gate is on “the east” of the wall and close to “the projecting tower”.

At the Fountain Gate (verse 15) we have already seen that the water speaks of the Word of God (Eph 5:26). There the water is in action, a well which springs up. That is the Word which does its work and works (1Thes 2:13). Here the water also represents the Word of God, but more in its immutability. This is a clear application of the fact that the Water Gate does not need to be restored. Nothing needs to be improved on the Word. It remains eternally in all its perfection (Psa 119:89; Jn 1:1; Rev 19:13).

This gives hope for the future, of which the east side speaks. The east side is the side where the sun rises. When the Lord Jesus appears as “the Sun of righteousness” (Mal 4:2), He will fulfill everything God has promised in His Word. It is as if “the projecting tower” emphasizes that. The watchman in that tower looks eastward to be the first to see the Sun of righteousness rise.

Verse 27 | The Tekoites

27 After them the Tekoites repaired another section in front of the great projecting tower and as far as the wall of Ophel.

This group of builders was also mentioned earlier (verse 5). Here they are working on a second part. It is possible that the Tekoites have to do a second part because the notables find it beneath their dignity to help.

We can apply this to all the work that is done for the Lord. In the work for the Lord the burdens are sometimes divided unevenly because there are some who do not perform their task. In that case a great deal has to be done by the few. If each member fulfils his or her function (1Cor 14:4-11), no member is overburdened. Unfortunately, practice is different. Some believe that they can do nothing. They hide behind incompetence or no time. But the Lord has given every believer a task. Apologies are pretexts, not valid excuses, and in fact disobedience to the Lord.

Verse 28 | The Horse Gate – the Priests

28 Above the Horse Gate the priests carried out repairs, each in front of his house.

The Horse Gate

We've arrived at the eighth gate, the Horse Gate. The Horse Gate isn't being repaired itself. It is mentioned as the starting point for a number of priests to rebuild the wall in front of their house. In almost all cases where the horse is mentioned in Scripture, they are war horses. The horse is praised for its fearlessness, speed, endurance, and strength. A wonderful description of it is given by the LORD Himself in His answer to Job (Job 39:22-28).

The mentioned characteristics of the horse are necessary to persevere in building. The end of the wall comes in sight. Sometimes the view at the end can give an extra boost of energy. We think about what already has been done and do everything we can to finish the work. Sometimes the last part can become just too much. If we measure the work still to be done by our strengths, we can become discouraged (Neh 4:10).

If we are in danger of becoming discouraged, it is important to remember that for the qualities mentioned, we should not rely on ourselves or a creature, but on the Lord. In some psalms the great power of the horse is mentioned to remind us of the greater power of God (Psa 20:8; 33:17; 76:7). If we call upon Him, He will give us the strength and endurance to achieve victory and reach the end goal.

The priests

More than anything else, this applies to the priestly service. In Christianity there is the confession of the general priesthood, but often not its practice. How important is it to hold on to this truth, which is so important to God, and to put it into practice. God wants us to praise Him continually – and not just occasionally (Heb 13:15; 1Pet 2:5).

It is possible that the impediment to perform this priestly service is caused by the absence of the walls in front of the priests' houses. By giving up the separation of the world – tearing down the wall – much has penetrated into the families of the believers, which does not exactly encourage priestly service. How many hours are they watching TV or surfing the internet or

spending on social media? And when people are watching and surfing, what do they see?

Let believing men and women, for they are both priests, inspect the walls in front of their homes. By not being vigilant, have thoughts entered the heart and changed the view of the Bible or the Lord Jesus? With honest self-examination it will then be established that the priestly service before God has diminished, the worship of the Father has disappeared and the dedication to the Lord is hardly present anymore.

Let the Horse Gate come within sight again. Seek the power of the Lord to resume the building of the wall. Listen to the encouragement of Nehemiah: “Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your houses” (Neh 4:14).

Verse 29 | Zadok – Shemaiah and the East Gate

29 After them Zadok the son of Immer carried out repairs in front of his house. And after him Shemaiah the son of Shecaniah, the keeper of the East Gate, carried out repairs.

Zadok

Zadok is also busy in front of his house. Zadok means, among other things, ‘sincere’, ‘honest’. Has the wall of sincerity been knocked down around our house? Are we honest in our dealings with others? When we’re married, let’s apply this to our marriage. Do we remember our promise of faithfulness to each other on our wedding day? Have we remained faithful and honest? Does this also apply to the desire for our partner’s companionship that must be greater than that of anyone else in the world? Or do we covet the company of someone whose wife or husband we say, “He suits me better, is more sympathetic to me than my own”? The sacred wall of honesty then lies in ruins and must be rebuilt.

Perhaps the husband should confess to his wife or the wife to her husband that dishonesty has come into his thoughts or perhaps even into practice. The debris must be cleared away before it can be rebuilt.

Zadok is the son of Immer, which means ‘talkative’. There is no part of the body that damages so much as the tongue. The wall of honesty often becomes a mess because of the talkativeness. To be critical on each other, on the brothers and sisters, bring down the wall. How do we talk about each other and with each other? Maybe we should confess this, also to the children who have heard how we have talked about our brothers and sisters.

Shemaiah and the East Gate

We’ve arrived at Shemaiah. It is mentioned of him that he is “the keeper of the East Gate”. The East Gate, the ninth gate in this chapter, is a special gate. Through that gate the glory of the LORD left the temple and Jerusalem (Eze 10:18-19; 11:23). Because of the sins of Jerusalem God’s glory could no longer dwell there. But He did not leave to stay away forever. The prophet Ezekiel sees in a vision the glory of the LORD returning in the new temple (Eze 43:4).

This great perspective is connected with the name of Shemaiah. His name means ‘Yahweh hears’. No matter how much God’s people are in decay, no matter how much God’s visible glory has had to retreat into heaven, there comes a moment when He returns. Faith cries out, ‘How long, LORD? It seems to have been for so long. But God listens to the cries of His people. The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” (Rev 22:17). The Lord Jesus answers: “Yes, I am coming quickly” (Rev 22:20).

Verse 30 | Hananiah and Hanun – Meshullam

30 After him Hananiah the son of Shelemiah, and Hanun the sixth son of Zalaph, repaired another section. After him Meshullam the son of Berechiah carried out repairs in front of his own quarters.

Hananiah and Hanun

We don’t know much more about these builders than their names. There’s a connection in their names. Hananiah means ‘Yahweh has favored’ and Hanun means ‘favored’. Of Hanun one particularity is mentioned: he is the sixth son.

Six is the number of man (Rev 13:18) and his work (Exo 20:9). Everything that man is and does bears the stamp of sin and weakness. Man is a crea-

ture favored by God. By choosing sin, man has cut himself loose from God. In his pride he boasts of his qualities. It is therefore foolish to hold that man high and trust him on the day of the visitation (Isa 2:22).

But every 'Hanun' can become a 'Hananiah'. He who acknowledges his sinfulness, pride and rebellion against God receives forgiveness of sins. He may see in the work of the Lord Jesus, Who as Man has answered perfectly to what God asks of man. He, as Man, has borne the sins of all who believe in Him. Whoever accepts in faith that He has also done it for him, comes into the favor of God (Rom 5:2).

Through repentance to God, the connection with God is restored. By faith in the Lord Jesus, someone in Him is made pleasant to God (Eph 1:6). This is the true grace (or favor) in which one must stand (1Pet 5:12). 'Hananiah' and 'Hanun' are united. 'Hanun' can truly fulfill the purpose for which God created him, that is to serve Him. Together with 'Hananiah' he can be used to build the wall.

Meshullam

Meshullam first helped restore another part of the wall (verse 4b), but he does not neglect "his own quarters" or "cell" as it also can be translated, his own living space. Meshullam may live alone in a cell. The application is obvious. Many young people leave the parental home to study in another city. They go and live on their own. They are responsible for the decoration of their cell and their behavior in it. They go and live on their own. They are responsible for the decoration of their cell and their behavior in it. Does it breathe the Christian atmosphere or do they see an opportunity to cleanly throw all the biblical values and norms of home overboard? Many young people have demolished the wall behind which they have been safe at home.

With Meshullam it is different. Although he has his own cell as his home, his life is a testimony of complete surrender. As a result, he lives in a sacred atmosphere. His name means 'surrendered'. He is the son of Berechiah, which means 'Yahweh blesses'. He who lives in surrender to the Lord is blessed by Him. The blessing of the Lord does not depend on whether my house is large or small, whether the work is impressive or insignificant,

but whether everything is used and done in submission to Him. The blessing then comes from the Lord, “who makes rich” (Pro 10:22).

We all build on the wall. No one should think he is too small. The smallest hole in the wall is in danger of being penetrated by the enemy. If we allow a hole to form or exist, the whole church is in danger.

Verse 31 | Malchijah – the Inspection Gate

31 After him Malchijah, one of the goldsmiths, carried out repairs as far as the house of the temple servants and of the merchants, in front of the Inspection Gate and as far as the upper room of the corner.

Malchijah

Just a little bit more and the tour around the wall is complete. We stop for a moment at Malchijah, a goldsmith. Malchijah means ‘Yahweh is King’. He knows the value of precious metals. To protect the material and the profession, he helps to build the wall.

Furthermore, his work is connected to “the house of the temple servants and of the merchants”. He has an eye for the work that the “temple servants” do. However humble it may be, it is important that this work can be done. By building the wall he makes sure that the enemy cannot enter the city through their house. A temple servant can underestimate his work so much, that he tries to get some prestige through other channels. But if the temple servant is connected to ‘Malchijah’ and lives by the meaning of that name and does his work, the enemy will not succeed in getting into the city of God through him. The wall is well built there.

Also “merchants” can only trade well if they do so in accordance with the rules that apply in the city. It is difficult, but not impossible, to do business honestly. The enemy has made special provision for businessmen to influence the life in the city of God. But on the businessman associated with ‘Malchijah’, who lives and acts according to the meaning of that name, he will not get a grip. The wall there is well built.

The Inspection Gate

The Inspection Gate is the tenth gate mentioned in this chapter. The work is almost done. It is not unusual at the end of a work, at the end of a year, at

the end of a life to look back at that work, that year, that life. From a spiritual point of view it is important to look back regularly. Later we often see better how we have worked than in the time of that work itself.

At the end of his life Paul draws up the balance sheet. When the time of his departure has come, he can say: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2Tim 4:6-7). At the same time, he knows that the final 'inspection' will be done by the Lord (1Cor 4:1-5), when we will all be revealed "before the judgment seat of Christ" (2Cor 5:10).

That 'inspection' before the judgment seat takes place in "the upper room", in heaven. But also on earth we already find an 'upper room', a place of fellowship with the Lord Jesus. There the Lord Jesus is with His disciples to celebrate the Passover with them (Lk 22:12). On that occasion He instituted Supper, which we are still allowed to celebrate every Sunday. Then we think of Him and His work of redemption on the cross. We proclaim His death. But we cannot do this without judging ourselves, investigating, 'inspecting' (1Cor 11:28). If we discover that there is something of sin in our lives, we must first condemn it. We have to confess it to God, and if people are involved we have to confess it to them as well.

After the ascension of the Lord Jesus, the disciples are back in the upper room (Acts 1:13). There they wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. 'Inspection' of the Word makes it clear that the event with Judas is foretold in Scripture (Acts 1:16). Scripture also tells the 'examiners' that someone else must take the place of Judas (Acts 1:20). Examination of the Word shows what must happen until the promise is fulfilled. More than ever we can apply this to the promise of the coming of the Lord Jesus.

Verse 32 | Goldsmiths and Merchants – the Sheep Gate

32 Between the upper room of the corner and the Sheep Gate the goldsmiths and the merchants carried out repairs.

Goldsmiths and merchants

In this verse no name or names are mentioned, but two professions: goldsmiths and merchants. They make sure that the last hole in the wall is closed and the wall forms one whole. The goldsmiths work with precious

metal. They work very precisely. The result of their work is always admired. Merchants work in such a way that they get the greatest return from a business.

When rebuilding the wall, it is important to work accurately to the end. In order to persevere in rebuilding the wall, it is necessary to recognize the value of this work. It is also important to work in such a way that it yields the greatest profit for the Lord Jesus. He has given each of His own talents, with the task: "Do business until I come back" (Lk 19:13).

The parable of the pounds (Lk 19:11-27) and of the talents (Mt 25:14-30) deal with what the Lord has entrusted to us during His absence on earth. On His return, He will ask us what we have done with it. Has our life brought profit to Him?

The Sheep Gate

After the walk along the wall around the city we're back at the Sheep Gate, where we started in verse 1. The Sheep Gate reminds us of the Lord Jesus as the door of the sheep and he reminds us of Him as the good Shepherd who gave His life for His sheep (Jn 10:11). In this way He will be with us forever. Forever and ever we will worship Him for that.

Nehemiah 4

Introduction

With each revival there is opposition. Ezra has experienced this (Ezra 4-5;10) and Nehemiah experiences this. Satan is always out to blur the distinction between the church and the world and if possible take it away. Wherever he succeeds, the truths of Christendom are partly or completely lost.

In Nehemiah 4 there is open opposition from outside and we see the enemy as “a roaring lion” (1Pet 5:8). In Nehemiah 6 the opposition also comes from outside, but in veiled form and directed at Nehemiah personally. There the enemy appears as “an angel of light” (2Cor 11:14). In Nehemiah 5 there is no overt or veiled enmity from the outside, but there is internal struggle. There the people are the enemy of themselves.

Nehemiah overcomes all hostilities in Nehemiah 4-6 because he knows God and involves Him in everything. Without God every opposition is too powerful for us, with God we overcome the greatest enemy.

Verse 1 | Sanballat Becomes Furious

1 Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews.

The opposition becomes fiercer. The enemy gets angrier as the building of the wall progresses. This is how it is with our separation. As long as we fulfill our religious duties, the enemy will not show himself. But as soon as sanctification of life is worked out in our practical lives, he becomes furious. The devil doesn't care if someone converts to Christendom, as long as he is not living according to it.

Sanballat expresses his anger in the use of mockery. His fearful suspicions about which we read Nehemiah 2 are getting more and more ground (Neh 2:10). In Nehemiah 2 he and his allies have already made themselves heard in the same, mocking way (Neh 2:19). The hatred of his heart always seeks and finds ways to express itself. At first it is 'only' a mockery of the work.

As the wall around Jerusalem closes, the enemy becomes furious. At first it is a frivolous mockery, now the mockery takes on a grim character.

In the face of the increasing enmity which he and his companions display, Nehemiah's courage and determination are also becoming more and more evident. We see his full trust in God and his great, passionate commitment to the service of the LORD. Today, men of the caliber of a Nehemiah are needed in the Lord's service. Whoever wants to dedicate himself to the Lord and His people must count on opposition. The greater the determination of the servant, the fiercer the opposition. Satan knows on whom he is aiming: on everyone who is determined to obey the Lord and live for Him.

Verse 2 | Mocking Questions

2 He spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy [men] of Samaria and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore [it] for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?"

The opposition has different forms and comes from all sides. There is mockery by the enemy and later also threats of violence and trickery. We will see later that besides the opposition from the outside, there also appears to be opposition from the inside (verse 10; Neh 5:1-15) in the form of discouragement.

Opposition from the outside first manifests itself in mockery. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews calls mockery a trial of faith: "And others underwent [the] trial of mockery" (Heb 11:36). To the first mockery (Neh 2:19) is attached the (unfounded) accusation that the building is a proof of rebellion against the king. Here it is mockery for the second time. This mockery manifests itself in the firing of five questions. All questions are meant to ridicule the work. The questions are not asked to the builders. The enemies ask the questions to each other. The questions have a dual purpose. On the one hand, the enemies encourage each other through these challenging questions. On the other hand, the questions are meant to discourage the Jews who hear this talk.

The first question is about strength. According to the opponents, the Jews are completely lacking in strength. They are called "weak Jews". The ene-

my wants to tell himself and the Jews that the Jews are ‘miserable’, ‘withered’, ‘powerless’, ‘brittle’, all meanings that are locked up in the word ‘weak’. To be portrayed in this way is not directly an incentive to continue a work. What do these weak Christians do? What do they propose in comparison to mass gatherings around them? Are they able to remove the rubble? If such criticism applies to us, we feel that it does not leave us unmoved.

The second question involves a threat. The enemy is suggesting that this work must be stopped. They will not stand idly by as the city continues to escape their grasp with the progress of the rebuilding of the wall.

The third question has to do with the sacrificial service of the Jews. It is a thorn in the side of the enemy that God is honored. Partly for this reason he will focus all his efforts on keeping the city open, accessible to their pernicious influence. This middle of the five questions strikes God in the heart. The sacrifice, the image of God’s Son Who died on the cross, by which God is honored, is also included in the mockery.

The fourth question focuses on their perseverance. There is still so much work to be done. It really isn’t finished tonight. It will be a long time before it is. The limit of endurance has been reached. The enemy senses that the people are running out (verse 10) and responds. Pointing out to someone the long distance he still has to travel while he is at the end of his strength is an effective way to paralyze him completely. A young believer who wants to live for the Lord can be blocked by constantly telling him that he is not going to be able to persevere.

The fifth question is about the soundness of the material. Even if they were to finish the work, it will turn out that all effort has been in vain. The stones they worked with will not give the protection they expected. Such a remark is of course completely frustrating, well suited to throw in the towel.

Verse 3 | The Mockery of Tobiah

3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite [was] near him and he said, “Even what they are building—if a fox should jump on [it], he would break their stone wall down!”

In his mockery, Sanballat is joined by Tobiah. A circle of spotters is forming. Unholy mockers stir each other up. Tobiah goes even further by giving

the answer to the last question, and by doing so he draws attention to the weakness of the work. Wanting to be a church according to God's thoughts puts the religious, natural man out of action. The enemy does not want that. That is why he begins to point out the worthlessness and unreliability of the work. Do you want to claim that you are the church of God? Do you imagine that you are doing everything in accordance with God's Word?

But if it really is as weak as the opponent claims, why does he put so much energy into his opposition? It is precisely the constant and ever-increasing attack on the work of faith that proves that it is a work of God. The stronger the faith, the fiercer the opposition. The degree of opposition is equal to the degree of the work of faith. In opposition to the work of God, parties who are otherwise enemies of one another unite (cf. Lk 23:12).

A fox is a cunning predator that goes out at night and alone. He is mentioned several times in the Bible (Jdg 15:4; Psa 63:11; Song 2:15; Lam 5:18; Eze 13:4; Mt 8:20; Lk 9:58; 13:32). Except for Matthew 8:20 (and the parallel text in Luke 9:58), the fox is indicated negatively everywhere. He is light-footed and very adept at catching his prey. At first sight he doesn't seem dangerous, but he is. The light jump of a fox against a wall would of course have absolutely no effect. But the enemy wants to make believe that the wall is so weak, that his light jump will bring down the whole wall.

This tactic of the enemy, to point out the weakness of the work, is meant to discourage the worker. If the enemy manages to persuade the worker that his work will not hold up anyway, he has succeeded. The worker will see its uselessness and stop his work.

Anyone who wants to live for the Lord will have to deal with this tactic of the enemy. One's own husband or wife or children may come up with remarks that certainly do not motivate to live a life of surrender to the Lord. You are too extreme, or too inconsistent, they point to all kinds of character flaws or character weaknesses, you do not keep it up, you are outside yourself and blind to reality. The Lord knows this opposition from His own experience (Mk 3:21).

If a Christian gives his testimony, the enemy will point out to him the discord between Christians. He may even point out that wars are being waged in the Name of God. Or he may point out the poor prayers. Or

he may point out the lack of organization, the lack of money, the lack of influential people. The world judges everything by size and numbers, by impressive methods, by appealing advertising. As soon as this thinking takes root in the church or the Christian, their service is over. If the Christian thinks he has to prove to the world that he is capable of leading a great enterprise, God can no longer be with him.

Verses 4-5 | Prayer of Nehemiah

4 Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity. 5 Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before You, for they have demoralized the builders.

In this chapter we see how Nehemiah responds to opposition and aggression:

1. he prays (verses 4-5),
2. continues his work (verses 6,15),
3. encourages his co-workers (verse 14),
4. takes precautions (verses 13,16-23).

If we encounter resistance personally or as a community of faith – and that is what we get when we are in the Lord’s way! –, we have here important clues for our response to those attacks.

Nehemiah does not go against them. He doesn’t revile in return. Nor does he suggest the enemy consult with each other to find a solution. He turns to God (verse 4; verse 9). He approaches the power of the enemy with the much greater power of prayer. Nehemiah is a man of prayer. This is the basis of his work (Neh 1:4; 2:4). This forms his strength during his work. Each time he takes refuge in God in between activities.

It is good to retreat regularly during busy activities to seek God in prayer. The nature of our work does not matter. Whether we are engaged in spiritual work, work in the church, or our earthly activities, we need to involve God in everything. Especially when we are busy, it often comes down to it. All kinds of problems that occur at the most unforeseen moments can be seen as an invitation from God to come to him.

Nehemiah points out to God the opposition, the scorn. God hears the scorn that is being poured out on His workers and sympathizes with it. Nehemiah also mentions what God should do with them. The words he uses show little mercy. From Jeremiah we hear the same kind of utterances (Jer 12:3; 17:18; 18:21-23).

In order to understand this, we need to remember the time in which Nehemiah lives and what he has in mind, the task he wants to fulfill. He lives in a time when it is normal for the Jews to destroy their enemies. This is even a commission from God, where God gives the example (Deu 9:3; Jos 8:1-2; 10:5-10).

Because of their unfaithfulness, they are no longer in a position to do so themselves. That is why it is right that he asks God to do this. The reason he asks this is that the enemies are in reality opponents of God. He is doing a work for God. Whoever wants to prevent that, enters into battle with God.

For us Christians, a prayer like Nehemiah prays here does not fit. We live in the time of grace. If enemies bother us, we will answer with the love of the Lord. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, as it is in the case of Israel. It is said to us that we will pray for those who persecute us and do evil and bless them (Acts 7:60; Rom 12:14; 1Cor 4:12-13).

Verse 6 | A Mind to Work

6 So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its [height], for the people had a mind to work.

After Nehemiah poured out his heart before God, he and the people continued to build as if there were no opposition. They do not allow themselves to be tempted to talk or complain about things. The people want to work. They don't work because they have to, because the whip is blowing. They put their hearts into it. That works a lot more pleasantly. There's no need to encourage someone who has his heart set on work. He not only sees the necessity and is therefore convinced of the importance of the work, but also the work itself has its heart, there is love for the work.

There are exceptions (Neh 3:5). There is a kind of people who stand by and comment from the sidelines, but disappear when there is opposition.

Some also want to contribute in an easy way, so they avoid effort. They send money – and insist on getting proof of payment in order to be able to use the gift as a tax-deductible item – and in doing so they think they can redeem their service in the kingdom of God. But they do not have a heart to work.

Work in and for the church is not regulated by a collective labor agreement. Yet there is a danger that work for the church will increasingly become a ‘job’. The church is becoming a company with a management and a strategy, with objectives and adjustments. There is talk about a product and a market share. Everyone is assigned a task and the hours they have put into it are counted. A reward is expected for performance. Perhaps not so much in the sense of money, but still in the form of appreciation.

This attitude is strange to the Lord Jesus. He says: *My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working*” (Jn 5:17). His heart is ready to work, every second. He is the example for every Christian. We can only selflessly dedicate ourselves to the other with a heart full of love if we look at Him. Then a workload becomes a work pleasure.

Verses 7-8 | The Enemies Conspire

7 Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, [and] that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. 8 All of them conspired together to come [and] fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it.

The feelings of the enemy keep pace with those of the people, but in the opposite direction. The more desire the people have to work, the more desire the enemy has to disturb the work. In verse 1 it is Sanballat. In verse 3 Tobiah has joined him. Now whole groups join them (verse 7). The enemy forms a strong coalition that can attack Jerusalem from all sides. This will happen in the future, and on a much larger scale (Zec 14:2; Lk 21:24).

Not only the number of enemies is increasing, but also the anger that animates them. The anger of verse 2 has swelled here to “very anger”. The determination of the people of God increases the opposition. The enemy groups itself together. They cannot watch with sorrow that the work of God continues. They cannot bear to be shut out more and more.

If the wall rises steadily and the breaches are closed, they will no longer have access to the city of God. That thought is unacceptable to them. If the mockery and ridicule expressed do not have the desired effect, the enemy begins to threaten with violence. In a 'unity makes power' feeling they make a conspiracy. While they are otherwise often in conflict with each other, they now close ranks in their hatred of God's work. Their plan is to launch a frontal attack on Jerusalem with the aim of creating confusion there.

The creation of confusion is a method which Satan has often used in the church with success. Just look at the church in Corinth. All kinds of groups have arisen there, although there is only one church. In the first chapter of the first letter to that church you hear them call out to each other. One calls out "I am of Paul", while another calls out "I am of Apollos" (1Cor 1:12). Because of the division or confusion in the church in Corinth the unity is lost. Then the enemy has won his battle.

Where he succeeds in opposing the believers against each other, he breaks the power of the testimony. At the same time he gains access to cause even more mischief: where "jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing" (Jam 3:16). The church in Corinth is an example of this.

The enemy did not only win his battle at that time. We hear that sound today as well. One calls out 'I am of Luther' and another one calls out 'I am of Darby'. The enemy has succeeded in sowing discord and confusion in the church. The origin of all those different groups, each with their own characteristics, with which they separate themselves from others, all with their favorite teachings or teachers, has never been God's intention. Because of the confusion, the enemy has succeeded in bringing all kinds of erroneous teachings into the church. This further diminishes the strength of the testimony that the church should give in the world.

"For God is not [a God] of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints" (1Cor 14:33). God gives peace when the church keeps its ranks closed and does not allow the enemy to go his way. When there is a desire to be assertive, when people want to hear themselves, when responsibilities are wrongly fulfilled, when what God says in His Word is not listened

to, confusion arises and peace is gone. God is the God of peace for all local churches. That peace is our part if we submit to His will which He has revealed in His Word.

Verse 9 | Pray and Watch

9 But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night.

When Nehemiah learns of their plans, he does not panic. He will not deliberate feverishly in order to come to a conclusive answer. His attitude radiates calm when we read his reaction. He and his associates start praying. That is a wonderful testimony of trust in God. For him it is not an emergency brake, not a last resort. Praying is his daily work. He has a confidential relationship with God. He can always turn to Him.

But Nehemiah is not the hovering kind who is blind to his own responsibility. Besides prayer, there is also sober vigilance (Mt 26:41; Eph 6:18). He stands with both feet on the ground. He sets up a guard. And not for a moment, but constantly, “day and night”. He will have instructed the guards very impressively not to slacken or fall asleep for a moment. They mustn’t let themselves be distracted. The lives of all the workers depend on their vigilance.

Verse 10 | The Strength Is Failing

*10 Thus in Judah it was said,
“The strength of the burden bearers is failing,
Yet there is much rubbish;
And we ourselves are unable
To rebuild the wall.”*

Despite Nehemiah’s steadfastness, determination, and trust in God, the enemy’s attacks are not without result. The people are becoming restless. Especially Judah has come under the influence of the opponents. Not that they have become afraid of the opposition. The influence reveals itself in a different way. They measure the amount of work that remains to be done against the rest of their forces and draw the conclusion that the balance

between them is lost. There will always be people who have an apology for the ruins. They want to leave everything as it always has been.

That they have little strength is true. That there is a lot of rubble is also true. But the conclusion that therefore it makes no sense to continue to build comes from unbelief. Unbelief is the result of looking at the problems without God. Separation must be maintained, no matter how great the weakness, and no matter how much in Christianity corruption has penetrated. A question like 'does it make sense, because the decay is too great?' is a breeding ground for discouragement. Questions with this content will become all the more pressing as opposition increases. Faith, however, calculates with God. It is not about the power of the people, but about the power of God.

It is the very Judah who gives up courage. The royal tribe, called by Jacob in his prophecy "lion's welp ... lion ... lioness" (Gen 49:9), the elite of the workers, no longer sees the sense in it. This is a great test for Nehemiah. But he does not know the word "give up", convinced as he is of his Godly mission. Of course there is a lot of rubble. Nebuchadnezzar has done his work thoroughly. He left no stone on the other. But before building can be done, rubble must be cleared and the original foundations uncovered. Walls cannot be built on rubble. First into the depths, then upwards.

Clearing rubble is not a rewarding job. You are constantly confronted with failure. And as long as you can't build, there doesn't seem to be any progress. Much has come to light in Christianity that does not belong to God. False teachings, sectarianism, sinful ways of living must be removed before healthy doctrine can take root.

There is still a lesson to be learned from the moment when the men of Judah weaken their sigh and threaten to give up their courage. This difficult moment has come when the wall is half finished, when the work is half done. Such a moment can be recognized in the life of the Christian, when the first days of his conversion are over, as well as the first experiences with God in the miracle of salvation. The initial enthusiasm wanes, the momentum is lost, you get tired, while there is still a long way to go.

You could say that the 'midlife crisis' has arrived. You get the feeling that what has already happened is not finished, and that the road that still has

to be taken is too long. What has already happened is becoming more and more in the background. You look ahead, at all the work that still has to be done, but you feel your powerlessness. What lies behind you has asked too much of your powers. You want to leave it at that, it's been enough. You are no longer up for a new challenge, that is too much to ask. Then listen to the encouragement from God's Word: "Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary" (Gal 6:9).

Verses 11-12 | A Trick of the Opponents

11 Our enemies said, "They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them and put a stop to the work." 12 When the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, "They will come up against us from every place where you may turn,"

It's as if the enemy smells that the builders are losing momentum. In spite of the guards Nehemiah set up, they discuss how to get into the midst of the Jews unseen. When the courage is given up, this is the moment for another attack by the enemy. He sees his chance to strike the final blow. They do not shy away from violence and murder. The end justifies the means. Whoever is killed is no longer a danger.

Violence and murder do not only take place with hands and literal weapons. We can also kill with our words: "There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword" (Pro 12:18a). If we have unsubstantiated criticism of workers of God, putting them in a bad light, we can deprive them of the courage to continue. When God has given blessing and prosperity to a work for Him, the enemy is immediately there to speak evil and bring the work to a standstill.

The enemy finds willing accomplices in Jews living with them to get their message across. These Jews are completely influenced by the enemy. Every day they undergo the brainwashing of the enemy's vision. That is why these Jews are also the messengers par excellence to manipulate their fellow citizens with their poisonous words. What's happening here looks like a propaganda war. The message is repeated over and over again. It's like advertising: the power and effectiveness is in repetition. As long as the point of view is said often enough, the public will eventually believe in it. A persistent alarming message has a paralyzing effect.

These Jews live in the vicinity of the enemy and always hear their propaganda. But they have no connection with the ardent spirit of Nehemiah. As a result, they are beyond the power and strength that emanates from him. They see only the power of the enemy.

Christians who are led by fear of man can easily become a stumbling block in the work done for the Lord. They often demand a lot of attention and require time and energy. If their demands are met, the enemy has also won a victory. If weakness is at stake, God wants us to stand up for such Christians. If, however, fear is at work, if we do not clearly associate ourselves with the Lord's work, we should not get involved. In such a case, feelings of pity are misplaced.

Christians who live in the midst of the enemies and hear and see what they have to offer every day are affected by this. They are not in close contact with the work of God. They are guided more by the thinking of the world than by the Spirit and the Word of God. There is hardly any fellowship with God and the Lord Jesus. They have their own thoughts about the Lord's work and judge it by worldly standards. Opening up to them also means falling under their negative influence.

Satan will try everything to make God's children believe that his power is greater than the power of the Lord Jesus. Those who mingle with the world outwardly, even though they do not enter it inwardly, behave like Lot. They are visibly impressed by the power of Satan and unable to detach themselves from it. Like Lot, they must be torn from it on the day the judgment comes.

Verse 13 | People Stationed

13 then I stationed [men] in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears and bows.

Tirelessly Nehemiah is at work. He does not let himself be discouraged. Again he sees through this action of the enemy and gives him the right answer. With conviction he creates order among the people. He does so by grouping them into their generations. All of the same "blood group" he brings together. They can understand each other well. The family feeling

gives extra energy to an enterprise, also to an army. In this way, he undoes the confusion that has arisen. In the lowest places, which are the most vulnerable, he reinforces. Armed with swords, spears and bows, they are ready to repel the enemy's attack.

For a local church the 'family feeling' is important. With your family you have something you don't have with those who are not in that position. There is a bond of fellowship because of common ancestors. In the church that family bond is there through the new life, the life out of God. The enemy is out to break through that feeling of togetherness. He tries to let each member take his own course. He doesn't mind that they come together from time to time. As long as everyone sits there for themselves, without attaching too much importance to being 'together' and as long as everyone, when the 'together' meeting is over, goes his own way again, without worrying about the order and unity of God's people.

Paul says to the church in Colossae that he rejoices "in seeing your good order [as it also can be translated] and the stability of your faith in Christ" (Col 2:5). The Corinthians, on the other hand, are admonished by him that with them "all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner" (1Cor 14:40). Order in the church cannot be obtained by creating structures, but by allowing the Holy Spirit to work freely in the church and let Him use whom He wills.

We can say with the words of Nehemiah that with the Corinthians there are "the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places". In their lives there are areas where the world has easy access because of the lowest lusts of their flesh. Additional guard posts have to be set up there. This is what Paul does in his letter to them, when he admonishes them about all kinds of wrongs. He writes his letter to help them bring up the wall of separation in their minds.

The life of the church does not follow an externally imposed organizational model. If things don't run the way you would like them to, you can't hire an organizational agency to reorganize. If certain members of the church do not fulfil their task, they need education, encouragement or correction. To this end, the Holy Spirit uses believers who place the Lord Jesus at the center of their lives and who want to be guided by God's Word. In this

way a 'reorganization' in the church comes about, or rather the church will function as God intended.

Verse 14 | Nehemiah Encourages the People

14 When I saw [their fear], I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people: "Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your houses."

Nehemiah sees it all sharply. He comes into action. Full of courage and determined, he rises up and speaks to the people. The nobles and the officials, the middle management so to speak, are mentioned separately. They must certainly take his message to heart, for they in turn must encourage the people. But the rest of the people are also among his listeners.

Nehemiah holds his umpteenth 'pep talk'. He sees that the enemy's message has done its work through his representatives among the people. The people threaten to stop building. But he encourages them to continue (cf. Heb 12:12), convinced that God is with him (Neh 2:20). In opposition to the enemy, he places "the Lord who is great and awesome" (cf. Neh 1:5). Compared to Him, the enemy disappears into nothingness! They do not have to fear that enemy. "The fear of man [m]brings a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted" (Pro 29:25).

He calls them to turn their minds to the LORD (cf. 2Tim 2:8). They must think of Him, Who He is and what He has done. If we think about what we all owe to Him, we will be filled with confidence that He will continue in making it well. We will confidently place the consequences of the work in His hands.

It is also a task for us to consciously focus our thinking on Him to Whom all powers are subject. The enemy wants us to think of him and be impressed by who he is. The Lord wants us to think of Him and be impressed by Who He is. It is our responsibility to focus on who we think (Col 3:2; Phil 4:8). Seeing the Lord Jesus gives us strength to fight for what is dear to us.

After grouping them together into their families, Nehemiah now appeals to the family feeling. He emphasizes its value to bring them to full commitment in the battle. They must fight for

1. all their brothers,
2. their children, to give them their future,
3. their wives whom they have received as help, and with whom they are one, to enjoy with them the land of God,
4. their homes, their home area.

Let us remember that our struggle is

1. for all God's children,
2. for all those who are entrusted to our care and who will soon have to continue God's testimony on earth,
3. for all who have a caring task in the church of God,
4. for their living environment, the atmosphere in which their family is formed.

If we want a passable way for our (natural or spiritual) children, we have to go this way ahead of them. If we leave that way because it takes too much effort, our children will not learn to go that way.

Verse 15 | All Go Back to Work

15 When our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his work.

The enemy is dripping off. He ran his propaganda machine, but without result. God has His own way of making His work known. He lets the enemy know that their plan no longer has a chance of success. Nehemiah attributes all this to God and not to his own clever actions.

He has an eye for the fact that God has paved the way so that they can all return to the wall, each to his own work. Here we see that beautiful balance again: on the one hand, building together on the wall, that one common project; on the other hand, each has his own place in that work that cannot be taken by another (Mk 13:34; 1Cor 12:11). It is a work that is not done by just one or two, but by all together.

Verses 16-18 | Working and Watching

16 From that day on, half of my servants carried on the work while half of them held the spears, the shields, the bows and the breastplates; and the captains

[wore] behind the whole house of Judah. 17 Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took [their] load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon. 18 As for the builders, each [wore] his sword girded at his side as he built, while the trumpeter [stood] near me.

The danger is gone, but Nehemiah does not slacken. He knows the enemy will not give up. The tasks are redistributed. Half the men are working on the wall. That means the work continues at half strength. It progresses slower, but no less certain. The other half of the men are supplied with weapons and assigned to ensure safety. The safety measures are being tightened.

In yet another way, work continues at half strength. Those who help with the building as burden bearers, who bring stones to the builders, also become fighters. In one hand they carry the stone, in the other the spear. So they only have one hand available for the actual work. As a result, progress is even slower, because in addition to the building work, they also have to defend themselves.

Those who build on the wall can use both hands. However, they have the sword within reach, at the hip. In his daily life, a believer must pay attention to his separation and must always be able to use the sword of the Word against attacks. True servants of God have had to spend a considerable portion of their time and energy defending the truth. From the beginning, the apostles have not only preached the gospel and taught the truth. The letters teach that they have also had to defend themselves against the attacks of the enemy. The truth is worth fighting for. If we lose the truth, we lose everything.

The Word is brought to our attention in yet another way, like a horn or trumpet. The trumpeter is with Nehemiah. The blowing of the trumpet, i.e. the ministry of the Word, must be done under the authority of the Lord. If God's Word is to be spoken, it may only be done at His command.

Verses 19-20 | The Signal to Rally

19 I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated on the wall far from one another. 20 At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there.

Besides sword and trowel there is also the trumpet. The workers do work far away from one another, but they do not work as individuals who have nothing to do with one another. The danger for one means the danger for all the others. The unity in the work must be preserved. This is done with the help of the trumpet, the Word of God that calls together. Workers engaged in obedience to the Word are linked in a powerful way and able to withstand the enemy.

The work is done by each in his or her own workplace. In case of battle, they must gather together and form a closed front. Both aspects are also important in the life of the church. Everyone has his or her own task in the church, his or her own work in his or her own place. But in the spiritual battle it is important to keep the ranks closed. By fighting in the prayers we can stand shoulder to shoulder while we are far away from each other in a service for the Lord.

The trumpet speaks both of the word God addressed to us and of the prayer in which we turn to God. In Numbers 10 the trumpets are blown to call the people together (Num 10:7) and to come to God's remembrance when faced with the enemy (Num 10:9).

When the enemy threatens us, we gather to pray to the sound of the trumpet. This gathering has no power in itself. Though there are thousands of us together, the enemy is much more powerful. However, if we are together in the awareness of Who God is as the Help in distress, we may pray in the confidence that He will fight for us (Exo 14:14). In Acts 4 we have a beautiful example of such a prayer in distress that is done in confidence (Acts 4:23-31).

Nehemiah again speaks of "our God. God is the God of His people, the God who stands up for His people.

Verses 21-23 | Always in the Work of the Lord

Our God will fight for us." 21 So we carried on the work with half of them holding spears from dawn until the stars appeared. 22 At that time I also said to the people, "Let each man with his servant spend the night within Jerusalem so that they may be a guard for us by night and a laborer by day." 23 So neither I, my brothers,

my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each [took] his weapon [even to] the water.

During the day work is done, and in the night watch is done. Anyone who takes the service for the Lord seriously is constantly doing so. This does not mean that we must not sleep, or never have to wash ourselves, or put on clean clothes. Nor does Nehemiah mean to say that. What it says is that the work must go on and that vigilance must not slacken.

Someone who is engaged in a work for the Lord can therefore be so seized that he forgets to be vigilant. A worker for the Lord must remain attentive to the actions of the enemy. The enemy does not sleep, which is why the worker is not allowed to sleep. The spear must be held in the right hand, ready for use.

It is necessary to have the whole armor of God on at all times to “be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil” (Eph 6:11). We must be aware that God has given us His armor. Therefore, it says: “Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm” (Eph 6:13). In practice, this means taking up the posture of someone who is fully equipped with weapons. Then there is no reason to be frightened by the enemy. Whoever has the whole armor on is untouchable.

Nehemiah knows that victory does not mean the enemy is eliminated. He is for the moment, but he will come back with new tricks. It is a deadly danger for the Christian to believe that he has definitively conquered a certain evil. It may be a certain slavery, or something in which he is weak. You may have arranged your separation well, but never think that you no longer have a weak spot.

In the world it's night. Christians live in the night. The world can occupy us with nothing but the “unfruitful deeds of darkness”. Scripture calls us not to participate in them (Eph 5:11). We must denounce these works, reveal them in their true nature, expose them, and thus eliminate the efficacy of the enemy.

In addition to a spear, everyone has water. Water is also a picture of the Word of God. Water serves to refresh and purify. We need both to be able to fight the battle well.

Nehemiah 5

Introduction

In this chapter, the account of the reconstruction of the wall is interrupted for a moment to reflect on the internal situation. It is not the joint action of the people against the enemy from the outside that is the focus of our attention here, but how the people behave among themselves, or rather, misbehave. This chapter warns that it is possible to be diligent in the separation from pernicious teachings and erroneous religious connections, while at the same time allowing abuses within one's own ranks to continue.

The enemy is tireless in attacking the work of God. If he does not succeed in attacking the people from outside, he seeks other ways. In this chapter, the enemy does not attack from outside. We hear nothing of the enemies who have played such an important role so far. This kind of henchmen does not need to use the great enemy, under whose leadership all attacks on God's people and God's work happen, in this case either. He is pleased to see how an internal battle arises. The enemy's ally here is the feeling of discontent that prevails among the people.

Verse 1 | Discontent Among the People

1 Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.

The good features present in the previous chapter cannot prevent what lies beneath the surface of injustice from being revealed. Under Nehemiah's command a powerful attitude has been taken against the enemy from the outside, but at the same time an evil of selfish oppression is raging within. The wall of separation from the world does not prevent the spirit of self-interest from taking possession of those who live within it. Where self-interest is pursued, it always damages and impoverishes others.

These abuses among the people are also an effective means of preventing work. Rulers and nobles place burdens on the poor of the people. While other dignitaries leave the work to others (Neh 3:5), these rulers and nobles add to that. Not only do they not help themselves, but they also make

the work harder for others. The contrast between rich and poor becomes a matter that threatens division among the people.

Social issues can now also paralyze the church. When the church has just come into being, people share everything with each other (Acts 4:32-36). But soon “a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews” (Acts 6:1). The discontent there is taken away by a wise decision of the apostles. They propose that men should come “of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task” (Acts 6:3). Such men are also needed now if, for any reason, there is discontent among the people of God.

The root of the evil is that the rich do not think that the poor are their brothers. In brotherly relations there is no longer love for the needy, but rather exploitation (1Jn 3:17; Jam 2:15-17).

It is a deeply sad thing that such abuses occur among those who boast of having returned to the Divine foundation. This applies both literally to Israel and spiritually to those who confess to come together as a church.

Verse 2 | The Need to Stay Alive

2 For there were those who said, “We, our sons and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live.”

The call of the afflicted is a call to God for righteousness (Jam 5:1-6). God gives them justice through Nehemiah (verse 6), who also heard the cry. God sees “the tears of the oppressed” (Ecc 4:1).

In verses 2-5 we hear three complaints, expressed by three different groups.

1. The first complaint concerns a lack of food (verse 2).
2. The second complaint concerns the loss of property by exchanging that for food (verse 3).
3. The third complaint concerns the loss of property in order to pay taxes (verse 4). Verse 5 is a summary of the suffering one experiences.

It is a great thing that among the people there are families with many sons and daughters. A people without sons and daughters dies out. But if those sons and daughters are not fed, the people also die out. That is the danger that threatens here. The country has become overcrowded by the return-

ing large families. As a result, there isn't enough food for everyone. Has the land not yielded enough? Perhaps the fields have not been cared for, partly due to the enthusiastic building on the wall, so that there is no yield.

There is work and fighting to be done, but agriculture also has to be considered. You can only work and fight if you regularly feed yourself with the yield of the land. For us it means that we take the necessary time to feed ourselves with God's Word and its rich fruit.

Fortunately, there are still Christians who dedicate themselves to the church in addition to their regular daily tasks. They are also often away from home and family in the evenings. The downside is that the wife and children receive less attention than in an 'ordinary' family. A lot is invested in other families. That is also necessary, but there are limits. This work for the Lord, this battle that must be fought, must not be at the expense of one's own family. In such situations there is a danger that those who stay at home will starve to death.

The complaining begins. First, which is to be hoped for, against the so often absent husband and father. If he doesn't listen, which is not to be hoped for, the wife and children look elsewhere for a listening ear. Lucky if they do that to people like Nehemiah. Unfortunately they are not always there or they are not looked for and they seek salvation with others who abuse the situation. There is a breach between the man and his wife and children, a breach that is not healed lightly.

Verse 3 | Mortgaging Properties

3 There were others who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine."

Another group has properties such as fields, vineyards and houses, but no corn. In order to stay alive there is nothing else to do but mortgaging these properties to the rich, who do have corn, in order to get corn that way. Everything the rich can earn anything from, they demand as security. What the fields and vineyards yield, will also end up in the pockets of the rich. In this way, the rich will also have access to all the valuables present in the house. In this way, the rich will become richer and the poor will become poorer.

This second group of complainants has possessions, but no food. Driven by hunger, they have to mortgage their property. This means they have lost the real pleasure of it. Someone can become so mentally impoverished that he surrenders what he still possesses in terms of spiritual wealth. In exchange for some spiritual food for the maintenance of his spiritual life he surrenders himself to someone who only wants to enrich himself at his expense.

They own fields, but they have not cultivated them, so that there is no fruit. If they mortgage them, they even lose the opportunity to get fruit from them. They do have vineyards, but they don't produce enough to buy corn for them. They have lost the joy the wine speaks of. They do have houses, but even the rich demand them in exchange for corn. In this way, their environment will be controlled by those to whom they are indebted.

Whoever becomes dependent on people for (spiritual) food will lose everything: his hope, his joy and his home.

Verse 4 | Money for Tax

4 Also there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax [on] our fields and our vineyards.

Yet another group lost the usufruct of their fields and vineyards. They had to borrow money to pay the tax. The king, who let Nehemiah go, still has his grip on the land, it is still under his authority. The people are still subject to a strange ruler. This pressure is especially felt in the high taxes (cf. Ezra 4:13,20; 6:8; 7:24). Partly because of this there is not enough money left to buy food.

Paying tax to a foreign ruler must make the people realize that this is the result of their unfaithfulness. The fact that money has to be borrowed for this makes them slaves in two ways. They are servants of the king of Persia and now also of the man from whom they have borrowed money.

As members of the church, we are strangers and sojourners on earth. We are reminded to be in subjection to the governing authorities (Tit 3:1; Rom 13:1). In that position we are told: "Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax" (Rom 13:7). But it is not God's intention that we make ourselves dependent on others to fulfill our obligations. If we do, we will lose

our spiritual freedom and sell ourselves to people from whom we expect salvation.

Verse 5 | Children Hired Out as Slaves

5 Now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage [already], and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others."

The misery painted in the previous verses led to even greater misery. Earlier Nehemiah addressed the people with encouraging language to fight against the enemy for the freedom of "your sons and your daughters" (Neh 4:14). Now it appears that those same sons and daughters are made slaves by their own flesh and blood, as it were, behind his back! The people in debt have seen no other way out. And the leeches show their complete insensitivity by simply accepting this extreme means of settling the debt. He who is overcome by greed for money, loses every sense of humanity and will stop at nothing (1Tim 6:9-10).

The mentioned abuses are found among the people of God, among members of the same people. They complain their need to Nehemiah. Surely it should not be the case that one member rules over the other and abuses it. But there are always people who try to take advantage of the misery of others. They use the misery of others to gain for themselves. For such people it means nothing that the other is of the same flesh and blood, so family.

The victims are powerless. They are in a position that makes it impossible for them to do anything to get themselves out of this situation. Yet there is a way out. That is: face the situation honestly, say the cause and bring it to the right person.

In the church it also happens that members try to favor themselves at the expense of others. Favoring oneself can be material, but also spiritual. Someone who seeks recognition and honor also seeks his own benefit. This should not be the case, but our hearts are no better than those of the Israelite of old. The dispensation may have changed, but man by nature has not changed. Lying to each other and stealing from each other occurs even in the church to whom the highest blessings are spoken (Eph 4:25-28).

Verse 6 | Nehemiah Gets Very Angry

| *6 Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words.*

Nehemiah gets very angry because of the great social injustice that is being done. It is a just anger (Eph 4:26). He sees the danger that the need among the people may cause a division, and that will do great harm to the work. The call from need, heard by God, leads him to act on God's behalf.

Nehemiah does not rely on rumors. He also does not rely solely on the cries. The cry can be an emotional expression as a result of experienced injustice, and experienced injustice does not have to be an actual injustice. However, the facts cannot be denied.

We can get angry about things that others tell us about injustice that people think has been done. Still, before we make our judgment, it is good to let the facts convince us, not just the story. We tend to believe the story when it is told to us by someone we trust completely. However, we should only be guided by the facts in our judgment and any subsequent action.

Verse 7 | The Action of Nehemiah

| *7 I consulted with myself and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, "You are exacting usury, each from his brother!" Therefore, I held a great assembly against them.*

When Nehemiah heard the shouts and the facts, he let it all sink in. He does not act directly and he also does not "consult with flesh and blood" (Gal 1:16b). Here is another lesson we have to learn. Even if we know the facts that compel us to act, our actions must fit with what we know about the injustice. We should not allow ourselves to be tempted to be partial in our actions. We can be partial in favor of the wronged person because we have sympathy for him, or we can come up with a heavier judgment than is justified because we find the culprit unsympathetic.

That is why we must learn from Nehemiah, who first looks at himself and considers everything and only then proceeds to act. We must not allow ourselves to be swayed by these feelings, and in doing so, we will come to a hasty and wrong action. This 'consulting with oneself' can also be translated as 'becoming master of one's feelings'.

With Nehemiah there is no regard for persons. He does not care whether he is dealing with enemies of God's people, or with ordinary members of the people, or with the dignitaries of the people. His reproach is firm. He accuses the nobles and rulers of taking usury from their fellowmen. He does not speak of 'poor' or 'subordinates', but of 'your brother'. With this he emphasizes that they do injustice to brothers (1Cor 6:8). This is an additional evil.

Nehemiah leaves the building for a while to deal with this situation. He sees that the complaint is justified and organizes a large meeting against the nobles and leaders. Without any fear of these distinguished people, he denounces the wrongs they have caused to the gathered people. He appeals to them for the excessive interest they ask for. Asking for interest is even forbidden, let alone asking for usury (Exo 22:25; Lev 25:35-38; Deu 23:19-20). It is allowed to borrow money in case of poverty (Deu 15:7-8).

Nehemiah knows how to act against external enemies. He also knows what to do with the abuses that reign internally. In both cases he acts with great determination. Nehemiah is a man who has an answer to the impending decline of the work to which he has been called. This confirms his vocation through God. Every work to which the Lord calls will be attacked. The worker called by the Lord may be confident that the Lord will give wisdom and clarity as to how to respond to each attack.

Verse 8 | Charge of Nehemiah

8 I said to them, "We according to our ability have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?" Then they were silent and could not find a word [to say].

Nehemiah testifies to the great assembly how his conduct and that of his brethren was in exile. They bought their brethren loose (Lev 25:47-55) to the extent that they were able to do so. How great is the evil that, in the very country in which the Jews were bought loose, they are sold again and lose their freedom. And not by enemies, but by their own flesh and blood! Being 'on holy ground' does not mean safekeeping for the most unholy actions. Those who have adopted the right position act more wickedly than

those who are still in the foreign land. The Jews of Jerusalem are in the better “church” position, while their brothers who are still in Babylon are in a purer moral state. In assuming the right church position, there is no certainty that there is also a good mind toward one another. Both are important. You cannot do one without the other.

Nehemiah can point to his own example. This gives him moral authority and strength to his words. Paul can point to his own example as a support for what he tells others (1Thes 1:5b; Acts 20:34; Phil 3:17). The people can say nothing of Nehemiah’s charge (cf. Acts 15:12). That points to acknowledgment. As long as there are objections, it is not possible to correct evil. But when God’s thoughts are passed on and the people listen, they bow to the reproof. They seek no excuses. Nehemiah here shows himself to be a “a wise reprover to a listening ear” (Pro 25:12). When people bow before the Word of God, the way to blessing is opened.

Verse 9 | The Solution

9 Again I said, “The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?”

It is not just an accusation. Nehemiah also holds out the solution to all. The first condition is to “walk in the fear of our God”. When a person comes to put his trust in God, to obey and serve Him, all wrongs are eliminated. Then the enemy also has nothing left to scorn over. Now the enemy has nothing to do. He can even enjoy what is happening among the people of God. Nehemiah wants to undo this with all his might. It is a false testimony to the world.

As Christians we are that also when we subject our needy fellow brother or sister to us. We can do this by mercilessly imposing the law and preaching precepts to them. But instead of obliging them to us, we are called to serve them “through love” (Gal 5:13). Instead of imposing burdens on them, we are called to bear the burdens of others (Gal 6:2).

Verses 10-11 | Nehemiah Calls for Remission

10 And likewise I, my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury. 11 Please, give back to them this very

day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves and their houses, also the hundredth [part] of the money and of the grain, the new wine and the oil that you are exacting from them."

After Nehemiah has openly named the evil and given a first clue to the way to recovery, he personally will be the first to remit debts. He will also have given money on loan, which is permitted. In order to persuade others, he now sets an example by voluntarily giving up his right to repayment of the lent money. How selfless this man is again to preserve the unity of his people.

Nehemiah also speaks in the name of "my brothers and my servants". He has people around him who act like him. Nehemiah's selflessness has a good effect on the company he has directly around him. A good example tends to be followed.

We must not wait with the restoration of the damage evil has caused. It had to be done immediately, "this very day". Those who know the human heart know that in case of conviction the deed must follow immediately. There is a danger that, with the passing of time, a conviction will lose its strength and one will no longer be able to act according to that conviction. There are things that cannot be postponed.

Nehemiah also fills in what is at issue. He helps to 'confess'. Nobody is allowed to hide behind a not knowing exactly what it is all about. When it comes to our own failure, we are very forgetful. It takes a lot of persuasion if we want to make up for something that also involves compensation. God's Spirit has a lot of work to do on us.

Verse 12 | The Remission Promised

12 Then they said, "We will give [it] back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say." So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise.

The transgressors respond to Nehemiah's preaching of penance by saying that they will do as he has said. They will give everything back. They even say that they will claim nothing of the guilt. Nehemiah wants even more assurance that they will do what they promise. He makes them swear in the presence of priests whom he has called for this occasion. Priests, as rep-

representatives of God, give the necessary solemnity to this event. It should make the transgressors aware that they swear their oath before God.

Verse 13 | Ratification by Nehemiah and All the People

13 I also shook out the front of my garment and said, "Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said, "Amen!" And they praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise.

As they so stand before God, Nehemiah presents the serious consequences in case of disobedience. Shaking the front of his garment, which also serves as a bag, has the same meaning as shaking off the dust of the feet (Mt 10:14; Acts 13:51; 18:6). The speaker who makes this gesture thus symbolizes the rejection of the spoken word by those who have heard it, and that he himself is free from the consequences it has for those who reject it.

God blesses Nehemiah's approach. Nehemiah has spoken plainly. There is a need for this in a time of woolly, diplomatic language. The people of God deserve a clear message. It must have done Nehemiah good that all agree. That consent does not take place through applause or other enthusiastic expressions. That would be inappropriate given the seriousness of the matter. Consent is given in the expression of an audible "amen" in one voice.

Then the LORD is praised. He has worked this willingness in the hearts and gets the honor for it. Then the people act according to the agreement made. That is better than their ancestors did. At first they released their slaves, but later they enslaved them again (Jer 34:10-11,18). Such a way of doing things resembles that of Pharaoh who first lets the Israelites go, but then chases them to enslave them again. Such a course of action evokes God's judgment.

Verses 14-15 | What Nehemiah Doesn't Do

14 Moreover, from the day that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, [for] twelve years, neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the governor's food

[allowance]. 15 But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God.

Nehemiah renounces what would be lawful in itself. As governor he has the right to demand food from the people. Governor at that time – Nehemiah served as governor of Judah from 444 to 432 BC – is the highest office to be held in the Jewish nation. Instead of demanding food, he distributed food. He makes himself one with his needy people. In doing so, he shows mercy that surpasses the law.

Such acts are the consequence of the fear of God (verse 15). It is the fruit that adorns a righteous and holy walk. It has nothing to do with the generosity that sometimes characterizes benefactors in the world. With this he is a picture of the Lord Jesus Who as the Lord and the Master during His life on earth is also the One Who serves (Jn 13:14; Lk 22:24-27).

Nehemiah's behavior is very different from that of the rulers of the people and former governors. He might have thought, which happens a lot: 'Everybody used to do it and now they do it, why shouldn't I?' But he has not eaten the bread of a governor because the fear of God leads him. He is not going to bargain about the difficulties, or organize things, but he is leading a walk of life above all suspicion.

He gives up his personal rights as governor to be simply and completely the servant of God and His people. Likewise, Paul also gives up personal rights towards the Corinthians to serve God and His church (1Cor 9:11-12; 2Thes 3:8). His example and that of Nehemiah is worth following. They are "examples to the flock" (1Pet 5:1-3). Such behavior gives moral preponderance, which makes admonitions have results.

Also in the church it happens that families of those who have a prominent place in the it, claim a prominent place for this reason. Because of a certain natural connection one thinks one is entitled to spiritual advantage and demands this. Skills and gifts, however, are granted by God and are not transferable or claimable because a friend or family member possesses them. Even Samuel does not act correctly in this matter (1Sam 8:1-5).

Much inner discontent and strife stems from a wrong lifestyle, rather than from attacks from outside. Only if we walk in fear of God we can fight this danger. In the first place, we will not participate in adapting to the times in which we live, we will not follow the masses. It is so easy to do what others do. Sometimes we participate because we are cowards, sometimes because we secretly wish to be like others.

Secondly, we will avoid the nature of the world. Many Christians make sure the world doesn't notice how different they are. They are not out to give the impression that they are different from others in practical life. What used to be a disgrace, everyone now finds normal, for example sex before marriage. But for the Christian it should remain a disgrace. He should be able to say: "But I didn't act like this."

Maybe we unconsciously have lowered the standard of our own behavior and thinking. How have we behaved towards the opposite sex in recent years or months? In our premarital lives, have we allowed things to happen that shouldn't have happened and that we should be ashamed of now?

Verse 16 | What Nehemiah Does

16 I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we did not buy any land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work.

Just as Nehemiah does not do certain things for fear of God, so love for the Lord Jesus must determine our actions and conduct. But not only does Nehemiah not do things, he is also positively building the wall. In no way does he want to use his position as governor to enrich himself. Instead, he cooperates with the people. He gives himself to work and does not seek earthly possessions. He is in Jerusalem to help his people, not to exploit them. His servants are of the same spirit.

Verses 17-18 | The Table of Nehemiah

17 Moreover, [there were] at my table one hundred and fifty Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. 18 Now that which was prepared for each day was one ox [and] six choice sheep, also birds were prepared for me; and once in ten days all sorts of wine [were furnished] in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the governor's food [allowance], because the servitude was heavy on this people.

Is Nehemiah so wealthy? Does he still receive his possibly generous salary from the king – not unpaid, but paid leave? We don't read it here. Therefore, it is good to assume that God provides him with what he needs to provide all these people with food and drink. What he gets from God he does not keep for himself, but serves others with it. He would rather pay for everything out of his own pocket than impose a burden on the people.

Nehemiah has a large company to eat every day, but there is enough every day. So may we also know that the Lord gives enough for every day. In addition, every ten days there is wine of all kinds and in abundance. This indicates the abundant joy that is associated with a life of dependence on the Lord.

Verse 19 | Prayer of Nehemiah

19 Remember me, O my God, for good, [according to] all that I have done for this people.

Nehemiah does not pray this prayer out of self-congratulation. He is not a spiritual relative of the Pharisee who commends his own actions to God (Lk 18:11-12). Nehemiah does not thank, he prays, not a proud, but a humble prayer. He is engaged in God's work and is well aware that God works through him. Therefore, the good that he may do is the good that God does through him. But there is so much more to be done. He asks God to remember him, because it is about the welfare, the good for His people.

Nehemiah can pray in this way because his life is in accordance with the content of his prayer. He prays the "prayer of a righteous man" (Jam 5:16b).

Nehemiah 6

Introduction

Nehemiah 5 is a kind of interlude. In it we see Nehemiah busy with the turmoil among the people. At that time we hear nothing from the enemy. If there is unrest among God's people, the enemy does not have to make an effort. But Nehemiah has taken away the unrest and is now continuing with the building. Then the enemy will be heard from again. Nehemiah himself is now the target of their enmity. They know: if he is eliminated, the work is over.

Verses 1-2 | A New Trick

1 Now when it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, and [that] no breach remained in it, although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates, 2 then Sanballat and Geshem sent [a message] to me, saying, "Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono." But they were planning to harm me.

The open resistance has been overcome (Nehemiah 4). Also the internal riots have been overcome (Nehemiah 5). Now the devil tries it by trickery. The resistance increases as the wall nears its completion. The enemy combines all his strength and trickery to prevent the completion. The same goes for us. We live in the end time. The battle is almost over. Satan knows that too. That's why he's doing everything he can to overturn us and thwart God's plan.

Several attempts are being made to stop the rebuilding of the wall. The enemy is using various tricks to do so. But all the tricks are seen through because the builders simply attach themselves to the Word of God. The building of the wall is completed (verse 15). There is no breach left, there is no hidden way to sneak into the city.

The first trick is to arrange a conference, call it a peace conference. The discussion with each other must result in a compromise. But Nehemiah doesn't walk into that trap. Wouldn't it at least have been polite of Nehe-

miah to listen to what they have to say? No, it wouldn't. He has nothing to do with the enemies. What they have to say can never be a contribution to the work. The enemy understands nothing of the motives by which a man of faith is led, and is himself led by completely opposite motives.

After ridiculing the work at first, the enemy changes his tactics and tries to make Nehemiah descend into the valley. It's what we can hear today when people say, "Don't be so fanatical; join us." The enemy pretends there is a common interest. If Nehemiah were to accept the proposal, he would show that he agrees with the enemy.

If Satan fails to tempt us into a moral trap, he sometimes succeeds in having us open up to his advice. Then we look at things with his eyes. When he gets us to that point, we will see God's work as a useless work, at least not as an exclusive work. There are so many other interesting things. Above all, don't say goodbye to your worldly friends. Go with them to the cinema and the pub. Do not exaggerate the work of God, otherwise you will go mad and end up in religious madness. The trap is to measure our lives against the world. By friendship with the world, we walk into that trap.

Verse 3 | The Answer of Nehemiah

3 So I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?"

Nehemiah's answer is clear. He let it be known that he "cannot come down". Therein lies the meaning that by going to them, he would go down a path. This is not a picture of self-abasement here, but of leaving the way the Lord wants us to go (cf. Jona 1:3; Lk 10:30).

The plain of Ono is also called "the valley of craftsmen" (Neh 11:35). The place where God dwells and where He wants to be worshipped cannot be exchanged without harm for any kind of crafty works of man. God wants us to serve Him at His level and not at the level of a man-made religion.

Nehemiah does not say that he is rebuilding the wall, but that he is "doing a great work". In doing so, he indicates that it is an important work. Those who have been given a great work by God should not allow themselves to be pulled down to the level of worldly thinking and acting. Focusing on

what unbelievers have to say about what we are doing for the Lord would mean delay and damage to God's work.

The enemy sees in the service of God an enormous threat to his self-formed religion that gives him prosperity. Introducing true service to God poses a threat to that prosperity. Spiritually, the Pharisees see that threat in the Lord Jesus. They see how their authority over the people is crumbling (Jn 11:48; 12:19). Materially, the creators of idols in Ephesus see that threat in the preaching of the apostle Paul (Acts 19:23-41).

Those who are aware of the importance of God's commission should not allow themselves to be delayed (cf. Lk 10:3-4). Even the Lord Jesus did not allow Himself to be delayed by false claims of His family (Mk 3:31-35).

Any work that has to do with defending the truth of God's Word and testifying for Him is a great work. Under no circumstances should we allow ourselves to be distracted from the defense of that truth. The enemy has countless means and makes countless attempts to keep us away from the work the Lord has entrusted to us. We must be careful to do that work (cf. Col 4:17).

Verse 4 | The Enemy Perseveres, Nehemiah Also

4 They sent [messages] to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way.

The enemy shows intrusiveness. He does not give up this tactic either. The pressure to consult is increased. Convinced as he is of his right approach, he keeps inviting Nehemiah to an interview. This should make it clear to Nehemiah that this is the only chance to complete the work. They know that repetition of the message can erode Nehemiah's resistance, that he will give in to the pressure, and that he will accept their proposal for consultation.

Many have succumbed as a result of incessant pressure. Children who are constantly nagging, can put so much pressure on their parents that they eventually give in. In faith communities, changes are made after constantly putting the same topics on the agenda. It is the tactics that govern diplomacy in the world, lobbying to achieve a certain result or to get a certain order or job.

Pressuring is a tried and tested method of Satan. He has been successful before. Thus Samson has succumbed to the pressure exerted on him to reveal the secret of his power (Jdg 16:15-21). But what has proved successful in the world and with the unfaithful believer has been tried in vain with the man of faith. Nehemiah is consistent in his answer. He sticks to his point of view. Without losing his patience, he always reacts in the same way.

Verses 5-7 | A New Trick of the Enemy

5 Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand. 6 In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports. 7 You have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'A king is in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together."

In close connection with the previous method, the enemy uses a new means: an open letter. This means is an attempt to intimidate. According to the enemy's view, it is now necessary to consult, because accusations have been made against Nehemiah. They present themselves as his protectors, as people who want to help him refute the accusations. Surely they need to talk to each other about that. If this is no reason to talk, what else could then be a reason!?

If the world cannot persuade the devoted Christian to compromise, it will spread an evil rumor about him and attribute false motives to him. The letter expresses the suspicion that Nehemiah is only building the wall in order to rebel against the ruling authority and then become king himself. If this becomes known, so the undertone is, all confidence in him will be lost. And let Nehemiah remember that this rumor is widespread: "It is reported among the nations", and that there are also witnesses: "Gashmu". He must now feel compelled to contact his enemies to discuss how to stop this evil.

This trick of the enemy contains the fabricated accusation that Nehemiah would act proudly and for his own benefit. He would like to present himself as king. People like Abimelech and Absalom have done this (Jdg 9:1-6;

2Sam 15:10). These sons of God-fearing fathers have claimed kingship and brought destruction upon the people.

The letter speaks of a certain tactic Nehemiah would follow to present himself as king to the people. He would have appointed prophets for this purpose. This would give the coveted kingship the appearance that it was a matter of God's will. The imagination of the enemy goes far. He knows how to respond to people's feelings in order to get them to do what he wants. These enemies themselves appear to be familiar with the use of (false) prophets to serve their cause (verse 14).

Verses 8-9 | Answer of Nehemiah

8 Then I sent [a message] to him saying, "Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind." 9 For all of them were [trying] to frighten us, thinking, "They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done." But now, [O God], strengthen my hands.

But the open letter has no effect either. Without discussing it, Nehemiah rejects the accusations alluded to in the letter and resorts to God. Domineering attitude is strange to the true leader among God's people. That the true servant of the Lord is accused of being domineering only says something of the accusers.

From Nehemiah's reaction we see a confirmation of what we already know about him: that such behavior is far from him. He does not fight the accusation, does not defend himself, but resolutely denies it. His conscience is free. His answer is as simple as it is radical. There is no hesitation. Such clarity is what the people of God need today. With proposals from an enemy you must not continue to search for something in which you are in agreement with each other. Clear and powerful, the distance between the opposing interests is maintained.

Nehemiah reacts here according to the example of the Lord Jesus. What false rumors have been spread about Him. But He kept entrusting everything "to Him who judges righteously" (1Pet 2:23b).

Nehemiah knows that the enemy is out to frighten them. The enemy knows well that fear of people paralyzes action. If there is fear, the work will stop

and not be finished. But Nehemiah understands the intention of the enemy and does not walk into that trap. Instead of defending himself, he resorts to prayer to God. The enemy is out to make the hands powerless, so that they would forsake the work, but Nehemiah prays whether the LORD will strengthen his hands. He speaks boldly, with confidence, to Him whom he knows as the One to Whom he can turn. He prays straight from his heart, without detours and fuss of words, short and therefore telling: "But now, [O God], strengthen my hands."

It is the prayer of the dependent servant who knows that he himself has no strength. He knows that his hands are powerful only when they are strengthened "from the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob" (Gen 49:24). No matter how much his hands have accomplished, no matter how much they must accomplish, nothing will ever be attributed to his own strength. All honor for any work of faith belongs to God.

Verse 10 | Another Trick

10 When I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined at home, he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night."

Tricks from outside the people are suspicious in advance, so the enemy must have thought after all the unsuccessful attempts. Then we must try it at the next trick by a member of Nehemiah's people pretending to be a friend. He must get Nehemiah to do something that goes against the law of God: enter the temple.

But how could they get Nehemiah to do that? They will lure him there on the pretext of wanting to protect him from the evil plans of the enemy. Who would lend themselves to sell this story to Nehemiah with a reasonable chance of success? They'll find someone in Shemaiah who fits their profile.

Shemaiah seems to live in Jerusalem. His father and grandfather are also mentioned. He seems to have locked himself in his house, which prevents him from going to Nehemiah himself. Would he have wanted to reinforce the impression that he himself is afraid of the enemy in order to make his

story more believable? In any case Nehemiah will come to him, possibly because Shemaiah called him.

In his story Shemaiah connects his own destiny to Nehemiah's. Everything has the appearance that there is real concern for Nehemiah. Shemaiah is a compatriot from a known family. He seems to suffer from the enemy as well. He also seems to care about the fate of Nehemiah and is someone who is apparently trusted by Nehemiah. Such a person makes a proposal that seems fair and acceptable. This is a trick that is very difficult to see through.

Under a pious cover, the enemy tries to bring Nehemiah to an act that is contrary to God's Word. The wolf comes in sheep's clothing, Satan comes as an angel of light. The man who comes to Nehemiah pretends to be a prophet. He foretells what Nehemiah is about to face. He also offers him a way out, so that he can avoid the danger. He anticipates the fear Nehemiah might have for his life.

Verses 11-13 | Nehemiah Sees Through the Trick

11 But I said, "Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in." 12 Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered [his] prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. 13 He was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me.

Everything Shemaiah says and does is like friendship, but it is treason. Nehemiah recognizes that Shemaiah is not used by the LORD, but by the adversary, that he even let himself be bribed to do this. Nehemiah's answer is clear again. When he speaks about "a man like me", he expresses the awareness of his responsible position. He simply cannot abandon the work he is doing. He knows that God has called him to this work.

He gives two reasons for his refusal to come. First, he does not allow himself to be frightened. Never will he leave his post for fear and flee (Psa 11:1). If he did, he would set a very bad example. With the courage of faith and trust in God, he resists the enemy. Secondly, he knows that the place he is offered as a refuge is forbidden territory for him. Entering the temple

is only allowed to the priests (Num 3:10; 18:7). Going there would be the end of his life and therefore of his work.

It is always important to understand the motives behind any proposal to keep us away from the Lord's work, even if only for a moment. If we are asked to flee, we must consider from whom this request comes. If it comes from the enemy, we will find that he is appealing to our fear for our own skin. The decision must then be that we stay. It may also be that the Lord Jesus says this to us. We will notice this in the thought that comes to mind that a flight will promote the work of God (Mt 10:23).

The enemy will always reveal himself through the safety he offers. That safety will always be associated with a place that harms God's interests and plays into the hands of the enemy.

Nehemiah does not believe Shemaiah just like that. He "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1Jn 4:1). God has ordered him to rebuild the wall. Would God now command him to flee? The only test is what God says. The test of God's Word makes it clear that he is not dealing with a prophet speaking for God.

He is asked to perform an act contrary to God's Word. By this Shemaiah is unmasked as a false prophet (Deu 13:5). Shemaiah is hired like a Bileam to hurt one of God's people by tempting him to commit a sinful act. Shemaiah is a corrupt and therefore false prophet. Money determines the message he brings. Money makes him blind to the right of God. The history of King Uzziah shows how God thinks about the unauthorized entering of the temple (2Chr 26:16-20).

Fear is never a good counselor. "The fear of man [m]brings a snare, but he who trusts in the LORD shall be put in a safe fortress" (Pro 29:25). The Lord Jesus does not allow Himself to be frightened and to be led into a wrong action (Lk 13:31-32; cf. Jn 11:9-11). No man can do God's work if he allows himself to be led by what others say.

Avoiding persecution, a refusal to endure the cross, often stems from the fear of what 'others will say' if we want to do a certain work. Fear or anxiety is mentioned as the first characteristic of people who will be eternally in hell (Rev 21:8). Fear keeps people from making the right decision.

Verse 14 | Prayer of Nehemiah

14 Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were [trying] to frighten me.

Opposition of those who confess to act in the name of God is far worse than that of declared opponents of God. It is an additional temptation to notice that those who claim to speak in the Name of God are in league with the opponents of the truth.

Again, Nehemiah does not take action, but again resorts to God in this matter (cf. 2Tim 4:14; Jude 1:9). There are many forms of evil that cannot be fought openly without harming oneself or others. Many evil workers in the church of God must be left alone. Fighting them would serve more the case of the enemy than the case of God. But our resource is always to call on God about them.

Again we get a glimpse into the prayer life of this man of God. Just like after the defeat of the enemy's attack from outside (verse 9), Nehemiah also prays here after the defeat of the attack by false prophets. He calls the enemies before God by name. He also brings to God's attention the evil they want to do to him.

The prophetess Noadiah is only mentioned here. In the Old Testament four more women are called 'prophetess': Miriam (Exo 15:20), Deborah (Jdg 4:4), Huldah (2Kgs 22:14) and the wife of Isaiah (Isa 8:3). These four are real prophetesses. They have spoken God's words.

Verses 15-16 | The Wall Completed

15 So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of [the month] Elul, in fifty-two days. 16 When all our enemies heard [of it], and all the nations surrounding us saw [it], they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

In spite of all opposition and that in many forms the wall is completed. This is a victory over the enemy, achieved by the help of God. The enemy has written off Jerusalem and Judah. But God has not. And when He begins something, He completes it. But we also see in the preceding verses the vigilance of Nehemiah and his devotion to the work.

The fact that the wall has been completed by such a weak people in the face of such a powerful enemy is a testimony to the nations. They fear it and acknowledge in the work the help of God, through Whom the work has come to a successful conclusion. If a work does not have its origin in God's heart, it will not come to a good end. Then all efforts are of no avail.

We are not here to carry out our church building programs. It is about God's program. We see the burden of God's heart in the Lord Jesus, Who sees the crowds "like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt 9:36). If that burden also comes on our hearts, we can start a work, because then it flows out from the heart of God.

God has no interest in our efforts to create a socially livable environment. Nor does He have any interest in our efforts to establish a new order with world peace. His program follows on from what He started on the day of Pentecost. There, a new order in the power of the Holy Spirit has begun, with which He has set to work and to which anyone who wants to be guided by His Spirit can be put to work. The only hope against all evil is a fighting church that has completely dedicated itself to the will of God.

Verses 17-19 | Exchange of Letters

17 Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's [letters] came to them. 18 For many in Judah were bound by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. 19 Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.

Among the associates of Nehemiah are those who correspond with the enemy in the person of Tobiah. In this way they exchange thoughts with the enemy. Tobiah is connected with God's people in two ways, in both cases by marriage. He himself is married to a daughter of Shecaniah; so his father-in-law is a Jew. And his son is married to the daughter of Meshullam; so his daughter-in-law is a Jew. We met Meshullam during the rebuilding of the wall (Neh 3:4,30). Through these connections he has many relatives in God's people and through them he can exert his influence on the people.

Mixed marriages, i.e. a marriage of a member of God's people to someone who does not belong to God's people, are against God's will (2Cor 6:14-18). Where these are found, the believer is almost always dragged into the world.

Another trick is to speak well of the enemy by Nehemiah's own people. Tobiah may be an opponent of the building of the wall, but otherwise he is very nice. They also convey the words of Nehemiah to him, putting Nehemiah in a bad light with the enemy. While they praise the enemy to Nehemiah, they speak to the enemy about Nehemiah as a man of words only. However, the letters Tobiah sends to Nehemiah are something. They are real threatening letters.

Through connection with the enemy the discernment disappears. The enemy is then presented as friendly and compassionate. Such views have the purpose of adjusting the conception of people who always see the enemy as the enemy. After all, the enemy has so many good things. Surely we must also have an eye for that.

Yet the enemy does not get anywhere with all his attempts to prevent the work. Herein lies an encouragement for everyone who is working for the Lord. If the Lord is trusted in the work, any attack by the enemy will come to nothing. Nehemiah triumphs because he knows God and involves Him in everything.

Nehemiah 7

Introduction

After the opposition in the previous chapter, this chapter is a relief. We see people here who, instead of hindering the building of the wall, willingly help to complete the building of the wall.

The wall is finished, but the vigilance must not slacken. It is about “having done everything, to stand firm” (Eph 6:13). When the greatest effort has been made, the greatest danger is that things will still go wrong. Joshua also experienced this after the destruction of Jericho (Jn 7:2-5). The power of the enemy is then underestimated.

Verse 1 | Doors, Gatekeepers, Singers and Levites

1 Now when the wall was rebuilt and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed,

Doors

The wall is ready, but the work isn't. Carelessness is a trap Nehemiah doesn't walk into. He does not underestimate the power of the enemy. However, his knowledge of the enemy does not lead him to close the wall hermetically. He places doors in it, openings through which one can enter and leave the city. The city of God is a city characterized by freedom. This does not mean that freedom knows no borders. Real freedom is always enjoyed only if one knows and respects the borders that go with it.

Gatekeepers

The fact that there are doors doesn't mean that just anyone can walk in and out. Pretending that no evil can enter the city is ignoring the existence of evil. Carelessness is not proof of piety, but of stupidity. That's why Nehemiah appoints gatekeepers in the first place. Their task is to ensure that only those people who belong there enter the city.

In a spiritual sense, gatekeepers represent believers who have a special task in the church to see to it that only those people are received as members of the church who actually are and behave as such. They will enter

into conversation with unknown persons who visit the local church. In this way they will be able to 'taste' what motivates those persons to come. In the New Testament church 'gatekeepers' are not appointed. We recognize them in brothers who want to carry out this task for the Lord and who have received the ability to do so from Him. We find a "profile" in 1 Timothy 3 (1Tim 3:1-7). There they speak of 'overseers', which means the same category as 'elders'. We also see this in Acts 20 where there is talk of 'elders' (Acts 20:17), while the same group of persons further on is addressed with 'overseers' (Acts 20:28; cf. Tit 1:5,7).

Singers

Then Nehemiah appoints singers. Singers give the Lord what is due to Him. The spirit of praise is the spirit of power. A church that rejoices is one where God can work freely and which will become a channel of blessing for others.

What is limited to a special group in Israel, in Christendom basically applies to every Christian (Eph 5:19-20; Col 3:16). There is no such thing in Scripture as a worship leader as a separate person or a worship team as a separate group within the whole of the local church. The Lord Jesus leads worship (Heb 2:12).

The singers praise Him for His goodness and honor Him for Who He is (1Chr 9:33). This is the wonderful task that can be performed in the church by all the redeemed. It is the work of heaven (Rev 5:8-14), which may start already on earth (Lk 24:52-53; 1Cor 14:26). In practical terms, believers can encourage one another to actually do that task. The singers are called after the gatekeepers, for if they are not vigilant, sin easily enters and worship is lost.

Levites

Then we see a third group, the Levites. Their task is to help the priests to sacrifice and teach the law to the people. They are service providers. Again, in Israel this is a special group, in the church it is every believer. Each has the responsibility with his or her specific gift to serve the other. There must be room for this in the church (Pro 18:16a). If one's ministry does not get that space, it may be because of the condition of the church or

the performance of a Diotrephes (3Jn 1:9-10). It may also be due to the fact that a person presumes a gift (Pro 25:14).

Every service among believers should be aimed at performing our priestly service more and more as God intended. Increasing knowledge and understanding of His thoughts about the Lord Jesus will have the effect that we will increase in our worship. We will do this more often and with more insight.

Verse 2 | Task for Hanani and Hananiah

2 then I put Hanani my brother, and Hananiah the commander of the fortress, in charge of Jerusalem, for he was a faithful man and feared God more than many.

Nehemiah knows only too well that now that the wall is finished, the enemy is not eliminated. The enemy will always look for new methods to get into the city and destroy it. Here Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, is mentioned again. We also have met him in the beginning of this book (Neh 1:2). Possibly Nehemiah has other brothers, but he has a special bond with this one. It is a great thing to have as brothers not only the same parents, but also the same goal: to serve God and the Lord Jesus. There are more brothers in the Bible who have been used together by the Lord. Just think of Moses and Aaron, Simon (Peter) and Andrew, John and James.

Hanani, together with others, has told about the situation in and around Jerusalem (Neh 1:3). This will not only have been a factual report, but above all an emotional one. In it he showed his faithfulness and love for the land and city of God. That love is also shown by the fact that he went back to Jerusalem with Nehemiah. He devoted himself to the restoration of the wall. Now it is so far that the wall has been restored. Then his brother gives him the care of opening the gates of Jerusalem at the right time. He who bears suffering can also bear the care.

Nehemiah did not appoint his brother because he is his brother. That would have been wrong. It would have meant, as it were, the honey in the meat offering, which is forbidden (Lev 2:11). Nevertheless, kinship should not be an obstacle if there are clearly spiritual qualities present.

Hanani does not have to carry out the task alone. He may do this together with Hananiah. Some particularly beautiful characteristics of Hananiah are mentioned (cf. 1Tim 3:1-7). As “commander of the fortress” he stands above others. However, he does not abuse this important position in favor of himself. He does not stand above other people only because of his position. The Spirit also mentions of this man that he is “a faithful man” and that he “feared God more than many”. In Hananiah we find a rare combination of a high position and high moral qualities. This man lives, as it were, in the light of Christ’s judgment seat. What will become public there will be no different from what can already be witnessed of him now. Working with such a man should be seen as a special favor of God. That favor is Hananiah’s. Paul also rejoices over a collaborator like Timothy (Phil 2:19-21; cf. Exo 18:21).

Verse 3 | Instructions for Hanani and Hananiah

3 Then I said to them, “Do not let the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot, and while they are standing [guard], let them shut and bolt the doors. Also appoint guards from the inhabitants of Jerusalem, each at his post, and each in front of his own house.”

Nehemiah does not leave it to the imagination of Hanani and Hananiah when they have to open the gates. The gates should not be opened “until the sun is hot”, i.e. only when it is full day. Every trace of darkness must have disappeared and everything must be placed brightly in the light before anyone can be allowed into the city of God.

This is an important clue for accepting someone who wants to be part of a local church and express this by participating in the Supper. We live in a time of confusion and ambiguity about many things in the Bible as a result of the erosion of the Biblical truths. Before someone can be accepted to be part of the local church, it has to be clear that someone complies with the biblical principles for this. Those principles are:

1. A person must be a believer who has the assurance of the forgiveness of his or her sins and is thus sealed with the Holy Spirit (1Cor 15:1-4; Eph 1:13). Such a person is a member of the body of Christ and only members of the body of Christ can express its unity.

2. Not everything has been said with the preceding point. God's Word gives reasons why a believer is excluded from taking part in the Lord's Supper celebrated at the Lord's Table. This is the case when a person allows sin into his life and does not condemn it. That sin may consist of a sinful walk of life (1Cor 5:1). That sin can also consist of a wrong doctrine regarding the Lord Jesus and His work (2Jn 1:9; Gal 5:7-10).
3. There is one more thing that is important. Even if a person does not allow the sins just mentioned in his own life, he can still find himself in a fellowship of believers where those sins are allowed. If no discipline is exercised over sin in the fellowship to which this believer belongs, God sees that fellowship as a whole that has been affected by the leaven (2Jn 1:10-11). The command "Remove the wicked man from among yourselves" (1Cor 5:13b) is not listened to. In that situation, the precept applies: "Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness" (2Tim 2:19b).

If the whole is affected by the leaven, it is impossible for a believer to keep himself clean from it. All those who are there the Lord considers as connected with the unjudged sin and therefore unfit to celebrate the Supper at His Table. No form of sin can be connected with the Name of the Lord.

Divine care must be given to the new birth of someone who wishes to take part in the Supper. This also applies to the doctrine and associations that such a person has. If this care is lacking, the pure and holy nature of a congregation of believers gathered together in the Name of the Lord Jesus will soon be over. The separation from the evil of the (Christian) world will not be maintained if people are given free access and no care is given. Hence the need for the service of the gatekeeper. This does not mean that they have to act as inquisitors. It is about fellowship. It cannot be experienced with confidence and in unity if there is no examination.

It is necessary to be perfectly clear about one's acceptance of the Bible as the infallible Word of God and about the Person and work of the Lord Jesus, the incarnate Word. The Lord will certainly give the desired clarity by means of a conversation that is held in openness, mutual trust and in dependence on Him.

It is important that “each” is “at his post”. Each member of the people has his or her own task. It must also be carried out in the place designated for it (2Cor 10:13-15). Those who are charged with a special care for what goes in and out of the city of God, an image of the local church, should focus on that and not on other things. For these other things the Lord has called others.

Guarding the wall belongs to the task of everyone who lives in the city of God. The guards are ordinary members of the people. Vigilance is required for every member of God’s people, not only for those who have special care for the flock. All together they are responsible for the safety of the city. Security is best ensured when each person occupies his or her post in connection with his or her own home. There the first concern is that there will be no intruders. Whoever keeps evil out of his house, keeps it out of the city. The whole city is what the inhabitants together make of it.

The condition of the local church is simply the condition of all who are part of it. If no discipline is enforced in the families, it will not be enforced in the church either.

Verse 4 | A Large City With Few People

4 Now the city was large and spacious, but the people in it were few and the houses were not built.

After the wall Nehemiah took care of the people. After all, a wall is of no use if there are no people within it to protect. Considering the size of the wall, many people can live in it. The city is large and spacious. Yet few people live there and there is also a great scarcity of houses.

A local church should be “large and spacious”, it should accommodate all those who belong to God’s people. It is possible that in practice only few people actually want to ‘live’ there. A church is limited and small when sectarianism is found, when people are excluded who want to live there and meet the conditions to do so.

The city must be inhabited by families in houses. Every family who wants to live in the city is allowed to build their own house there, their own way of living with God, and experience what He gives. The different ways of living and experiencing will not conflict with each other, but complement

each other. They will not conflict with each other if each family adheres to the standards that apply to life in the city of God. God has laid down those norms in His Word.

Verses 5-7 | The Genealogy

5 Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogies. Then I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up first in which I found the following record: 6 These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city, 7 who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum, Baanah. The number of men of the people of Israel:

Nehemiah observes the lack of inhabitants. In Nehemiah 11, which follows verse 4 of this chapter, we will see that there will come more inhabitants. Before that happens, some other things will happen. It starts with a register of the Jews who returned from Babylon to Jerusalem and Judah before the building of the temple. Next comes the Word of God. It is read out and works in those who hear (Nehemiah 8-9). The result is a renewed devotion to God (Nehemiah 10). The result is that a number of Israelites voluntarily move into the city of God (Nehemiah 11).

The registration in the genealogy is not an invention of Nehemiah. God has put it into his heart. He speaks about “my God” because he has a personal and close relationship with Him. He knows God and knows what God wants, he understands His voice and knows His purpose.

The nobles, the officials, have the responsibility to give an accurate picture of the generation or the family for which they are responsible. They are expected to be able to indicate who belongs to which generation and where they live. In this way, their size and strength can become clear.

Verses 6-72 are almost word for word a repetition of Ezra 2:1-67. Through this enumeration, Nehemiah connects his work with that of the remnant that previously returned under Zerubbabel, about eighty years ago. He identifies himself with the work of the Spirit of God in that earlier period.

Many will already have died, but their works follow them, they are honored. They have begun the work. That made it possible for Nehemiah to finish it. So it is with much work that is permitted to be done for the Lord (Jn 4:37-38).

To be able to live in the city one must be able to prove one's genealogy. Through this register Nehemiah also finds out who used to live in Jerusalem. He can therefore encourage them to live there again. Such people may have forgotten their connection with Jerusalem through their stay in Babylon. Or maybe they don't feel like living so close to God anymore. A little further away, more in touch with the people around you, is not as oppressive as being so close to God.

The register mentions different groups:

Verses 8-25 | Sons

8 the sons of Parosh, 2,172; 9 the sons of Shephatiah, 372; 10 the sons of Arah, 652; 11 the sons of Pahath-moab of the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2,818; 12 the sons of Elam, 1,254; 13 the sons of Zattu, 845; 14 the sons of Zaccai, 760; 15 the sons of Binnui, 648; 16 the sons of Bebai, 628; 17 the sons of Azgad, 2,322; 18 the sons of Adonikam, 667; 19 the sons of Bigvai, 2,067; 20 the sons of Adin, 655; 21 the sons of Ater, of Hezekiah, 98; 22 the sons of Hashum, 328; 23 the sons of Bezai, 324; 24 the sons of Hariph, 112; 25 the sons of Gibeon, 95;

Verses 26-33 | Men

26 the men of Bethlehem and Netophah, 188; 27 the men of Anathoth, 128; 28 the men of Beth-azmaveth, 42; 29 the men of Kiriath-jearim, Chephirah and Beeroth, 743; 30 the men of Ramah and Geba, 621; 31 the men of Michmas, 122; 32 the men of Bethel and Ai, 123; 33 the men of the other Nebo, 52;

Verses 34-38 | Sons

34 the sons of the other Elam, 1,254; 35 the sons of Harim, 320; 36 the men of Jericho, 345; 37 the sons of Lod, Hadid and Ono, 721; 38 the sons of Senaah, 3,930.

Verses 39-42 | Priests

39 *The priests: the sons of Jedaiah of the house of Jeshua, 973; 40 the sons of Immer, 1,052; 41 the sons of Pashhur, 1,247; 42 the sons of Harim, 1,017.*

Verse 43 | Levites

43 *The Levites: the sons of Jeshua, of Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodevah, 74.*

Verse 44 | Singers

44 *The singers: the sons of Asaph, 148.*

Verse 45 | Gatekeepers

45 *The gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, 138.*

Verses 46-56 | Temple Servants

46 *The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth, 47 the sons of Keros, the sons of Sia, the sons of Padon, 48 the sons of Lebana, the sons of Hagaba, the sons of Shalmal, 49 the sons of Hanan, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, 50 the sons of Reaiah, the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda, 51 the sons of Gazzam, the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, 52 the sons of Besai, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephushesim, 53 the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur, 54 the sons of Bazlith, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha, 55 the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah, 56 the sons of Neziah, the sons of Hatipha.*

Verses 57-60 | Sons of Solomon's Servants

57 *The sons of Solomon's servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Sophereth, the sons of Perida, 58 the sons of Jaala, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel, 59 the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, the sons of Amon. 60 All the temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants [were] 392.*

Verses 61-65 | Those Who Cannot Prove Their Ancestry

61 *These [were] they who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addon and Immer; but they could not show their fathers' houses or their descendants,*

whether they were of Israel: 62 the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, 642. 63 Of the priests: the sons of Hobaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai, the Gileadite, and was named after them. 64 These searched [among] their ancestral registration, but it could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean [and excluded] from the priesthood. 65 The governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest arose with Urim and Thummim.

Here persons are mentioned who cannot prove that their family and offspring belong to Israel (verse 64). Mixing with the nations is the cause of them losing the certainty of their nationality. In the same way, dealing with the world today can cause believers to become insecure about their salvation. Maybe they still say it themselves, but for others there is no evidence of it anymore, because they have identified so much with the world. The result is also that few are interested in taking their place among the children of God who gather around Christ as their center.

‘Gatekeepers’ have a responsibility to ask for proof that people are what they say they are. If there is uncertainty about salvation, either that one doubts it or that others doubt it because of their relationship with the world, they must be considered “unclean [and excluded] from the priesthood” (verse 64b). “They should not eat from the most holy things” (verse 65a). For us this means that such persons cannot participate in the Supper.

All uncertainty comes to an end when the Lord Jesus comes. In Him the light – “Urim” means “lights” – and the perfection – “Thummim” means “perfection” – of God are present (verse 65b).

Verses 66-69 | Returning People and Animals

66 The whole assembly together [was] 42,360, 67 besides their male and their female servants, of whom [there were] 7,337; and they had 245 male and female singers. 68 Their horses were 736; their mules, 245; 69 [their] camels, 435; [their] donkeys, 6,720.

Verses 70-72 | Contributions to the Work

70 Some from among the heads of fathers' [households] gave to the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 gold drachmas, 50 basins, 530 priests'

garments. 71 *Some of the heads of fathers' [households] gave into the treasury of the work 20,000 gold drachmas and 2,200 silver minas. 72 That which the rest of the people gave was 20,000 gold drachmas and 2,000 silver minas and 67 priests' garments.*

Verse 73 | Residents of the Cities – the Seventh Month

73 Now the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants and all Israel, lived in their cities. And when the seventh month came, the sons of Israel [were] in their cities.

The seventh month has come. In that month three feasts are to be held. The first day of that month is, according to the precept, the day on which the Feast of the trumpet is to be held (Lev 23:24; Num 29:1). The day itself is a day of rest. Thus, the feasts of the seventh month begin with a day of rest, a day of reflection. That is always the start of something new. The starting signal is given by the trumpet, which is an image of the Word of God. When God's Word is heard and entered into hearts and consciences, it humbles them, ceases their own efforts, and comes to rest.

With Israel, the month always begins with a new moon. On the fifteenth of the month, the beginning of the Feast of Booths, it is full moon. On that day, the moon, which receives its light from the sun, reflects the light of the sun. On the first day, nothing of this can be seen. This indicates in picture that the testimony of Israel is darkened. At the same time, it is also the turning point to the time when the moon begins to shine again.

From a spiritual point of view it will be a full moon for Israel when the church is raptured. The light that it will pass on again comes from God. God will deliver His people from their enemies (Psa 81:4). It does not seem that Israel held the Feast of the trumpet at the beginning of this seventh month.

Nehemiah 8

Introduction

After we have been through the rebuilding of the wall in Nehemiah 1-7, it is now the turn of teaching God's people. In Nehemiah 8 the Word of God regains its authority after the separation from evil represented in the rebuilding of the wall. When we are in the true position before God, His Word will touch our hearts deeper than when we are in a false position. We only gain insight into God's thoughts if we are where God wants us to be. Here is God's people in God's land and in God's city, and here God's Word is of use.

In Babylon and Assyria there may also be souls who read the law of God. But there everything is so unnatural, so contrary to what the law says to God's people. Circumstances make it impossible to give effect to many precepts of the law. The Word then does not make the same impression as when they are in a place where it is possible to do so. Truths of Scripture that they cannot live up to because they are outside the land lose their power and speak little to the heart.

Nehemiah 8-10 belong together. They form an intermediate sentence. In Nehemiah 11 the thread with Nehemiah 7:4 is picked up again. In Nehemiah 8-10 the people go through a spiritual process. This is necessary in order to live in the cities in the right spirit. The process begins with listening to God's Word, which then has a deep effect on the conscience and leads to sanctification.

When they examine the law (verses 13-14), they find, as it were, something of what they have lost. This is quite late when we consider that these are people who have lived in Israel for at least eighty years. So we are not dealing with people who have just returned from Babylon. Then we could understand that because of their long stay in Babylon they have completely forgotten about the feasts. But even if the people have long since returned to the land, that does not mean that God's Word has authority over the lives again and is being examined.

Yet God blesses when there is faithfulness. The Israelites are back in their cities. They have regained their place in the land that God has allotted to them. Then they are in the right position to receive God's blessing through His Word. God's blessing is always connected with His Word.

Verse 1 | As One Man

1 And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel.

"All the people" gathers (verse 1; verses 3,5,6,9,11,12,13). The wall is no obstacle for the whole people to gather "as one man" in the square in front of the Water Gate. The wall is not there to separate the people, but to protect the house of God.

In the same month that the first generation has returned and restored the altar (Ezra 3:1), the people are asking for the law. Divine worship, of which the altar is the symbol, and interest in the Word always go hand in hand. This is where Ezra is again coming forward. Nehemiah and Ezra complement each other and each acknowledges the place of the other. Ezra returned from exile to Jerusalem some fourteen years before Nehemiah. His teaching first had an effect (Ezra 10:11-12,19), but its influence slowly faded away. Ezra did not impose himself, but withdrew. Now that his service is being asked again, he is immediately ready to serve.

Ezra is asked to bring "the book. It is not about the opinion of Ezra or the teachings of Nehemiah, it is about what God has said. It is a bad thing if human writings or opinions are aligned with Scripture. This is sometimes to be feared in relation to the writings of esteemed brethren. Then you sometimes hear of an appeal being made to what a gifted and authoritative brother has written, as if that were the end of all contradiction.

All this time Ezra has been there, but there is no longing for God's Word. Now that the Spirit is working in a man who is doing the work of God, there is a new longing among the people for the Word of God. Ezra and his ministry are brought in again. Happy is the servant who, like Ezra, can withdraw if his service is not asked for and who is willing to serve if one is ready and asks for it.

Verse 2 | Ezra Brings the Law Before the Assembly

2 Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who [could] listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month.

It is the first day of the seventh month. On that day the Feast of blowing the trumpet should be celebrated. Yet they do not come together for that. In a time of decay, the first thing to happen is not to restore the feasts, but to re-establish the authority of the Word over the consciences of God's people.

Ezra comes without delay as soon as he is asked to come. He is as anxious as ever to teach God's Word to God's people. He brings the Word to the people, not his own thoughts about the Word. He does not present it as something on which everyone is allowed to have their own opinion, no, he brings "the law before the assembly".

There is no separate teaching for each group. Men, women and children listen to the same part of God's Word (Deu 31:12; cf. Jn 8:35). Together they form God's people. To them, that is to say to everyone who can listen with understanding, Ezra brings the Word. It says nothing about the presence or absence of small children. Nor does it say anything about the possibility of coming together as men or as women or as young people. However, it emphasizes a meeting in which everyone who belongs to God's people is present to listen to God's Word. With every revival the Word gets the attention of the whole people (2Kgs 23:2).

This is not about personal Bible study, which is also important, but about a meeting in which the whole people receive instruction from the Word of God. The shaping through God's Word is not only focused on the individual believer, but also on the whole. Being engaged together with God's thoughts is of immense importance for the experience of the unity of God's people.

In order to listen fruitfully, 'understanding' is needed. That is not to say that God's Word appeals to our intellect, but that a certain spiritual maturity and, above all, a spiritual mind is needed which makes it possible to absorb what comes to us from God's Word. It does not necessarily mean

that we understand everything. It is about the inner conviction that what we hear are words of God that He speaks, so that we will act accordingly.

Verse 3 | Listening to the Word

3 He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

The people have gathered before the square which was in front of the Water Gate (verse 1). There they still are when Ezra comes. To underline the importance of that place, the Holy Spirit again mentions the name of the place where Ezra is going to read now.

There is often discussion about the length of the sermon. In such discussions you can hear that a good sermon should not last longer than twenty minutes at the most. According to the 'scholars', this is on average the maximum that a person can concentrate. After twenty minutes the attention slackens quickly, that is the argument. Fortunately, in those days they were not familiar with studies with such outcomes and recommendations related to them. Ezra does not give a 'twenty-minute sermon'.

By the way, he does not preach at all. He reads aloud. He does so "from early morning until midday". And is there any slackening of attention? On the contrary. "All the people were attentive to the book of the law." They listen with taut ears, afraid to miss a word. Boredom doesn't get a chance to strike. The attention of everyone present is captured by the Word for at least four hours in succession. This is a beautiful and jealous spirit.

Verse 4 | On a Podium

4 Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah [and] Meshullam on his left hand.

Ezra stands at a podium . That elevation was made especially for this purpose. It does not say that it was done on the advice of Ezra. There must have been a feeling that everyone should have the opportunity to get in touch with the law. It is not the intention to elevate Ezra, but the Word.

Through the elevation the whole people can see the book. Probably Ezra is in possession of the only copy.

Seeing a Bible, getting hold of a copy to feel it, has already caused tears to many people. Often testimonies have been given, for example by believers in countries where the Bible is a forbidden book or by groups who get a Bible in their own language for the first time. Such a tribute can be seen in people who have either never had a Bible or have been deprived of it for a long time.

There are people who collect old Bibles because of their material or antique value. That's not what Ezra and the people are about and that's not what believers are about in countries where the Bible is forbidden reading. Those who are gripped by the message of the Bible will cherish a copy of it as the most precious possession.

The elevation is a kind of plateau that also accommodates thirteen Levites, six of whom are on the right hand and seven on the left hand of Ezra. It is reminiscent of Peter with the eleven apostles on Pentecost (Acts 2:14).

Verse 5 | The Book Is Opened

5 Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up.

Because of his elevated position Ezra can be seen and heard by all. All see how he opens the book. When he opens the book, a wave of reverence goes through the people. They all stand up out of reverence. The Lord Jesus also stood up to read and the eyes of all in the synagogue are also fixed on Him (Lk 4:16,20b).

Do we, do I, get impressed every time we read the Bible or hear it read out? Can I say, "I rejoice at Your word, as one who finds great spoil" (Psa 119:162)? Is God's Word so special to me? Or has it become so mundane that we no longer feel the uniqueness of God's speaking through His Word?

It is not about reverence for a material book, but about every letter in it. Every letter comes from God, "all Scripture is inspired by God" (2Tim 3:16). We do not have God's Word in the Bible, as if there were words in the Bible

that were not given by Him. The whole Word of God “is the truth” (Jn 17:17). Words spoken by the devil and written down in the Bible are also in it because God wants them to be in the Bible.

Verse 6 | Glory to the LORD the Great God

6 Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, “Amen, Amen!” while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with [their] faces to the ground.

The first consequence of opening the book is an attitude of reverence as well as a spirit of reverence. Ezra praises the LORD the great God. The right attitude in opening God’s Word is that of praise. It is also a great good that God has made His thoughts known to us. Respect and thanksgiving will fill our hearts each time we open His Word to hear Him speak.

The mind of the people is manifested in the pronunciation of the “Amen, Amen!” They affirm what God says before they have heard what He says. There is acknowledgment and consent in advance. They lift up their hands to heaven to receive the coveted blessing from the LORD. Among the believers in Berea we also see that they first “they received the word with great eagerness” and then “examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). If there is a mind to accept and do everything God says without objection, the truth will be known and enjoyed.

The people feel the presence of God Himself in the presence of God’s Word. They are impressed by Him and bow down in worship before Him and pay homage to Him. They make themselves small, so that He becomes great.

Verse 7 | Explanation of the Law

7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people [remained] in their place.

Ezra is not alone when he reads the law. The thirteen who stand with him (verse 5), are a witness together with him of what he reads. In addition, thirteen other Levites support the service of Ezra by explaining the law to

the people. There is no need for the people to move. The Levites come to the people, the explanation is brought to them (cf. Acts 8:30-31).

The testimony, the law, the Word of God, comes from above, from the podium on which Ezra stands. This symbolically indicates that the Word of God is above the people and also that it is above all doubt. Those who teach, however, should not do so from above, but on the level of God's people. Servants are not above the people, but are part of them.

Verse 8 | Reading and Explaining

8 They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.

When it is read aloud, it must be done clearly. This is all the more necessary for the time of Ezra because no one has a copy of what is being read and therefore cannot be read along with it. Reading aloud has always been important (1Tim 4:13a). That's where it starts. When reading from God's Word, the listener is placed in the direct presence of God.

Then what has been read aloud must be explained and applied to heart and conscience (1Tim 4:13; Lk 4:16-21; Acts 13:14-16). The Levites ensure that all understand what has been read (cf. 1Cor 14:9-20). It is the teacher's task, as the gift of the Lord Jesus to His church (Eph 4:11), to explain the Word of God. He will do this in a way that the hearers understand. He will also have the desire that the Word does its work in the hearts and consciences of the hearers. The spoken and explained Word is an active force, it is dynamic and works in those who accept it in faith (1Thes 2:13).

Explaining it cannot be done by someone who has just come to faith. He himself must first be taught. Otherwise a blind person would lead a blind person, with the result that both perish (Mt 15:14).

Verse 9 | The Effect of the Word

9 Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest [and] scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law.

The result of reading and explaining the Scriptures is that the people become aware of their failure and sin. They are not only hearers, but also doers. They have seen themselves in the mirror of the Word and have not forgotten what they look like after reading it (Jam 1:23-25). The Word works in their conscience and they weep. The day of great victory becomes at the same time a day of deep awareness of sin. In the light of God's Word, they discover how serious their failure is.

While reading and explaining God's Word, Nehemiah is in the background. He acknowledges Ezra's rightful place in this as God has given him. This is an example of good cooperation and appreciation of the gift that the LORD has given to another member of His people. When the Word gets its effect, Nehemiah comes forward again. There must be government again, there must be an indication of what the people must do. Nehemiah takes the initiative for this – at least, it seems, because he is mentioned first – and Ezra and the Levites join him.

These men declare that the tears can be dried. Mourning and weeping are good, but not on this day. For on this day it is not the people that are the center, but the LORD their God. It is a day especially dedicated to Him. By reading His Word He has laid hold on this day. When the Word is read and gets its effect, all honor goes to Him. In this case being busy with one's own failure shifts the attention too much from the greatness and goodness of the LORD to the misery of man.

Verse 10 | The Joy of the LORD Is Strength

10 Then he said to them, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Wherever the LORD becomes the center of the people, He lets the people share in His joy. Nehemiah knows his God. He knows the joy of God is to see that His people are happy and that they enjoy the good gifts He gives them. They may eat delicacies, of the best in the land, and drink of the sweet. If they so enjoy God's good gifts, they will not forget those who have nothing. They will let the poor share in the joy by sending them a portion of their gifts. In doing so they will be imitators of God, Who has acted in goodness with the people in this way.

If the Word has discovered our failure and we repent, we will once again consecrate ourselves to the Lord. A first result of dedication is that we will enjoy the Word as a source of refreshment and strength. As a result, we will become a channel of blessing for others.

When our own failure has become clear to us, we can then be reminded of the power that preserves us from further failure. After the sadness, joy can come again. After failure service for the Lord comes again. For this service, strength is needed. That strength lies in the joy in the Lord.

If we are put on a dead end in our service, or if we do not receive thanks or recognition, it is difficult to hold on to this joy. But why should things be any different for us than for the Lord Jesus? He does not reap any thanks or recognition either. Yet He rejoices “in the Holy Spirit” (Lk 10:21). And when Paul is imprisoned, really on a dead end, he does not sit there sulking and being pathetic, but speaks abundantly of joy, as is evident from his letter to the Philippians which he writes from his imprisonment (Phil 1:4,18; 2:2,17-18; 3:1; 4:1,4,10).

Verse 11 | A Holy Day

11 So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.”

The Levites help Nehemiah to calm the people. If the spoken Word is to have its effect, its effect must also be guided. We see the same with the disciplinary measure applied in 1 Corinthians 5 (1Cor 5:13b). In 2 Corinthians 2, the man who was removed from among the believers as a wicked person is overwhelmed with sadness. The Corinthians are then encouraged by Paul to forgive and comfort him so that he is not “overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (2Cor 2:7b). Those who are impressed by the Word must also learn to subject their feelings to it in the right way. The danger of going in a certain direction is always present.

The Levites calm the people by pointing out that it is a holy day, that is, a day dedicated to the LORD. Dedication to God cannot go hand in hand with sorrow. They may be silent and need not be sad any more. They may rest at the thought that the LORD is at work. When He is at work, man may rest therein and rejoice.

Verse 12 | The Words Are Understood

12 All the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.

The people have understood. The message has come into their hearts. They go away to enjoy, because God has said it. This is the great enjoyment of God's good gifts, together with a great joy. Those who have accepted God's great gift in the Lord Jesus and all the blessings associated with it, enjoy it and also enjoy great inner joy.

What the people enjoy is the result of the reading of the law and the teaching of the Levites. First they came to repentance. Then they were told that this day with its far-reaching events is for the LORD. Then they were encouraged to have a feast and let those who have nothing to share in it. Nothing went out of the people themselves. They acted only on the instruction of the Levites. Such action receives the seal of God's approval.

Verse 13 | Desire For Insight Into God's Word

13 Then on the second day the heads of fathers' [households] of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law.

The interest for the Word remains. The desire for the Word of the previous day has not been a superficial emotion that has vanished a day later. On the second day, the heads of the fathers, the priests and the Levites come to Ezra to be taught from the law. These men have a responsible task in the midst of the people. They realize that they first need education in God's Word in order to carry out that task properly.

Taking the place of a student also remains necessary for a teacher. A person can only teach others what he himself has learned from others. Even the Lord Jesus has taken the place of a disciple (Isa 50:4b). Timothy must pass on to others what he has learned from Paul (2Tim 2:2).

Verses 14-15 | Rediscovering the Feast of Booths

14 They found written in the law how the LORD had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the sev-

enth month. 15 So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of [other] leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written."

Whoever is engaged in the Word with the desire to know God's will, will discover God's will. Here it happens in relation to the Feast of Booths. During their examination of the law, they find the commandment about living in booths in the seventh month (Exo 23:16; Lev 23:34; Num 29:12; Deu 16:13-15). This feast is to be held when all the harvests of the land have been gathered. That is why it is also called the "Feast of the Ingathering" with the statement that with it also "the end of the year" has come (Exo 23:16).

The time of effort is over; they no longer need to be busy with their work, but may rejoice in the results. When the whole harvest of the land has been gathered, can it be otherwise than that the whole people, full of thankfulness to the LORD, celebrate a feast for Him? When we oversee all the blessings with which God has blessed us, can it be any other than that our hearts overflow with thankfulness and joy?

The feast begins with a sabbath rest – which does not mean that the first day of the feast also falls on a sabbath – and it ends with it. The Feast of Booths speaks of the millennial realm of peace, the great day of rest for creation, a rest in which the nations will also share (Zec 14:16-19). The day of rest at the beginning speaks of the beginning of a period of rest that follows. This represents the beginning of the millennial realm of peace, the time called the "administration of the fullness of the times" (Eph 1:10a). This is the time when God's intention is fulfilled, namely "the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth" (Eph 1:10b). Christ will then reign over creation together with His church as the true Adam with His wife.

The LORD wants them to celebrate this feast to remind them of the time when He led them through the wilderness, where they lived in tents and not in houses. He takes their thoughts back to the time immediately after their deliverance from Egypt, to His care for them during the wilderness journey. He also lived with them then in a tent. The memory of His care and His proximity will have filled them with great gratitude. Unlike the

Passover, which can be celebrated in the wilderness, the Feast of Booths cannot be celebrated in the wilderness, but only in the land. It is a harvest festival and there is nothing to harvest in the wilderness.

When they discover the precept for this feast during their examination of God's Word, they do not find anything new, but rediscover a forgotten truth. For centuries it has been in the law. But the book of law has become a forgotten book. As a result, God's precepts for the feasts have also been forgotten. God is withheld what He is entitled to from the side of His people. His people are no longer aware of the blessings associated with doing His will. That awareness is coming back to the surface through this examination.

In Christianity, the Bible has also become a forgotten book. Many Christians barely read it. The heart does not go out to the Lord Jesus and what He values. However, as soon as the Word takes hold of the hearts again and the wrong thing is confessed and forsaken, the inquiring Christian goes from discovery to discovery. He discovers what has been in the Word for centuries, but what now takes on luster and meaning for him. Whether it is about the rapture of the church, the celebration of the Supper or the future of Israel, every new discovery is given a place in heart and life.

The researchers of the law don't announce their discovery and then leave it to each person's politeness what they will do with it. No, they are aware of their responsibility and issue an order to make booths. In doing so, they do not give any clues that they believe are more appropriate to the current situation of the time in which they live. They give orders to act "as it is written (cf. Ezra 3:4).

There is no question of new forms with an old content. Their actions are determined by what "they found written in the law how the LORD had commanded through Moses ". What is true of the feasts for the time of Moses, is true undiminished and unchanged for the days of Nehemiah. Also for our time the Word is as current as in the days in which God had His Word written down.

Verses 16-17 | Celebrating the Feast of Booths

16 So the people went out and brought [them] and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and

in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. 17 The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing.

Also with the people the interest in God's Word was not a fleeting feeling. When the precept is presented to them, they show great willingness to act upon it. They go out to fetch branches of leafy trees and make booths.

1. They do this at home, on the roof, bringing their whole family under the influence of this feast, as it were.
2. They do it around their house, bringing their contacts with the neighbors under the influence of this feast, so to speak.
3. They do it in the courts of God's house, indicating that they involve God in this feast.
4. They also make booths in the square at the Water Gate. By doing so they show that they are celebrating this feast in accordance with God's Word.
5. Finally, they make booths in the square at the Gate of Ephraim to show that they are celebrating as one people.

For a similar celebration of the Feast of Booths, the writer goes all the way back to "the days of Joshua", i.e. to the early days of the people in the land. That's about a thousand years ago. They do not argue that this feast cannot be that important, because even in the glory days of Solomon – although it is celebrated (2Chr 7:8-10; 1Kgs 8:2) – it is apparently not celebrated in the way they do now. It is sufficient for them that it is written in the law of Moses given by the LORD. That alone is decisive for an obedient people, and not how it has been dealt with in earlier days or what has been done with it by esteemed leaders of the people.

Previous mentions of the celebration of a feast do not go so far back. When in the days of the revival under Hezekiah the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are celebrated, it is mentioned that it has not been so celebrated since the days of Solomon (2Chr 30:26). This is a reference to a celebration that took place about two hundred and fifty years earlier. If in the days of the revival under Josiah the Passover is celebrated, it is mentioned that it has not been so celebrated since the days of Samuel (2Chr

35:18). This is a reference to a celebration that took place about five hundred years earlier.

Also in Christianity, what God gave to the church in the beginning is soon lost. Think of the gifts for which there is soon no more room due to the introduction of a clergy. Nevertheless, we can learn the following from this chapter. At a time of great decay in Christianity, a weak remnant that wants to be obedient to God's Word can be a testimony reminiscent of the early days of the church. It will never be with the same strength and radiance to the outside world as it was then, but it will be accepted by God in connection with then.

Verse 18 | Reading, Celebrating and Assembling

18 He read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day [there was] a solemn assembly according to the ordinance.

The fact that every day they read from God's Word is further proof that the interest in God's Word is not a whim. Every day of the feast the people came to listen to the reading from the book of God's Law. You only have a real feast when everything happens in accordance with God's Word. The whole of life becomes a feast when every day begins with listening to what the Lord has to say. It is important to persevere in this.

On the final day of the feast, the eighth day, a solemn assembly is held. In a way, this eighth day is no longer part of the feast, because the feast lasts seven days. It ends on the seventh day. Yet this day is directly connected to it. This is already apparent from the ongoing count. There is talk of "the eighth day" and not of a "first day" as the beginning of a new period of seven days. The eighth day certainly heralds a new period, a new beginning, but then a new beginning without end. In this eighth day we can see a picture of eternity.

Remarkably enough, the Old Testament says nothing else about this eighth day. There is no particular content given to it. Nevertheless, we have a clue about the meaning of this day in the New Testament, in John 7. There we read about the Feast of Booths where the Lord Jesus does not go up to at first, but later does (Jn 7:2-10). We also read about "the last day, the great

[day] of the feast" (Jn 7:37a), which means the eighth day. For this feast many have come to Jerusalem to meet the living God. But what do they find? The Feast of Booths has become a "feast of the Jews" (Jn 7:2), where there is no place for God anymore. It is all for appearances, where the heart of the searching soul remains empty and hungry.

As the crowds are about to go home disappointed, all of a sudden someone cries out and says: "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink" (Jn 7:37b). The calling One continues His invitation with the promise of streams of living water that will flow from within every believer. An explanation of this is also given. By this the Lord Jesus means the Holy Spirit (Jn 7:38-39).

The thirst He quenches connects the thirsty with the water of eternal life (Jn 4:14), in which the Spirit works. In this way someone is connected with its source: that is the glorified Lord in heaven. Whoever is connected with Him and lives out of Him will be able to be a refreshment for others.

Nehemiah 9

Introduction

In this chapter, we become partakers of the confession of guilt of the Israelites. We can connect this chapter with Ezra 9 and Daniel 9 where we also find confessions of guilt, spoken by Ezra and Daniel.

Verse 1 | Fasting and Sackcloth

1 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them.

The consequences of reading the law, the Word of God, become visible. The Word of God is at the origin of everything that follows. The Word was read in Nehemiah 8. The first consequence there is that God gets His part: the Feast of Booths is celebrated. The second consequence we find here: the people take their true place before God. They acknowledge that their present position is the result of not listening to God's commandments.

The people of God are deeply impressed by the Word of God. The Word has caused great joy among the people (Neh 8:13). Now the Word of God leads them to confess their sins.

There is fasting and mourning. This does not contradict the feast and joy of the previous chapter. It belongs together. Joy and self-denial go hand in hand with the Christian if it is good. Joy in the Lord is the result of knowing Him; humbleness is the result of recognizing one's own failure, the result of knowing oneself.

Fasting is a sign of mourning. He who fasts sees the seriousness of the situation in which the people of God or he himself find themselves. By fasting one renounces food, of what the body needs and what is lawful to take, to devote oneself in the spirit to the sad circumstances and to call upon God about them. Isaiah speaks about fasting as God intended (Isa 58:6-7; cf. Joel 2:12-17). Man takes his true place toward God and gives God His true place.

A sequel to the Feast of Booths as we find here is not prescribed anywhere in the law. The Feast of Booths ends on the twenty-third of the month. What we read here takes place on the twenty-fourth of the month. That day is not part of the feast. They don't want to ruin the feast by their grief. After the feast, however, the Word takes effect on their conscience. It is voluntary and complemented by the working of the Spirit. An exuberant feast is followed by a day of penance and repentance. In this way expressions of mind alternate. Being surrounded by blessings can make us small when we realize how undeserved they are and, as a result, bring us to confession. We wonder from what we have earned it.

Mourning and dirt upon them is, as it were, becoming equal to a dead person. To take that place because there is the consciousness of being dust and ashes in the presence of the Almighty (cf. Gen 18:27; Job 42:6) is also the place of blessing.

Verse 2 | Separation and Confession

2 The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

The praise of the LORD at the Feast of Booths cannot go together with connections forbidden by God. Sincere recognition of failure brings to action. The first act is separation from foreigners. In this they are not half-hearted. They separate themselves from "all" foreigners. The second act is confession. Confession of sins does not only take place at the beginning of life as a Christian, but is part of the whole life of the Christian. Separation and confession of sins belong together.

Nor do they detach themselves from their ancestry. They do not put themselves above them, but make themselves one with them. It is the recognition that we, human beings, have dishonored God through our lives.

Verse 3 | Listen, Confess and Worship

3 While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for [another] fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God.

Again the Word of God occupies the principal place. All their actions are controlled by it. They listen to it and obey it. Confession and worship are the effect of hearing God's Word. There is a balance between being pre-occupied with God's Word on the one hand and confession and worship on the other hand. The same duration is used for both soul exercises. The duration of listening to God's Word is followed by an equally long time during which the Word gets its effect in the conscience.

What they read or hear is material for prayer, and through prayer the Word gets its desired effect. Word and prayer must go hand in hand. He who reads only the Word, without prayer, gathers knowledge for the head. A theoretical Christendom arises, which will lead to annoyance of fellow Christians. Those who devote themselves solely to prayer run the risk of losing themselves in mysticism and fanaticism. Whoever does both will grow up in the "grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2Pet 3:18) and become a good follower of Him.

Verse 4 | The Levites Cry to the LORD

4 Now on the Levites' platform stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani [and] Chenani, and they cried with a loud voice to the LORD their God.

Eight Levites stand in a place made for them, on a platform. This time they do not take that place above the people to teach the people from God's Word. No, they are the first to express their guilt toward the LORD. They cry to the LORD their God with a loud voice, and lead the people in this. Through the exaltation they enter the sanctuary as it were.

Verse 5 | Call to Praise the LORD

5 Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah [and] Pethahiah, said, "Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever!

*O may Your glorious name be blessed
And exalted above all blessing and praise!*

After the Levites have turned to the LORD, they also involve the people in their approach unto him. They call upon the people to arise and praise

the LORD. The confession of guilt begins with a call to praise the LORD, to which the Levites give expression immediately. True confession of the guilt of the people of God takes place in a spirit of trust in the goodness of the LORD. The proofs of that goodness are mentioned at length. The more clearly the goodness of the LORD comes to our attention, the greater will be the guilt that we have borne toward such a Person.

The Levites turn to the LORD with first of all the acknowledgment of His glorious Name, a Name which in fact surpasses all praise. They are conscious to stand before Him for whom all human thought and description fall short. What His Name means is beyond our comprehension (Rev 19:12b; Mt 11:27). This awareness should also characterize us more. This will save us from an inappropriate manner of dealing with the High and Holy.

We may know God as our Father and enjoy the closest intimacy with Him. We may approach Him with boldness with the certainty that He loves to have us as His children with Him. But that does not mean that we would no longer need respect and reverence and that we can forget how high He is above us and everything and everyone. The awareness of His highness only increases the miracle of our closeness.

Verse 6 | The LORD, the Creator

6 *"You alone are the LORD.
You have made the heavens,
The heaven of heavens with all their host,
The earth and all that is on it,
The seas and all that is in them.
You give life to all of them
And the heavenly host bows down before You.*

The awareness of the exaltation of God comes to the fore in the prayer of the Levites in three aspects:

1. They maintain God in all His ways of discipline with His people. They also acknowledge Him in the omnipotence He has shown in the deliverance of the people from Egypt, in the support of the people in the wilderness and in the introduction of the people into the

promised land. God has always acted with them in mercy and justice.

2. They confess their own sins and the sins of their fathers, and do not justify their actions.
3. Because of their great distress and submission to the nations they renew the old covenant of the law, and make it a firm covenant which they confirm with their seal.

All living beings in heaven worship the LORD. They are constantly impressed by their Creator and Sustainer and worship Him without ceasing. For us it is even more appropriate to have an attitude of constant worship because we may also know our Creator as Savior (Heb 2:14-16).

The Levites show in their prayer – the longest in the Bible, also longer than Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple – that they have an eye for God’s grace and power

1. in creation (verse 6),
2. in Egypt and at the Red Sea (verses 9-11),
3. in the wilderness and at the Sinai (verses 12-21),
4. at the conquest of Canaan (verses 22-25),
5. by prophets and judges (verses 26-28),
6. by prophets (verses 29-31) and
7. in the situation they are in now (verses 32-37).

Until verse 16 there is first a list of all the blessings that the people have received as a result of God’s action in goodness to them. Each time there is talk of “You”, of the LORD, of what He has done. Everything shows His faithfulness, His grace, His blessing. May He expect anything but to thank and serve Him with all their hearts and lives? But in verse 16 comes a turning point. Then it no longer only speaks of “You”, but also of “they”. From that verse God’s gracious acts are interwoven with their ingratitude, infidelity, unwillingness and rebellion.

Here, in verse 6, first the LORD is honored and acknowledged in Whom and what He is: He is LORD, He alone, unchanging, eternal. He is the Creator and the Sustainer. He is the source of all that exists (Col 1:15-17). That the LORD is the Creator means that the Lord Jesus is the Creator,

for the LORD of the Old Testament is the same as the Lord Jesus in the New Testament. This is evident from John 12 where John quotes a word of Isaiah (Jn 12:41; Isa 6:1-4). A comparison of both parts shows that while Isaiah speaks about the LORD of hosts, John says that Isaiah speaks about the Lord Jesus.

Verses 7-8 | The Election of Abraham

- 7 *“You are the LORD God
Who chose Abram
And brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees,
And gave him the name Abraham.*
- 8 *“You found his heart faithful before You,
And made a covenant with him
To give [him] the land of the Canaanite,
Of the Hittite and the Amorite,
Of the Perizzite, the Jebusite and the Girgashite—
To give [it] to his descendants.
And You have fulfilled Your promise,
For You are righteous.*

After His omnipotence in creation follows His sovereignty in His election. God is the God of election and of promises. Election is His prerogative, and He has the power to make His election come true. That power is evidenced by giving a name and changing it. It indicates His supremacy. He promises and fulfills His promises. He is faithful to His word, He keeps His word, for He is righteous.

Verses 9-11 | The LORD Is a Redeemer

- 9 *“You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt,
And heard their cry by the Red Sea.*
- 10 *“Then You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh,
Against all his servants and all the people of his land;
For You knew that they acted arrogantly toward them,
And made a name for Yourself as [it is] this day.*
- 11 *“You divided the sea before them,
So they passed through the midst of the sea on dry ground;*

*And their pursuers You hurled into the depths,
Like a stone into raging waters.*

God sees all that men do to His people, and He hears their cries to Him (Exo 3:7). He is closely involved in all that is done to His people and all that is going on in them. He acts both for the benefit of His people and in judgment against their enemies. Thus He has delivered His people out of their misery, then accompanied and cared for them along the way, and finally brought them into the land of promise.

God is a God of salvation and victory. In order to free His people, He has made His judgment come to Pharaoh and his people. These are for the Israelites ‘signs and miracles’ (verses 10). For them they are proof that God stands up for them in order to deliver them. He offers His people a way to escape where they have thought to perish. But His people will be saved there while the enemies perish.

Verse 12 | The Pillar of Cloud and the Pillar of Fire

*12 “And with a pillar of cloud You led them by day,
And with a pillar of fire by night
To light for them the way
In which they were to go.*

In verses 12-21 the people are in the wilderness; in verses 22-29 they are in the land. In every part of Israel’s history we see the interweaving of man’s unfaithfulness and the mercy of God. After their deliverance, He does not leave His people to their fate. He Himself goes before them and travels with them through the wilderness. His light shines on the path they must go.

Verses 13-14 | At Sinai

*13 “Then You came down on Mount Sinai,
And spoke with them from heaven;
You gave them just ordinances and true laws,
Good statutes and commandments.*
*14 “So You made known to them Your holy sabbath,
And laid down for them commandments, statutes and law,
Through Your servant Moses.*

He governs all their life. They need not think of anything themselves to remain a people. From heaven, His dwelling place, He speaks to them. Where He dwells, everything is in accordance with Himself. If He speaks to His people from there, it can only be for their benefit. He has redeemed His people to dwell with them. Then that dwelling place must correspond to heaven.

That is why He gives them “just ordinances”. The point of departure for His abode among them is His righteousness. He gives His people those provisions so that they may enjoy the blessing of His presence. He also provides them with “true laws”. Their life together before Him is governed by incorruptible justice. They are not laws adapted to the situation. They can rely on those laws, they come from Him Who is completely and in every way trustworthy.

Furthermore, He gives them “good statutes and commandments”. He determines their lives socially and religiously. His statutes and commandments must serve as the marrow of society. With all this He has their well-being in mind. Accepting and applying all this as a gift from Him means blessing and prosperity. Deviation from it leads to disaster and misery. God has given us His good Word. If we allow ourselves to be dictated by it and live by it, we will enjoy His blessing. Any deviation from His Word has unpleasant consequences.

The sabbath is not called a commandment here, but a “holy sabbath”. Between the listing of all that the LORD has given in the form of laws, commandments and ordinances, the Levites here remind us of this special institution. The LORD has given this day as a blessing. The people need not work on that day. They may share in the rest of God. By keeping that day they show that they appreciate God’s peace. It is also a proof that they appreciate all God’s commandments.

Verse 15 | Bread and Water

15 *“You provided bread from heaven for them for their hunger,
You brought forth water from a rock for them for their thirst,
And You told them to enter in order to possess
The land which You swore to give them.*”

The LORD delivered His people out of misery, freed them from their oppressors, led them into the wilderness, and enabled them to function as His people. All non-material conditions have been fulfilled. They are paramount. After all the efforts the LORD has made to provide the people with everything they need, He has also given them food and water in the wilderness. He has also promised them that they will come to the land that He wants to give them. For this He has sworn an oath.

He has always helped the people and given them a perspective for the future. They would have been able to live as a grateful and happy people, provided with all that was necessary, overwhelmed by the support and encouraged by what He had promised them.

Verses 16-17 | But ...

- 16 *“But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly;
They became stubborn and would not listen to Your commandments.*
- 17 *“They refused to listen,
And did not remember Your wondrous deeds which You had performed among them;
So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt.
But You are a God of forgiveness,
Gracious and compassionate,
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness;
And You did not forsake them.*

The prayer of the Levites takes a turn here. That turn is heralded with “but”. After seeing Who God is and acting in faithfulness and grace with them, it is now necessary to look back at the attitude of the people since their deliverance from Egypt.

Their attitude of rebellion and unbelief after all the goodness of God comes over us like a cold shower. A cold shower is sobering. This is necessary, because when we have seen the faithfulness of God, we must also have an eye for our reaction to it. It should make us ashamed.

Our shame becomes even greater when we see that the ungrateful reaction of the people is also answered with a “but” from God’s side. In spite

of their rebelliousness and their disobedient and wicked conduct, He has continued in grace with them, both in the wilderness and in the land. The Levites are aware of this, and at the end of verse 17 a new enumeration of God's blessings follows, which can only increase their amazement and gratitude.

Each time we find the interaction between the 'but' that heralds the actions of God's people and the 'but' that heralds God's actions. How far He has risen above man's actions. How totally different is His action from that of man. God is a God of forgiveness, of pardon. The word "forgiveness" is in the plural. It is a rare word and only occurs in Psalm 130 and in Daniel 9 (Psa 130:4; Dan 9:9).

Verses 18-21 | God's Faithfulness and the Unfaithfulness of the People

- 18 *"Even when they made for themselves
A calf of molten metal
And said, 'This is your God
Who brought you up from Egypt,'
And committed great blasphemies,*
- 19 *You, in Your great compassion,
Did not forsake them in the wilderness;
The pillar of cloud did not leave them by day,
To guide them on their way,
Nor the pillar of fire by night, to light for them the way in which they
were to go.*
- 20 *"You gave Your good Spirit to instruct them,
Your manna You did not withhold from their mouth,
And You gave them water for their thirst.*
- 21 *"Indeed, forty years You provided for them in the wilderness [and] they
were not in want;
Their clothes did not wear out, nor did their feet swell.*

The nadir of their rejection of God is the making of the golden calf. With it they have a visible god in their midst. To this god they attribute their deliverance. This is very offensive to their Deliverer and a great insult. Yet He has not surrendered them to the dangers of the wilderness to be devoured by it. He remains faithful to His oath and leads them further with His light

on the way they should go. If blessings, which we must lose because of our unfaithfulness, remain our share, it should lead us to double our gratitude.

Also in Christianity there has always been a desire for visible leadership. When faith disappears, the longing for tangible things increases. God is invisible to the natural eye. But those who believe “that He is” (Heb 11:6) receive abundant proof of His existence and of the care He exercises. A visible leadership cannot be anything but a creature, so by definition, it will be a failing leadership. Those who rely on it instead of God will have no prosperity.

In verse 20 we find again an abundance of good gifts that God has given His people to be able to travel through the wilderness. Those who pray speak of “Your good Spirit,” “Your manna,” and “water”. There is not only talk of the Spirit of God, but of God’s “good” Spirit. The Spirit of God is working among them in goodness to teach them. He wants to control their minds so that they will think as God thinks. God has communicated His thoughts to them in His commandments and statutes. They do not need to guess what His intentions are. The good Spirit of God teaches them.

The Holy Spirit does not dwell in the members of God’s earthly people, as He does in the members of God’s heavenly people, the church (1Cor 6:19). But He does work in and among them. Every Israelite who repents does so because the Spirit convinces him of his sins. This gives him a nature that desires to do what God wants.

It doesn’t stop there, teaching the will of God. God also gives them the strength to do His will. For that He gives them His manna. This food enables them to go the way God wants them to go. The manna is the well-known picture of the Lord Jesus in His life on earth. He speaks of Himself in connection with the manna as the bread from heaven (Jn 6:31-35). For our walk on earth through the wilderness of this world we gain strength by occupying ourselves with the Lord Jesus and His life on earth. The way we must go, He has gone before us. His example gives us strength to follow Him.

In the just quoted section from John 6, the Lord Jesus also says that whoever believes in Him will never thirst again (Jn 6:35). This is the third thing

the Levites quote in their prayers in this verse. They tell the LORD that He also gave water to His people for their thirst. Faith in the Lord Jesus, the real trust in Him, is a refreshment that makes the thirst for other things disappear.

We have here in verse 20

1. the Holy Spirit who teaches in goodness;
2. in the manna the example of the Lord Jesus, in Whom the teaching becomes visible as it were;
3. in the water – a picture of the Word of God (Eph 5:26) – a means to quench thirst.

The Levites notice still more goodness. For forty years the LORD has cared for His people. The provisions mentioned in the previous verse are not temporary. They have been with the people all the time they have been in the wilderness. They have suffered no shortage, neither of food, nor of drink, nor of clothing. They've always had warmth. The warmth of their clothing symbolizes the warmth of God's loving care.

Also at their feet there is nothing to be seen of the fatigue of the journey. When they look at their feet, they can notice that the LORD has not let them travel a way that has asked too much of them. Yes, He carried them, "as a man carries his son" (Deu 1:31).

Verses 22-25 | What the LORD Has Given

- 22 *"You also gave them kingdoms and peoples,
And allotted [them] to them as a boundary.
They took possession of the land of Sihon the king of Heshbon
And the land of Og the king of Bashan.*
- 23 *"You made their sons numerous as the stars of heaven,
And You brought them into the land
Which You had told their fathers to enter and possess.*
- 24 *"So their sons entered and possessed the land.
And You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites,
And You gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of
the land,
To do with them as they desired.*

25 *“They captured fortified cities and a fertile land.
They took possession of houses full of every good thing,
own cisterns, vineyards, olive groves,
ruit trees in abundance.
o they ate, were filled and grew fat,
nd reveled in Your great goodness.*

God has not only surrounded them with His care, He has also helped them to take possession of kingdoms and nations. The land of Sihon and the land of Og are mentioned by name. These are the first kingdoms that Israel had to take possession of even before they crossed the Jordan.

Furthermore, the LORD has blessed them with numerous offspring, so that they can populate the land. This offspring has been commanded to take possession of what the LORD has promised their fathers. They have done so, helped by the LORD Who gave the inhabitants of the land in their power. He has given them a free hand to do with those nations what they want. In doing so He has put them to the test. Will they act with those nations as He commanded? He has told them to exterminate the inhabitants. Because of their unfaithfulness, the roles have been reversed. The nations reign over them, and the nations do with them as they please (verse 37).

Their conquest of the land throws a treasure of blessings into their lap. They have feasted upon it. That is lawful. It has all come within their reach by the grace of God. God wants to give His people everything to enjoy. He wishes, however, to be involved, to be recognized as the Giver, and to thank and honor Him for it.

This is not an ambition of God, as it would be with us. He knows that enjoyment without Him leads to selfishness and excesses, from which much evil arises. Enjoying without Him has a devastating effect on the relationship between people. Where the bond with Him is broken, the bond between people is also broken.

Verses 26-28 | Unfaithfulness of the People and God’s Salvation

26 *“But they became disobedient and rebelled against You,
And cast Your law behind their backs
And killed Your prophets who had admonished them*

*So that they might return to You,
And they committed great blasphemies.*

27 *“Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their oppressors who
oppressed them,*

*But when they cried to You in the time of their distress,
ou heard from heaven, and according to Your great compassion
You gave them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of their
oppressors.*

28 *“But as soon as they had rest, they did evil again before You;
Therefore You abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they
ruled over them.*

*When they cried again to You, You heard from heaven,
And many times You rescued them according to Your compassion,*

When man comes apart from God, no longer involving Him in his actions, he comes to “great blasphemies”. Then the greatest of God’s blessings are answered by man with the greatest evil. The rebellion of the people manifests itself in rebellion against God. They cast His law behind their backs. That is an act of contempt. If then God sends His prophets to bring them back to Him, they kill them.

They have settled with God. They don’t want Him anymore. They’re declaring Him out of time. Their “enlightened” thinking is hindered by His existence and presence. That is why every voice that interprets Him must be silenced. As if this can silence God.

God does not give up. He has another method to bring them to repentance. If they do not want to listen to His voice, they will listen to His actions. He delivers them into the hands of their enemies. That does not miss its effect. They are oppressed and cry out to the LORD. And, miracle of grace, He hears them. In His “great mercy” He gives deliverers.

And that does not happen just once. No, it repeats itself many times. Each time after their deliverance, they do evil again. They really are repeat offenders, people who fall into the same mistake over and over again. In His faithfulness the LORD then delivers them into the hands of opponents. Then they get oppressed again, and in their distress they cry out to the LORD. According to His unchanging mercy He then hears their crying

and delivers them. The book of Judges impressively describes the course of these events.

Verse 29 | The People Sin Against God's Provisions

29 *And admonished them in order to turn them back to Your law.
Yet they acted arrogantly and did not listen to Your commandments but
sinned against Your ordinances,
By which if a man observes them he shall live.
And they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck, and would
not listen.*

In spite of all these acts of God in mercy, the people are going further and further downhill. God exhorts His people to return to His law, for in keeping the law lies life. In not listening to the law, in breaking it, lies death. His people do not act as ignorant ones. They know God's law. However, they do not put their shoulders under it, but they turn their backs on it. They do not bend their necks under it, but stiffen their necks. They pile sin upon sin.

Verses 30-31 | God's Great Patience Has an End

30 *"However, You bore with them for many years,
And admonished them by Your Spirit through Your prophets,
Yet they would not give ear.
Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands.*
31 *"Nevertheless, in Your great compassion You did not make an end of
them or forsake them,
For You are a gracious and compassionate God.*

For many years God has endured this constant rebellion with longsuffering. In verse 20 the Spirit is teaching the people. However, because they did not listen to the teaching of the Spirit, the Spirit began to admonish them. Each time God's Spirit has been speaking to the people in His prophets to convince them of their sins (2Chr 36:15). He wants to make His people happy. Therefore, He exhorts them continuously to break with sin and to submit to His commandments. But they do not listen.

Finally, He has no choice but to deliver them into the power of the nations around them. First the ten tribes were taken from the land by Assyria and scattered over several countries. Later the two tribes were taken away to Babylon. But He didn't wipe them out. In spite of all the unfaithfulness of the people and God's discipline over them, He has not destroyed them forever. He remains "a gracious and compassionate God".

Verse 32 | Begging For God's Favor

32 *"Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and lovingkindness,
Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before You,
Which has come upon us, our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers and on all Your people,
From the days of the kings of Assyria to this day.*

In the preceding verses, the Levites have recounted the history of God's faithfulness opposite the unfaithfulness of the people in an impressive way before the face of God. On this basis they will now plead with Him in view of their present state of unfaithfulness and weakness. They present the people in all His ranks – "our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers and on all Your people" – to the "the great, the mighty, and the awesome God", whom they first and foremost and above all call "our God".

They speak to Him in His relationship with them. In that relationship they know Him as "great". He is all-embracing and transcends everything. He is also 'great', omnipotent, unlimited in His possibilities. And He is 'awesome', He is to be feared by everyone, especially by those who oppose Him.

They also know Him as the God "who keeps covenant". They know that He will never break the covenant made and ratified by Him. The people have not kept their part in the covenant. That is why they also speak of God's keeping of "lovingkindness". They ask God if, in the abundance of lovingkindness that characterizes Him, He does not want to think small of all the trouble that has afflicted them from the moment that He has given them in the power of their enemies. They do not prescribe to God how He should act, but ask for a favor.

Verses 33-35 | God Justified in His Actions

- 33 *"However, You are just in all that has come upon us;
For You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly.*
- 34 *"For our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers have not kept
Your law
Or paid attention to Your commandments and Your admonitions with
which You have admonished them.*
- 35 *"But they, in their own kingdom,
With Your great goodness which You gave them,
With the broad and rich land which You set before them,
Did not serve You or turn from their evil deeds.*

As they call upon the mercy of God, they do not forget to acknowledge that God has the right on His side in everything that has happened to them (cf. Psa 51:6). They take the right attitude before God. There is no justification for their own sinful behavior, and they do not blame Him for injustice. It is clear to them where the cause of all their misery lies. All the misery they have brought upon themselves can be traced back to their disobedience to the Word of God.

God has given them a kingdom. He has showered them with beneficence. He has given them space and abundance. Nothing has He withheld from them to make them happy, content and thankful. But instead of serving Him, they have served themselves. He has made them aware of this, but they have not repented of their evil deeds.

Verses 36-37 | Slavery Is Justified

- 36 *"Behold, we are slaves today,
And as to the land which You gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its
bounty,
Behold, we are slaves in it.*
- 37 *"Its abundant produce is for the kings
Whom You have set over us because of our sins;
They also rule over our bodies
And over our cattle as they please,
So we are in great distress.*

They are back in the land, but there is no liberty. A strange power rules the land, not a king from the house of David. They recognize their true position. Both for God and for the world around them, they take the place they have earned through their unfaithfulness.

They cannot fully enjoy the proceeds of the land either. They can enjoy it as far as their rulers allow. The proceeds are not for them, but for those to whom they have been subdued by God because of their sins. They do not even have anything to say about their own bodies and possessions. It is all in the power of foreign rulers.

Verse 38 | An Agreement

38 *“Now because of all this
We are making an agreement in writing;
And on the sealed document [are the names of] our leaders, our Levites
[and] our priests.”*

Having seen and admitted their past failures, they try to guard against a repetition of them. The means they choose is to make an agreement (cf. 2Kgs 23:3), which they write down and seal. This suits the dispensation in which they live. But such an agreement cannot be kept by a human being. By doing so they (unconsciously) indicate that they are better than their fathers.

Yet they have ground for this agreement, for, with or without agreement, they are obliged to keep the law. In the present dispensation this is different – although many voluntarily commit themselves to keep the law. For us, the general lesson is that after confessing our guilt, we will continue our walk on the basis of grace that we received when we were converted.

Nehemiah 10

Introduction

In verses 1-27 are the names of those who put their seals under the agreement. After having stopped doing evil, they now want to learn to do good (Isa 1:16-17).

Making an agreement or covenant, no matter how well intentioned, is a negation of man's inability to fulfill his obligations. This is evident at Sinai, where they have committed themselves to do everything God says (Exo 24:3,7; Acts 7:53), and under Josiah (2Kgs 23:3; Jer 3:10).

Making a covenant gives the impression that things will improve in the future. But in man there is no guarantee for that. On the contrary. Every promise made by a person not to fall into a certain mistake shows a lack of self-knowledge. Yet in those days the law is the foundation of God's dealings with man. That is why it is not to blame these Israelites for imposing this obligation on themselves. It indicates their sincere desire to comply with God's will.

It is only with the coming and rejection of Christ that the foundation of God's dealings with man changes. The cross is the great turning point. At the cross, the utter hopelessness of expecting anything good from man has become fully apparent. Anyone who still places himself on the foundation of the law has not yet grasped the meaning of the cross. But until then man has been under self-imposed responsibility to obey God's statutes. That is why it is the right path for those who join the covenant here.

Verses 1-8 | Names of Nehemiah and the Priests

1 Now on the sealed document [were the names of]: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, and Zedekiah, 2 Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah, 3 Pashhur, Amariah, Malchijah, 4 Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch, 5 Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah, 6 Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch, 7 Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin, 8 Maaziah, Bilgai, Shemaiah. These [were] the priests.

Nehemiah is the first to put his signature. Then twenty-two priests put their signatures. Remarkably, Ezra's name is missing. Would he under-

stand that a signature is not a guarantee? What's good for one person, another doesn't need to have any part in it. Ezra probably understands, through more insight into who God is and who man is, that God does not call him to sign. This kind of distinction between believers can be found in the church in Rome. There we find weak and strong believers. They must learn to interact and tolerate one another in matters relating to conscience (Romans 14-15).

Verses 9-13 | Names of the Levites

9 And the Levites: Jeshua the son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel; 10 also their brothers Shebaniah, Hodiah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan, 11 Mica, Rehob, Hashabiah, 12 Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah, 13 Hodiah, Bani, Beninu.

After the priests seventeen Levites sign the covenant. Among them many have been the mouths of the assembly in prayer (Neh 9:2,5). This shows that they themselves are impressed by what they have said, and that they do not want to impose burdens on others that they themselves refuse to touch. Those who lead in prayer should also lead in any other good work.

Verses 14-27 | Names of the Leaders of the People

14 The leaders of the people: Parosh, Pahath-moab, Elam, Zattu, Bani, 15 Buni, Azgad, Bebai, 16 Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin, 17 Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur, 18 Hodiah, Hashum, Bezai, 19 Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai, 20 Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir, 21 Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua, 22 Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah, 23 Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub, 24 Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek, 25 Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah, 26 Ahiah, Hanan, Anan, 27 Malluch, Harim, Baanah.

After the Levites forty-four of the heads of the people have signed that they want to keep God's commandments. As heads of the people they do the same for all those they represent and over whom they have influence by their position. Their names are mentioned here for their honor as men working diligently to revive and maintain the service of God in their land. The memory of such men will be a blessing.

It is noteworthy that most of those previously mentioned as heads of houses (Nehemiah 7) are mentioned here among the first of the heads of people

who have signed the covenant. It is also remarkable that many who are heads today bear the same name as those who are heads at the exodus from Babylon (Ezra 2:3-35).

Verse 28 | The Rest of the People

28 Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had knowledge and understanding,

The children are also involved in the covenant. They are part of the people of God and share in their privileges and responsibilities. They are sanctified in the parents, who have the obligation to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). There are also proselytes who sign. These are “all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands”.

Verses 29-31 | The Self-Imposed Obligations

29 are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God’s law, which was given through Moses, God’s servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes; 30 and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. 31 As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the sabbath or a holy day; and we will forego [the crops] the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.

All those who have entered into the agreement are called “kinsmen”. They all take the same place before God. Even the “nobles” among them are “kinsmen”. Faithfulness to God humbles the high and increases the low. They are connected not only by family ties, but also by a common desire. They all want to obey the law of God.

The nobles join the covenant . The people affirm with a curse and an oath that they will obey the law. They solemnly declare their sincerity before God, invoking His righteous wrath when they act unfaithfully.

As an application to us who are not under the law, we can say that the commitment they make to obey the law is for us a renewal of the desire to obey. Obedience is a fundamental principle in the Christian's life in every area of his life: family, society and church. For us the admonition of Barnabas, who encourages the church in Antioch to remain to the Lord with the purpose of their hearts (Acts 11:23), applies to all the areas mentioned.

Verses 29-31 describe the obligations to which the people submit themselves and their families. The covenant covers

1. their personal walk (verse 29),
2. their children in view of the matrimonial obligations they enter into (verse 30), and
3. the keeping of the sabbath and the sabbath year (verse 31).

So the first obligation is for each one personally, the second for the children. If there is no obedience in personal or family life, God cannot possibly be honored. Obedience brings about separation from the world. Friendship with the world is given up and instead there is dedication to God. They want to walk in God's law, that is, in submission to Holy Scripture. Personal obedience to God's Word is the starting point.

Secondly, they want to maintain the separation of the nations of the land, and therefore they do not want to allow their children to enter into an unequal yoke. Separation from evil and dedication to God is the first consequence of obedience.

Thirdly, they want to honor God by keeping the sabbath and not give in to greed in response to what the nations offer on that holy day. The sabbath is the peace of God in which His people may share.

They fourthly pledge to leave the land fallow in the seventh year, for because they did not, they were transported to Babylon at that time (Exo 23:11; Lev 26:33-35). It also means that they will not claim the debts their brethren owe them, and therefore will not give in to the spirit of domination. The sabbath year is the year of release and remission (Deu 15:1-2).

In that spirit God wants us to treat our brothers and sisters. These are all lessons for us if we want to give Christ His place as Head and act according to the unity of His body, the church, and preserve the unity of the

Spirit. Have we not been unfaithful to the Word of God? We have boasted on our position in Christ, but we have not personally submitted to God's Word. The voice of people in the church sounds louder than the voice of God through the Word. Tradition has more authority than Scripture.

Haven't we also lacked true separation? We may be separated from church systems, but in our dealings and walks we resemble people of the world. Hasn't the spirit of the world come into our homes and into the churches? What does church separation say when we are connected to the world in other ways?

Are we not cool in our dealings with God-fearing believers from whom we sometimes differ in a slight way, while we deal with worldly people in a warm-hearted manner? All these questions are better answered now than before Christ's judgment seat.

The sabbath speaks of the peace that Christ has given us through His work. But do we not fall short of that rest when we believe that we can gain a certain merit, a certain profit, on the basis of something in ourselves, is it not with God than surely it is with our fellow Christians?

And what about life in faith? Leaving the land fallow in the seventh year represents the confidence that God will provide even if it seems to us that things are going wrong. It is an acknowledgment of God's right to the land. That acknowledgment determines us with God Himself. Is it really only about Him in our lives? We can 'come together on a Godly foundation', 'break bread in a Scriptural way', 'maintain the testimony', and do all kinds of other things that are only perceptible and verifiable externally, while our appreciation of the eternal and unseen decreases further and further, and we only live for the here-and-now.

The fifth obligation, that of not claiming debts, is related to the previous one. Are we not often demanding of our fellow believers the more we lose sight of eternal things and live for the present? "Behold, the Judge is standing right at the door" (Jam 5:9b). The end of this dispensation is in sight. It is high time that we stop demanding of each other, and start living in the awareness of all that has been forgiven us by God. A demanding attitude prevents fellowship. If we judge it, we will together be able to uphold and honor God and His truth.

Verse 32 | One Third of a Shekel for the House of God

32 We also placed ourselves under obligation to contribute yearly one third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God:

Now follow obligations concerning the house of God. Caring for the house of God – which is mentioned nine times in verses 32-39, once in each verse and twice in verse 36 – occupies a great place in the agreement. There is no mention of the wall, although it is the main subject of this book. The great touchstone of faithfulness to God is the maintenance of His house, the temple, the maintenance of those who serve in it, and the obeying of the statutes that govern order in the house.

If in the individual lives of the members of God's people everything is directed toward God and lives are arranged according to His will, the common interest will also develop in prosperity. This is expressed in the care for the house of God, which is now the church of God. There will be a desire to arrange everything in the church as God prescribes in His Word (1Tim 3:15). There will be sufficient means to maintain the visible testimony. If there is no spirituality, hearts and purses will remain closed. If there is such a mind, both will open.

The original amount to be paid per head is half a sickle (Exo 30:13). It is possible that because of the poverty of the people this cannot be paid. But then we see that the poverty of the people is not a barrier. If the consciences are exercised, the possible will be given and sometimes more than the possible (2Cor 8:1-5). God will then make sure that the lesser leads to the same result as the greater. This makes His greatness shine all the more, as is always the case where man relies more on God's goodness.

Verse 33 | Provisions for the House of God

33 for the showbread, for the continual grain offering, for the continual burnt offering, the sabbaths, the new moon, for the appointed times, for the holy things and for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God.

Through the contribution of one third of a sickle a year, the following provisions can be made, through which the work in the house of God and the feasts connected with it can progress:

1. The showbread.
2. The continual grain offering.
3. The continual burnt offering.
4. The sacrifice for the sabbaths.
5. The sacrifice for the new moon.
6. The appointed times (Passover, Pentecost and Feast of Booths).
7. The holy things (peace offerings).
8. The sin offerings to make atonement for Israel.
9. All the work in God's house.

"The showbread" – these are the twelve showbreads – represents the whole people. The unity of the people can no longer be seen through the scattering, but for God that unity is there. The remnant may think of it in their worship. This is the first thing that is brought to God's attention by the contribution and is therefore also the first thing that is placed in front of our attention.

The "continual grain offering", that is the daily grain offering, speaks of the Lord Jesus in His life on earth as perfectly devoted to God. The "continual burnt offering", that is the daily burnt offering, speaks of the Lord Jesus in His full surrender to God in His death on the cross. The sacrifice for the "sabbaths" shows the work of the Lord Jesus in His result: rest for God and rest for the believer. The sacrifice for "the new moons" sees the work of Christ as the basis for the restoration of Israel.

The "appointed times", i.e. the three great feasts, indicate the great results of Christ's work, namely the deliverance of a people from the power of sin (Passover), the coming into being of the church (Pentecost), and the establishment of the kingdom of peace (Feast of Booths). "The holy things", that is the peace offering, indicate the fellowship of believers among themselves and of the believers with God and the Lord Jesus. "The sin offerings" are "to make atonement for Israel." Christ works atonement between the holy God and sinful man, an atonement on the basis of which once all things – not: all men! – to be reconciled with God (Col 1:20-22). All work that takes place in God's house takes place on the basis of the atonement.

Verse 34 | Supply of Wood for the House of God

34 Likewise we cast lots for the supply of wood [among] the priests, the Levites and the people so that they might bring it to the house of our God, according to our fathers' households, at fixed times annually, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the law;

To know the will of God often the lot is cast, that is to say, in the time of the Old Testament. The last time we read about throwing lot is at the beginning of Acts (Acts 1:26). It happens

1. when dividing the land among the tribes (Num 26:55; Jos 14:2; 18:10);
2. to discover a guilty one (Jos 7:14; 1Sam 14:42; Jona 1:7);
3. to appoint the first king, Saul (1Sam 10:19-21);
4. to resolve disputes (Pro 18:18);
5. in the division of various Levite orders (1Chr 24:5; 25:8; 26:13; Lk 1:9);
6. appointing who would dwell in Jerusalem (Neh 11:1) and
7. to appoint Judas Iscariot's substitute (Acts 1:26).

Occasionally there is the casting of the lot, without learning the will of God. We see that the lot is cast superstitiously by Haman in order to know the time that would be most suitable for exterminating the Jews (Est 3:7; 9:24). The soldiers cast the lot for the clothing of the Lord Jesus (Mt 27:35; Mk 15:24; Lk 23:34; Jn 19:24).

After the Holy Spirit has come to earth, there is no more casting the lot in order to learn the will of God. The New Testament believer is not guided by the lot, but by the Word of God and the Spirit of God.

For "the supply of wood" we find nowhere a special commandment of God. Yet what happens here is according to God's thoughts, for without wood there can be no sacrifice. It is an important supply, so important, that Nehemiah mentions this supply again at the end of his book (Neh 13:31). When hearts are set on God and His interests, they also think about what is not explicitly mentioned in God's Word, but what is important for the service in God's house.

Wood grows out of the earth and is a picture of man as born on earth. If every believer offers something so that the sacrifice becomes possible, it

means that he himself comes into God's house. After all, if the believers do not come, no sacrifices will be made.

The wood is brought to the families at the appointed times. In turn, a family makes sure that the necessary wood is present at the right time, so that the sacrifices can be made. The church has its regular meetings. There the whole family of God comes together to make offerings at the Table of the Lord in accordance with God's Word and God's desire. The wood burns. In it we can see that what we ourselves are disappears. It is about the sacrifice. What ascends is the aroma of the sacrifice, that is what the church offers to God of the Lord Jesus.

Verses 35-37 | The First Fruits for the House of God

35 and that they might bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all the fruit of every tree to the house of the LORD annually, 36 and bring to the house of our God the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks as it is written in the law, for the priests who are ministering in the house of our God. 37 We will also bring the first of our dough, our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the new wine and the oil to the priests at the chambers of the house of our God, and the tithe of our ground to the Levites, for the Levites are they who receive the tithes in all the rural towns.

The willing people continue their consecration to the LORD. They are not content with partial surrender. They want to obey the law in everything. Therefore they also want to offer to the LORD the first fruits of the land (Exo 23:19; 34:26; Lev 19:23-24). The land belongs to the LORD and they may enjoy the fruit of it. But they do not want to enjoy it without Him.

Enjoying all God's good gifts, whether they are blessings from the earth or blessings in heaven, is only real enjoyment if we involve Him from Whom we have received everything. That is what He wants as well. He has a right to it. The bringing of the first fruits is the acknowledgment that everything belongs to the LORD.

After the first fruits are offered to the LORD in His house, they are given to the priests and Levites for their sustenance (Num 18:13; Deu 26:1-11). Thus the LORD deals with all that He gives us. If we give it to Him, He gives it back to us as food to perform our priestly service and to be able to perform our task as Levites (our gift).

After the first proceeds of the land, the first-born are brought to the priests in the house of God (Exo 13:11-15). These are both the first-born of the people and the first-born of the cattle. They are brought to the priest. Priests bring offerings. That is why we see here in the picture that new life is consecrated and sacrificed to God. He is the Giver of new life and is entitled to it. Whoever has learned the mercies of God and thereby received new life, will want to make his body available to God “for a living and holy sacrifice” (Rom 12:1).

Further sacrifices are brought. These sacrifices are brought to the priests, not so that they may sacrifice them or that they may serve for their sustenance, but to bring them into the rooms of God’s house. This emphasizes the enduring nature of these sacrifices before God. They are constantly in God’s presence, before His attention. Then the tithes are brought to support the Levites. If God gets His share, there will also be care for His servants.

Verses 38-39 | The Tithes for the House of God

38 The priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes, and the Levites shall bring up the tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse. 39 For the sons of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of the grain, the new wine and the oil to the chambers; there are the utensils of the sanctuary, the priests who are ministering, the gatekeepers and the singers. Thus we will not neglect the house of our God.

The charging of the tithes by the Levites is done under the supervision of a priest. What is to be given for the maintenance of God’s servants is to be given in a priestly manner. What is offered spiritually to God and what is given materially to His servants are both called “sacrifices” (Heb 13:15-16).

The Levites, in turn, will give the tenth of the tithes they have received. The tithes of the Levites are taken to the chambers of the storehouse in God’s house. There it lies in God’s presence. He watches over it and disposes of it. At the right time He will give it to those who need it. Everything we entrust to the Lord is managed in the best possible way. There is no thought of speculation. Whoever invests in faith in the house of God gets the highest return.

He who does not abandon the house of God to its fate (cf. Hag 1:4-9) will give. In spite of the heavy taxation by the king of Persia (Neh 5:4), Nehemiah reminds us that the LORD is entitled to the first fruits. We must "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (Mt 22:21). Faithfulness in giving is a great part of a revival. In addition to faithfulness in giving, there will also be faithfulness in attending the meetings of the church. Also in that respect the care for the house of God becomes visible.

Wherever the love of Christ reigns, there will be love for the house of God. In spite of the fact that the glory that descended upon it in the days of Solomon is no longer there, the heart of the people goes out to that house, because it is the house of God. This also applies to us who are being built up "into a dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Eph 2:22). The Spirit is the Spirit of truth Who will always be with us and in us (Jn 16:16-17).

The concern for the house of God summarizes all previous commitments. Under the guidance of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people have been led to give priority to spiritual things and thereby also to provide the restored temple with what is needed for the service. The main elements are grain (a picture of Christ), new wine (represents joy, fellowship) and oil (a picture of the Holy Spirit).

The people of God conclude their agreement with the impressive wish: "We will not neglect the house of our God". Is that also our desire in view of what is now the house of our God: "The church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth" (1Tim 3:15)?

Nehemiah 11

Introduction

The wall and the gates were not erected to give the few who live within the wall the exclusive right to the house of God. That would mean sectarianism. It is not the intention to forbid those who live outside the wall access to the house of God. Then the wall would serve for their own glory, they would exclude many of the people of God and deny the rights of the LORD.

This is what the people in Ezekiel 11 are doing (Eze 11:15). There we see that as a result the glory of the LORD disappears from the house (Eze 11:23). They lose what they claim. God does not connect His glory with spiritual pride and human posturing. But we also see there that the LORD is a sanctuary for those who are excluded (Eze 11:16).

The wall is not built to separate those who live in Jerusalem from the other members of God's people, but to maintain the holiness of God's house. The wall is necessary because without separation it is impossible to maintain the holiness of God's house. But we must also see clearly the danger that the truth of separation can be abused to form a 'better' group that excludes many who belong to the people of God. In this way the rights of God are denied and, finally, the very truth of the house of God that would be maintained through true seclusion is lost.

Verses 1-2 | Those Who Lived in the Jerusalem

1 Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem, but the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while nine-tenths [remained] in the [other] cities. 2 And the people blessed all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.

This verse is a continuation of Nehemiah 7:4. The intervening chapters have informed us of the religious condition of the people. Surprisingly, it turns out that people are not eager to go and live in Jerusalem, even though the wall has been completed. The cities in the countryside are more popular. Jerusalem is the 'undesirable' city, or rather the 'abandoned' one.

The city is spacious enough, but the number of inhabitants is small (Neh 7:4). This will be different in the future (Isa 49:14-21; Zec 8:4).

In 1 Chronicles 9 there is also a list of those who have repopulated Jerusalem (1Chr 9:2-21). Many of the names mentioned there can be found here. Their names are joyfully mentioned by God (Psa 112:6b).

The leaders of the people go voluntarily. They feel responsible for good government and good defense of the city of God. Do we want to be as close to the Lord as possible? The place where the sanctuary stands and where God dwells is attractive only for faith, not for the flesh.

Jerusalem is called "the holy city" here (verse 18; Isa 48:2; 52:1; Dan 9:24; Mt 4:5; 27:53; Rev 11:2), because God has chosen this city as His city and the temple as His dwelling place is there. This is the reason for the God-fearing to want to live there. To live in that city, so close to God, requires looking carefully at the walk. Also, those who live there are special objects of the enemy's attacks.

These two aspects may be the cause of the lack of enthusiasm to live there. What is forgotten is that just as Jerusalem is particularly hated and threatened by its enemies, it is also protected with special care by its God and made a "safe dwelling place" (Isa 33:20; Psa 46:5-6).

Not wanting to live in that city, but preferring to live in the country, can also have to do with considerations of a business nature. More 'profit' can be made outside Jerusalem. The application for us is to seek our own interests, to think of the earthly things, rather than to seek and think of the interests and things of the Lord Jesus (Phil 2:21).

For those who allow themselves to be guided not by faith but by sight, the city has lost its attractiveness. The cloud of glory is no longer there, there is no ruler from the house of Judah, but a foreigner reigns there, the city is deserted and most of the houses are in ruins. Because of the sins of the people all glory is gone. But faith keeps it in remembrance (Hag 2:4) and cherishes the sure hope of its return, never to leave again.

What determines spiritually the place where we want to live? Do we want to be where there are many people and much action is found or among the two or three who come together in the Name of the Lord Jesus?

In order to recruit residents for Jerusalem, they are going to “tithe” themselves, just as they used to tithe their goods (Neh 10:37-38). This is done by lot, of which they know that its guidance is done by the LORD (Pro 16:33). This will prevent quarrel, for in this way the LORD Himself makes clear who will dwell there. In this way the LORD also takes the tithes for Himself. Those ‘tithes’ represent before God the whole people.

Those who will voluntarily dwell there reap the appreciation of their fellow people, as if it were a great undertaking, a great achievement, to do so. Those who do it, leave everything behind, give it up. But the choice for the holy city, the city of God, is a blessed one, for the choice that is made is also God’s choice. He has chosen that city to live there. The city is still in ruins. It can only be attractive if it is looked at with the eyes of God and with the eye of faith that sees the future glory of that city.

Moses also once set up a tent for the LORD where he goes, while the people watch him, but do not go with him (Exo 33:7-11). Only those who seek the LORD go to that tent where the glory of the LORD rests. There are not many of them. All who remain in their own tent do bow down at the sight of the pillar of cloud, but only Moses and Joshua enjoy fellowship with the LORD in that tent.

Sometimes there is respect for those who go their way in faith and therefore often in solitude, while there is no faith to go the same way. One holds on to visible, tangible things in the opinion that they offer more hold. They do know God, but are a bit anxious to entrust themselves to Him excluding everything else. If others can do that, take your hat off. But going that way themselves, no way.

Verses 3-24 | Those Who Went to Live in Jerusalem

3 Now these are the heads of the provinces who lived in Jerusalem, but in the cities of Judah each lived on his own property in their cities—the Israelites, the priests, the Levites, the temple servants and the descendants of Solomon’s servants. 4 Some of the sons of Judah and some of the sons of Benjamin lived in Jerusalem. From the sons of Judah: Athaiah the son of Uzziyah, the son of Zechariah, the son of Amariah, the son of Shephatiah, the son of Mahalalel, of the sons of Perez; 5 and Maaseiah the son of Baruch, the son of Col-hozeh,

the son of Hazaiah, the son of Adaiah, the son of Joiarib, the son of Zechariah, the son of the Shilonite. 6 All the sons of Perez who lived in Jerusalem were 468 able men. 7 Now these are the sons of Benjamin: Sallu the son of Meshullam, the son of Joed, the son of Pedaiah, the son of Kolaiah, the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ithiel, the son of Jeshaiiah; 8 and after him Gabbai [and] Sallai, 928. 9 Joel the son of Zichri was their overseer, and Judah the son of Hassenuah was second in command of the city. 10 From the priests: Jedaiah the son of Joiarib, Jachin, 11 Seraiah the son of Hilkiyah, the son of Meshullam, the son of Zadok, the son of Meraioth, the son of Ahitub, the leader of the house of God, 12 and their kinsmen who performed the work of the temple, 822; and Adaiah the son of Jeroham, the son of Pelaliah, the son of Amzi, the son of Zechariah, the son of Pashhur, the son of Malchijah, 13 and his kinsmen, heads of fathers' [households], 242; and Amashsai the son of Azarel, the son of Ahzai, the son of Meshillemoth, the son of Immer, 14 and their brothers, valiant warriors, 128. And their overseer was Zabdiel, the son of Haggadolim. 15 Now from the Levites: Shemaiah the son of Hasshub, the son of Azrikam, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Bunni; 16 and Shabbethai and Jozabad, from the leaders of the Levites, who were in charge of the outside work of the house of God; 17 and Mattaniah the son of Mica, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, who was the leader in beginning the thanksgiving at prayer, and Bakbukiah, the second among his brethren; and Abda the son of Shammua, the son of Galal, the son of Jeduthun. 18 All the Levites in the holy city [were] 284. 19 Also the gatekeepers, Akkub, Talmon and their brethren who kept watch at the gates, [were] 172. 20 The rest of Israel, of the priests [and] of the Levites, [were] in all the cities of Judah, each on his own inheritance. 21 But the temple servants were living in Ophel, and Ziha and Gishpa were in charge of the temple servants. 22 Now the overseer of the Levites in Jerusalem was Uzzi the son of Bani, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Mica, from the sons of Asaph, who were the singers for the service of the house of God. 23 For [there was] a commandment from the king concerning them and a firm regulation for the song leaders day by day. 24 Pethahiah the son of Meshezabel, of the sons of Zerah the son of Judah, was the king's representative in all matters concerning the people.

Those who settle in the city are remembered by God. Psalm 87 shows what God thinks of Jerusalem. That should be enough. Most of the names are forgotten by us as soon as we have read them. But for God this list is valu-

able, as are the other lists of names in these books of after exile. Before the judgment seat of Christ, their names will be mentioned again. Then these volunteers of heart will notice how good their choice was to accept the loss in this world in order to be able to take better care of the city of God's choice.

Some details in this section:

The work outside the house of God – verse 16

Those “who were in charge of the outside work of the house of God” are engaged in things that are not done directly in the house of God, but which are necessary for the orderly progress of the activities in the house of God. The activities that take place in the house of God are directly related to approaching God to honor Him. There are also activities that do not have that direct purpose, but that contribute to that purpose.

Perhaps we can apply this to “serve the tables” – that is, administering and distributing collected money from the believers – in addition to devoting “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2-4). Believers who are supported by this will honor God in His house. One can also think of sexton service. A sexton ensures that the outer circumstances are such that the service is possible.

It can also relate to the spiritual repair of defects on the outside of the house of God. We can think of the behavior of believers in the world who need correction. It is a blessing if such believers are reminded of this. In a sense this can be understood as a “work outside the house of God”. In the same way, evangelization takes place in the world, outside the church, but is connected with it.

Beginning the thanksgiving at prayer – verse 17

Prayer begins with praise. If we want to make our needs known to God – and He invites us sincerely to do so – it is important that we first thank Him for all the benefits He has already given us.

Living in the cities – verse 20

Living in the cities is not of a lesser order, but of a different order, than living in Jerusalem. Everything has its place under the rule of God. Motives come to light, but God can direct everything so that it corresponds

to His purpose. All those who do not dwell in Jerusalem go to their own inheritance.

Concern for the singers – verse 23

The pagan authority, the king of Persia, is even mentioned in connection with the house of God. Those who are to be maintained by the people who give the tithes are now dependent on the rulers. Probably the people have failed in bringing the tithes, or the people are too few in number, so that few tithes are brought. God has made the pagan ruler's heart favorable, in order to provide for the possible negligence of his people.

This concerns the care of the singers who may have been forgotten by the people, but not by God. He cares for them through the head of the nations. If the whole people forget the singers, God knows other ways to achieve that the singers can do their work.

The temple service is not only a sacrificial service, but also a singing service. Because of the sacrifice it is possible to sing. Only those who know the sacrifice and live from the sacrifice can sing. Accompanying the worship service by means of hymns of praise and spiritual songs is the privilege of every member of God's people today. If there is little praise, because the people of God do not give substance to it, there are always other reasons to sing praise to God.

The king's representative – verse 24

Pethahiah, from the lineage of Judah, is a royal agent who brings the Jewish affairs before the king of Persia and informs the Jews about the king's wishes and orders. In this he is a picture of the Lord Jesus as the Advocate for His own with the Father and the Apostle on behalf of God with His own.

Verses 25-36 | Residents of Other Villages and Cities

25 Now as for the villages with their fields, some of the sons of Judah lived in Kiriath-arba and its towns, in Dibon and its towns, and in Jekabzeel and its villages, 26 and in Jeshua, in Moladah and Beth-pelet, 27 and in Hazar-shual, in Beersheba and its towns, 28 and in Ziklag, in Meconah and in its towns, 29 and in En-rimmon, in Zorah and in Jarmuth, 30 Zanoah, Adullam, and

their villages, Lachish and its fields, Azekah and its towns. So they encamped from Beersheba as far as the valley of Hinnom. 31 The sons of Benjamin also [lived] from Geba [onward], at Michmash and Aiya, at Bethel and its towns, 32 at Anathoth, Nob, Ananiah, 33 Hazor, Ramah, Gittaim, 34 Hadid, Zeboim, Neballat, 35 Lod and Ono, the valley of craftsmen. 36 From the Levites, [some] divisions in Judah belonged to Benjamin.

What at first sight does not seem to us to be of much importance will be examined with special interest by the Jews in the last days. It is an equally faithful service for some to cultivate the land and live in the restored villages and thus preserve the land for God, as it is for others to live in the city of God. God values everything according to the intentions of the heart, which will become apparent in the coming day.

Nehemiah 12

Verses 1-7 | Heads of the Priests

1 Now these are the priests and the Levites who came up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua: Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra, 2 Amariah, Malluch, Hattush, 3 Shecaniah, Rehum, Meremoth, 4 Iddo, Ginnethoi, Abijah, 5 Mijamin, Maadiah, Bilgah, 6 Shemaiah and Joiarib, Jedaiah, 7 Sallu, Amok, Hilkiyah and Jedaiah. These were the heads of the priests and their kinsmen in the days of Jeshua.

Again we find a list of names of those who went up with Zerubbabel and Jeshua from Babylon. These are the priests and the Levites. Both characteristics, those of a priest and of a Levite, should be found with every believer: sacrifice and serve.

The first series of names is that of “the heads of the priests and their kinsmen in the days of Jeshua” (verse 7). In the other lists the chief priests are not mentioned separately. They are mentioned here. The heads of the Levites have been mentioned before. In verses 12-21 a later generation of priests is mentioned, who undoubtedly served in the later days of Nehemiah. They are the sons of those mentioned earlier, faithful men who walk in the footsteps of their fathers and are examples to the people.

Verses 8-11 | The Levites

8 The Levites [were] Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, [and] Mattaniah [who was] in charge of the songs of thanksgiving, he and his brothers. 9 Also Bakbukiah and Unni, their brothers, stood opposite them in [their] service divisions. 10 Jeshua became the father of Joiakim, and Joiakim became the father of Eliashib, and Eliashib became the father of Joiada, 11 and Joiada became the father of Jonathan, and Jonathan became the father of Jaddua.

The second series of names is that of Levites. The names are in connection with the singers. Despite the decay and small number of Israelites, who are also spiritually weak, there are Levites who are “in charge of the songs of thanksgiving”.

There is also a short genealogy of five generations, running from Jeshua to Jaddua. These five generations cover the period of 538-333 BC. Jaddua is the great and deservedly celebrated high priest who occupied this high place in the days when the Medo-Persian rule was overthrown by Alexander the Great. He is the last mentioned high priest in the Old Testament.

Verses 12-21 | Priestly Families

12 Now in the days of Joiakim, the priests, the heads of fathers' [households] were: of Seraiah, Meraiah; of Jeremiah, Hananiah; 13 of Ezra, Meshullam; of Amariah, Jehohanan; 14 of Malluchi, Jonathan; of Shebaniah, Joseph; 15 of Harim, Adna; of Meraioth, Helkai; 16 of Iddo, Zechariah; of Ginnethon, Meshullam; 17 of Abijah, Zichri; of Miniamin, of Moadiah, Piltai; 18 of Bilgah, Shammua; of Shemaiah, Jehonathan; 19 of Joiarib, Mattenai; of Jedaiah, Uzzi; 20 of Sallai, Kallai; of Amok, Eber; 21 of Hilkiah, Hashabiah; of Jedaiah, Nethanel.

Here are mentioned the sons of those already mentioned in verses 1-7. The twenty fathers in those verses are mentioned here again, now with one son each as the next head of the family. It are the later days, the days of Joiakim, the son and successor of Jeshua (verse 10). Here we see the favor of God for His people. God ensures that there will always be a priestly lineage.

Verses 22-23 | The Levites Are Registered

22 As for the Levites, the heads of fathers' [households] were registered in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, and Johanan and Jaddua; so [were] the priests in the reign of Darius the Persian. 23 The sons of Levi, the heads of fathers' [households], were registered in the Book of the Chronicles up to the days of Johanan the son of Eliashib.

Here the following generations of Levites are mentioned, who live during the successive high priests. God also maintains the Levite service, even though it sometimes seems as if it is over. The priestly service also continues, despite the foreign domination. There is no conceivable circumstance of which it should be said that God cannot be brought what is due to Him.

Verses 24-26 | Levites in the Days of Joiakim

24 The heads of the Levites [were] Hashabiah, Sherebiah and Jeshua the son of Kadmiel, with their brothers opposite them, to praise [and] give thanks, as prescribed by David the man of God, division corresponding to division. 25 Mattaniah, Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshullam, Talmon [and] Akkub [were] gatekeepers keeping watch at the storehouses of the gates. 26 These [served] in the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and in the days of Nehemiah the governor and of Ezra the priest [and] scribe.

Of the Levites mentioned here, it is said as a special feature that they are there “in the days of Joiakim ..., and in the days of Nehemiah the governor and of Ezra the priest [and] scribe”. These Levites are contemporaries of these men, that is to say, they have to deal with the same spiritual atmosphere and face the special spirit that characterizes the time in which they live. These contemporaries hold on to God’s Word, while the characteristic of that time is that it is abandoned by the majority. They maintain, though in weakness, a testimony to the LORD Who brought them back to the place of His Name.

Of the heads of the Levites it is specially mentioned that they “praise [and] give thanks, as prescribed by David the man of God”. They do not look at the wretched situation in which they find themselves, but at God’s commandment, and they keep it. Whatever our weakness may be, we too can keep what is from the beginning and carry out what is written.

Verses 27-30 | The Dedication of the Wall

27 Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites from all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem so that they might celebrate the dedication with gladness, with hymns of thanksgiving and with songs [to the accompaniment] of cymbals, harps and lyres. 28 So the sons of the singers were assembled from the district around Jerusalem, and from the villages of the Netophathites, 29 from Beth-gilgal and from [their] fields in Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built themselves villages around Jerusalem. 30 The priests and the Levites purified themselves; they also purified the people, the gates and the wall.

This is where history goes on. The wall is already finished in Nehemiah 6 (Neh 6:15). The intermediate chapters tell the story of the consecration of the people as a whole because the Word of God brings them to self-judgment. Now that the people have consecrated themselves, the wall can be dedicated. The completion is cause for joy and thankfulness to God and a feast to dedicate the wall.

The feast of dedication is celebrated because the LORD has not only brought His people back from the land of the foreigner, but has also granted that His house and His holy city are surrounded with a wall by His people. The wall is a testimony for friend and foe that those who once were scattered because of their sins are now under God's care. This is a cause of joy. This joy manifests itself in thanksgiving and songs accompanied by musical instruments. This is how David arranged it (verse 36; 1Chr 15:16; Ezra 3:10). Each Levite has his own voice and his own instrument, but they are all full of what the LORD has arranged. He is the object of their hymns of praise and thanksgiving, and therefore it is harmonious.

There have been more dedication feasts in the history of Israel: at the bringing up of the ark by David to the city of David (2Sam 6:12), at the dedication of the temple (1Kgs 8:62-66), at the laying of the foundation of the temple (Ezra 3:10-13), and at the dedication of the house (Ezra 6:16-18). The joy at the dedication ceremonies is always in connection with God's house and is there in spite of the decay. These feasts are not imposed by law, but take place spontaneously.

This is also the case here. The dedication of the wall becomes a general feast. And not only for the builders of the wall and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The Levites, the singers, come from all sides. The wall of Jerusalem is a symbol of salvation and its gates of praise.

Before the feast is celebrated, the priests and the Levites first cleanse themselves and then the people, the gates and the wall. There can be no real dedication without cleansing. It is a cleansing with water, for which they may have used the water for impurity (Num 19:11-13). The washing with water through the Word is always necessary (Eph 5:26). In this way we come to confession and become clean.

Verses 31-37 | The First Choir of Thanksgiving

31 Then I had the leaders of Judah come up on top of the wall, and I appointed two great choirs, the first proceeding to the right on top of the wall toward the Refuse Gate. 32 Hoshaiah and half of the leaders of Judah followed them, 33 with Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, 34 Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah, 35 and some of the sons of the priests with trumpets; [and] Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph, 36 and his kinsmen, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah [and] Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God. And Ezra the scribe went before them. 37 At the Fountain Gate they went directly up the steps of the city of David by the stairway of the wall above the house of David to the Water Gate on the east.

By climbing the wall and walking over it, the wall becomes the property of the people (cf. Jos 1:3). In this way the people take possession of what lies within the wall. The walk on the wall is not meant to look at everything outside the city, but to look at everything inside. Separation is not negative, but positive. It is about what is dedicated to God. This can only be done by separating it from what is not dedicated to God. Going over the wall therefore gives the people a wide impression of the location of the city and how glorious God's temple is.

The wall of separation around our lives has the same purpose. It is intended that we walk on it with thanksgiving for all that God has given us. Then we will not fall into acid sectarianism, but our lives will be a testimony of what God has done in it. In the first place for our children, as well as for all those around us.

Let us listen to the son of Korah in Psalm 48. After their jubilation for the salvation of Zion is their call:

*“Walk about Zion and go around her;
Count her towers;
Consider her ramparts;
Go through her palaces,
That you may tell it to the next generation.
For such is God,
Our God forever and ever;
He will guide us until death” (Psa 48:12-14).*

If we go over the wall like this, we will see the city of God as God sees it. We will then see the church as it is according to God's counsel. That processes expressions of thanks and these in turn are a testimony for all who see and hear it. That is the effect of separation according to God's thoughts.

The first choir of thanksgiving departs from the west, near the Valley Gate. Their route runs along the southern part of the wall in the direction of the Refuse Gate. Ezra is at the head of this procession. Nehemiah makes way, as it were, for the Word of God in the person of Ezra. That must lead and be followed by all.

We then come to the Fountain Gate, to draw fresh water, to be revived and encouraged by the Word of God on our way. Our gaze is lifted up, through the steps, to the dwelling place of David, a picture of our Lord in heaven to Whom all power is given in heaven and on earth.

When we have the sight of the Lord Jesus, we come to the Water Gate in the east. The east speaks among other things of the future, of the expectation of the Lord Jesus. Water speaks not only of refreshment but also of cleansing (Eph 5:26). We are looking forward to Him and this will have a cleansing effect on us, because "everyone who has this hope [fixed] on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1Jn 3:3).

Verses 38-39 | The Second Choir of Thanksgiving

38 The second choir proceeded to the left, while I followed them with half of the people on the wall, above the Tower of Furnaces, to the Broad Wall, 39 and above the Gate of Ephraim, by the Old Gate, by the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate; and they stopped at the Gate of the Guard.

Nehemiah walks behind the second choir of thanksgiving. He is not ahead. Every thought of self-interest is missing. He does not walk there in the spirit of Nebuchadnezzar with the thought: 'Isn't this the great wall I built?' (Dan 4:30). He knows that he is but an instrument of the LORD.

This second choir passes a lot of buildings. Except for the Ephraim Gate and the Prison Gate they are all mentioned in Nehemiah 3 (see there for the commentary on these structures). Possibly nothing had to be repaired

at the Gate of Ephraim and the Gate of the Guard. While this choir is walking over the wall, these buildings again come to their attention.

We will always have to be reminded of certain truths on our way in separation according to God's intent. Peter is committed to reminding believers of what they have learned (2Pet 1:12). Jude does the same (Jude 1:5). And Paul does not find it sad to repeat things he has pointed out before (Phil 3:1).

There is always the danger of forgetfulness. This forgetfulness can strike in the breadth of our life of faith. Then we don't take it so carefully anymore. We become more and more absorbed in the things of this life and no longer worry so much about the interests of God. God's interests are getting sidelined. We forget what He has done for us and no longer examine His Word.

This forgetfulness can also strike us in the depths of our life of faith. Then we will emphasize certain truths, while forgetting other truths, no longer paying attention to them. And when others point this out to us, we declare "those other truths" of a lower, less important order or as not applicable to us.

Verses 40-42 | Both Choirs in the House of God

40 Then the two choirs took their stand in the house of God. So did I and half of the officials with me; 41 and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elioenai, Zechariah and Hananiah, with the trumpets; 42 and Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan, Malchijah, Elam and Ezer. And the singers sang, with Jezrahiah [their] leader,

The tour over the wall is finished. This gave the choirs a great impression of the size and location of the city, each from a different perspective. Wouldn't that say something about our view of the church? Who dares to say that he oversees the whole plan of God? Which local church, however endowed with gifts of great insight, can say that it oversees the whole of God's thoughts?

"We know in part" (1Cor 13:9). We need each other to come to a full view. "All the saints" are needed to discover "what is the breadth and length and

height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:18-19).

Both choirs meet in the house of God, in the presence of God. There they become one mighty choir. If the Word of God precedes us on our way over the wall and leads us into the joy of what is dedicated to God, we will end up in the house of God. That will be in perfection when the Lord Jesus comes to take us into the Father's house. But it is also true now. We will praise Him in the church in the presence of God with all the 'members of the two choirs' for all that He has done (Eph 3:20-21).

Verse 43 | Great Joy

43 and on that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar.

The walking over the wall, taking possession of the city for God under thanksgiving to dedicate it to Him, culminates in great joy. This is the result when His people walk before Him in holiness and truth. In accordance with the "great joy", "great sacrifices" are offered. Thus God is honored and admired. He receives all thanks and worship for what He has given His people.

The sacrifices speak of the Lord Jesus. It does not say what kind of sacrifices they are. Most likely they are peace offerings. Of those offerings God gets His share, and the priest and the people also get their share (Lev 3:11; 7:19,31). The peace offering is an offering that expresses the fellowship between God, the Lord Jesus, and His people. Through the offering of the Lord Jesus this has become possible. It is a 'great' sacrifice. For us it means that we have a great impression of the work of the Lord Jesus and tell that to God and to each other.

The fellowship we are allowed to have with one another is experienced in a special way at the Table of the Lord. There we think of His work and remember His death. On the one hand it makes us sad that we are the cause of His death through our sins. On the other hand, we remember with joy that He did it, making fellowship with Him and God and with one another possible. That is why we speak of "the cup of blessing" or "the cup of

praise” at the Supper of the Lord (1Cor 10:14-18). At the celebration of the Lord’s Supper we will rejoice at the extent to which we have “walked on the wall” during the week.

In this verse we read about “rejoicing” and “joy” no less than four times. This joy comes from God. He is its source. It is a great joy, not only for men, but also for women and children. The added value of this joy is that it is a testimony to the wider environment (cf. Ezra 3:13). All those who did not go along share in the joy. It is like the anointing of the Lord Jesus through Mary, through which “the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume” (Jn 12:3), so that everyone present could smell the fragrance of the perfume intended for the Lord Jesus.

Verses 44-47 | Take Care of the Levites

44 On that day men were also appointed over the chambers for the stores, the contributions, the first fruits and the tithes, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the portions required by the law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who served. 45 For they performed the worship of their God and the service of purification, together with the singers and the gatekeepers in accordance with the command of David [and] of his son Solomon. 46 For in the days of David and Asaph, in ancient times, [there were] leaders of the singers, songs of praise and hymns of thanksgiving to God. 47 So all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah gave the portions due the singers and the gatekeepers as each day required, and set apart the consecrated [portion] for the Levites, and the Levites set apart the consecrated [portion] for the sons of Aaron.

Another consequence of the walking on the wall is the care of God’s servants to further His work. When there is dedication, not only the heart is touched, but also the wallet (Heb 13:15-16). Where there is thankfulness to God, it will also be seen in doing good to and sharing with people. Giving love does not empty the heart; giving money does not empty the wallet (Mal 3:10-11).

After the LORD has received His part in the “great sacrifices”, the servants receive their part of the people. If God is praised for the restoration He has given, there will also be thankfulness for the service His servants do among the people. Judah rejoices.

Our joy is expressed in accepting each service on behalf of God and in supporting it in a practical way. If servants are not accepted and even forgotten, it is proof of contempt by the people for what the church is to Christ. For Christ, out of love for His church, gave ministers for the edification of His church (Eph 4:11).

The care of priests and Levites goes out to the service of their God and what is needed for cleansing. Everything that happens for God can only be acknowledged and accepted by Him if it is in accordance with His holiness. He cannot accept anything that is unclean. But He also knows who we are. That is why He provides opportunities to serve Him in a way that is pleasing to Him.

There is order by obeying the institutions of the past. The standards of purity have not changed since the days of David and Solomon. What those standards are, God has revealed in His Word. Because He has not changed, the standards of purity have not changed for us either. If we want to serve Him as a priest, Levite, singer and gatekeeper, we will consult His Word. Then we will go back to the origin and we will not be at the mercy of human traditions that are constantly being adjusted in the course of time.

This is not about adapted melodies or adapted language. It is about the content of our thanksgiving. Are God and the Lord Jesus still the object of it? Do the songs bear witness to the necessary reverence? Is the content in accordance with Scripture? The preference of many Christians is more and more for songs that “sing well”, that give a certain good feeling. The content is hardly looked at, let alone tested against the Bible. Songs in which the Holy Spirit is sung to and worshiped have become commonplace. Respect also disappears more and more. God and Jesus are brought down to the level of man. Certainly, we may speak boldly with and about God and Christ, but we must never become popular or banal.

The last verse (verse 47) aptly connects the days of Nehemiah with the days of Zerubbabel. In both cases it concerns a revival that God has worked. In both cases the same things happen. There is great willingness to give. There is given for the maintenance of the singers and the gatekeepers. Every day they get what they need. Every day they can do their work, without having to worry about their livelihood.

Singers turn to God in thanksgiving. Gatekeepers look at people. They see to it that only they who have the right to do so enter the city. For us this means that we have to make sure that our thanks to God and our care for the church are before our attention every day, that these aspects, so to speak, receive food every day, are present in us alive.

All Levites are thought of. They receive consecrated portions. The people give them what they have set aside for the LORD. In turn, the Levites give the consecrated portions to the priests.

The foregoing expresses a beautiful mind. Where the Lord becomes great for the hearts and there is dedication to Him, the people will function the way He wants them to. Each member fulfills the task assigned to him or her for the benefit of every other member. This working among God's people culminates in what is given to the priests, who here are called "the sons of Aaron". This designation emphasizes the practice of the priesthood in the awareness of the connection with the Lord Jesus as the High Priest. Thus, finally, the heart is turned toward Him.

Nehemiah 13

Introduction

Nehemiah 12 would have been a nice ending of the book. However, it would not have been a correct and fair ending. In the chapter before us it becomes clear that on earth perfection is not reached. In spite of the dedication of the wall with the good things that are present with the people, not everything is good. In this chapter we learn that discipline is necessary to preserve the holiness of the city. Nehemiah exercises personal discipline. That is not possible now. Discipline is the responsibility of the entire local church (Mt 18:15-20).

Here we see a great contrast between Nehemiah's commendable zeal in discovering and acting with various forms of deviation, and the constant tendency of the people to deviate from obedience to God. In a sense, this second task that he has before him, is more demanding than the first, the rebuilding of the wall. It is about moral aberrations, about inner unfaithfulness.

A deviation has two characters. On the one hand, there is the truth of separation that is maintained unilaterally. Then the position is everything, while the situation is neglected. The result is Pharisaism: doctrinal correctness in main points, but in practice cold, tight and heartless. We find there a glory in separation, but also a denial of the more important things of true Godliness and Divine charity.

On the other hand, there is an over-sensitivity to everything that smells of purity. Every remark about purity is received with amplification. The reaction of the masses of the people to this is indifference and carelessness. As a result, there is room for idolatry and the people become as ungodly as their fathers who were deported for that reason.

This chapter contains the warning never to detach condition from position, never to detach godliness from grace toward people in need.

Verses 1-3 | Separation on the Basis of the Word

1 On that day they read aloud from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and there was found written in it that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, 2 because they did not meet the sons of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing. 3 So when they heard the law, they excluded all foreigners from Israel.

The Israelites return to the first principles. What they have read several times in Deuteronomy 23 about the Ammonite and Moabite, they now apply (Deu 23:3-4). Not only the Word is needed, also the Spirit is needed to make the Word alive for us. Mixed principles are rejected. The mixing is not with the world, the unbelievers, but with relatives, those who claim a connection with God's people, but do not belong to them.

With God the defamation that has been done to His people will not be time-barred. Time has not changed the sin and the character of those people. The attitude of these peoples towards God's people is twofold. They do not do something and they do something. They do not give bread and water, but they do everything possible to bring a curse on God's people. This is how the Christian world acts, by those who profess to be God's people, but have no life out of God. They do not give the people of God food and refreshment. Instead, they will try to put a curse on God's people.

As soon as the people have heard the law, they will act accordingly. There is direct obedience. That is often lacking today. When God says something clearly, man begins to reason. Man must first understand the reasonableness of something if he is to obey it. That is not the way it works here in Israel and it is not the way it works in everyone who trembles before God's Word. There are also those who read the Word, but then react like the Roman governor Felix who says to Paul: "Go away for the present, and when I find time I will summon you" (Acts 24:25). These are those indecisive people. For a moment they are impressed, but they do not make a decision.

It is a trick of the enemy to let God's people mingle with those who have no life out of God. This takes away the power of the people. Those who do not belong to God's people, but are nevertheless accepted into them, bring with them a way of thinking and acting that is contrary to God's will. This

has a negative effect on the people of God. Then there must be broader thinking and action against evil is out of the question. Where these elements occur, strong action must be taken against them. That happens here.

Verses 4-9 | An Enemy Removed from the House of God

4 Now prior to this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, being related to Tobiah, 5 had prepared a large room for him, where formerly they put the grain offerings, the frankincense, the utensils and the tithes of grain, wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, the singers and the gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. 6 But during all this [time] I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had gone to the king. After some time, however, I asked leave from the king, 7 and I came to Jerusalem and learned about the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, by preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God. 8 It was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room. 9 Then I gave an order and they cleansed the rooms; and I returned there the utensils of the house of God with the grain offerings and the frankincense.

Another evil is discovered, this time when Nehemiah is back in Jerusalem. He returned to the court of the king of Persia after the dedication of the wall, and there he will again have practiced his ancient profession of cup-bearer. When he has done this for some time, he asks permission again to go to Jerusalem. The situations he encounters then lead him to take firm action against the prevailing wrongs of various kinds.

By the way, he only acts when the evil is confirmed. His action seems harsh. Nehemiah's action, however, is not hard; sin is hard and bitter. Nehemiah's harsh action is like Paul's harsh action against false brethren, because they undermined the truth of the gospel, and against Peter, because he and Barnabas were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, (Gal 2:4-5,11-14).

The first evil he notices concerns a man who, because of his high position, enjoys prestige among the people. It concerns the high priest Eliashib (verse 4; verse 28; Neh 3:1). However, an official status among the people of God is no guarantee not to go astray. Eliashib manages to defile the

house of God by giving a room to an enemy of God's people, the Ammonite Tobiah. He has prepared a large room for the great adversary of God's work. This seems generous, while Nehemiah's performance could be considered scary. But with Eliashib we see the generosity of the flesh, while what Nehemiah does is entirely in accordance with the thoughts of God.

The room where Tobiah has taken up residence, is a room where everything that is important for the service in the house of God has been stored before. Previously, the people have committed themselves to make sure that there will be no lack of it (Neh 10:32-39). They have solemnly declared not to leave the house of their God to its fate.

We are now twelve years later. The room is empty in terms of the means by which the service in God's house can proceed. Instead, the enemy has been offered this room to live there. If our lives are not filled with service to God, the devil will use our lives to serve his purpose. Our lives will then contribute to the destruction of service to God.

Nehemiah is not the man to bypass evil and pretend not to see it. When he sees what happened, he is not going to kindly ask Eliashib to remove Tobiah from the temple. He becomes angry and takes all of Tobiah's things and throws them out of the temple. This is an anger that rightly comes over sin that occurs unpunished in God's house. Every God-fearing person rebels against such insolence. Eliashib's behavior is so contrary to God's holiness, that any slowness to act against it must be considered sin.

It is not the presence of evil that destroys the character of the Lord's Table, but the refusal to judge it. The most terrible evil is no reason to stay away from the Lord's Table. It evokes the obligation to do everything to remove evil. In the church it is not a matter that can be dealt with by one person. God wants the church to act as a whole. When Paul has heard of the terrible evil found in the church in Corinth (1Cor 5:1), he does not write that they are no longer a church of God now, but that they must remove the evil.

Tobiah, the man of whom Nehemiah has said that he has no portion in Jerusalem (Neh 2:20), was given a room in the house of God during his absence. This was only possible because of inattention on the part of the gatekeepers.

What ‘Tobiah’ have we given room in our hearts, because ‘Nehemiah’ has been absent from us for a time? Who or what is central to our lives, if it is not (anymore) the Lord Jesus and His interests? Which of Tobiah’s household goods has entered the temple of our lives and driven out the Holy Spirit as far as His activity is concerned? Many Christians afford powers to influence their lives that only the Holy Spirit should have.

We should throw out Tobiah and all of his household goods without pardon. What is in our bookcase, what magazines do we read, what movies do we watch, what do we look for on the world wide web, what music do we listen to? Do we have to throw something out of our collection? What place does the wardrobe occupy in our thinking? There must be room for God and the service to Him!

Nehemiah is not at all impressed by Eliashib’s high place. On the contrary, it requires all the more incisive action and public punishment (cf. Gal 2:11-14; 1Tim 5:20). He does not apologize either. He acts in a way that we see later with the Lord Jesus when He cleanses the temple (Jn 2:14-16).

The rooms are defiled by the habitation of Tobiah. Therefore, they must first be cleansed before anything can be brought back into them that is for the glory of God. If we have allowed things into our lives or into the church, it is not enough to remove them. The removal must be done with a confession that it has been made possible by our inattention. We will have to dedicate ourselves again to the Lord, in the knowledge that there is no guarantee in us that it will not happen again.

Verses 10-13 | The Levites Forgotten

10 I also discovered that the portions of the Levites had not been given [them], so that the Levites and the singers who performed the service had gone away, each to his own field. 11 So I reprimanded the officials and said, “Why is the house of God forsaken?” Then I gathered them together and restored them to their posts. 12 All Judah then brought the tithe of the grain, wine and oil into the storehouses. 13 In charge of the storehouses I appointed Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and in addition to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered reliable, and it was their task to distribute to their kinsmen.

The evil of an enemy in the house of God is not an isolated thing. Nehemiah learns that Tobiah has been able to get a room there because it is empty. This is the result of the failure of the people to bring there what is for the maintenance of the Levites. And once the enemy dwells there, what originally belonged in it no longer comes into it. Where the enemy is admitted into the house of God, the servants of God are neglected.

Nehemiah observes that the Levites no longer care for God's house. Because they are no longer cared for, they feel compelled to work for their own sustenance. This is at the expense of the work of God. The workers then no longer receive the contributions they need to perform their service. When other interests come into play, this attitude of God is no longer considered. The Corinthians must also be reminded of this matter (2Cor 8:11).

Nehemiah addresses the leaders of the people with a penetrating question. The character and dedication of leaders is often reflected in the attitudes and actions of the people. This gives leaders a great responsibility. Without, so it seems, waiting for an answer, Nehemiah takes measures. He brings the Levites together and reminds them of the task assigned to them. They must resume their service in the house of God.

The question of verse 11 is related to what they promised in Nehemiah 10 (Neh 10:39). What was promised there is not done. Only the Lord Jesus never forgot the house of God or left it to his fate. The zeal for it has consumed Him (Jn 2:17). Love for Him will also mean love for the house of God. Love for God's house is a measure of our love for God.

Everything that does not belong in God's house has been thrown out by Nehemiah. Thus the return of the Levites and the things that do belong in it will be replaced. He will make sure that the Levites will be provided for again and that they will be able to perform their task with respect to the house of God. Nehemiah also ensures that only reliable men perform the task of division (cf. 2Cor 8:18-21).

Being reliable is one of the most valuable characteristics of a believer. It is a characteristic that every believer can adorn and toward which he can aspire. Being reliable does not mean being flawless, but being mindful of what is fair and just in everything we do. The believer is not judged by the size of his gift or effort, but whether he has faithfully done what the Lord

has commanded him to do (1Cor 4:2). Especially when it comes to money, someone must be unquestionably trustworthy, faithful.

Verse 14 | Prayer of Nehemiah

14 Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services.

Nehemiah turns to God because only He can perfectly appreciate and reward what he has done for His house. He does not ask for reward. He knows Himself to be a slave who has only done what He ought to do (Lk 17:10). But he also knows that God is not unjust to forget what has been done for Him (Heb 6:10).

Nehemiah is only concerned that he submits his work to God for judgment and that he can say that he has been busy out of love for God's house. Therefore, he can ask Him not to blot out his work. He knows that he has been busy in agreement with God. Yet he does not boast of this, but humbly asks God to keep what he has done for Him.

In the same way, we too may recommend our works to the Lord and ask Him to confirm the works of our hands (Psa 90:17). If we cannot go to Him in sincerity with all that we have done, we have not been working for Him. We have to confess that and then we can go back to Him and work with Him and for Him.

Verses 15-22 | The Sanctification of the Sabbath Restored

15 In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading [them] on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs and all kinds of loads, and they brought [them] into Jerusalem on the sabbath day. So I admonished [them] on the day they sold food. 16 Also men of Tyre were living there [who] imported fish and all kinds of merchandise, and sold [them] to the sons of Judah on the sabbath, even in Jerusalem. 17 Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day? 18 Did not your fathers do the same, so that our God brought on us and on this city all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath." 19 It came about that just as it grew dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the

sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and that they should not open them until after the sabbath. Then I stationed some of my servants at the gates [so that] no load would enter on the sabbath day. 20 Once or twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem. 21 Then I warned them and said to them, "Why do you spend the night in front of the wall? If you do so again, I will use force against you." From that time on they did not come on the sabbath. 22 And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come as gatekeepers to sanctify the sabbath day. [For] this also remember me, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness.

If the house of God is neglected, the sabbath is secularized. Instead of being consecrated to the LORD, it is used for satisfying one's own pleasures, and thus degraded to an ordinary day. The people have forgotten what they promised in Nehemiah 10 (Neh 10:31).

While Nehemiah is in the process of making everything right again for the service in the house of God, he sees the sabbath being profaned. He warns the traders. Then he approaches the nobles and talks to them about these evil practices. There is nothing against trade, as long as it is not on the sabbath. He points out that it is for this very reason that God has brought disaster upon the people (Jer 17:21-27). Then he takes measures to stop this evil work by having his servants posted at the gates.

When he sees that there are traders who spend the sabbath just outside Jerusalem to enter as soon as the gates open, he takes action against them as well. He knows what an impact it has if the evil that has been removed is near. The traders might indeed not be able to bring the Jews to violate the sabbath commandment, but the Jews would be reminded of it all the time. Their minds would be filled with the things they could do tomorrow, with the profits they would gain. God would be driven out of their minds. To deal with this evil, he has Levites guarding the gates in addition to his servants.

Before the Levites guard the gates, they must first cleanse themselves. In order to guard the gates, there must be nothing with them that would prevent them from doing their duty properly. Similarly, we, too, can only keep imminent evil at a distance if we have removed from our lives what may be a connecting factor to the evil we must stop.

The sabbath commandment is a commandment that like no other commandment asks every Israelite for simple obedience. The reasonableness of any other commandment can be seen after contemplation because it governs the relationship between God and people and between people. The sabbath commandment is given because God wants the sabbath to be held. Surely in doing so He has the welfare of man in mind. But fallen man considers especially the sabbath commandment to be something difficult. The sabbath is the clearest test of obedience to man under the law.

The Christian does not live “under law, but under grace” (Rom 6:14b). Therefore, he is not under the sabbath commandment. He stands in the freedom of Christ in heaven. Every Christian who truly understands this will not be living a loose life. His life is subject to Christ. The norm of his life is not the law, but Christ. He is interested in everything Christ is interested in. Christ’s interest is particularly in the house of God, the church.

For the church it is not the sabbath, but Sunday that is the special day of the week. This does not mean that what applies to the sabbath in Israel applies to Sunday in Christendom. It is a day that is in a special way of the Lord. A remarkable connection in the use of words in two biblical texts clearly indicates this. We read of “the Lord’s Supper” or “the Supper of the Lord” (1Cor 11:20) and of “the day of the Lord” (Rev 1:10). I quote the footnote that the TELOS translation puts in Revelation 1:10: “In the Gr. there is an adjective derived from ‘Lord’ (i.e. different from e.g. in 1Thes 5:2), in the sense of belonging to the Lord. The word is further only found in 1Cor 11:20.

These two Scriptures show how much the Supper of – thus in the sense of belonging to – the Lord, celebrated by the congregation, is connected with the day of – thus in the sense of belonging to – the Lord. It is clear that the day of the Lord is no other than the first day of the week, Sunday. There are several indications in Scripture that the first day of the week is the day of the meeting of the church (Mk 16:2,6; Lk 24:13,33-49; Jn 20:19-29; Acts 2:1; 20:7). And if it is a day that belongs especially to the Lord, there is every reason to spend that day as such.

In this spending, the Lord gives us complete freedom – except that He says to us to “not forsaking our own assembling together” (Heb 10:25). Any

thought of acting under the pressure of a law is foreign to the freedom in which the Christian stands. If, however, the interest in God's house diminishes, the day of the Lord also becomes more and more a day in which one's own pleasures are satisfied. We may still visit the church, but for the rest we hang out in front of the TV, surf the Internet endlessly, go out and do all kinds of things, but without dedicating ourselves to the service of our Lord.

Hanging out in front of the TV is not an activity (well, activity ...) that is a Christian's honor. A Christian is expected to live consciously for the Lord every day of his life. But if Scripture itself marks a day especially as 'His' day, it is surely a call to dedicate ourselves to His house on that day. On that day we can, for example, concentrate a little more on fellowship with our fellow believers.

It is good to have a day on which we, as far as possible, distance ourselves from things that we, by order of the Lord, have to concern ourselves with on the other days of the week. It is just like the Lord's Supper. We will, if it is good, be occupied with His death every day. After all, we owe everything to Him. But how good it is to have a special opportunity to think about His death, to remember it, when we come together for that purpose as a church.

After Nehemiah has again given the sabbath its rightful place among the people, consecrated this day anew to God, he again speaks out for God (verse 22b). He does this every time he has done a work. He asks if God will remember him with regard to what he has done for the maintenance of the sabbath. Last time he asked this concerning what he has done for God's house. He places each work separately before God's face.

He asks if God will have compassion on him. After his resolute performance there may have been a feeling of exhaustion. It takes a lot of effort to show God's people the right way and to correct what is wrong. As long as the effort has to be made, there is strength. But when the work is done, you can feel very tired. We may say that to the Lord.

We also feel that our actions, no matter how powerful they may be, are still carried out in great weakness. Then, like Nehemiah, we may call upon God's great lovingkindness. He knows who we are, He knows us through

and through, for He has made us. To remember that gives courage to go on. That's what Nehemiah does.

Verses 23-28 | The Evil of Mixed Marriages

23 In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon [and] Moab. 24 As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah, but the language of his own people. 25 So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. 26 Did not Solomon king of Israel sin regarding these things? Yet among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless the foreign women caused even him to sin. 27 Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?" 28 Even one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite, so I drove him away from me.

Nehemiah perceives a new evil. Things don't go well in the families of the Judeans. He notices that from the speech of the children of those families. He speaks to the Judeans about it and becomes so angry that he curses them, strikes some of them and pulls out their hair and makes them swear by God that they will not continue with this sin. His fierce reaction shows how great this evil is.

Nehemiah points the company to Solomon. With all due respect to King Solomon, but he too has sinned greatly in this (1Kgs 11:1-8). The fact that he is especially privileged by God has not saved him from this great evil. God does not conceal evil, not even from those closest to Him. By quoting Solomon as an example, Nehemiah shows that a privileged position is not a license for sin. It is precisely the evil that privileged people do that God will punish, because they should know better (Amos 3:2).

Nehemiah points to Solomon without regard for persons. Without distinction Nehemiah deals with the family of the high priest Eliashib. What began with the preparing of a large room for Tobiah (verses 3-4) ends in

a marriage between the grandson of the high priest and the daughter of the enemy of God's work (Neh 2:10). And just as Nehemiah has thrown Tobiah out of God's house with all his things (verse 8), so he drives away the man who made this horrible connection.

We are dealing here with a priest. He has violated a clear precept. What applies to the whole people, that he may only marry one of his people, definitely applies to a priest (Lev 21:7,14). He is someone with an exemplary function. If such a person goes wrong, he may under no circumstances remain in his position, but must be acted upon according to the example set by Nehemiah.

If the real interest in God's house diminishes, friendships with the world take their place. We may ask ourselves: Which 'daughter of Sanballat' has captured our love and robbed our hearts of our faithfulness to the Lord? Which 'stranger' or 'foreigner' has drawn us away from the Lord? Which 'Delilah' has taken away our spiritual strength (Jdg 16:16-21)?

We learn important lessons from the wrong commitments made by the children of families who belong to God's people. We see a commitment to the world reflected in the language our children speak. The mother's teaching (Pro 1:8) has an important place in the child's development. A child expresses itself as it learns from its mother. Nehemiah hears a mix of the language of Judea and language of Ashdod, in which the language of Ashdod predominates.

The language of Ashdod is the language spoken in Ashdod, a Philistine city under God's judgment (Jer 25:20). Philistines are a picture of confessors of Christendom, but without having new life. They are those Christians who occasionally produce a biblical sound, but who do not submit their lives to the will of God (2Tim 3:5). They live for here and now. Space is only given to God and His Word in so far as they can use it to impress and profit.

The popularity of the (Dutch) New Bible Translation is a topical and disconcerting example of this. This book was launched on the market with a media spectacle that has never been shown before around the presentation of a Bible translation (2010). Everything breathes a worldly way of thinking and doing, while people say they want to promote the Word of God.

Who raises our children? Do we do this ourselves, by means of and subject to God's Word? Someone wrote: We are dealing with a first generation raised not by a mother and father, but by the media. Shall we allow the media to raise our children? Do you honestly face the following questions: Does your child know the SMS-language, twitter-language, street-language and sports terms better than the language and terms of the Bible? Does your child know the songs of the world better than the songs of God's children?

If you have to answer (one of) these questions with 'yes', it is high time to change this. Don't you feel able to do this? Ask for help! But don't let that situation continue. Call with all your strength to God for help. Confess your failure to Him and to your children. Then He will surely show the way out. Share your need with others. Seek prayer partners to fight with you in the prayers for your children and also those of others.

The alarm bell must be sounded. No more time must be wasted. Every second counts. It's about the families of God's children. Parents lose contact with their children. They seem to have to watch powerlessly as their children get stuck in the world wide web. I don't mean to say that you should know as much about the Internet as your child does. The question is what your contact with God is like. It doesn't get out of His control.

Put your trust in Him again and be prepared to follow His instructions with all your heart. He says, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you" (Psa 32:8). We may take an example from Ezra and be encouraged by it: "Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions. ... So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty" (Ezra 8:21,23).

*Let us respond to the call of Jeremiah:
"Pour out your heart like water
Before the presence of the Lord;
Lift up your hands to Him
For the life of your little ones" (Lam 2:19b).*

Verse 29 | Prayer of Nehemiah

29 Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

After his powerful action against the wrong alliances, Nehemiah addresses God again. He brings the evil of especially the priests before God. He explains to God, as it were, why he was so angry. It is unacceptable to him that God is approached by a priesthood that does not correspond to God's holiness.

What goes wrong in the families of God's children has great consequences for the priesthood. And where the priesthood is defiled, God is robbed of what is rightfully His (cf. Joel 1:13). Believers who live in connection with the world cannot properly perform their ministry as priests and Levites. If such people do want to approach God, God is not taken seriously. Does that also give us a feeling of indignation? How do we feel when people do not take us seriously?

Verses 30-31 | Purification and Restoration and Final Prayer

30 Thus I purified them from everything foreign and appointed duties for the priests and the Levites, each in his task, 31 and [I arranged] for the supply of wood at appointed times and for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

Nehemiah is not just busy with getting rid of the wrong. Surely this is necessary, but then it is necessary to fill the vacant space with the good. Nehemiah purifies the Levites. In this he is a picture of the Lord Jesus (Mal 3:3). Then he appoints each one in the task that is to be performed.

Criticism of certain things in the church can be justified and necessary. But it should never happen from the sidelines. Real commitment to the things that are not good will manifest itself in a commitment to follow God's instructions again.

These last acts we read of Nehemiah have to do with the service in the house of God. He makes sure that priests and Levites can do the work that can be expected of them again. In veiled terms he involves the whole people, for he also arranges the supply of wood (Neh 10:34) and the first fruits

(Neh 10:35-37). He knows that the result is for the glory of God. As far as the acts of Nehemiah are concerned, this is a beautiful and fitting ending of this book. He has done it all for that.

We see Nehemiah working to the very end to motivate others to do the work according to their position and competence. Such motivating people are needed today as well. The motive for his service is to serve and please his God. He has set a vivid example of leadership as God desires.

The book ends with a prayer from Nehemiah (verse 31b). The book also begins with a praying Nehemiah. In this fascinating book we have read the memoirs of this active man of God. Now he asks if God wants to remember him. This is not pride, but humility. He commends his work to God. He gives it to Him to judge and trusts in His goodness. Nehemiah must have it from God, from God's thinking, for God's thinking is doing.

Nehemiah has shown that his life's work could only take place under constant prayer. He prayed and built the wall and people's lives. He has also prayed while building for all kinds of people and things. He prays, while building, and builds, while praying. Therefore the Lord Jesus tell His disciples, and us, that "at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart" (Lk 18:1).

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