

## Healing Old Wounds Nehemiah 5

A fortune-teller studied the young man's hand and told him, "You will be poor and very unhappy until age 37..."

The young man asked, "Does that mean that I will become rich and happy?"

Said the fortune-teller, "No, you'll still be poor, but you'll be used to it by then."

The frustrations and bitterness associated with poverty and class distinction raised its ugly head even as the walls of Jerusalem steadily rose to the sky. Under any circumstances, it would have been amazing that these walls that had laid in ruins for over a century could be restored in only fifty-two days. It was a massive task. But as we saw last week, an alliance of nations led by Sanballat the Horonite gathered to oppose the Jews. They breathed threats against the Jews. They even assembled for war. Work on the wall had to cease briefly so that Nehemiah could organize the city to display a show of strength and a willingness to defend itself against its enemies.

Now, another problem surfaced. It was not a new problem. It existed well before Nehemiah ever hit town. The poor in the land were in dire financial straits. And, even though the enthusiastic response to Nehemiah's plan to restore the city walls was city-wide, all that attention and energy turned to a single cause may have exacerbated the plights of those who were struggling with every bit of their energy and resources just to feed their families and manage their debts.

Poverty alone was not the most sinister aspect of this new challenge. Evidently, the rich had exploited the poor in order to become even richer. A seething resentment laid behind what Nehemiah describes in verse 1 as a "great outcry against their Jewish brothers" by the poor.

### I. The Nation's Unresolved Distress (1-8)

#### A. Economic Setbacks Had Crippled the Poor verses 1-5

<sup>1</sup>Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. <sup>2</sup>Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."

<sup>3</sup>Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine."

<sup>4</sup>Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. <sup>5</sup>Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons 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."

A frenzied crowd of both men and women indicated that this outcry was not over a simple labor grievance or a matter of local politics. Frantic parents feared for their families' well-being in the throes of a current famine. The nation was overcrowded. The parcel of ground that the Persians allowed the Jews to repopulate after the captivity was not as large as the nation that Babylon had conquered in the first place. "We have to have food to stay alive!" they cried. Some had mortgaged their homes and their holdings just to buy food – a drastic measure for a very temporary fix.

Others had borrowed money to pay their taxes to the Persian throne. From the remote regions of the empire, the king did not accept payment in commodities, but only in silver and gold coin. Persia melted down these coins and stored them as bullion. When Alexander the Great defeated Susa, the capital of Persia, he found 270 tons of gold and 1200 tons of silver sitting in the royal reserves. Taking all this coinage out of circulation drove up inflation. Whatever meager funds an occupied people such as the Jews could scrape together didn't buy what it should have.

To secure the money they needed for taxes, some resorted to selling their children into slavery. That seems like a heartless measure at first glance, but at least a slave was fed. Of course, these people had already mortgaged their houses and lands, so even when the famine passed and the taxes were paid, they had no means to redeem their children out of slavery.

### **B. The Rich Were Exploiting their Struggling Countrymen verses 6-8**

The outcry of the poor Jews was not against foreigners, but against their own countrymen. Rich Jews held the mortgages on the homes of the poor Jews. Rich Jews held the fields of the poor Jews as pledges for the cash loans to meet the Persian tax burden. Rich Jews purchased the sons and daughters of the poor Jews as slaves. These practices were not precisely forbidden when the benefit was mutual. But they were expressly forbidden when the intent of a wealthy man was to improve his own permanent holdings by exploiting the misfortunes of his poorer countrymen.

Bond-servant arrangements, holding property in pledge, issuing loans – all of these practices were allowed against the backdrop of the year of Jubilee. Once every seven years, indentured servants were freed, property was returned to its ancestral owners and debts were cancelled. But, this great outcry of the poor against the rich reflected no hope of a Jubilee. Perhaps, the time of Jubilee had passed. Perhaps, the Jubilee was a tidbit of ancient Law that the rich simply ignored.

Nehemiah was immediately angry, but he remained thoughtful. He "pondered" these issues, searching for the right response. Flying off the handle and saying hurtful things is one way to handle anger, but Nehemiah was determined to be constructive. To the rich, he simply spoke the facts. I don't picture ranting and raving. He didn't address the motives of their hearts. He simply stated what was true; "This is what you are doing to your own people." Who knows, perhaps the spiritual momentum generated by the wall project had already begun to soften the hearts of many toward matters of community and justice and God. They said nothing. There was nothing to say.

### **C. Discord Within Was More Crippling than 100 Sanballats outside the Wall**

When threats rise up against the church from the outside, Christians often rally together. They find strength in one another. Historically, the church becomes more vibrant. Before he met Jesus, Saul spearheaded a persecution against the church in Jerusalem. All he accomplished was to scatter missionaries all over the globe. On the other hand, threats from within the church are more like a virus. They don't seem as deadly as an advancing army, but they drain our vitality and destroy our health. Jesus was praying for the internal health of the church when He prayed:

... I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. – John 17:23

## II. The Nobility's Unlimited Repentance (9-13)

### A. The Governor Demanded a Remedy of the Rich verses 9-11

In verse 9, Nehemiah said, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of God ...?" The biggest traps that people of faith fall into are when they live as though they are not people of faith at all. If it is the fool who says in his heart, "There is no God," then it follows that the height of foolish behavior for a believer is to behave as though God is not paying attention. What the rich Jews were doing, they were doing under the scrutiny of God in heaven.

Nehemiah told the nobles to consider a watching world ... "to avoid the reproach of our neighbors" (verse 9). God selected a covenant people for the purpose of bringing Jesus into the world. But, He also intended that they would reflect His character and holiness to the world around them. Ideally, Jew and Gentile alike would conclude, "There is no God like *JEHOVAH*." This was not possible when the poor in Jerusalem were seething at the rich, and when the rich were victimizing the poor. When the people of God look just like the people of the world, what can possibly compel the people of the world to say, "Tell us about your God"?

Nehemiah called the rich to loving kindness. He, his brothers and his closest companions had been helping the poor since they had arrived, but they were not holding precious properties as pledges and they were not charging interest. He told the nobles to stop what they had been doing, to alter their actions toward the poor, to return the vineyards and the children and the houses and to even stop charging that one percent interest compounded monthly on what others owed them.

### B. The Nobles Responded Wholeheartedly verses 12, 13

I do not want to rob Nehemiah of his due, but I have to believe that something was going on here besides the mere eloquence of one man. God was working in the hearts of His people. They were tired of business as usual, and to a man, they repented of how they had treated their brothers:

<sup>12</sup>"We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say." - Nehemiah 5:12

The nobles obeyed. They never even hesitated. But Nehemiah knew human nature and they knew themselves. Good intentions are short-lived. They needed to make themselves accountable to one another and to God. So, collectively, they swore an oath. An oath among the Jews was a solemn declaration into which God Himself was invited as a witness. Jesus taught that oaths should be unnecessary for insuring that a citizen of God's kingdom is telling the truth, but He never condemned the value of an oath for joining men together in solemn accountability.

They also accepted a curse upon themselves which said essentially: "If any man today does not keep his word, may God rid Himself of that man!" Nehemiah illustrated this by shaking out the folds of his robe. The folds of the robe were where guys carried their stuff. It would be like me tossing all my stuff in my pockets in the trash. Picture it. Nehemiah shook out his robe. Out flew loose change, a box of *Tic-Tacs*, a Swiss Army knife and the peanut butter sandwich he had packed for lunch. And, as all that paraphernalia went flying through the air, the message was, "May those items be me and that fold the one in God's robe if I ever exploit my brothers again.

### **C. Unity Never Comes without Changes of Heart**

A woman testified to the transformation in her life that had resulted through her experience in conversion. She declared, "I'm so glad I got religion. I have an uncle I used to hate so much I vowed I'd never even go to his funeral. But now, why, I'd be happy to go to it any time."

As remarkable and rapid as the repentance of the rich oppressors was, it only represented half of the battle for unity within the walls of Jerusalem. From the poor, much forgiveness would need to be extended. Had Sanballat attacked the city and been driven away, it would have been easier for the people to forgive and forget his misdeeds than it would be to embrace one another. He would be back in Samaria. He would be out of sight and out of mind. Being restored to those nearby so that a sense of community could be genuinely re-forged would be much tougher.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Unity requires hard work and attentiveness. The old man of sin within each of us by nature serves himself. When people in community only look after themselves, they can only fly apart. Unity means that we sacrifice our ambitions, expectations, rights, pride, grudges, safety and comfort if that is what is required to make the whole strong.

## **III. Nehemiah's Unselfish Example (14-19)**

### **A. His Noble Governorship**

A doctor and a lawyer were conversing at a party. While they were talking, a woman approached the doctor and complained about a sore leg. The doctor listened, then told her about applying cold compresses, keeping the leg elevated, taking aspirin, *etc.* After she had gone, the doctor said to the lawyer, "Do you think I ought to send her a bill?" The lawyer said, "Yes, I think you should." So the next day, the doctor sent the woman a bill...and the lawyer sent the doctor a bill.

We cannot always grasp for that to which we think we are entitled. The rich needed to stop sinning against the poor, and they did, but they needed to do more than that. To stop doing harm was good, but to sacrifice to proactively better the situation of their impoverished brothers was better. Nehemiah would show them how. As the Persian-appointed governor, he was the most powerful man in town. Any example he set for the rest of the nobility would be significant.

As the governor, he refused the perks of his office: "...neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor (verse 14). Unlike some governors who had preceded him, Nehemiah cared more about helping his people than amassing personal power and fortune. As a governor, it was expected that he lavishly entertain local officials and foreign dignitaries. Earlier governors had exacted 40 shekels plus food and wine daily from the population. Nehemiah knew that this was more than the people could handle, so he abruptly discontinued receiving this allotment.

Nehemiah reigned in his underlings. Speaking of earlier governors, he wrote: "Their assistants also lorded it over the people" (verse 15). History is filled with rulers who were less oppressive toward the people than the staff that served them. In Susa, a man named Haman rose to a position of prominence under King Xerxes. He had designs on destroying the entire Jewish race. But, by God's providence, the king's new queen, Deborah, was a Jewess, who brought the plot to the king's attention. Nehemiah was a conscientious governor. He knew what kind of people served him and he insisted that they share his pity and compassion for a burdened nation.

Nehemiah and his close associates attended to the wall. They had the same opportunity as other nobles in the city to acquire the land of desperate farmers. But, the fortification of Jerusalem was the supreme item on the national agenda. That along with love and kindness toward the nation prevented Nehemiah and his associates from engaging in any such profiteering.

Nehemiah drew on his own personal fortune in order to fulfill the expectations of governance:

<sup>17</sup>Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. <sup>18</sup>Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds ... – Nehemiah 5:17

## **B. His Noble Motivations**

Nehemiah was motivated by the fear of God. Speaking of earlier governors and their staff, he wrote: “But out of reverence for God I did not act like that” (verse 15). Nehemiah had rebuked the nobles about their failure to treat their countrymen as if they feared God. Now, we observe that this was a genuine part of his own decision making. These were God’s people, His flock. What was the gentlest and most loving way he could deal with them in the eyes of God?

Nehemiah cared for his people: “I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people” (verse 18). I think of Paul in his ministry at Corinth. Some questioned his apostolic credentials, whether he really measured up to others who had seen the resurrected Jesus. After all, Jesus allegedly appeared to Paul in a special vision some years later and even Paul admitted that he was “untimely born” in this matter of apostleship. Still, he defended his right to be supported like any other apostle. But, to avoid a hardship on the Corinthians (perhaps, a burden of controversy more than finances), Paul took nothing from them.

Most importantly, Nehemiah was moved by a yearning for God’s approval: “Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people” (verse 19). The Jews did not have a well-developed concept of eternal rewards. Still, Nehemiah simply wanted to be in favor with God. For this man driven to please God, obedience to His will was the height of contentment.

## **An Observation on Loving Relationships**

The work on the wall was crucial. Jerusalem had to keep the bad guys out. But, this little interlude reminds us that community safety and health require more than just guarding ourselves from the world outside. Loving relationships must abound on the inside. Nehemiah doesn’t say much about love in his various speeches, but his actions speak volumes. His love for his people was unfeigned, practical and obvious to all for it manifested itself in his personal surrender of his own wealth and rights so as to benefit others. That is what New Testament *agapao* love is.

<sup>16</sup>This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. <sup>17</sup>If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? <sup>18</sup>Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. – 1 John 3:16-18

When this kind of unfeigned, practical love is operative in the church, it has a magnetic drawing power that no program, method, style or innovation can ever duplicate.