

# Nehemiah: The Enemy Within

REVIEW: We have been looking at the life and leadership of Nehemiah. So far we have seen Nehemiah's heart break with compassion as he wept for his countrymen and their plight in Jerusalem when he was hundreds of miles away. We asked ourselves what breaks our heart with compassion that would move us to action. We have seen Nehemiah was a pray-er. More than once we have seen Nehemiah depend on the Lord in prayer, which is a great challenge to all of us to follow his lead. We have also seen Nehemiah, while depending on God in prayer, was still a man of action. He planned for what he needed from the king, he planned what was needed to rebuild the wall.

Last time we saw how Nehemiah dealt with opposition. The opposition came in the form of the surrounding peoples trying to get the work on the wall to stop. First they ridiculed the workers, trying to discourage them. Then they turned it up and threatened violence. Nehemiah responded to both in prayer, and by posting a guard. To keep the work moving, all workers watched out for one another, with half holding spears and half working, and all having a sword at their side. We talked of how there were some great pictures of what the church is supposed to be like.

INTRO: Today we see more opposition to the building of the wall. However, the big difference between the two types of opposition is the direction from which it comes. In chapter four, the opposition was coming from without. Today, we are going to see the opposition from within, and how Nehemiah dealt with it.

Nehemiah 5 (p. 479)

## I. The great outcry - v. 1-5

### A. Notice what happens between chapters 4 and 5

1. In chapter 4 you have opposition from without
  - a) Does this not seem like something ripped from the headlines today
    - (1) Churches face opposition from outside the walls
    - (2) And about the time that dies down and the church can get on with its mission
2. In chapter 5, opposition from within
  - a) The Christian community starts to turn on itself
  - b) If you have been in this church long enough, you have seen this happen in the past
  - c) And it is one of those things we need to be on constant guard against
  - d) How foolish is it for the church to threaten her own mission by turning against itself
  - e) What did Jesus say, "a house divided against itself will fall"

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3. So before we start looking at the details and the verses, understand the overview
  - a) Nehemiah's plans would have been undone because of this threat from within
    - (1) The founding father's of this country have said that America will never fall from enemies from without
    - (2) If America falls it will be because of enemies from within
    - (3) And that is what is threatening Nehemiah and the Jewish people
  - b) The same is true of the church - the fastest thing to derail most plans of the Church is fighting among its people
    - (1) In fact, opposition from outside the church, as seen through history, makes the church grow
    - (2) It is opposition from inside the church that tears it apart
- B. The first thing I want you to notice in the verses is in verse 1 - who is giving this outcry?
  1. The men AND THEIR WIVES
  2. It is a rarity for the women of the community to be mentioned in Nehemiah
  3. And yet, here are the wives raising a stink over what is going on
    - a) So you know that this has to be important because they are mentioned
- C. This was an economic crisis that is hitting the Jews, and it is being brought on by fellow Jews
  1. Again, ripped from today's headlines - you would think Bernie Sanders would be jumping up and down over this passage
    - a) The 1% get richer
    - b) And the 99% get poorer
  2. Basically that is what is taking place here, and it is affecting four groups of people
    - a) First, people that owned no land but needed to eat
      - (1) They had large families to feed
      - (2) They had no grain and little to barter with
    - b) Second, in verse 3, others who had property, but had to mortgage it to get food
    - c) Third, in verse 4, those having trouble paying their taxes on their property
      - (1) The king had a tax on the property itself
      - (2) As well as on the crops the property yielded, and it was becoming a heavy burden

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- d) The fourth group is not mentioned outright, but they are there, the Jews that are exploiting their fellow Jews (v. 5)
- 3. The result of this exploitation was some families had to subject their children to slavery
  - a) Commentators are split over the significance of the daughters being mentioned twice
  - b) Most think that it is calling attention to the humiliation of having their daughters given as a second wife to their creditors
  - c) The point is that Jewish boys and girls had to choose between starvation and servitude
- D. It was lawful for the Jews to lend money to one another
  - 1. However, they were not to charge interest
  - 2. Deuteronomy 23:19-20 “Do not charge a fellow Israelite interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. <sup>20</sup> You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a fellow Israelite, so that the Lord your God may bless you in everything you put your hand to in the land you are entering to possess.”
  - 3. Turn to Leviticus 25:35-46
    - a) The people and the land belonged to God
    - b) God would not have them used for personal gain
- II. Nehemiah deals with the situation - v. 6-13
  - A. The first thing it says that Nehemiah did when he heard all of these charges was he got angry
    - 1. Now, chances are Nehemiah did not know this was going on before he arrived
      - a) He had one mission - to rebuild the wall
      - b) That was his focus
    - 2. The wall building may have made things even more difficult, but the people were not angry with Nehemiah, their complaints were against those exploiting them
    - 3. Some people do not like to read that Nehemiah got angry
      - a) Some have even re-translated the verse to remove the idea of anger
      - b) Even commentators have written lengthy sections on the righteousness or unrighteousness of Nehemiah’s anger
    - 4. Folks, let’s be real here, Nehemiah is angry because Jew is exploiting Jew - and this is directly against God’s Word
      - a) Nehemiah is angry because this is something God would be angry over
      - b) And that is a great lesson for us - righteous anger is anger over things that would make God angry

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- (1) So in Nehemiah's case, it is Jew exploiting other Jews - it is a social injustice
  - (2) Isaiah and several of the other prophets wrote about the injustice in the society and how God would bring judgment upon them because of the injustice
  - (3) There is a whole tradition of the church that has focused on social justice
    - (a) In many cases they have forgotten the gospel which gives the anger at social injustice its power
    - (b) However, they are a great reminder to us of being socially conscience
5. So let's make this more practical and more personal, what makes you angry?
- a) Not your neighbor next door trimming the shrubs again that you think are yours
  - b) What social injustices make you angry?
    - (1) Abortion - that little lives that had no say in being created are eliminated just as easily and without their permission
    - (2) Poverty - Have you ever thought of your standard of living as part of that issue? When people make some joke about their snowmobile not working - "first world problems" Does that make you angry?
    - (3) Human Trafficking - we have talked about
    - (4) Single parents needing help
    - (5) Addictions
    - (6) The list goes on
    - (7) What makes you angry that needs to be addressed?
    - (8) The thing that makes you angry may be the very thing that God is calling you to address in society
- B. Nehemiah consulted with himself - it literally means "My heart consulted within me"
1. Nehemiah mulls over the problem
  2. Then basically yells at the nobles about charging interest
    - a) The word in Hebrew lends itself to the idea of a lawsuit
    - b) However, the rest of the passage does not read that way - so perhaps it was more like formal charges in front of the people
    - c) By the way, to have this public meeting, which is called a large meeting, that means that work probably stopped on the wall
      - (1) The mission had to come to a halt while threats to the mission were dealt with

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- (2) But the threats were too great to continue to ignore
- (3) What good is it to build a wall to protect the Jews from threats when there were threats already happening inside the wall
- d) The question for us would be similar
  - (1) What good is it for the people of God to be on mission with one another
  - (2) When in reality they are hurting one another from inside the camp?
  - (3) Put another way, what good is it to maintain a separate Christian identity if Christians act just like non-Christians
  - (4) Let's not race past this question, because I think there is more relevance to this than we like to admit
    - (a) The world expects to see a difference in people that call themselves Christians - and when they don't, they can smell hypocrite from a mile away
      - i) Granted, it is unfair that sometimes non-Christians hold us to an impossible standard of perfection
      - ii) But if we are striving to be like Christ, is that not what we are striving for?
      - iii) Now we understand that perfection, this side of heaven is impossible
      - iv) But the world should see such a difference in us that it is striking
        - (1) When the world does not see us fighting against social injustice
        - (2) When the world sees us fighting with each other (and yes, they might not understand the reasons for the legitimate fights), but when that is what we are known for
        - (3) The world thinks, "why become one of them, they are no different than us anyway"
    - (b) There is no excuse for Christians fighting, or exploiting each other or anyone else for that matter
    - (c) We must set a better example if the world will ever take the Church seriously
    - (d) Let me re-emphasize one thing here
      - i) The world is sometimes more compassionate than is the Church
      - ii) The world is sometime more enthusiastic about engaging in social injustice than the Church

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- (1) The problem is the world has lost its moral compass
  - (2) It engages in things that are morally wrong in the name of social injustice
  - (3) Largely because the church has vacated this area of social justice
  - iii) When the world cares more than the Church about making this world into a better picture of what Christ had in mind in the first place, the Church needs to wake up and take a serious look at itself
  - iv) And that means, to bring this home
    - (1) If you are more worried about maintaining your little slice of the world than helping to change it in Jesus' name
    - (2) If you are not engaged in seeking to bring justice into this world, you need to reconsider your Christianity - because it is worthless as far as the world is concerned
      - (a) If you want to convince me or anyone else of your faith, and you are lazy, uncompassionate person that will not lift a finger to serve the world through this church, or in the world
      - (b) Hear again James 2:18 - "Show me your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by what I do"
      - (c) Deeds do not earn our faith - but they sure do prove our faith is real
      - (d) And if you are asking yourself, "How much do I need to do to be considered a true Christian?"
      - (e) You have already answered your own question - Getting away with the minimum shows where your heart is - God's call is total and complete
- C. Nehemiah's first point was they bought back the Jews from the Gentiles
1. Apparently, some Jews were sold into slavery to Gentiles around them
    - a) We are not sure who those Gentiles were
    - b) But they bought them back - they made a concerted effort to get the Jews back from slavery
  2. So Nehemiah's point is obvious: We bought back our people and now you are selling our people into slavery!
    - a) To this, they had nothing to say
    - b) How could they, this was very public knowledge
  3. Again, consider the witness this was to the outside world

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- a) Those outside the wall
  - b) Are watching those inside the wall take advantage and enslave each other
- D. Then Nehemiah makes it plain that what they are doing is not right
- 1. We already showed you that from the OT law, God did not want the Jews charging each other interest on loans
  - 2. So he expects that interest will stop
  - 3. Not only that, but that the land and houses that have been taken because people could not pay are to be returned
  - 4. And not only that, but that any interest that was taken will be returned
- E. And they agree!
- 1. That is pretty remarkable in itself
  - 2. That is like telling the Wall Street bankers that caused so much grief in recent years - “Give it all back” “Ummm, okay”
- F. Nehemiah made them take an oath to promise to do exactly what they said
- G. Then Nehemiah shook the folds of his robe
- 1. People back in those days would have a pocket in the gown
  - 2. Nehemiah’s shaking out of the robe symbolized a curse on those that would break their oath
  - 3. If they should fail to keep their promise, they would be shaken out in the same manner and have nothing left
    - a) The implication is that God (in whose name the oath was taken) would shake out the person
    - b) They would have nothing left in the land
- H. Then the worship service broke out
- 1. The people shouted “Amen” and praised the Lord
    - a) The word Amen means “let it be so”
    - b) So the people are in effect, agreeing with all that has been said
      - (1) The rebuke of those taking advantage
      - (2) The witness of the promise to stop taking advantage and to return that which they took inappropriately
  - 2. With the relief that came, the tension having passed, the people praised the Lord
- I. It was Nehemiah’s drastic measures that helped bring this about
- III. Nehemiah’s example - v. 14-19
- A. The chapter ends with Nehemiah showing us how he conducted himself
- 1. He said that he and his brothers never ate the food allowed for the governor
    - a) His brothers are probably the leaders under him

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- b) The governor was allowed to collect food from the people for himself, but Nehemiah refused
- c) He even contrasts himself with the governors before him
  - (1) They put a heavy burden on the people
  - (2) They took full advantage of their position, no matter what that meant to the people
- 2. Notice why Nehemiah refused to take advantage of his position
  - a) “Out of reverence for God”
  - b) Nehemiah’s behavior toward his fellow man was affected by his fear of the Lord
    - (1) He would not take advantage of his position
    - (2) His love for the Lord would not allow it
    - (3) And that is how we are to act
      - (a) Our love, our faith in God, our fear of the Lord had better affect how we treat others
      - (b) That means no pride
        - i) We don’t hold on to our rights
        - ii) We lay them down for the good of others
      - (c) It means not taking advantage of people
    - c) Nehemiah’s self sacrifice is a valuable lesson for each of us
- B. More than that, look back at verse 17
  - 1. Nehemiah hosted 150 Jews at his table
    - a) Nehemiah was generous!
    - b) Very generous
      - (1) I have had to pay the bill for 25 youth group kids and I know what that is like
      - (2) Imagine 150 Jews that had been working hard on a wall
  - 2. To feed that many people, Nehemiah had to slaughter a lot of animals
  - 3. In spite of it all, Nehemiah never demanded food from the people
- C. And this is how he conducted himself for the entire time he was there - 12 years - v. 14
- D. At the end, he asks God to remember him with favor
  - 1. Which I have little doubt God was doing
  - 2. To continue this for 12 years was to display a generosity that most do not experience
- E. I hope that Nehemiah is also a great example to us of generosity
  - 1. We are not here to lord it over others with what we have, and how we keep it
  - 2. We are here to be generous, to share what we have with those that do not have as much

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3. And honestly, that is a lot of fun - to be generous and helping others

CONCLUSION: We have seen Nehemiah deal with opposition from without, and now from within. Next week we will see Nehemiah deal with even more opposition.