

Nehemiah Part 4 – Study Notes

Introduction

We studied last week that Nehemiah was in the middle of external opposition from people who did not want the Jews to rebuild the wall. Some of them hated Nehemiah and wanted him dead, we will look at that next sermon. Although opposition had started from outside the camp he now had to deal with opposition, conflict and injustice from within his own people.

Sometimes the greatest opposition to Christian work today can be from those within the church itself; from the very church family who should be working together for the benefit of each other and the gospel. It is a sad but true statement that sometimes people are really damaged by other Christians. Remember OCC is not a courtroom but a hospital. We are not here to judge others but to introduce them to Jesus, set a godly example and to help them heal and become whole. It is so important we do not become part of the problem but that we are part of the answer, Amen!

Exploiting the poor

Nehemiah 5:1-5 *And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren. ² 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." ³ There were also some who said, "We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine." ⁴ There were also those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our lands and vineyards. ⁵ 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."*

These verses describe an all too often example of the gap between rich and poor and the way the rich sometimes tend to control things so that the rich get richer and the poorer get poorer. This was nothing less than exploitation amongst those who should have been helping one another.

Originally the Jews who returned to Israel from Babylon were well off. Ezra 1:2-4 *This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. ³ Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. ⁴ And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.*

The people prospered so much that they were able to panel their homes. This was normally a luxury reserved only for kings. Haggai 1:4 *Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?*

Thirteen years before Nehemiah's arrival the exiles had brought silver and gold given to them. Ezra 7:15-16 *Moreover, you are to take with you the silver and gold that the king and his advisers have freely given to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, ¹⁶ together with all the silver and gold you may obtain from the province of Babylon, as well as the freewill offerings of the people and priests for the temple of their God in Jerusalem.*

So why were the people so poor now in Nehemiah's time thirteen years later? **Firstly** there had been a famine a lack of rain and the consequent failure of the crops was a major disaster. **Secondly** apart from the devastating famine there were heavy taxes to pay which forced people into insolvency. The rich were taking advantage of the poor, so much so in order to eat some of them had to sell their children into slavery. Because of Nehemiah's presence the poor had found someone to champion their cause and came to him with their problems.

Nehemiah 5:6 *And I became very angry when I heard the outcry of these words. Nehemiah became exceedingly angry with the injustices his own people were suffering by the hand of his own people. He was not going to let this continue. So he confronted the offenders. Nehemiah 5:7 *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.**

The Jews knew full well the Biblical laws that they should not exploit their countrymen. Deuteronomy 23:19 *Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest.* (For further study read Leviticus 25:35-31,39-41).

They rich had no excuse because they knew full well that a Jew was **not** to take advantage of another Jew in any way, and that if a Jew fell into slavery they were to do **everything** possible to redeem them and set them free.

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Whilst trying to rebuild the walls Nehemiah had to call a public meeting to deal with this situation. It was so important that it had to be dealt with immediately. This meant that he had to stop the work on the walls, which were only half built, to deal with this internal problem.

So often the Great Commission of the church can stop because of having to deal with internal opposition and conflict. The church can be in turmoil sorting out internal conflicts that is not able to reach out to those who desperately need to know Jesus.

One commentator writes: **What good is it to build the wall if inside the wall there were people exploiting each other.**

We have to make sure that we are getting on with the work God has called us to do and not stop the work to have to deal with internal opposition. We can look at Nehemiah's account and address two of these internal problems.

Firstly, their disobedience to the Word of God: The nobles were disobeying the teachings of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, as we have just looked at.

Today there are Christians who openly disobey the Word of God, so is it any wonder that those people who do not know the truth disobey God. It is not that Christians don't know what the Word of God says; the bottom line is that they don't want to submit to it.

Oasis Christian Centre teaches and fully believes that the **Bible is the Word of God** and we totally believe that we have to live by what it says. We are called to obey the Word. We are called to live the Word of God.

Secondly, the nobles put their personal prosperity before other people's well being. They loved money more than their people. They put themselves above the needs of their brothers and sisters.

A question to ask ourselves today is this; **do we have a love of money?** We know having money is not wrong. It is the love of money that is the problem. 1 Timothy 6:10 says: *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.* It's the love of money, which is a root of all kinds of evil.

At OCC let us make sure that we don't put our own personal prosperity above our brothers and sisters well being?

In all this opposition Nehemiah succeeded. The nobles said in Nehemiah 5:12 *We will restore it, and we will require nothing from them.* They said that they would do as Nehemiah had asked and Nehemiah made quite sure that they did. He called the priests and had the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they promised.

Nehemiah was within his rights as governor of Judah to have charged taxes himself and lived the good life, but he lived of his own means and used what he had to feed those less fortunate. Previous governors had lived richly at the taxpayers expense but Nehemiah refused to do so. He was a brilliant example because he feared God.

Application

We can learn so much from Nehemiah today. Nehemiah was close to God. He had his priorities right and lived a constant godly, self-sacrificing example. As every difficulty came he faced it head on and persevered for God, trusting him for what he needed to finish the job. He dealt with the threats rather than ignoring them.

He recognized that there would be opposition to the plan and believed God would help him. He was a man of great faith and action.

In summary of this sermon today I want to remind us of what Jesus said that he *did not come to be served but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many,* Matthew 20:28. Jesus set us the ultimate example of servant hood. God expects Christians to sacrifice and share what they have with others.

Let this be one of the things OCC is known for. **Amen!**