

# Cost of Living Crisis!

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] So last week in Nehemiah chapter 4, we were thinking about issues with various outsiders who attacked Nehemiah and his leadership and they attacked God's people.

But today we've got an issue from within. And we read at the beginning of the chapter, there's a great outcry that had come from men and from their wives against their own fellow Jews.

And so the issue is that the people of God are struggling to get by. It's a cost of living crisis, and that is the title of today's message, Cost of Living Crisis.

And the injustice is that the people weren't being looked after by their own. And it was in particular those who had plenty, were found to have certain miscarriages when looking after those who were, and looking out for those who were less fortunate.

And so right in the off, we've got four different groups that are mentioned. First we've got families who are plenty in number, lots of people in the families, but in order to stay alive we've got to get grain, meaning that they don't have their own land, so they've got to get their own grain elsewhere.

[ 1 : 1 2 ] And then we've got adversity, the next group that did own land, but they were so overwhelmed with things that they've got to mortgage their own homes, they've got to mortgage their own fields in order to buy food to feed their families.

Then we've got to pay their own lands.

They're a bad witness to their neighbours. So in the previous chapter you've got these guys on the outside attacking them, and then it's because people in chapter 5 are a poor witness amongst themselves and to the rest of the world, really.

They were supposed to be a model, a type of community that was set apart from all other nations. This is Israel, this is God's holy people. They're starting to rebuild, not just the walls physically, but as a people, coming to the realisation that they're God's own, God's chosen people.

But they're found wanting here. They're not living by God's rules, God's laws. This great outcry that has come, as well as being that poor witness to the surrounding people, it's also got the potential to hinder the ongoing work on the walls.

[ 2 : 4 9 ] They've been making really good progress. The sandballot, the bayan, the geshem, the ashdodites, all these folks coming from the north, south, and the east, and the west, as we thought about last week. To attack, Nehemiah's set up some really good policies in place, putting people in different parts of the wall, and they're able to continue the building of the wall.

They've got a brick in one hand, a sword in the other, and it's going well. They've been able to fend off the attack from outsiders. But this inside disruption has got the potential to hinder the ongoing work.

Nehemiah's sole focus and goal was to complete the building of the wall at any cost. That's what he was called to Jerusalem for from Susa.

And so he's finding more trouble and shame here than he'd heard about in that very first chapter from his brother Hanani. There's disgrace and trouble and shame in Jerusalem. The walls being broken down and destroyed by fire.

But now he's finding it's not just the outsiders, it's the inside folk. It's their own people. There was much friction between the folks. There was a food shortage. There was rising prices. There was an increase in taxes for the government, for the king.

[ 4 : 03 ] I mean, it's a sound familiar. It's really familiar to us today. The cost of living prices. We find ourselves very much in inflation. Pete, last October, 11.1%.

Just huge. You know, you go out for a shop to Tesco's or Morrison's or Lill or whatever, and you go and put in your regular items. You come to the checkout. It's, wow, that's the same stuff that I buy every week.

It's now, how did, you have to take a mortgage to buy a lure pack? You know, how did that happen? Milk is so high. You know, low-fat milk has gone up 42.1%.

Ready-made meals, 19%. Jams, marmalades, honey, 28%. Bread, 14.6%. It's crazy. We've all felt a squeeze.

We've all felt a pinch in one way or another. Maybe we were going, buying even less in our shopping. Okay, I'll cut out this, I'll cut out that. I'll cut out a bit of chocolate. All right.

[ 5 : 02 ] We say that, hopefully, going in. But say we cut out something, and then we still find at the checkout, well, that'll be such and such. When we get a little bit, maybe it's becoming less of a shock now because we're starting to get used to it.

But it's, we've all felt a pinch. You know, I was online the other day just checking out my news feed, and this article came up from this TikToker, this social media influencer, and it went viral.

It's got over 800,000 views in the last few days. It's a girl called Amelia Goldsmith. You know, she goes around with her phone, putting TikTok videos on. And the one thing she wanted to do this week, in the middle of the week, just to spread some good news, she would go to her nearby Sainsbury's and buy someone their shopping.

Sounds nice. Sounds harmless. To cheer someone up, instead, at the end, she was in tears. She was confused because everyone said, no, we don't want you to pay for our shopping.

What was the issue here? So she goes up to the first person at the counter, and the person says, no, no, it's okay. Thank you very much, but no, I don't want you to pay for my shopping.

[ 6 : 19 ] She says that the guy looked angry, and she felt sad, overwhelmed, confused. She went, okay, the next person, I'll try the next person. The first person said, no. So she moved on.

Third person, well, I'm sure there's a lot more deserving people in the world than me, but thank you anyway. So then, she's still filming herself. She goes to the pasta and she puts in some pasta, some sauces, some bread, some other bits and bobs, and she then sticks it in the food bank box at the end of Sainsbury's.

And she reflected on this video at the end. She said, wow, that was so weird. I'm still really happy that the food can go to those who are in need, but I'm just really overwhelmed right now.

I don't know what's going on. And then came the feedback from her video, and it was somewhat mixed. People noted that she lived in a pretty wealthy part of London, the area she was in, the shop she was in.

She went to Sainsbury's. And people come to that, well, she's on her phone. She's filming herself doing this good deed. Why does she need to do that? People maybe felt somewhat uncomfortable with the thought of this.

[ 7 : 28 ] And there was all sorts of conflicts online. People saying, this is a bit strange. If you want to do a good deed, you don't need to film it.

And I think this speaks of today and how social media can have a lot of, it can be a force for good in the world, but also it can show us that our desire is to find validation and public validation of how good we're doing.

This desire to be seen and to be noticed for doing good, in order that we might feel good, and that we seem good as people, that at the end, as for that poor TikToker, can end up just being no good.

Because it comes down to a heart issue, doesn't it? And Jesus gives it poignantly, whatever you did for one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, that you did for me. Caring for the poor is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian, caring for those less fortunate than us.

And it means that we do things that go unnoticed. We do things that may be unnoticed for our whole lives, that never will get the recognition, but they're seen by our eternal God who rewards those who live in faithful obedience to him.

[ 8 : 43 ] It's that we're not influenced by being an influencer, but that we're influenced by someone who's greater than ourselves, and that which is eternal, not that which is merely a temple, which will fade away.

Because God's purposes, when we step into God's purposes and caring for the lost and for those who are on the margins, those who have no thought of coming into a church building, those who have all sorts of issues in life, we know that that's an eternal purpose of God to reach out to those that we would see people reach with the good news of Jesus, and that they would know that their whole lives are important to God, not just the spiritual coming to church on Sunday, which is so important, we know, but also their whole lives, and that we offer our whole lives as a living sacrifice, acceptable and pleasing to God.

We firm God's promises that are assured a certain foundation in which we build our lives on, and this is what it means to be a Christian, this is what it means to look and to live distinctively.

And although we might think to ourselves that there are many struggles out there, there are many issues in our time, in our day, there are all sorts of concerns, whether that be financial, whether that be mental health and well-being, in our day, whether the living costs and the rights of living costs cause us concern and may cause our neighbours and those around us more concern, but as we, as God's people, and as the church, as his bride, continue to look to the living God and his purposes and step into his purposes, and we can find that his concerns become our concerns, his heart.

What's on his heart translates to our heart. And this is where we read on now of the response of Nehemiah to this injustice, to this outcry from verses 6 to 13, where we find the injustice in the first five verses.

[ 10 : 36 ] In the verses 6 to 13, we've got a wrong which is righted by this leader, Nehemiah. And we find in verse 6, it says there that he's angry.

When I heard the rap trying to, on these charges, I was very angry. And again, it can be quite hard to know what to think of this. How can a man of God like this be so angry?

Can a Christian in general be angry in this way? And we did think about this a little bit last week in the type of prayer that Nehemiah offers up to God against his enemies. He says, Hear us, O God, for we are despised.

Turn their insults back on their heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in our face, in the face of the builders.

And so this type of prayer which we find in the Psalms, what we call the imprecatory prayer, it's like a prayer of cursing, what we find is the distinction that Nehemiah is not literally saying curse them, O God.

[ 11 : 37 ] He's saying, God, I'm looking to you and may you, the God of justice, deal with us in your way, in your time. And would you vindicate us as God's people who are trying to live by your standards, by your grace, by your laws.

But what we see in chapter 5 here is Nehemiah, he's very angry. We read right on in verse 7, he says, I pondered them in my mind. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and the officials.

So, we've been going through the prayer course and a couple of the sessions one was on contemplation, contemplative prayer. I'm thinking about that practice of listening to God, of having times of silence in our prayers, of that Psalm 46, be still and know that I'm God.

I think this is what we might describe Nehemiah doing, that he's contemplating the right thing to do at the right time. It's a steady flow that we see throughout Nehemiah's recording of this so far in his prayers.

He's asking God to work at the right time and the right way and that God's supplies might come there and then. Not just there and then but in God's timing.

[ 12 : 49 ] And so, the exact translation actually is somewhat difficult to work out but the root issue Nehemiah seems to be looking at is, as one writer, John White, puts it, people being pawned, the pawn brokers were cruelly pressing the financial advantage over these hungry and desperate people.

So people are being pawned and the pawn brokers are pressing their financial advantage over them because they're hungry, they're desperate and they don't know what to do.

And so these greedy and selfish readers are using people in their own way to get ahead no matter what the cost would be to the whole of God's people and they're found wanting.

They've forgotten the commands that Moses had given them in Deuteronomy such as what we read in chapter 15. So they've forgotten all about this and Nehemiah, this is why he's angry, this is why he's contemplating and this is why he goes and addresses them and says, actually, we've got to do something about this.

So verses 8 and 9 he calls together a large week to deal with the situation and to tackle the wrong by going right to the heart of the matter. So he's pointing out the irony that actually you Jews who were slaves to Gentiles in Babylon in exile, you were living in a time where you were transported to exile and living as foreigners in the land.

[ 14 : 36 ] Now, you're back here and you're slaves to fellow Jews in Judah. I mean, what's, it's not right. There's total irony there.

And as they're confronted with this deceit, we find in verse 8 that they could say nothing to the matter. Nothing. They kept quiet, they could find nothing to say, there was silence.

And then from verse 9 onwards, Nehemiah makes a point from a rather spiritual point of view that should you walk in the fear of God? Should you do that to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?

In other words, he's saying you're supposed to follow God's rules and you're supposed to live distinctively as God's people, but by doing what you're doing, it's a bad witness. And if you seek to simply make money and to use money by any means, then you're no better than the sand ballots and the tobias and the gishims and all these weird and wacky names that are the enemies.

See, the golden rule means nothing to you. Love God, love your neighbour, it means nothing to you. So the hypocrisy is clear for all to see. But what's really interesting as we read on in verse 10, Nehemiah does what he does in chapter 1, where he identifies himself with God's people.

[ 15 : 54 ] He says, let us stop charging interest. He could easily say, you're going to stop charging interest. But just like that prayer in chapter 1, where he says, God, we've all let you down, and I include myself in this.

So he's doing the same here. He's saying, I identify with this wrongdoing. I'm part of it, and I'm coming to you, God, in humble repentance, that you would reignite the spark to a flame, as we saw it earlier.

You know, it is sad when you see things happen amongst God's people, and within God's people, that grieve God's heart, when there's a disruption amongst the fellowship in a Christian community.

But here, this tells us that it's in light of the fear of God that we should live from. And what is the fear of God? Well, it's not a hiding behind the couch, lest the almighty smite you kind of fear.

That's not the fear of God. It's the recognition that we're human, we're mere mortals, and God is not. He's eternal, and he's our Father in heaven, and he loves us.

[ 16 : 57 ] But also, when we come face to face with who he is, like Isaiah the prophet in chapter 6, he went, God, you're a poor, woe is me, I'm a man unclean lips, and I can't even look because you are holy, holy, holy.

And you're looking at the Hebrew that, the thrice holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, it's basically you wouldn't get someone writing that unless they're serious about he's God so unlikely.

So that's what it means to live, that we recognise that we're human beings who are created in God's image, and he loves us, and he absolutely does, and at the same time, he is not like us, he is our holy God, and we live in that reverential fear before him, that awe and wonder, awe and reverence.

So Nehemiah then pleads with the people to give back immediately, not in a week, not in three weeks, not in six months, but immediately the fields, the vineyards, all the groves and houses, and also the interest.

So they've really got to go back to square one, and what we find is that God requires of his people, as Michael 6, he wonderfully puts it, is that God's people are to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

[ 18 : 14 ] And as they're confronted with this, the people are silent, so it's a reminder of God's holiness and awe, that we're to be a distinctive, standing out before the whole of our community kind of people, and live fruitful lives in light of who he is.

That's our call as God's people, to live in the fear of who he is, and like I say, not a hiding behind the couch, lest the almighty smite me. That's Bruce almighty sort of language, it's not that kind of pop culture, fear of God, it's a right and proper, yes God is God, I'm not, but he loves me, and I know who he is.

And so just concluding our time now, that as Nehemiah sorts out that issue, I think from verses 12 to 19, we find that this chapter is, you might think it's just a fuller chapter, another issue, and then the next chapter another issue of rebuilding, but we find that everything has to do with the mission of God's people, and the response in verse 12 is immediately positive, and he says, okay, we're going to give it back, and we will not demand anything more from them, we will do as you say, so that people are confronted with this injustice, they're confronted with the fear of God, and they say, okay, we're going to do everything in response to what you have said.

Everything's to do with the mission of God's people, and what was taken was return, even the level of interest, and as a way of showing that, Nehemiah, what we find is that he shook the folds of his robe, it was a symbol of saying that one who does not abide what has been done should be shaken out and emptied himself, and basically taking out the community, saying we're all together, we're all part of it, we're all living, distinctively, and if you don't do that, you should be shaken off and emptied yourself.

So then in the final verses, 14 to 19, we've got, on the back of this, Nehemiah saying, okay, we're going to live this out, just thinking of the Shakespeare play, the seven ages of men, we've got that, he quotes that immortal line, all the world is a stage, and all the men and women merely players.

[ 20 : 34 ] It's a famous line quoted many times over throughout cultural history, but if we were to translate it for this chapter, Nehemiah's saying the land is the stage on which the Israelites would model a redeemed community, the land is the stage on which God's people would model how they live their lives.

And so Nehemiah's saying, okay, the previous governors, they laid heavy burdens on the people, their assistants lorded it over them, but we're not going to do that, we're going to lead by God the example.

And for all the 12 years that Nehemiah was governor in the land of Judah, he says that neither he nor his brothers would eat the food allotted to the governor, nor did they acquire any land because it was out of reverence for God that he did not act like his predecessors.

He was devoted to God, he was committed to the task and to the call that God had on his life and that was to complete the building of the wall at any cost. His burden was the work of God, the ongoing work of God, which was hard going, but it wasn't the same sort of burden as this because he used his own personal resources to cover his own expenses and he would not charge the additional taxes.

It's just as Jesus would say and warn in Matthew 23, the teachers of the law of the Pharisees, they sinned and Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you, but do not do what they do, for they do not plant the seed.

[ 21 : 59 ] They preach, they tie up heavy, cumbersome loads, they put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves aren't willing to lift a finger to move them.

So he's saying, don't act like we're not going to act like these previous governors, we're going to live distinctively. And we see that Nehemiah, we know that he comes from before the time of Jesus, but surely Jesus' words can be found ringing throughout his story, that the greatest among you will be your servant.

Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. As people of God, to live distinctively, to be distinctively, to act distinctively, this is the outlook in all ways of life, to be a set-apart people.

And so we enter in, as the church today in the 21st century, we find the Bible as our guide, as our model. We find in one example of this, in 1 Peter chapter 2, we've got an older apostle, an older disciple who's been there, done it, it's now an older guy, and he urges and appeals God's people to live distinctive lives, to live good lives, that the watching world might be silenced by our good deeds.

So they might say, well, I'm sitting up and taking watch of the church. They're not doing it for their own benefit, they're not doing it to get 800,000 views on TikTok, they're doing it because they love God and they want to bless the community and they want to live distinctive lives and they live in the fear of God.

[ 23 : 28 ] There's something different, there's something attractive about that. It's not about having the nicest, coolest chairs, oh, that's good, but it is about being a people of God who love him to be distinctive, to offer Christ to a watching world.

So how do we do this? Well, how do we go about that? Someone must be serving in different capacities in this area, Cain, for those who are less fortunate than us, someone must be serving as part of the food bank.

But what is it we might together be asking God for, for this season in this church, in this area? Jesus always prioritised Cain for the poor.

And I just mentioned that we've got a new chair, we've taken our fuse out and we've replaced them with chairs. And it's not just that the church will look pretty or to offer a comfy seat for us, but it's to offer a flexible space for our community, isn't it?

It's to offer a flexible building. It's to meet the needs of those who are out there today. It's to recognise, say, well, what was there in the past was really good for its age, for its season, but now we need to provide something, not just on Sunday at 11 a.m. and 6.30 a.m., but through the week.

[ 24 : 47 ] We need to open up our halls and our sanctuary, our whole church, in order that we might see people, and particularly families who are struggling in various areas of life, and have as yet unreached that they might be welcomed in and experience Jesus for themselves.

What might it cost us to give up that level of comfort for us here in view of the surrounding us? Because the gospel comes with a house key, doesn't it?

And this is God's house. The gospel comes with a house key, and this is God's house. And this is a generous church, a welcoming people, lovely people in this church. I certainly noticed that in the one year that I've been here.

so warmly welcomed in. And going to the soup lunch on a Thursday, you just see, wow, what a well-oiled machine that is. You know, just the volunteers who serve there, what a great thing to be commended.

An amazing team that serve. And you go in and you're treated by royalty, and you just think, wow, there's so much potential there. How might we go further?

[ 25 : 55 ] And by that, I do not mean that the same people serve more and more. But as a body, together, what might we do together to go and to reach out, to specifically focus on those who are in need, for those who are not yet reached?

Or we might also say for those who are beginning to be reached through our bodies and who have been over the last year after our kids have come through the door on Friday, in primary and secondary age.

How might we go about this? One branch of churches puts it on our website. When the marginalized and forgotten of any society are brought into the center of a loving community that worships Christ, powerful things begin to happen.

Jesus has called us to care for the poor, both for their sake and our own. You know, I want to see powerful, powerful things begin to happen.

I know it costs us more than we might know or realize. I've seen that happen in Stornway Martins as they reached out and people came in with all sorts of baggage and backgrounds.

[ 27 : 10 ] But I also saw the blessing. I saw in February going across in the communion, there was a whole family coming to membership in the church. A whole family being saved and coming to membership. I saw people from addictions and road to recovery courses and services come through and not having to go through the 12 steps of church reality before they then eventually became members, but they're welcomed in straight away.

And they say, you belong now. Not five years' time before you've given yourself some sort of credit, but you belong now. And you're into membership now. blessing far outweighs the cost, but it is a cost.

But it's so worth it that people would know and experience Jesus, to taste and see that the Lord is good and that we trust in him as blessed. And that the saints would fear God and know that the Jesus is the one who comes alongside us to soothe our sorrows, to heal our wounds, and to drive away our fear, our fear of man and our fear of what we might think others think.

So may we be willing, as God's people, to step out in faith in this area and in all ways of our lives, because together we go in his name and for Jesus' sake and glory.

Amen.