

Nehemiah 05 - Nehemiah's Handling of Internal Problems

I. Rebuilding of the wall (Neh 1:1—7:23)

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Nehemiah 5

- (ii) Usury (5:1-13)
 - (a) Attack: people complain about usury charged by fellow Jews (5:1-5)

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

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1 Now the people along with their spouses complained loudly against their fellow Jews,

1 And there was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren the Jews.

2 For there were those who said, "We, our sons, and our daughters are many; therefore let's get grain so that we may eat and live."

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."

2 because certain of them kept claiming, "Since we have so many sons and daughters, we must get some grain so we can eat and survive."

2 For there were that said, We, our sons, and our daughters, are many: therefore we take up corn for them, that we may eat, and live.

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

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."

3 Others were saying, "We're having to mortgage our fields, our vineyards, and our homes so we can buy grain during this famine."

3 Some also there were that said, We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn, because of the dearth.

4 There also were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax *on* our fields and our vineyards.

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

4 Still others were saying "We've borrowed money against our fields and vineyards to pay the king's taxes.

4 There were also that said, We have borrowed money for the king's tribute, and that upon our lands and vineyards.

5 And 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."

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."

5 Now our bodies are no different than the bodies of our relatives, and our children are like their children. Nevertheless, we're about to force our sons and daughters into slavery, and some of our daughters are already in bondage. It's beyond our power to do anything about it, because our fields and vineyards belong to others."

5 Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children: and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought unto bondage already: neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our lands and vineyards.

- Up to this point Nehemiah's challenges as a spiritual leader focused primarily on those outside of Judah. But before the walls were finally rebuilt, he encountered the most difficult and intense kind of problem almost every spiritual leader has to face sometime—problems within.

- For Nehemiah, those problems centered not on Sanballat, Tobiah, or Geshem but on his own people, the Jews.

- There were four such difficulties:

1. The people face a food shortage. They said they needed to get grain for food to keep themselves and their families alive (v2). The work on the wall hindered their tending their crops. And this crop failure was called a famine.
2. Others had grain (buying it from others), but to get it they had to mortgage their fields vineyards, and homes (v3).
3. Others, not wanting to mortgage their property, had to borrow money from their Jewish brothers to pay property taxes to King Artaxerxes (v4). This problem was compounded by the fact that they were charged exorbitant interest rates by their own Jewish brothers.
4. To repay their creditors they had to sell their children into slavery (v5; Cf. Ex 21:2-11; Deut 15:12-18). This of course left them in a hopeless state.

All these difficulties created an internal crisis in Judah. And they meant "double trouble" for Nehemiah. Not only were their enemies a constant threat to their security and state of well-being, but now many Jews were actually taking advantage of other Jews. Morale, which was already low (Neh. 4:10-12) because of external pressures, physical exhaustion, and fear, now took another plunge because of these internal problems.

(b) Answer: Nehemiah's condemnation, call for restitution, and mandate that the priests not repeat the sin (5:6-13)

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

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

6 I became very livid when I heard their complaining and these charges.

6 And I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words.

7 So I thought it over and contended with the nobles and the leading people, and said to them, "You are lending at interest, each to his brother!" Therefore, I held a great assembly against them.

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.

7 So after thinking it over carefully, I accused the officials and nobles openly, "Every one of you is charging your fellow countrymen interest!" So I opened a public investigation against them.

7 Then I consulted with myself, and I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother. And I set a great assembly against them.

- Nehemiah's initial response to all this was deep anger. His intense emotion was directed at certain people's selfishness, greed, and insensitivity.

- Some people were hurting and suffering, and those who should have been the most compassionate (the nobles and officials) were most guilty of exploitation. Though Nehemiah's anger was certainly righteous indignation, he did not take immediate action. Spending time reflecting on the problem enabled him to cool down, to see the facts in proper perspective, and to decide on a course of action (v7a).

8 And 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*.

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*.

8 I accused them, "To the best of our ability, we've been buying back our fellow Jews who had been sold to foreigners. Even now you're selling your fellow countrymen, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet and never spoke a word.

8 And I said unto them, We after our ability have redeemed our brethren the Jews, which were sold unto the heathen; and will ye even sell your brethren? or shall they be sold unto us? Then held they their peace, and found nothing to answer.

9 So I said, "The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the taunting of the nations, our enemies?

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?

9 So I said, "What you're doing isn't right! Shouldn't you live in the fear of our God to avoid shame from our foreign enemies?

9 Also I said, It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies?

- After regaining his emotional equilibrium, Nehemiah confronted the situation head on.

First, he rebuked those who were violating God's command not to charge their own people interest (Cf. Ex 22:25; Lev 25:35-38; Deut 23:19-20). Money could be loaned (Deut 15:7-8) but not to gain interest from another person's distresses.

Second, calling a large meeting, Nehemiah pointed out the inconsistencies of their behavior compared with what he and others in exile had done personally to help their brothers. He and others had already purchased (redeemed) some indentured Jews who were sold to foreigners (Cf. Lev 25:47-55). But now the opposite was happening; Jews were selling their fellow Jews into slavery.

Also God's reputation was at stake. This immoral and unethical behavior was bringing reproach on the One who had delivered their country from both Egyptian bondage and Babylonian Captivity. So he exhorted them to live in the fear of God (ie., to trust, obey, and serve Him) and thus avoid the reproach of their Gentile enemies.

10 And likewise I, my brothers, and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please, let's do without this interest.

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

10 I'm also lending money and grain, as are my fellow-Jews and my servants, but let's not charge interest.

10 I likewise, and my brethren, and my servants, might exact of them money and corn: I pray you, 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, as well as the hundredth *part* of the money and of the grain, the new wine, and the oil that you are charging as interest from them."

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."

11 So today please restore to them their fields, vineyards, olive orchards, and homes, along with the one percent interest charge that you've assessed them on the grain, wine, and oil."

11 Restore, I pray you, to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their oliveyards, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money, and of the corn, the wine, and the oil, that ye exact of them.

- Nehemiah's final action was intensely personal. He referred to his own example and that of others who were already helping those in need by lending them money and grain. He was already doing something about the problem. So he was not asking the people to do something he was not exemplifying in his own life. Some Bible translations and commentaries suggest that Nehemiah was admitting his own guilt of charging interest on his loans. This, however, seems inconsistent with his high leadership qualities and his charge to the nobles and officials about their guilt (v7). Nehemiah then asked those guilty

of exploitation to return what they had taken from others. Mortgaged fields, vineyards, olive groves (the groves are mentioned here for the first time; they were not referred to in v3-5), and houses were to be returned (perhaps with the income made from the grain, new wine, and oil from those fields), charging interest (usury) was to stop, and the interest received from the loans was to be returned. The interest was a 100th part, that is, one percent a month. He emphasized the urgency of this exhortation by asking them to act immediately.

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 made them take an oath to act in accordance with this promise.

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.

12 They responded, "We will restore these things, and will assess no interest charges against them. We will do what you are requesting!" So I called the priests and made them take an oath to fulfill this promise.

12 Then said they, We will restore them, and will require nothing of them; so will we do as thou sayest. Then I called the priests, and took an oath of them, that they should do according to this promise.

13 I also shook out the front of my garment and said, "So may God shake out every person from his house and from his possessions who does not keep this promise; just so may he be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said, "Amen!" And they praised the LORD. Then the people acted in accordance with this promise.

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.

13 I also shook my robes, and said, "May God shake out every man from his house and his possessions who does not keep this promise. May he be emptied out and shaken just like this."

All the assembly said, "Amen!" and praised the LORD. And the people kept their promise.

13 Also I shook my lap, and said, So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth not this promise, even thus be he shaken out, and emptied. And all the congregation said, Amen, and praised the LORD. And the people did according to this promise.

- No doubt Nehemiah was pleased when the people responded to his exhortations. But knowing that words are cheap and easy to say on the spur of the moment under public pressure, he made the guilty leaders (nobles and officials; Cf. v7) take another step—to take an oath affirming that they would do what they had said.
- The priests witnessed the oath taking. Nehemiah visualized for them the grave consequences that would come if they lied to God. Shaking out the folds of his robe (Cf. Paul's action in Acts 18:6), which served as pockets, he asked that God similarly shake out of His house every person who failed to keep his oath. This gesture indicated rejection, something like shaking the dust off one's feet (Matt 10:14; Acts 13:51).
- Presumably sometime while the city wall was being rebuilt, Nehemiah was appointed governor of Judah. This was the highest position of leadership in the nation at that time.
- Later, as Nehemiah wrote this historical account of his years in Jerusalem, he evidently inserted these observations (v14-19) about his perspective on that leadership position. Apparently he included these verses here in the narrative because of their relationship to the events described in v1-13.

(iii) Nehemiah as a burden to the people (5:14-19)

(a) Nehemiah's refusal to eat of the king's food allowance (5:14-15,17-18)

14 Furthermore, since 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*.

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*.

14 In addition, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah (that is, during the twelve years from the twentieth to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes), neither I nor my relatives relied on the provisions allotted to the governor.

14 Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year even unto the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes the king, that is, twelve years, I and my brethren have not eaten the bread of the governor.

15 But the previous 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 *my* fear of God.

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.

15 Nevertheless, the former governors before me placed a heavy burden on the people. They received food and wine, plus a tax of 40 shekels of silver. Even their young men took advantage of the people, but I never did so because I feared God.

15 But the former governors that had been before me were chargeable unto the people, and had taken of them bread and wine, beside forty shekels of silver; yea, even their servants bare rule over the people: but so did not I, because of the fear of God.

- Nehemiah served as Judah's governor for 12 years, from Artaxerxes' 20th year (444 BC) to his 32nd year (432 BC) This Hebrew word for governor is *peh#ah* derived from the Akkadian word *pahatu*. (The word for governor in 7:65,70; 8:9; 10:1 is a Persian word.)

- One of the "fringe benefits" of being governor was a food allowance, granted him by the Persian officials, perhaps for official entertaining of guests. However, Nehemiah did not take advantage of what was rightfully his.

- In providing food for many Jews and in entertaining dignitaries from other nations (v17), he served food and wine out of his personal resources. This practice contrasted with the former governors, who charged the Jewish people 40 shekels (about one pound; cf. NIV marg.) of silver besides the food allowance of food and wine.

Even those governors' assistants took advantage of their position and oppressed the people, demanding their payments. Nehemiah's reverence for God kept him from placing a heartless burden on his fellow Jews. This is still another evidence of his sterling leadership qualities: compassion for those under him and refusal to use his privileges at the expense of others.

(b) Nehemiah's participation in the building (5:16)

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.

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.

16 Also, as I continued to work on the wall, we purchased no land, and all of my young men were employed in the work.

16 Yea, also I continued in the work of this wall, neither bought we any land: and all my servants were gathered thither unto the work.

- As governor, Nehemiah could have loaned people money to pay their taxes, having them use their land as collateral. And then, when they could not pay back what they had borrowed, he could have applied the world's standard and taken their land.

He, along with other leaders in Judah, could have exploited the poor. But he did not acquire any land in this way, or by outright purchases. He was careful not to abuse his position as

governor in any way, thereby jeopardizing the people's respect for him. In fact he continued working right along with the people in the construction project. He did not hesitate to get his hands dirty in this important building program, and was never sidetracked by other interests. His motives were pure, and he never lost sight of God's calling in his life. He was in Jerusalem to help the people, not exploit them. He was there to exemplify God's Law, not violate it. He was there to rebuild the wall, not a personal empire.

17 Moreover, *there were* at my table 150 Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us.

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.

17 I fed 150 Jews and officials every day, not counting those who came from the nations around us.

17 Moreover there were at my table an hundred and fifty of the Jews and rulers, beside those that came unto us from among the heathen that are about us.

18 Now that which was prepared for each day was one ox *and* six choice sheep; also birds were prepared for me, and every ten days all *sorts of wine were provided* in abundance. Yet for *all* this I did not request the governor's food *allowance*, because the forced labor was heavy on this people. 19 Remember me, my God, for good, *in return for* all that I have done for this people.

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.

18 Our daily requirements were one ox and six choice sheep, along with various kinds of poultry prepared for me. Every ten days there was a delivery of an abundant supply of wine. Despite all this, I refused the governor's allotment, because demands on the people were heavy.

18 Now that which was prepared for me daily was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and once in ten days store of all sorts of wine: yet for all this required not I the bread of the governor, because the bondage was heavy upon this people.

- Exactly who all the 150 Jews were for whom Nehemiah provided food is not known, though some of them were officials. The cost to supply one ox, six sheep, and some poultry daily was no doubt great. Even so, Nehemiah willingly bore the cost out of his own pocket rather than place heavy demands on the people.

(c) Nehemiah asks God to remember his goodness (5:19)

19 Remember me, my God, for good, *in return for* all that I have done for this people.

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

19 "Remember me with favor, my God, for everything I've done for this people."

19 Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.

- As a man of prayer, Nehemiah was in touch with God. He prayed that God would remember him (i.e., not fail to act on his behalf) because of his concern for the people — Seven times in his prayers recorded in this book Nehemiah asked God to remember (v19; 6:14 [2x]; 13:14,22,29,31). Remember me with favor is the same prayer he voiced at the end of the book (13:31).