

The Book of Nehemiah

Chapter 5

From Bondage to Bondage

Bondage

Nehemiah had to devise a plan to protect the Jews from those enemies who threatened them with attack, and at the same time keep the workers from abandoning the project. His solution was to organize the Jews into a battle unit and to bring them together at one place so that they could 1) recognize that in unity there was power, and 2) that indeed there was a well thought out plan of defense in place that utilized both professional soldiers and workers as militia. There were watchmen placed in strategic locations along the partially completed wall so that a surprise attack was all but impossible; and there was an alarm system was devised. To deal with the issue of possible desertion Nehemiah ordered that all workers were to spend their nights in the city, behind the rapidly ascending new walls, and not to go home at all (even if only overnight). Further the people would take turns as watchmen assuring there were enough participants available for a 24 hour, 7 day per week watch. These measures seemed to alleviate the immediate concerns; but as we begin chapter 5 a new set of problems is brought to light.

Verse 1 jumps right to the point: the problem facing Nehemiah is one of Jew against Jew. It was serious and so even the role of the women is included. This is a rarity especially in the Old Testament where wives are usually relegated to the background in such matters. But since the issue is poverty, then it is the wives and mothers who are the most vulnerable and so they lose their fear of protest in a man's world when it comes to the survival of their children.

There are two main factors that have led to this outcry from the common citizens.

- First is that Nehemiah's forceful insistence upon the people that they focus all their time and energy to rebuilding the city's walls left such matters as food growing and subsistence as nearly impossible – Unbalanced Ministry
- Second was that then as now, trade either with or through their immediate neighbors was a must.

There is no doubt that the 4 hostile leaders of the territories surrounding Judah had set up an embargo to try and strangle the Jews economically. So there would be no food available for import, and the Jewish farmers had been conscripted by Nehemiah to build the walls so growing food locally was necessarily left to the women and children.

But leadership can often get distracted by other matters, and this is what is happening with Nehemiah. He is so focused on the task at hand that he has either not heard the grumblings of his people about their dire economic situation, or he has seen it as a low priority. That is about to change as apparently the normally discreet women of Jerusalem begin to openly campaign about the social injustice they and their families are facing



- Lack of fundamental fairness is tearing the community of Judah apart
- Huge gap in personal wealth between aristocrats and the common Jews
- 21st century is experiencing this, with America as Ground Zero
- The issue is one of Jew against Jew
- Even the women are stepping forward, as their children's lives and futures are in doubt
- 2 main factors: 1) Nehemiah insisted that the top priority is rebuilding the walls 2) The 4 enemies had set up a trade embargo that was strangling Judah economically

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If we pay close attention to the verses we see that 3 different groups of people provided 3 different reasons for all their troubles.

- The first group was those who had no land; perhaps they were craftsmen, or folks who had never recovered their land when they returned from exile. After all, not all Jews in that era owned fields and so produced food. So verse 2 represents those who weren't growers of food as their main means of support and instead normally had to purchase it with money earned from tradecrafts or selling their labor. This group says that they have large families, and they can't produce enough food to feed themselves, but the situation has made them even poorer and now they have no means to purchase food. And, recall, that trade had

been disrupted and so a vital source of food imported from nearby neighbors had been cut off by the 4 gentile rulers.

- The 2nd group (verse 3) clearly represents folks who did own land, and usually were able to grow enough food for themselves (and no doubt some extra to sell), but the bad economy had forced them to mortgage their fields to survive. Borrowing to buy seed or to have food to tide them over for a short time during a bad harvest or the winter was rather customary, so the reason for this situation being held up as dire can only be that they had no means to repay and were now in danger of losing their lands or having to sell their children into bond servitude. Then, as now, once one has so much debt that repayment is essentially impossible, and one starts selling or losing their assets, then a cycle of poverty sets in from which escape is unlikely and one's independence and freedom can become lost for generations.
- The 3rd group of verse 4 is somewhat like the 2nd group in that they were landowners and thus growers of food. However their situation was that they were being taxed to death. They didn't need to borrow to replant or to have food for a short time of insufficiency; they had to borrow to pay taxes. The taxes they owed are what is better known as royal tribute; money to fund the king's and other officials' privileged lifestyles. Thus they were also severely pinched economically and in danger of losing their land to the mortgage holder or having to sell their children into slavery. Although the identity of those mortgage holders hasn't yet been included in the complaints, the next few verses make it clear: they were wealthy Jewish community leaders.

3 DIFFERENT GROUPS
3 DIFFERENT REASONS



➤ **Group 1:** vs. 2
Those who had no land, so didn't grow food

➤ **Group 2:** vs. 3
Folks who DID own land, DID grow food, but had to mortgage their land to survive

➤ **Group 3:** vs. 4
Like the 2nd group who had land, but this group was being taxed to death

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LEGAL TO BE A BOND SERVANT

- Legal to use land as collateral on a loan
- Purpose was to help the poor survive AND recover
- NOT for the rich to take advantage and acquire more land
- Lev 25:14, 17, 23-24, 33-37, 44-46
- Outline principles for transactions between Hebrews
- These principles were not being observed, but rather used for exploitation of the poor



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What Nehemiah did was fairly drastic. The aristocratic Jews (whose support he needed) would be put into the humiliating position of being publically confronted by angry peasants. The problem is that the accused were essentially the elders and judges who presided over the legal cases, thus the assembly of people would have to become the judges as well as the witnesses. While this wasn't exactly a Kosher trial, it was fair under the circumstances. And Nehemiah deserves much credit for the courage to address this matter head-on as opposed to siding with the wealthy and powerful. The main accusation against the aristocrats is stated in brief summary in verse 7: "You are lending against pledges, everyone to his brother...." So the central point is that you are displaying fundamental unfairness to your fellow Jews. But to soften the blow, he also threw some compliments their way by pointing out that indeed these same wealthy Jews had redeemed many peasant Jews from the foreign occupiers of Judah. In other words, these rich Jews paid off the debts that the poor Jews had accumulated but were held by pagans. Therefore some poor Jews that were in bond servitude to foreigners were released to come home to their families as a result of what could only be called charity.

ARISTOCRATS PUT ON TRIAL



- Community in danger of rupturing
- An assembly called, the nobles and rulers confronted
- Issue: fundamental fairness
- On one hand the rich Jews redeemed the poor from servitude to pagans
- On the other hand, they put them right back in servitude, but to other Jews!
- A moral absurdity
- Technically it was legal, but it violated the SPIRIT of the Law
- Lev. 25:17

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On the other hand, says Nehemiah, these rich Jewish benefactors turned right around and put these poor Jews back into debt, and even sold some of them into bond servitude to other Jews. Yes, technically the rich Jews were following the letter of the Law. It was considered unthinkable that poor Jews would be debt slaves to pagans, and it was the duty of those who could to redeem them back to do so; and indeed the wealthy Jews did that. But, it was also technically legal for poor Jews to become debt slaves to fellow Jews. Even so the spirit of the Law was being trampled down and ignored! And the Spirit of the Law is well summed up in Lev. 25: 17:

Everything that is lawful is not expedient

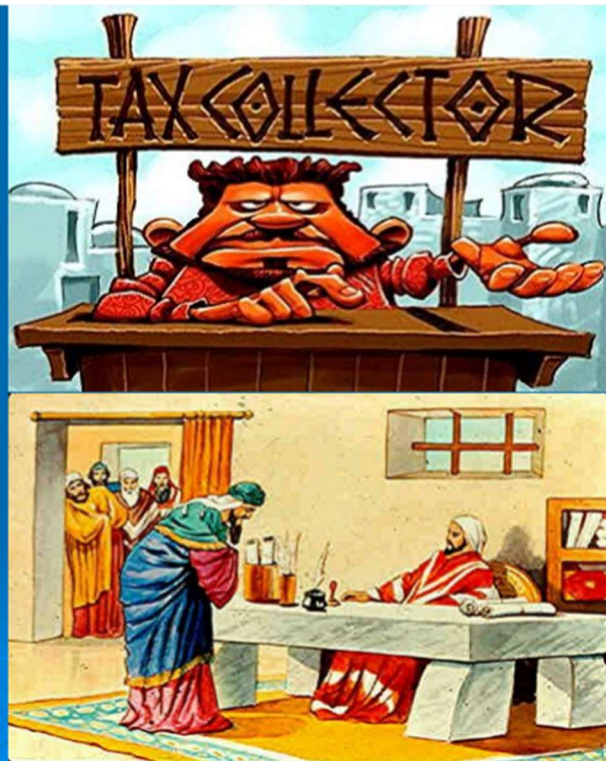
This chapter closes by giving us some additional insight into the leader Nehemiah. The exact time span of Nehemiah's tenure as Governor of Judah was 12 years. And that time in office was reckoned as starting in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes' reign and ending in the king's 32nd year. This would have been from 445 B.C. to 433 B.C. (plus or minus a year or two depending on if one uses the Nisan or Tishri based calendar year). And more, he was indeed the official Governor of Judah, and not merely a diplomat sent by the king or some kind of temporary advisor. A Governor had the right (if not the duty) to collect taxes for the Empire, but also other taxes to support himself and his staff. It is not unlike in America where we have Federal taxes, state taxes, and local taxes that are collected independently and used for separate purposes by separate groups of government officials. However **Nehemiah chose NOT to collect taxes to support himself**

or his staff, and also didn't demand a tax of produce to be taken from the local Jews to feed himself and others that were typically fed at the taxpayers' expense. It certainly would not have been wrong or heavy handed to have done so; however verse 15 explains that the previous Governors had taxed the people to an extreme thus putting a difficult and unfair burden on them.

Additionally, Nehemiah provided for the food needs for 150 leaders of Judah plus various others. In fact it took an Ox, 6 sheep, and some amount of fowl every day, plus and a constant supply of wine. Yet, as he said, not once did he ever draw upon the Governor's allowance (meaning tax money) to buy these items. Rather he provided them out of his own generosity, using his own personal wealth, as it must have seemed wrong to him to have been given such abundance by Yehoveh, only to turn around and take from those who had so little. Thus he finishes his narrative by asking God to see him in a favorable light because of his decisions and his actions. He asks that his labors, his moral motives, and His complete devotion to God and to helping His fellow Jews would be an eternal legacy. The fact that we are studying a Book of the Bible named after Him is proof enough that God answered his prayer as he had hoped.

NEHEMIAH = GENEROUS

- Nehemiah served for 12 years 445 – 433 B.C.
- As Governor he had the right to collect taxes for himself, but did not
- Previous Governors taxed the people highly
- Governorship had been vacant for a while
- Nehemiah was wealthy in his own right



(Content adapted from A Study of Nehemiah by Tom Bradford)