

A Study of the Book of Nehemiah

Facing Internal Problems: Leading with Character (*Nehemiah 5:1-13*)

“When we enter into the ‘in Christ’ existence we become one with those who are in Christ. Eternal life is received individually, but it is lived out in community. And the community battles sin in the body by confronting sinners and by requiring spiritual accountability.” ~ Ajith Fernando

I. Overview

To this point in the story, it would seem that the Israelites are completely behind Nehemiah in this daunting building project. His only opposition had originated from “outside the camp”. However, in chapter 5, we learn that Nehemiah also faced great opposition from his own people. One author aptly writes, “The productive sounds of a wall being raised up have been replaced with the destructive sounds of people tearing one another down” (Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick Study Guide*, 48). In the midst of these internal problems, Nehemiah provides several important principles for godly leaders.

II. Living in the Midst of Internal Strife (5:1-13)

A. Overview

Cries of injustice, hunger, and despair drown out any sounds of chiseling or verbal attacks by such individuals as Sanballat. This chapter reveals a dangerous undertow among God’s people. Social exploitation among the Jews was threatening to undermine the entire building project. While some scholars believe chapter 5 provides details later in Nehemiah’s political role, it seems more likely that these problems originated well before Nehemiah ever arrived to Jerusalem. Instead, this massive construction project has only accentuated these social injustices. Observe the following:

- There is no evidence to argue that this chapter has been misplaced. We should assume that Nehemiah recorded this passage simply because it took place at this time.
- This public outcry would have needed immediate action; and would have been quickly rectified. As one commentator writes, “Had he taken no action, it is likely at best that he would have lost the service of many of his workers, and at worst, that civil unrest would have developed” (Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 235).
- The commitment Nehemiah would have requested from the workers for the purpose of building the wall would have placed economic stress on themselves and their families—a stress that could not have been withstood because of the present economic situation (see 4:16). One scholar proposes that the time frame would have been August/September. It was during this period when the creditors exacted their capital and interest (see Neufeld, *JQR*, 203-4). Without the ability to return home, these men could not assist their families in gathering the produce necessary to pay their creditors.

B. The Content

v. 1 - “great outcry” - This was not a minority group raising an insignificant complaint, but a loud mob demanding justice. The same verbiage is used when Pharaoh and the Egyptians mourned the death of their firstborn sons in Exodus 12:30 (also, see Gen 27:34).

Observe that Nehemiah highlights that “wives” were present in this demonstration. They had to bear the brunt of the work at home and gather produce for the creditors, while trying to care for the children.

vv. 2-5 - The following three groups raise their voices in concern:

- *Those who are facing starvation (v. 2).* All the energy and resources dedicated to gathering stones provided no food on the table. Grain, not stones, was their immediate need. After all, one cannot eat stones! The recent famine only exasperated this dire situation (see v. 3).
- *Those who are in jeopardy of losing their land due to faltering on a loan (v. 3).* They could stand to lose everything if they cannot pay their debtors.
- *Those who are now selling their children into slavery because of bankruptcy (vv. 4-5).* The “royal tribute” was a fixed annual land tax assessed on the basis of an average yield from the land. Debt-slavery was not illegal according to the Mosaic Law (see Exod 21:2-11; 22:24-26; Lev 25; Deut 15:1-18). However, the reference to “daughters to slavery” carries sexual overtones. In addition, interest-taking loans were forbidden (see Deut 23:19-20) and both loans and slaves were to be remitted (see Deut 15). The Law was meant to secure provisions during difficult times and to alleviate undue burden.

As observed by one Old Testament scholar concerning the Mosaic Law: “Rights were not to be insisted on to the extent of exploitation or the causing of intolerable poverty (Deut 24:10-13). In short, all actions in the area of economic relations were to be governed by love (cf. Lev 19:18)” (McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 98).

Rather than seeing these as three distinct groups, each group is intended to represent a general problem faced by all of these families.

vv. 6-7a - When Nehemiah heard about the poor condition of Jerusalem’s walls, he wept. When Israel’s enemies hurled insults and accusations, Nehemiah prayed. However, upon hearing the outcry of the Jewish people, Nehemiah was angry.

The Hebrew indicates that Nehemiah needed to master his feelings before acting. *Why do you think Nehemiah did not go to the Lord in prayer?*

vv. 7b-9 - Nehemiah levels the following accusations against the Jewish officials:

- *They are seizing the collateral from their own people.* These wealthy men were behaving as harsh pawnbrokers.
- *They are selling their own people into slavery.* They had purchased Jewish slaves owned by Gentiles; and now are turning around and selling these Jewish individuals back to Gentile slaveowners! The Law prohibited selling fellow Jews as slaves to Gentiles (see Lev 25).

- *They are not living in fear of God.* Another potential allusion to Leviticus 25 (see vv. 36 and 43), Nehemiah's greatest concern was that they were not fearing God. Living selfish lives was tarnishing God's reputation.

“While they were praying to God for help and assistance in rebuilding the wall (which God was granting freely, and without ‘interest,’ we might add), they were ignoring His commands” (G. Getz, *When Your Goals Seem Out of Reach*, 111).

v. 10 - While Nehemiah had loaned resources, his actions differ vastly from his fellow countrymen. Nonetheless, Nehemiah “sees now the depth of poverty had called for gifts, not loans, and he makes no disclaimers—except indirectly by the change from ‘I’ and ‘us’ in this verse to ‘you’ in the next” (Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 96-97).

v. 11 - Nehemiah requires either the wealthy to refund both the property and the income derived from the loan; or Nehemiah demands that they cancel all debts due and return all properties.

v. 12 - Nehemiah seizes the moment of their compliance with a public oath before the priests.

v. 13 - Similar to the prophets of old, Nehemiah provides a visual aid to solidify the oath and to pronounce judgment on anyone who does not adhere to their vows (see 2 Kgs 13:15-19). The word “shake” is used of how the Lord tossed the Red Sea over Pharaoh and his army (Exod 14:27; Ps 136:15).

“praised the Lord” - This is the first time in Nehemiah that God's people are praising Him. It was through their obedience that they could properly worship the Lord.

III. Intersect

- A. How we handle our monies directly impacts our testimonies. We can either glorify God with our pocketbook, or we can bring dishonor to His name.

1 Timothy 6:10 -

- B. Honesty in leadership thwarts Satan's plans, honors the Lord, and blesses others. In *Excellence in Leadership*, John White writes, “Leaders make mistakes. What marks godly leaders is the willingness to deal with mistakes openly, applying the same criterion to themselves as to others. Never shrink from doing so. You may find it embarrassing. But it is the honest road to freedom” (p. 83).

Proverbs 11:3 -

C. We must be careful in serving the Lord. Ministry is not immune to sin.

1 Timothy 4:16-

For further thought . . .

Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week interacting with the following:

In *Master Your Money*, Ron Blue writes, "First of all, God has the right to whatever He wants whenever He wants it. It is all His, because an owner has rights, and I, as a steward, have only responsibilities . . . I literally possess much but own nothing" (p. 19-20). In light of this statement, take some time examining the following texts:

- Philippians 4:6-8
- 2 Corinthians 6:10
- Matthew 19:16-22

Does the Lord have full ownership of all of your resources? Are there any areas, such as in the realm of spending, that you have neglected to submit to the Lord? Are you as concerned with what you spend as you are with how much you give away?

"According to Scripture, virtually everything that truly qualifies a person for leadership is directly related to character. It's not about style, status, personal charisma, clout, or worldly measurements of success. Integrity is the main issue that makes the difference between a good leader and a bad one."

~ John MacArthur