

In the Diaspora Called to be a Part of Answers

1) Where has God placed you?

God often places His people in strategic positions in order to accomplish His purposes. To bring about the reconstruction of the wall at Jerusalem, God used Nehemiah, a man who perhaps was closest to and most trusted by the Persian King Artaxerxes I. As the king's cupbearer (Nehemiah 1:11), Nehemiah held one of the most important assignments which a courtier could have in the ancient world. Cupbearers tasted a ruler's food in order to test if it was good and healthy and to ensure against poisoning, whether intentional or accidental. In the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian courts that were notorious for political intrigues and assassinations, the job of a cupbearer carried enormous responsibility. Usually, cupbearers were foreigners, and they often became trusted confidants of the rulers they served. Through the nature of their position, the cupbearers tended to enjoy unusual political privileges and prestige. It was in a ruler's self-interest to keep his tasters happy, so their requests were listened to carefully, and their wishes were frequently granted. This situation worked to Nehemiah's advantage. Unburdening himself to the king concerning the situation at Jerusalem, he requested and received a leave of absence and letters of authority to go and rebuild the city wall (Chapter 2:3-8). Later, when his adversaries at Jerusalem threatened to falsely accuse him of rebellion (Chapter 6:5-9), Nehemiah must have been comforted by the fact of his close association with Artaxerxes and the trust that his years of service had earned. Where has God placed you in order to accomplish His purposes? What position and responsibility do you hold that might be useful to bring about good? Like Nehemiah, are we in prayer about what God is doing in the world? Nehemiah serves as a model of faith. He used the position where God had placed him, to accomplish God's purposes. Let us pray and consider why God has placed us in certain places. Nehemiah's position as the cupbearer of King Artaxerxes I enabled him to use the authority of the Persian government to rebuild the wall at Jerusalem. His contacts and connections with the king's inner circle played an important role throughout his life. His model of working from within the system is the one of several ways to accomplish institutional changes for the Lord in our cities.

2) Prayer is the first choice, not the last chance

The prayer-life of Nehemiah in the Old Testament offers several important lessons for us, today, concerning the discipline of prayer. He prayed that God would grant him favour with the king on the behalf of the Jews. When we desire to obtain anything from other people, we should at first present our concerns to God. Then, He can move the hearts and minds of influential leaders to do His will. Proverbs 21:1 says, the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. He directs it like a water course wherever it pleases Him. And because Nehemiah was deeply burdened for his people and for God's work, he did for four months pour out his heart in prayer before God. Prayer was not something that he engaged after he had exhausted all other alternatives. He did not approach it as the last ditch effort with the attitude "What have I got to lose?", but instead, his immediate instinctive response to the news of trouble back home was to fast and pray. In the work that we're doing for the Lord, let us make prayer our first choice, but not the last chance. Nehemiah recognized and affirmed God's sovereignty. He recognized that the Lord had the first and primary claim over all nations. Therefore, Nehemiah prayed for God's grace concerning his situation. He identified himself with his people rather than blaming others for the destruction which was happening in Jerusalem and throughout Judea. He accepted the corporate responsibility for his people's sins, and his heart-beat was to be a part of

the answer to their situation. Have you ever thought about a situation whereby God wants you to be the answer? When we pray to God, it is often easier to focus on what one wants from Him and to ignore what God wants from us. Nehemiah knew what the Scripture says about the Lord's covenant with Israel, and he accepted the responsibilities of this covenant, not just the privileges. As Christians, Christ wants us to participate in public institutions for the benefit of all. One will never know his destiny until he gets into an area or into a situation where people are broken down helpless and need others to become an answer to their prayers. Nehemiah's life was well with him in the house of the king, but because of broken down conditions in the city of his fathers and of his people, he left his position of blessing to become an answer to the prayers of his people. In our days in Berlin/ Germany, African Pentecostal Pastors' Association, African Christian Council, African Council and many other organisations are born to bring solutions to the destruction of mankind in the Diaspora in which we find ourselves. The only secret for us to be effective will probably be to be interdependent which means depending upon others and allowing them, too, to depend upon us. This has always been the way how God's visions become reality in the lives of His people. And this is, too, what Nehemiah did. We can use the systems of our cities' education, health care, transportations, houses or communities' developments as instruments for good. By doing so, we will be the part of answers to create healthy cities that promote healthy neighbourhoods that encourage healthy families and lead to healthy individuals. This was the sort of work in which Nehemiah was ultimately involved. His concern was far more than building a wall. He wanted to see people restored and revitalized. His aim was for his people to return to the covenant with God, and the rebuilding of the city wall of Jerusalem was the first step in that process. The question of thought is: Are we committed to our local churches and cities in the way that Christ is? Are we using our resources whether work, money, relationships or influence to be a part of the answer to our church needs to accomplish tangible benefits for our cities? Nehemiah prayed, and because it was the will of God, God granted him success. Prayers changes things. Today, we can use Mother Theresa as an example of a prayerful woman. She brought clarity to the world's viewpoint in her statement: "True acts of love go before God, forever, as worship to Him". And we know how she had a heart for suffering people. She gathered people to pray for and use their substance to help change societies. She founded a charity organisation for poor, sick people in South India where she worked hard until she died at an old age. It is always shocking to unbelievers when we as Christians break expectations by offering simple, practical answers as a demonstration of God's love to others. We should remember that people don't necessarily remember what they are being told of God's love, but that they never forget what they have experienced as love of God in a practical way.

3) Christians adapt to adversity

Many people run away from adversity; wise people cheerfully expect it! Wherever change and progress are underway, competing interests inevitably rise to challenge them. At that point, leaders must decide whether they will accept the challenge and meet it or whether they will turn tail and let their opponents set the agenda. Nehemiah's adversaries were a group of Jews from racially mixed backgrounds and gentiles who had a vested interest in seeing that Jerusalem remained unprotected (Nehemiah 4:7-9). During the 70 years of Judah's exile, they had established dominance over those left behind. Therefore, Nehemiah's plan to rebuild the walls and revitalize the city, threatened to end their monopoly on control. Ancient documents that were discovered in 1903 and were called the "Elephantine papyri" mentioned Sanballat (Chapter 2:19), Johanan (Chapter 12:13) and the replacement of Nehemiah as a governor about 410 B.C. Nehemiah responded to the opposition with resolute faith,

prayer and measured resistance. He didn't escalate a touchy situation, but defended against attack and kept working. Thus, he adapted to adversity rather than running away from it or over-reacting to it. God eventually rewarded Nehemiah's perseverance with the completion of the wall (Chapter 6:15). As a Christian, how do you respond to oppositions and adversities? Do you burn but not break, strengthened by your faith and confident that God will see you through? Do you respond to the opposition in appropriate ways taking practical steps to ensure that the task goes forward even as others try to short it down? In matters that are related to God's work, success begins with God. Therefore, the grace to endure adversities and come out victoriously will always be granted to us from on high when we are prepared to walk in God's wisdom. This is what Nehemiah and the movement of God's people did. Just as Nehemiah was fully confident that God would give him success to do His will, God wants us, also, to be successful in His work. Our Lord desires that His people become co-workers with Him. Three factors of success that involve our human responsibilities are as follows: The people put their whole heart into the work (Chapter 4:6). The people were prayerful and watchful when they did the work (Verse 9). Also, the people demonstrated courage, determination and faith when they were confronting opposition from the enemy. When Jerusalem's wall was finished in 52 days, even the Jews' enemies had to acknowledge that this work had been accomplished with the help of God (Chapter 6:15.16). God does always do His part in a situation in which His people find themselves. When His people also do their part in perseverance, faith and unity, the answer will come. In all respect, we African pastors must learn to appreciate the work of the African Council. The members of this council seem to show more concern for the suffering of humanity than we do. Many of us are saying to their members: "Give me to prosper, and you look to God to prosper". The African Council is taking care of those who are being abused and cannot go to the police because they don't have the staying permit. They have reached a point of even getting the attention of the media and the politicians, showing them the areas of the city which are dangerous for foreigners. They call it "No-Go-Areas", and this is supposed to be a guide for foreigners who come to Berlin as guests during the Football-World cup this summer. It is my prayer that we Christians will learn to work together with them through the grace given to all of us in our diversities. Ancient Africa did always function in a unity of diversities of cultures.

4) Next to...

Modern Western culture tends to value independence and celebrates solo performers. Yet, most of the great accomplishments in the world are the results of coordinated team-work in which many dedicated people were pulled together. The reconstruction of Jerusalem's wall was that kind of team effort. Notice how many times the words "next to" are used in Nehemiah 3! Wherever people come together to accomplish meaningful tasks, coordination and corporation are necessary if they want to see successful results. Whatever each member does affects everyone else on the team. That means that everyone is accountable to the team for his or her performances. We in a local church are called to be a team. In our working-places, we're there to be a team as well as in our families and in our communities. Wherever you find yourself next to others, consider the ways in which you impact their lives and efforts. The question of thought is: What kind of impact are we making in our local churches and the cities in which we live? The account of Nehemiah's project of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem may seem like a footnote of history, but it illustrates a fundamental principle that has implications for every Christian, today. Christ cares for cities. The key concept for understanding this is the emphasis in Paul's letter to the Colossians. There we learn that Christ is the Lord of all in life, whether public or private. He does not only transform us, personally, but uses us in the global arena to

transform societies and systems, as well. In many Western countries of the twenty-first century, the labour force often has been sharply divided between management and labour. One problem of this rigid distinction is that it turns to create a mentality of “us” versus “them”. History shows that most of the greatest achievements of humanity have been accomplished by teams and communities of people working together towards a common end. Nehemiah understood the power of togetherness as he undertook the task of rebuilding Jerusalem’s wall. After surveying the situation, he gathered the people and gave a speech in which he mobilized the people for the work. At first, he raised the people’s awareness that something should be done. Then, he instilled confidence in them that something could be done (Chapter 2:7-18). It is interesting to notice that Nehemiah spoke in terms of “we” and “us”. Clearly, he saw himself as a participant in the dire circumstances, even though he had just arrived from the royal palace. In fact, he bridged the class divisions between the people and himself by sharing the discussion he had had with the king. Thereby he showed that he was a friend for them in the emperor’s court. As a Christian, have you learned how to break down walls that divide people and classes and instead, build a dream of God with love in the community? Like Nehemiah, do you know how to overcome communication barriers? Do you address individuals and families by name, involve people right where they live, respect their limitations and take a personal interest in their circumstances? A classic example of this work is the General Secretary of the “Council of Christian Communities in Europe with African Approach” Sesay. This man was interviewed by Reverend Dr. Gerdi Nuetzel who is the Theological Secretary for Congregational Services and Publications. The interview was published, and there it says: “More than playing drums”- African Christians are not fully accepted in the German churches. In other words, they accept us as far as their prejudice will go. Out of this article which was published at the 1st of January 2006, a female pastor Daniela Maithya who is pasturing blind people in Berlin and is married with a man from Kenia, called the council’s office to invite the lovely Brother Sesay to a blind people’s meeting to talk about how foreigners feel living in the big German city Berlin. The leaders of the council weren’t able to go there because of lack of time, so they asked me if I can go there. I went there with my family, and the grace of God came down, that a bridge could be built. This was the kind of work in which Nehemiah was involved, the welfare of humanity.

5) Unlimited faith with small beginning

Almost by definition, we all have some end to where we are headed. This sense of mission helps us to guide our decisions and determine our strategies. Nehemiah’s mission grew out of his knowledge of the Word of God and his awareness that the destruction of Jerusalem had come about through God’s judgement of His people’s sin (Nehemiah 1:5-8). At the same time he knew that God was willing to forgive their sins and restore them in the beauty of His holiness in the Land of Promise (Verse 9). Therefore, Nehemiah determined that he would see the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem in accordance with the Lord’s promises, and he had unlimited faith with a small beginning. He planned his strategy towards the end (Verse 10.11). It is important for us, today, to notice that Nehemiah did not dream of a mission out of his own agenda or his own self-interest, but he responded to the news of Jerusalem’s troubles with tears, prayers, fasting, humility and seeking of the will of God as he prepared to go before the king. He, probably, did not know exactly what he should say or do. Also, he did not know what he would encounter once he arrived. All that he knew what he needed to do was to go to Jerusalem. Nevertheless, he was convinced that God wanted the city to be revived. Nehemiah stepped forward as an agent of social change, and his love for his people gave him the passion and ability of leadership. This way he became an answer to the situation. We could ask what this means for

us, today. But if we are observant, we will notice that in the spiritual world, gates which represent strength and walls that represent safety and protection, have been destroyed by Satan. This is true in our church world, today, and in our cities, in Germany and in Europe. We can react to this situation with passion to be a part of the answers, or we can sit down and complain. David Wilkerson who is well-known, today, in the church world, did also have unlimited faith with a small beginning when he heard about the brutality that was going on in the streets of New York City. Many people were complaining about this, and the newspapers made many people panic. But David Wilkerson made a midnight ride, and when he saw what was happening with young people killing one another, he had a passion to become the answer. Out of this came the birth of Teen Challenge which is a Christian organization to help young people who are on the streets and often have become drug addicts. Teen Challenge helps them in practical ways, with counselling and through prayer. Through this, many of the young people could bring their lives back in order. As Christians, we are in a position of spiritually leading people to Christ in our cities. And the will of God for us is to be a part of the answers in our local churches, communities and cities.

6) Celebration time

Nehemiah, whose name means “the Lord comforts”, is one of the super Biblical models of godly leaders whom we need. He was a man of wisdom, principle, courage, impeccable integrity, unwavering faith and compassion for the oppressed. Throughout his years as a governor, he remained righteous, humble, free from greed, self-sacrificing, and uncorrupted by his power. He was also a man of prayer and an intercessor. No less than ten times, he is described as addressing God in prayer. He was a man who accomplished impossible tasks because of his complete dependence on God. Nehemiah illustrates that prayers, sacrifice and hard work go together in realizing a God-given vision. In Bible times, leaders appreciated the value of celebrating the great things that God had done in and through their organization. When a task was completed, when results have been achieved, when people have been saved, then it is appropriate to take time to celebrate. This is what Nehemiah did when the rebuilding of the Jerusalem wall was completed (Nehemiah 8:1.9.10). First, he had the priest Ezra read from the Mosaic Law, and the words kindled a godly sorrow (Chapter 9:1-3), but also, a genuine joy. With heartfelt praise and delicious foods, the community rejoiced in the Lord for the work He had accomplished. One interesting sidelight to the celebration was Nehemiah’s instruction to “send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared” (Chapter 8:10). In other words, they should bring the poor to the party and share their wealth with them so that no-one should be deprived of joy that comes from celebration just because he cannot afford even a small feast. If we are Christians and God has blessed us, in time of celebration let us remember others. Celebration is also a way of worship, because God is the source of all good works and all good gifts. We can praise Him for giving us a task and a means to accomplish. That is why he said: “The joy of the Lord is our strength”. And Jesus is the centre of our joy. There is no problem too big that our God could not take care of, and there is no mountain too high that our Lord could not reach top to help us. There is no valley too deep that the breath of God could not reach us and elevate us to reach the goal that Christ has set for us in the local church. If we are willing to not become complainers about situations but ask God what we can do, the breath of God will make it possible. It could be that you have not heard about the Saviour Jesus Christ. He cares for you, personally, and He is looking for you to bless you. You can make Him the shepherd of your souls, today.

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