

Nehemiah - Opposition from Within

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Date: 28 April 2019

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[0 : 00] Continuing to take this series on the book of Nehemiah further, we this morning look at Nehemiah chapter 5 and I'll read all of it. Nehemiah chapter 5.

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[4 : 45] Amen. May God bless that reading. May God bless that reading. We find that in fact there are two kinds of individuals in it.

You'll see there's the action of the nobles and there's the action of Nehemiah and those who followed him. Now while it is the case that all that's local and historical has gone, it's necessary to understand something of the history to understand precisely what is going on here.

The 20th year of Artaxerxes was somewhere about 445 BC. In chapter 1 you have the report of Nehemiah and his subsequent prayer.

Following right on to chapter 4, the topic that we left last week was this question of opposition from without.

But in chapter 5 we have a different kind of problem which is opposition from within. Now the chapter actually divides itself into two distinct portions.

[5 : 58] The first 13 verses deal with the problem of slavery to provide grain for the people. And the final verses, 14 to 19, give the example of Nehemiah as governor, not demanding an allowance when other people were finding food.

Now the probability is that all of this situation which you find in Nehemiah 5, which is when the whole thing is in hostility and division, it is probable that what happened here was that commercial ties were cut between Judah and its neighbors so that Judah and the normal commercial activities were suspended.

Judah was isolated. The second thing that happened was that the demands of Nehemiah for the rebuilding of Jerusalem were stern. So these two things, the isolation of Judah and the lack of farming, also commented on in this chapter, are what give rise to this complaint.

So we read this complaint. Now the men and their wives raved a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. That complaint has three bits to it.

In verse 2, we and our sons and daughters are numerous. In order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain. Now the problem here is that these people had large Jewish families.

[7 : 35] They were not unable to produce enough grain to stay alive, so they had to buy it. Because they were poor, this was difficult. The second thing, others were saying, we are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our homes to get grain during this famine.

In other words, they went about mortgaging their real estate. Now when it comes to this reference about vineyards, what's being talked about here is a massive vineyard that was in the province of Gibeon, part of the province of Judah.

During this period, it was a great centre for wine production. Although it did indeed decline later on. So this was a prize to mortgage.

Thirdly, still others are saying, we've had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen, and although our sons are as good as their sons, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery.

The tax that they refer to here was a tax on real estate, which the Persians had taken over from the Babylonians.

[8 : 59] This became a heavy burden to bear. So the lands were being mortgaged to wealthy Jews, so they could get the money to pay these taxes to the king.

They also say that the children had been taken into debt as slavery, and they had to work for the creditor until all these debts were paid off.

So what's happening in reality here as you look at all of this and understand what's happening, is that on the one hand, the work of God to rebuild Jerusalem is going ahead.

But because of this internal division, there's a vice coming around the whole thing, which is squeezing it, so that the economy of this tiny little province is about to collapse.

And the point is that if it collapses, the work of God collapses with it. What is the answer? Nehemiah commenced this project in faith.

[10:07] And so we find in verse 6, When I heard their outcry and their charges, I was very angry.

Now he was angry, because he realized just what I'm saying, that the economy of this little province was about to collapse. But more importantly, the peaceful coexistence of the Jewish community was also in danger.

So he decides to think about this prayerfully. And he comes up with some drastic measures. I pondered them carefully in my mind, and accused the nobles and the officials.

I told them, You are exacting usury from your own countrymen. Interest. Compound interest.

But, the Mosaic law is very clear about this. Exodus 22, verse 25 says, If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a money lender.

[11:27] Charge him no interest. Leviticus 25, 36. Do not take interest from him, but fear your God, so that your countrymen may continue to live among you.

So this idea of charging interest for a loan is against the Mosaic law. It does actually come into the New Testament in a parable Jesus told in Leviticus, in Luke chapter 16, where he told the parable of the master and the unjust steward.

And this parable starts off by relating the fact that the work of this steward was called into question, and the master told him, You're about to get the boot.

So he thinks to himself, I'm not strong enough to dig, I'm too ashamed to beg. So he turns to his debtors, and he calls them in one by one.

And the first one owes 100 shekels. And the steward says to the debtor, Take your bill and write 50.

[12:52] Now the first kind of sense that you might think there's some kind of corruption going on here. But given that the master, and Jesus for that matter, later commends the action of this unjust steward, we have to understand that what's actually happening is that the unjust steward is taking the bill, looking at it, cancelling the interest due, and therefore, two things happen.

Suddenly, the master looks good in the sight of the Jewish community. He's a law-abiding Jew. He looks good in the sight of the debtors. They have to pay less.

Interest. When Nehemiah accused them, they kept quiet because they had nothing to say.

This charging of interest on these loans so that the people could stay alive was, as I've said, against the Jewish law.

And if they continue in this way, what's going to happen is that this work, which is being gone on by faith, of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, will come to an end.

[14:18] Also, he's asking them to do this to avoid reproach of their Gentile enemies.

Now, last week, we thought about this business of opposition from without in the form of Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and varying others. But what's going on here is more savage and insidious than anything that they could do.

Nehemiah and his men have become an example. They are lending the poor money and charging no interest whatsoever. I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain.

So what Nehemiah is saying is you people who are charging interest and who are bringing the work of God into ridicule, you'll have to act as we are acting.

So what they have to do is this. And this is the challenge. Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses and also the usury that you are charging them.

[15:37] the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine, and oil. So, this is what's to happen.

All these loans have got to be cancelled. All the properties that have been mortgaged have got to be handed back. And indeed, if it involves any money, grain, wine, or new oil, all of that has to be handed back.

So, if they do this, this community is going to survive. There's a challenge here to the nobles.

You see, these are people, the problem with the nobles is they're only committed to this rebuilding of Jerusalem. they appear at the very beginning in chapter 2.

It's an inspection that involves them. But they're only committed to it as long as it doesn't impact on their life and their standard of living.

[16:47] And that's the challenge that comes to the nobles from this chapter. Are you going to live according to the faith of your fathers or are you going to continue in this way because if you do, you will stop the work of God?

Let me turn thirdly and finally to the example of Nehemiah. Moreover, from the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be the governor in the land of Judah, until his 32nd year, 12 years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor.

Now here there's a comparison between those that had been former governors who are not named but who did not do as Nehemiah did.

And the answer is, if you want to examine it, Nehemiah is totally devoted to the work of God.

Now this idea of being totally devoted, you'll find in the Acts of the Apostles. After the ascension of Jesus, there's a prayer meeting which involves the eleven plus Matthias plus the mother of Jesus and his brothers.

[18:23] And what the text says is that all of these people gathered in this upper room and they had devoted themselves with one single purpose and that is for God to honour his word and to send the spirit of God and to honour the gospel and to spread it.

To be totally devoted allotted with one single purpose. Nehemiah is the Old Testament example of that.

Neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. This food allowance was claimed from the people of Jerusalem by means of taxation.

so the governor has the right to collect the taxes for the king but also for himself.

And Nehemiah has turned all of that aside and said I'm not interested. The earlier governors those who preceded me placed a heavy burden on the people and took 40 shekels of silver for them in addition to food and wine.

[19:48] Their assistants also lorded it over the people. Now all of this was going on with these former governors because they had an idea about the prestige of their own position and what they wanted.

They weren't all that interested in rebuilding Jerusalem. What they were interested in was living a luxurious life. Not only is this the action of the governors but we are told that their assistants also lorded it over the people.

These are mine officials and the administration. But Nehemiah says this in verse 15 but out of reverence for God I did not act like that.

Verse 16 Indeed I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assemblies there for the work assembled there for the work.

We did not acquire any land. So there's a great lesson here about Nehemiah's reverence for God and how he devotes himself to the work of God in rebuilding Jerusalem.

[21:19] Now because of this he's going to overcome these fantastic obstacles. The obstacles of Sanballat, Tobiah and the rest which are all in propaganda and not really in any force.

That can be set aside. more importantly this action of division which is going on in the midst that also is going to end.

Because what he's seeking to do is to create a united brotherhood a united force a united set of people who will like him be devoted to the work of God.

I devoted myself to the work on this wall. That could suggest that he lost his prestige as a governor. But that's not the case. Verses 17 and 18 Furthermore 150 Jews and officials ate at my table as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations.

[22:35] Yet in spite of all this I never demanded the food allowance allotted to the governor. So where did this food come from?

Scripture doesn't say. But perhaps Nehemiah would say it came by my careful budgeting of resources. It came because we made it a matter of prayer.

It came because we believed that God can indeed supply. So in other words all of this is turned round because of one man.

That one man as you remember from chapter 1 was not a prophet not a priest but cup bearer to the king.

king. And this is the man who says I devoted myself to the work on this wall.

[23 : 41] So what can we learn about this? If we seek God and we seek him to revive his work it requires that we act like Nehemiah.

We have to be singularly devoted to that one task. And Nehemiah ends as he does in other chapters by saying this remember me with favor oh my God for all I have done for this people.

Is that your prayer? We're going to sing. As we sing we're going to think of this devotionally.

Sing it two or three times. I invite you to think about it to consider what your response to the word of God is as I consider my response and pray God that we'll all be devoted to this work and we will see the hand of God moving for his own glory.

Thank you.