

Study Notes: Nehemiah 5:1-13
September 10, 2023: “How Do You Solve A Problem? Like Nehemiah”
Prepared by Reverend Robert W. Rice
Pastor, Muncy Baptist Church

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. Some were saying, “We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.” Others were saying, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.” Still others were saying, “We have 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 fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.”

- Amidst the opposition and problems the people faced from their enemies, now there were also problems amongst the people. Many Jewish people were facing hunger and debt amidst a famine that was taking place.
 - Biblical Scholar James Boice notes, “Suddenly, to judge from the tone of chapter 5, a new form of opposition erupted and from an unexpected source. The first two forms of opposition had been from without, from Israel’s enemies. This new form was from within. It arose because of wrong conduct by some of the Jewish people themselves.”
 - The “great outcry” is reminiscent of the people’s cry in Exodus when they were enslaved (see Exodus 3:9). This was a major problem that must be dealt with.
- Biblical Scholar James Boice details how these problems came about, “The sequence would be: (1) a lack of adequate food, or hunger, (2) the mortgaging of the fields for short-term cash to buy grain and pay taxes, (3) loss of the fields because of an inability to repay what was borrowed, and (4) the selling of sons and daughters either into indentured service or outright slavery for the sake of survival.”
- Rather than cooperation between the people, there were feelings of unrest. Some of the poorer people felt powerless, while those who were well-off continued to gain both money and power.

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are charging your own people interest!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: “As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

- When Nehemiah heard about this problem, he became angry. In a sense, Nehemiah’s anger was righteous anger because he was angry that God’s people were being mistreated and oppressed.
- Rather than allow his anger to consume him, Nehemiah took time to think and decide how to respond to what was happening. He confronted the nobles and officials, who charged interest and allowed people to be sold into slavery. Both these actions were against the Law (see Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25:35–37, 39–41).
 - The Faithlife Study Bible explains the phrase “accused” is a legal term, “This Hebrew term used here, *arivoh*, has legal-judicial significance. The prophets often used this term to describe Yahweh’s covenantal lawsuit against those guilty of breaking His laws.”

- Upon hearing these accusations, the leaders made no response, because they could not deny that they had done these things.

So I continued, “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.”

- Nehemiah continued to confront the officials, telling them that they were wrong for charging interest and taking the people’s possessions.
- Nehemiah did not suggest that the officials should stop lending money and grain, but did tell them to stop charging interest and give the people back their possessions and the interest that the officials had already charged.
- The New American Commentary finds a biblical pattern for conflict resolution in Nehemiah’s response, “Tollefson’s sociological reading of Nehemiah reveals a model for conflict resolution: (1) ‘Separate the people from the problem.’ Instead of seeing the problem as a class conflict, Nehemiah treated it as a community problem (v. 8). (2) ‘Focus on interests, not positions.’ Nehemiah showed the rich that their actions were hurting the whole community (v. 9). (3) ‘Generate a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do.’ Nehemiah proposed a solution that benefited the whole community (vv. 10–12). (4) ‘Insist that the results be based on some objective standard, tradition, or authority.’ Nehemiah based his solution on biblical principles (v. 13).”

“We will give it back,” they said. “And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.” Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, “In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!” At this the whole assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

- The people received Nehemiah’s word, and promised to keep it. Nehemiah symbolically shook out his robe as a sign of what would happen to those who refused to keep this word. Such a person would be emptied of their possessions.
- The people affirmed this course of action, and they did what they promised to do.

Verses 14-19 of this chapter indicate that Nehemiah did not just cause the people to take action, but he, himself, took action, as well. He refused to lord his position of governor over the people, not imposing a heavy tribute, but instead he cared for the people and provided for their needs. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary notes, “Nehemiah, like Paul, bent over backwards and sacrificed even what was normally his due to serve as an example to the people (1 Co 9; 2 Th 3:8)...Nehemiah’s behavior as governor was guided by principles of service rather than by opportunism.”