



Nehemiah - Chapter Five

II Nehemiah 3:1-7:4 - The Wall Is Built, Despite Difficulties (continues)

Summary of Chapter Five

There was an outcry to Nehemiah by all the Jews for they were struggling under the burden of both taxation to the king of Persia and also to their fellow Jews for the nobility were loaning them money at interest. Therefore, the poorer people were struggling to feed their families and having to sell their land to the nobles. Nehemiah instructed the nobility and the priesthood to honour God and treat their countrymen fairly, which they then did.

Nehemiah set the example in this for he did not take the food allowance or the tax that was due to him from the people in his position as governor. In addition, he invited many people to his own table each day to feed them from his own provision.

II.c Nehemiah 5:1-19 - Nehemiah's Contribution to the Project

Refer to the chapter summary above.

II.c.i Nehemiah 5:1-13 - Nehemiah Deals with Oppression

Nehemiah's story of the restoration is not triumphalistic, for it tells of serious shortcomings in the community. Nehemiah takes measures to end the exploitation of the weak in the community by its powerful and more affluent members, who are ignoring God's commandments with regard to their fellow citizens.

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

Nehemiah 5:1

Now there was a great outcry. This is typical language of protest under oppression, as when they were enslaved by the Egyptians: <<*After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God*>> (Exodus 2:23). Chapter Four ended on a note of great victory. The people of God were undertaking the work of God and they did it despite all obstacles. They worked with a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other, and they would not let their enemies stop them. However, in this section of Chapter Five, there is no mention of working on the wall indicating that the work had stopped because the focus of the people had been diverted onto more pressing personal needs.

The people are the rank and file in the Jewish community. And of their wives adds to the picture of families made desperate by hunger and poverty.

Against their Jewish kin. The work stopped because of strife among God's people. The enemy could not stop the work of God by direct attack, but the work stopped when God's people were not unified and working together. When God's people fight against one another they certainly are neither fighting the real enemy nor getting God's work done.

The term Jewish kin shows the strong bond among all Israelites, such that, according to the Mosaic Law, none should permanently enslave or exploit another; refer to Deuteronomy 15:1-18 for details.

² For there were those who said, 'With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive.'

Nehemiah 5:2

For there were those who said. Several kinds of complaints emerge in vv.2-5, each concerning some cause of hardship, all made worse by the preoccupation with the walls and apparently by a bad harvest or neglect of the land due to the building of the wall.

We must get grain. This cry, perhaps coming especially from the women, probably arises because the men who are fully engaged on the building project are not able to undertake their usual work and are therefore unable to feed their families.

Nehemiah is not primarily a book about finances; it is a book about rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and bringing God's people into a place of peace, security, and blessing - one of the primary concerns of good government and certainly part of God's will for his people. Yet financial problems directly affected the rebuilding work and the focus of the Lord's people in undertaking it. Most the time financial problems affect a building project because there is

not enough money to do the work. However, the task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem seems to have been paid for by the king of Persia, who provided the necessary building materials: <<Then I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may grant me passage until I arrive in Judah; and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, directing him to give me timber to make beams for the gates of the temple fortress, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.' And the king granted me what I asked, for the gracious hand of my God was upon me>> (Nehemiah 2:7-8), and sent him with royal guards: <<Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent officers of the army and cavalry with me>> (Nehemiah 2:9). Nehemiah's financial problems were different; they were problems among the people that harmed the unity of the people of God.

³ There were also those who said, 'We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine.'

⁴ And there were those who said, 'We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax.'

Nehemiah 5:3-4

We are having to pledge our fields; that is, raising money by temporarily forfeiting the use and produce of their land, which meant that they also risk becoming insolvent. Some were borrowing to pay the heavy tax on produce levied by the Persians, a practice that has hit poor land workers throughout history all around the world.

To get grain during the famine. People had financial problems because there was either a famine or a shortage of food because the men spent more time building the wall than tending to their crops, which made food more expensive. It was so expensive that some mortgaged their property to provide food. A famine is no one's fault; many of the financial problems people face are really not the fault of anyone. Yet there may be fault in how the problems are addressed.

We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. People had financial problems because the government kept taxing them even though they were not working as much and even though the cost of living went up. These taxes were not the fault of those who were hurt by them. Neither Nehemiah nor the people acted as if these taxes were unfair, yet they were still a hardship.

⁵ Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters

to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others.’

Nehemiah 5:5

Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred. The complaint emphasises the close relationship among Israelites; refer to the comment made on v.1.

Forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves. People had financial problems because the loans they had taken out to live incurred interest charges and some were in default. Therefore some had to give their children as servants to their lenders to pay off the debt. Temporary debt-slavery but not permanent chattel-slavery was permitted under Mosaic Law among Israelites and was often the only way a debt could be paid, either after six years: *<<If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you for six years, in the seventh year you shall set that person free>>* (Deuteronomy 15:12), or at the Year of Jubilee: *<<If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or bound labourers. They shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee>>* (Leviticus 25:39-40). However, even this practice might hit families hard in the current situation; there is also a suggestion that those taken into debt-slavery are not being treated properly.

Paul writes about the servant-master relationship: *<<Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free. And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality>>* (Ephesians 6:5-9), and: *<<Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord>>* (Philemon 15-16).

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

Nehemiah 5:6

I was very angry. Nehemiah became angry because these financial problems were caused, in part, because of the greed of those who wanted to make a profit from the financial woes of others, something the Mosaic Law clearly said was wrong:

<<If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them>> (Exodus 22:25).

When I heard their outcry and these complaints. Nehemiah became angry because these financial problems led to a lack of unity among the people of God. This unity that was more precious than any amount of money. No mention was made of the work on the walls. Nehemiah became angry because these financial problems stopped the work of the Lord in rebuilding the walls and was causing obvious distress for the people of God. It must have frustrated him that they could stand so strong against an enemy, yet fall so quickly to these kinds of problems.

⁷ After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, ‘You are all taking interest from your own people.’ And I called a great assembly to deal with them, ⁸ and said to them, ‘As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!’ They were silent, and could not find a word to say.

Nehemiah 5:7-8

After thinking it over. This was good leadership from Nehemiah. He was a man passionate enough to get angry; yet wise enough to not act until he had considered the matter carefully. Knee-jerk reactions are never good in any walk of life but can be particularly problematic within the family of God.

I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. Nehemiah was no coward. When people were in the wrong, he confronted them. He told the truth and from the result it can be seen that he must have told the truth in love. The nobles and the officials within the Jewish community were accused of oppressing their own people, showing that the danger to the community comes not only from outside but also from within. Oppression of the weak by the strong had been one of the reasons for God’s anger that had brought about the exile: *<<For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry! Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land! The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing: Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant. For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield a mere ephah>> (Isaiah 5:7-10), and: <<Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals – they who trample*

the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed>> (Amos 2:6-8). The Book of Nehemiah teaches that the way a leader should approach problems is head on, firmly and yet with kindness of heart.

You are all taking interest from your own people. The Hebrew term used here is usury, which is interest that is either too high or should not be charged at all. While property might be taken in pledge, pending repayment of a loan, taking interest from a fellow Israelite who borrowed out of poverty and need was forbidden: *<<You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent. On loans to a foreigner you may charge interest, but on loans to another Israelite you may not charge interest, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings in the land that you are about to enter and possess>> (Deuteronomy 23:19-20).*

The Bible says it is wrong to make money off of someone's financial need; if someone needs money for the most basic needs of life, they should be given money, not loaned it at interest, as the apostle Paul said: *<<In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive">> (Acts 20:35).* Of course, loaning money at interest is permitted for things that are not absolute necessities. Yet God's people must always use great wisdom and self-control in borrowing money.

Our Jewish kindred. Again, Nehemiah stresses this kinship in order to drive home the people's neglect of this great principle underlying the law.

We have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin. In his anger, Nehemiah brings out the irony of the Jews being redeemed from exile only to be sold into slavery again by their own brothers.

God had spoken out on the practice of taking Hebrew slaves before the exile: *<<The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty to them – that all should set free their Hebrew slaves, male and female, so that no one should hold another Judean in slavery>> (Jeremiah 34:8-9).* They had now returned to that very practice that had so displeased the Lord less than two hundred years earlier.

They were silent, and could not find a word to say. When confronted with the reality of their wrongdoing, these nobles and officials who were exacting interest

from their fellow Jews had no reply, indicating their guilt and shame. However, to their credit they did not try to justify their actions or make excuses.

⁹ So I said, ‘The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?’ ¹⁰ Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest.

Nehemiah 5:9-10

Should you not walk in the fear of our God. This is where many business deals go wrong before God, because there is no regard for God’s will or wisdom. The only concern is if a deal can be made, and if a profit will come from it; not if it is right or wrong.

To prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies. This was the original tactic used by Sanballat and his associates in an attempt to intimidate the people of Jerusalem into ceasing their work on the walls; refer to Nehemiah 4:1-4. When people mock those who belong to the Lord they are mocking his holy name: <<“*And now what do I have here?*” declares the Lord. “*For my people have been taken away for nothing, and those who rule them mock,*” declares the Lord. “*And all day long my name is constantly blasphemed. Therefore my people will know my name; therefore in that day they will know that it is I who foretold it. Yes, it is I*”>> (Isaiah 52:5-6 NIV).

Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Nehemiah admits that he and his closest associates are implicated in the injustice and therefore presents his moral challenge as something to which he himself must respond.

¹¹ Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.’ ¹² Then they said, ‘We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say.’ And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised.

Nehemiah 5:11-12

Restore to them, this very day, their fields. This appeal not only commands a return of the interest that was illegitimately seized, but is apparently a general amnesty, occasioned by the crisis and going beyond the provisions for debt-release (Deuteronomy 15:1-11), or jubilee (Leviticus Chapter 25), since it is to be done without delay. The people agree, and solemnly undertake to keep their word.

Nehemiah was not asking the nobles and the rulers to just feel regret for their past actions or to just stop what they were doing; they had to set right the wrong they had done. If money had been charged unfairly or collateral was taken unfairly, it had to be set right. The NT gives an excellent example of the right response in the case of the chief tax collector in Jericho, Zacchaeus: <<*Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much'*>> (Luke 19:8).

We will do as you say. This was the right response from these men. Nehemiah wisely told the truth in love, confronting these brothers; and they received the rebuke, doing the right thing and admitting they had been wrong. Their teachable, correctable spirit was impressive; too few are willing to admit they are wrong and to do what is right - especially where their money is concerned!

¹³ I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, 'So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied.' And all the assembly said, 'Amen', and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

Nehemiah 5:13

I also shook out the fold of my garment. This was a symbolic action matching the words of the curse that follow. Jews would use similar displays for anything they believed was displeasing to God including shaking the dust off their feet when leaving a Gentile region. For the missionary disciples that Jesus sent out it was a sign against those who rejected the Gospel: <<*If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town*>> (Matthew 10:14).

So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. This type of curse-formula was a solemn, conventional way of compelling commitment to a course of action. Nehemiah wisely knew their words were not enough. Their actions had to be followed through with real action - and it was: the people did according to this promise. With the oaths, and public record of all this, Nehemiah assures accountability. Accountability is so often a missing step in dealing with an area of life where a person is having a hard time doing what is right.

By saying Amen, the whole assembly took upon itself the terms of Nehemiah's curse.

II.c.ii Nehemiah 5:14-19 - The Generosity of Nehemiah

Nehemiah demonstrates to the nobility the way forward by refusing to take the food and tax from the people that he was entitled to as governor and by sharing what he had with others at his table.

¹⁴ Moreover, from the time 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, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor.

Nehemiah 5:14

Governor in the land of Judah. This is the first indication that Nehemiah held this official post in the province of Yehud, i.e. Judæa, within the larger province of Beyond the River. That others had done so before him was known from: <<Moreover, the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem and had brought into the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to a man named Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor>> (Ezra 5:14), and: <<In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest>> (Haggai 1:1). Sheshbazzar was probably the Persian or Aramaic name for Zerubbabel.

From the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes was 445-433 BC.

The food allowance of the governor. Governors apparently had the right to raise taxes for their own use but Nehemiah had not taken what was due to him for he knew it would have further impoverished the poorer people.

Nehemiah was a great example of putting the work of God ahead of his own personal interest. He certainly had the right to tax the people for his support as others had done it before him, but he did not take that right because it would not help the work of God. The apostle Paul is another great example of someone who had the right to be supported, but did not take that right because it was better for the cause of the Gospel; refer to 1 Corinthians 9:1-15.

Should ministers be supported today? It is all a question of what is better for the cause of the Gospel. If it is better for ministers to be able to devote themselves full time to the care and teaching of God's people, they should be supported: <<Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching>> (1 Timothy 5:17). If it is better for them not to be supported that way, they should not.

However, there is something wrong with a minister who will only minister to God's people if the money is right.

¹⁵ The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people, and took food and wine from them, besides forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God.

Nehemiah 5:15

The former governors. Nehemiah's predecessors, however, had used the people for the enrichment of themselves and their servants or subordinate officials. This not to say they are wrong for accepting payment for their role for they too had to feed their families. They would be judged as to how much they took and whether it was proportionate to their need and value of their work.

The fear of God. Nehemiah might mean that he respects God's law requiring all Jews to regard themselves as kin. Nehemiah did what was right before God, not what was 'right' for his own cares and concerns - because he knew he would have to answer to God.

As the apostle Paul would later write: <<Moreover, it is required of stewards that they should be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me>> (1 Corinthians 4:2-4).

¹⁶ Indeed, I devoted myself to the work on this wall, and acquired no land; and all my servants were gathered there for the work.

Nehemiah 5:16

I devoted myself to the work on this wall. Nehemiah has put himself on a par with his fellow Jews, labouring with them and not using his position for gain. Again, the apostle Paul and his followers set a similar example: <<For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat>> (2 Thessalonians 3:7-10).

¹⁷ Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty people, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations around us.

Nehemiah 5:17

There were at my table one hundred and fifty people. This may refer to obligations that fell to Nehemiah by virtue of his position as governor although it may be that he invited in ordinary citizens to dine with him. Nehemiah not only did not take when he could have; he also gave when he did not have to. He received a lot of food from the king's provisions, which he could have sold for his own profit. Instead, he gave them away to be the example of generosity - feeding as many as one hundred and fifty people regularly.

Those who came to us from the nations may have been diplomatic visitors or it may have been people bringing trade goods to the city.

¹⁸ Now that which was prepared for one day was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and every ten days skins of wine in abundance; yet with all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because of the heavy burden of labour on the people.

Nehemiah 5:18

This heavy burden (v.17) makes Nehemiah's self-sacrifice concerning the food allowance all the more remarkable. He does not wish to live comfortably while his people are in need. Nehemiah could have taken more of the governor's provisions, but he did not. Therefore, Nehemiah was an example for what he did not take and for what he did not keep.

Because of the heavy burden of labour on the people. Nehemiah, in his own life, lived the way he told the nobles and rulers to live - not to take personal advantage of another's need. He did what every godly leader must do: he never expected more of his followers than he expected of himself.

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

Nehemiah 5:19

Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people. This is the first of Nehemiah's prayers for God to remember Nehemiah and his deeds, Nehemiah 13:14, 13:22 and 13:31; and to remember his opponents, Nehemiah 6:14 and 13:29. These prayers reflect the awareness that a merely human judgement might not achieve full justice. Nehemiah's deeds demonstrate his sincere faith, while the schemes of the opponents demonstrate their opposition to the wellbeing of God's people. Refer also to the comment on Nehemiah 1:8-9 when Nehemiah called upon God to remember his promise to Moses.

Some think that Nehemiah was wrong for saying all the good things he did. Jesus clearly taught that good works must not be done to show others how spiritual a person is: *<<Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you>> (Matthew 6:1-4).* But in his prayer, Nehemiah did not look for praise from man - but from God. In fact, Nehemiah probably originally intended that no one else should see all or part of this book, because it was written as a personal diary.

Jesus also teaches against seeking human praise rather than seeking that of God: *<<You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept glory from human beings. But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me>> (John 5:39-46).*