

BEN WASHINGTON BAPTIST CHURCH

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Wednesday Noon Bible Study

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The Book of Nehemiah – Chapter 5

CHAPTER 5

THE WORK IS THREATENED INTERNALLY

1. Financial problems threaten the work.

A great outcry of the people stops the work of rebuilding the wall. And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren.

Chapter four ended on a note of great victory. The people of God were doing 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. But in this section of chapter five, there is no mention of working on the wall, indicating that the **work had stopped**.

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 weren't unified and working together. A great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren meant **one group fought against another**. When God's people fight one another, they certainly are neither fighting the real enemy nor getting God's work done.

(2-5) The reason for strife among God's people: money problems.

For there were those who said, "We, our sons, and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain, that we may eat and live." There were also some who said, "We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine." There were also those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our lands and vineyards. Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been brought into slavery. It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards."

Nehemiah is not primarily a book about money; it is a book about rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and bringing God's people into a place of peace, security, and blessing. **Yet money problems directly affected the rebuilding work.**

Most of the time money problems affect a building project because there isn't enough money to do the work. But the job of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem seems to have been paid for by the king of Persia, who provided the necessary building materials for Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:8) and sent him with royal guards (Nehemiah 1:9).

Nehemiah's money problems were different; they were money problems among the people that harmed the unity among the people of God.

People had money problems because they worked hard on the walls and did not spend the same time on providing for the needs of their household.

If you want to spend much time directly ministering to the needs of God's people and in spreading the gospel, in most cases it will affect your **ability to provide**. Ministry takes time, and time spent on ministry is time you aren't making money. If one gets to the place where the ministry is your way of making a living, one should be used to not making a lot of money – or the transition will be rather difficult.

People had money problems because there was a famine, 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.

People had money problems because the government kept taxing them even though they weren't 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.

We have borrowed money... indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves:

People had financial problems because the loans they had taken out to live cost interest, and some were in default. Therefore, some had to give their children as servants to their lenders to pay off the debt.

As will be indicated later (Nehemiah 5:11, the hundredth part), **the rich were taking advantage of the crisis to make money off the poor, charging 12% interest a year.**

It isn't unusual for money problems to create strife and completely disrupt what God wants to do. If Nehemiah and his people did not find a way to do what God wanted them to do with their money and money problems, the work of God would be stopped – without a single arrow being fired by the enemies of God.

We sometimes want to separate what we do with our money from our walk with God. This is a huge deception from Satan. Buying a house is a spiritual decision, not just a financial one. Taking a job, choosing a career, deciding how much money you should make – all these are matters that will directly affect your walk with God, both now and in the future.

If we don't handle our money with the right heart, and make financial decisions with an eye to eternity, we can make mistakes that will affect the work of God in our lives for years and years.

Essential to handling our money with the right heart before God is **being a giver**. Being a giver to the work of the Lord helps us always remember that **God and His kingdom come first**. The New Testament tells us our giving should be **regular, thoughtful, proportional**, and **private** (1 Corinthians 16:1-4); that it must be **generous, freely given**, and **cheerful** (2 Corinthians 9).

Money problems are rarely only money problems. We often think if we just had more money, our money problems would go away. It isn't true – and that's a proven fact, just by looking at the lives of many of those that win a lottery or come into unexpected riches. If they had money problems before – if they didn't know how to handle their money and glorify God with it – they won't know after. The same problems will soon show up again, often bigger than ever.

(6) Nehemiah's immediate reaction: anger.

And I became very angry when I heard their outcry and these words.

Nehemiah became angry because these money problems were caused, in part, because of the greed of those who wanted to make a profit off of the money troubles of others, something Moses' law clearly said was wrong (Exodus 22:25).

Nehemiah became angry because these money problems led to a **lack of unity among the people of God**. This unity was more precious than any amount of money.

No mention was made of the work on the walls. Nehemiah got angry because these money problems **stopped the work of the LORD** in rebuilding the walls. It must have frustrated him that they could stand so strong against an enemy but fall so quickly to these kinds of problems.

(7-11) Nehemiah's wise response: confronting those who were in the wrong.

After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers, and said to them, "Each of you is exacting usury from his brother." So I called a great assembly against them. And I said to them, "According to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations. Now indeed, will you even sell your brethren? Or should they be sold to us?" Then they were silenced and found nothing to say. Then I said, "What you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies? I also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury! Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them."

This was great leadership from Nehemiah. He was a man passionate enough to get angry; but wise enough to not act until he had considered the matter carefully.

Nehemiah was **no coward**. When people were in the wrong, **he confronted them**. He told the truth, and from the result (Nehemiah 5:12-13), we can judge that he must have told the truth in love. Nehemiah teaches us that the way a leader should approach problems is head on.

Usury is interest that is either too high or should not be charged at all. 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.

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.

Nehemiah noted that when Judah was conquered, many Jews were sold as slaves to foreigners and many of them had been bought out of slavery by other Jews. Because of this, it was very wrong to have Jews being sold into slavery to other Jews because they couldn't pay off high-interest loans.

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 money will come from it; not if it is right or wrong.

Nehemiah was not asking the nobles and the rulers to just feel bad, or to just stop what they were doing; they had to set the wrong they had done right. If money had been charged unfairly or collateral was taken unfairly, it had to be set right.

(12-13) The response of the rulers and nobles who had done wrong.

So they said, "We will restore it, and will require nothing from them; we will do as you say." Then I called the priests, and required an oath from them that they would do according to this promise. Then I shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out each man from his house, and from his property, who does not perform this promise. Even thus may he be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said, "Amen!" and praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise.

We will restore it: This was good. 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 if money is involved.

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 – something we often need to help us do what our spirit is willing to do, but our flesh is weak to do! Perhaps accountability is a missing step in dealing with an area where you are having a hard time doing what is right.

Nehemiah's godly example.

(14-16) Nehemiah did not tax the people.

Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year until the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the governor's provisions. But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people, and took from them bread and wine, besides forty shekels of silver. Yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so, because of the fear of God. Indeed, I also continued the work on this wall, and we did not buy any land. All my servants were gathered there for the work.

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 (others had done it before him), but he didn't take that right because it wouldn't help the work of God.

The **apostle Paul** is another great example of someone who had the right to be supported but didn't take that right because it was better for the cause of the gospel (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 a minister to be able to devote himself full time to the care and teaching of God's people, he should be supported. If it is better for him not to be supported that way, he shouldn't. There's something wrong with a minister who will only minister to God's people if the money is right.

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.

I did not do so, because of the fear of God: Nehemiah could say this because it didn't matter to him what others did, how the crowd acted, what the rest of the world thought. He lived by another standard. We should have even better standard than Nehemiah did, and we should say, when confronted by the sin this world takes for granted, I did not do so, because of the love of Jesus.

(17-18) Nehemiah's example of generosity.

And at my table were one hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. Now that which was prepared daily was one ox and six choice sheep. Also fowl were prepared for me, and once every ten days an abundance of all kinds of wine. Yet in spite of this I did not demand the governor's provisions, because the bondage was heavy on this people.

Nehemiah not only did not take when he could have; he also gave when he didn't 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 150 people regularly.

Nehemiah could have taken more (the governor's provisions), but he didn't. Therefore, Nehemiah was an example for what he did not take and for what he did not keep.

Because the bondage was heavy on this people: Nehemiah, in his own life, lived the way he told the nobles and rulers to live – to not 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) Nehemiah's prayer, asking God to remember his good deeds.

Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.

Some think that Nehemiah was wrong for saying all the good things he did. Jesus clearly taught us that our good works must not be done to show others how spiritual we are.

Matthew 6:1-4: *Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.*

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 see all or part of this book, because it was written as a diary.

In our own private time with the LORD, it is entirely appropriate – and right – to say, “Remember me, my God, for good” – to have confidence in our heavenly reward, instead of the praise of men.

According to all that I have done for this people: We should be glad that God took this personal diary of Nehemiah and gave it to us. It shows us that a leader must first lead by example, and that Nehemiah could tell others to do what was right here because his own walk was right. His public words and private actions said the same thing.