

Nehemiah: Prejudice and the Poor

Nehemiah 5:1-13

By **Dr. Derek Thomas**

*The Lord's Day Evening
September 21, 2008*

Please be seated. Now turn with me in your Bibles once again to the book of Nehemiah, and to chapter 5. We'll be reading together the first thirteen verses of Nehemiah 5...verses 1-13. Before we read the Scriptures together, let's look to God in prayer.

Lord, as we still our hearts, as we gather our thoughts together, as we read Your holy word, we once again acknowledge that unless You grant us illumination, unless by Your Spirit You shine upon these dull minds and hearts and spirits of ours that we will not understand, let alone do what it is that You ask us to do. As we read this passage tonight we are thankful for the gospel. Thank You for the forgiveness of sins. Thank You for the peace that passes all understanding that comes from resting in Jesus only. Now grant Your blessing we pray. We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now hear with me God's word:

Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive." There were also those who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine." And there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards."

I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, "You are exacting interest, each from his brother." And I held a great assembly against them and said to them, "We, as far as we are

able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!" They were silent and could not find a word to say. So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them." Then they said, "We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say." And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my garment and said, "So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said "Amen" and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

So far God's holy, inerrant word.

Foreclosures...corporate greed...mortgage crisis...*laissez faire* economics...government interventionism...lending fees...fiscal liquidity. No, those aren't headlines from this week's newspaper, though they might well have been. They actually summarize Nehemiah 5. [And you say to yourself, 'What has Nehemiah 5 got to do with me?']

Well, let's remind ourselves of where we were. The people of God in Jerusalem, they've been building this wall and they have met opposition from without... from outside. A band — a consortium of tribal clans have endeavored to come as would-be terrorists to destroy them and theirs, and that has been defeated. That threat seemingly has now gone. So what does Satan do to prevent the advancement of the kingdom of God? Well, he turns to another strategy. He turns inside. He applies the rule "divide and conquer," because it almost always works. When there's opposition from outside, the people rally together. When there's opposition within, the people fragment. That's the strategy.

We'll see here in this section three distinct elements. First of all, in verses 1-5, there are three allegations that are being made. Then in verses 6-11, you'll see the steps that Nehemiah took in order to eradicate these charges. And then in the closing verses we see just a beautiful response.

I. Allegations

It's about a month or so into the rebuilding of the wall — that's all. It's only a couple of months. Nehemiah has arisen to an extraordinary leadership in the space of a couple of months, but the scale of the task is enormous. The tendency

to defeatism is great, and there's trouble. There's trouble within. There's trouble amongst the people of God. The conditions of work were difficult. The hours that Nehemiah had demanded—night shifts—you can imagine the scenario. Mama isn't happy! He's coming home at odd hours, falls asleep from exhaustion, the crops are not being tended to, there's no food on the table. The wives and children are in desperate straits. Like a lightning bolt this comes out of the blue. It's almost as though — from the angle of Nehemiah — it's almost as though he hadn't even seen it, he hadn't anticipated this. Families are at each other's throats. Accusations are being hurled — three in particular. They're coming from three distinct groups. The first seems to come from those who had no land — the poor. They had enlisted, you see, in Nehemiah's workforce. But building walls for Jerusalem to protect people who probably lived in Jerusalem, and these people did not, did not put food on the table. These are folk living at subsistence level.

The reference in the first two verses to wives and sons and daughters suggests that there's family strife within the family itself — let alone strife between Jew and fellow Jew. But there's strife within the family itself...the wives, the sons, the daughters. It's not putting food on the table. It's all very exciting to join this workforce and to be amongst the brothers and to play at soldiers...but we're starving.

The target is Nehemiah, but the target is also, and perhaps more especially, fellow Jews — brothers...merchant classes...merchant class land owners who are using — abusing — the poorer sections of the community. It's a classic case of the proletariat complaining that the *bourgeoisie*, the well-off, the landowners, are having it their own way. It's a familiar picture, and the cry, the charge is exploitation.

There's a second charge, and it comes from landowners because there's a famine. And the landowners have mortgaged their land in order to have money to buy seed for a harvest. But they're not working on their harvest. And although the threat, I think, is a potential threat, the needs of the first are self-evident. These, this second group, were anticipating that there would be no harvest, or at least a poor harvest, an insufficient harvest to provide the means to pay back what they had borrowed. There would be no cash to redeem their property, and there would be consequences. They might lose their property altogether. It might be confiscated from them. They might have to give their children to what in effect was a form of slavery to work off their debt. And if they lost their land, they were possibly facing a never-ending situation in which their children would never be able to redeem themselves.

Now there were laws, of course—laws that seemingly had been forgotten. They are laws that we've looked at in recent days in the study of the Five Books of Moses: laws in Exodus 21; laws in Leviticus 25; laws about mortgaging land; laws about the right way for children to be used to pay off family debt. The maximum period according to the law was six years, and then everything was to

revert back to the owner. There were laws about the loss of land. A redeemer kinsman, for example, could redeem that land. At the Year of Jubilee, all that land reverted back to the family. You never did own land as such in Israel. Land always belonged to God. You had the use of the land.

There's a third group, and these are complaining about, yes, taxes! The poor have nothing at all. The landowners are up to their necks in debt, and then there's another group who are complaining about taxation. The Persians loved to tax. Artaxerxes I, the king that Nehemiah worked for as a cupbearer, was known for his taxation policies. When Alexander the Great conquered Susa, where we first met Nehemiah, he discovered 270 tons of gold bullion and 1200 tons of silver bullion, and that was just in Susa. They were taxed for ownership of land, ownership of vineyards, and little of this taxation went back to the satrapies, the local Persian government officials, to provide for certain needs of the community. In order to pay this tax, they too are borrowing, and borrowing at exorbitant interest rates...credit card rates! From what seems to be loan sharks within the community of Israel itself.

Now, the prophet Ezekiel, for example, lambasts against the loan sharks in the second chapter of Ezekiel. They've mortgaged their property, there is little by way of hope for a harvest, children have been sent out to work — and worse. In verse 5, "...yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved." Now some commentators suggest — believe — that the second reference to daughters is that these girls had been sent to local Persian government officials as sex slaves in order to delay foreclosure. No wonder fighting has broken out. In fact, it's a wonder this project ever started. I mean, if those are the conditions, and they may be exaggerated in the heat of the ensuing battle here, but if those are the conditions it's a wonder, it's a phenomenon that this project ever began. Times were bad.

Do you think times are bad? I mean, really. Do you think times are bad this week in the financial markets? I daren't go there. But however bad you may think they are, I doubt that they're this bad. They may be for some. You're wondering what has the Bible to do with me. You're wondering what these strange books of the Old Testament have to do with anything in 2008. You know, my friends, this could have been written yesterday. These are the headlines in the newspapers throughout this week. The same issues — the haves and have nots. Is it right to charge usury? Is it right to charge interest? What rate of interest? The whole business about mortgaging and lending and so on and so forth...and there's trouble. There's deep and desperate trouble among the people of God. Brother is accusing brother. The kingdom of God is about to fall apart. Satan has shot an arrow right into the very core of the kingdom. He's dividing them from one another, and conquering.

The church is always just a knife edge away from division and conquering. I had a long email this morning from a dear friend in South Africa. It was long! [I have a

policy about emails: if it doesn't fall on the screen, I never read the rest!] This one I read. It would make your heart break. It was about division. It was about church politics. It was about brother at the throat of another brother, and he was right in the middle of it, and could I give advice. I wanted to say my email doesn't work.

II. Nehemiah's solution to correct the abuses

What's Nehemiah's response? He's facing issues of inequality. Do you hear the accusation? Do you hear how personal it gets? When they say my children are the same as other children; they're not better than our children? Of course these are the issues that drove Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* to suggest that capitalism fails, and that what you should have is socialism. Now that's not Nehemiah's solution. Let's watch Nehemiah's solution. And partly we must have an eye here not for legislation in the state so much as legislation among the people of God, legislation in the church.

His first reaction (vs. 6), he was angry. You know there's a time when we should be angry. In fact if you're never angry about anything at all, there's something wrong with you. How can you be a Christian and not be angry? Angry at injustice? Angry at the murder of the unborn? How can you not be angry? How can there not rise up within you an emotional response to the people of God who are at each other's throats, and they're hurting? Some of these charges are reflecting deep, deep hurt among the people of God. And Nehemiah is angry! The New Testament says be angry and sin not. Be angry and sin not. (That's easier to say than do, of course.)

The second thing (vs. 7), and it's almost as though Nehemiah is aware of what Paul is going to say, because the second thing he does in verse 7, "I took counsel with myself." He doesn't say anything first of all. He just retreats and thinks and ponders, and reflects. Because anger is a dangerous emotion. You need to count to a hundred when you feel angry, and don't say a word. Don't say a word. Button that lip when you feel angry! Because what's going to come out isn't going to be nice, and oftentimes won't even be appropriate. So Nehemiah ponders. He thinks.

And then thirdly, he goes straight to the top. He calls for what is basically a cabinet meeting. He calls for the officials and the nobles. Actually these are the landowners. These are the "haves" rather than the have nots here. Power corrupts. Power corrupts.... They were exacting usury.

Now let's be clear on this if we can. Ligon has addressed this in expositions most recently of Leviticus 25. Profiteering on the back of social deprivation, that's what Nehemiah is talking about. Now the Old Testament has a lot to say about economics, and the economic laws of the Old Testament were designed to prevent, or at least limit, growth of private wealth at the cost of justice, or at the

cost of oppression. Usury, for example...you'll find the laws of usury, charging interest on a loan. And you'll find the laws in Exodus 21-22, and you'll find them again in Leviticus 25.

Now, it's my understanding that the Old Testament was not opposed to usury *per se*. It wasn't opposed to the principle of charging interest on a loan. In fact, it is very clear that in the case of foreigners the Jews could charge interest on loans given to foreigners. Now where the Old Testament does have restrictions about usury is in the case of brothers who are in need, desperate need, so that the charging of usury in that instance becomes an example of exploitation, and in that case they were not to charge interest and therefore make a profit at the expense of other people's need.

The Old Testament had specific laws about pledges — pledges as security against a loan. If you gave your cloak, for example, as security against a loan, you were to get that cloak back at nightfall. There were laws about mortgaging land, and laws about children who are used in employment in order to pay off those loans.

But something much worse than that is taking place here. That's not what's in this Nehemiah 5. There is exploitation here. They are in fact, some of them, involved in what looks like a slave trade. They are taking children as security against a loan, and then they were selling these children to foreigners — perhaps even to Persian officials. And then Nehemiah says, 'We've bought some of these back.' Verse 10: "I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields..." Nehemiah suggests in this passage that they were actually buying back these slaves at public expense. So you've got this scenario of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.

And what does Nehemiah do? It's actually fascinating what he does do and what he doesn't do. He doesn't attempt, for example, to cite Old Testament case law. It would have been interesting to read an account here of Nehemiah calling all the lawyers together, studying the relevant passages of case law in Exodus and Leviticus. But I sense that the situation was far greater than that and far more desperate than that. Something needed to be done, and something needed to be done right now! Nehemiah sensed, I think, that it was possible that the kingdom... that the people of God were about to fracture. What he does is appeal to their conscience. He says, "This thing..." (verse 9) "...the thing that you are doing is not good." It's not right what you're doing. Think about it! Because you're exploiting, you're using the people of God for your own ends here, for your own greedy ends. And it's just not right!

In the Revolutionary War, in 1777, when Lafayette first visited the troops of the Continental Army, he found that many of the troops had blackened limbs that were needing to be amputated because of frostbite. Now apparently it wasn't a

severe winter. It was a mild winter. What was the reason for it? One historian suggests that the reason was that the supplies of warm clothing and blankets was held by some folk in Boston who were refusing to release this warm clothing and blankets unless a profit of 1000 (and in one case 1800) percent was being charged. They were exploiting their own people in a time of desperate need. It's what's going on here.

And then like a bombshell — it's like a bombshell in verse 10! Did you hold your breath when you read verse 10? “Moreover I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain.” What??? Nehemiah himself is involved in this! Now, while you hold your breath, let me say that there are two possible interpretations here. The one is that Nehemiah is confessing his own sin here. Nehemiah would be relatively well off as a government official of King Artaxerxes in Jerusalem. There's no doubt that he was lending money to those in need. Of that there is no doubt. It says so in verse 10. Now some think that he's actually confessing a sin here. You know even leaders can fail. If that is the case, this is a knife edge: that their leader, the one in whom they had put their trust, the one for whom they'd worked, the one for whom they'd worked and endangered the livelihood of their own families, and now they're discovering that even their leader is involved in this!

Well, that's possible. I don't think that's what is being said here, but it's possible. I rather think that what is being said here (and you need to read the sentence carefully): “Moreover I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain [period]” With no interest. Now he's making an appeal. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Not saying abandon it because I too have been charging interest, no. What he's saying is do what I did. Let me be an example to you. Yes, loan to your brother who is in need, but do not charge him interest.

III. The people respond

And then this phenomenal response. You understand that the future of the kingdom of God is at stake here. This little story in Jerusalem, the future of the kingdom of God is at stake here. And they said, “We will restore these and will require nothing from them. We will do as you say.” And Nehemiah isn't sure, so he calls the priests and makes them swear to it. [I like him!]

Verse 13, he does this prophetic thing shaking his garment. Garments had lots of folds in them, and they were tied around the center, and important things were often tucked in the folds. And this is a picture that God will shake His garment, and those that are tucked in the belt of the fold will fall to the ground if they go back on their word. It's an imprecatory kind of sign.

“And all the people said Amen, and they praised the Lord, and they did as they had promised.” It's amazing, isn't it? It's breathtaking, and it's of the Spirit. This

isn't human nature at work here. We're talking about money! We're talking about personal gain here. We're talking about personal wealth here. We're talking about land. We're talking about property. And they all did exactly what Nehemiah said. It's breathtaking!

What is Jesus teaching us in this passage? Sometimes in the church we can behave in an unseemly way, and it isn't right. My friend, is that you? Is that me? We're behaving in a way that just isn't right. But it's a beautiful thing that in a context where the whole church is about to fall apart, the Holy Spirit comes and gives them unity. The principle, you see, is that they didn't look to themselves. They looked to the Lord. They said, "Amen, and praised the Lord." Because they understood that they were recipients of grace. That Jesus in the covenant of grace didn't act for Himself, but for all the elect, for all that God had given Him. Well, may that be the lesson that's written on our hearts.

Let's pray together.

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