

Nehemiah: A Righteous Governor to Jerusalem and Example to All

A Study of the Book of Nehemiah: Nehemiah 5¹

One Week Study Guide

Introduction

Nehemiah five provokes a most contemporary discussion regarding what charitable mercy and sacrificial leadership governed by the fear of God should look like. We are all too comfortably yoked with this world and, left unchecked, we too can conduct ourselves with great shame – hurting others for personal comfort under the guise of what is regarded as shrewd and permissible. Nehemiah was a magnificent rebuke to these offenses in his time and continues to be in ours as well.

Here again, Nehemiah, the man of God, the man of prayer, proves to be a faithful example of leadership that asks not that the people recognize his legacy or praise his name, but that the Lord would remember him and his faithfulness.

5:1-5, An outcry from offense.

Chapter five begins with the testimony of a great public outcry by the people and their wives against, not the scowling enemies among the nations, but against their unjust brethren.

A common use of this term throughout the Scriptures present a substantial corporate protest of distress - usually from a large assembly or people. Here it is the Jewish people laboring to restore the city of Jerusalem. It was a unique outcry in that it was a great expression of distress, and it was a tragic outcry because the offended and offenders were of one people and were governed not simply by the standards and expectations of decency among men, but by God's law and the charge to make his name great.

The reason for the outcry was on account of three primary complaints as expressed in the immediate context - each introduced with "those who said" (5:2,3,4).

There were three primary groups and accompanying complaints - identified by what was required of them to survive:

5:2, There was a general complaint of the people's needs on account of their family size. There was no definitive action referenced beyond the imminent threat to their lives from starving.

5:3, There was the complaint regarding the mortgaging of fields, vineyards, and houses to secure necessary income to purchase food when it was scarcely available.

5:4-5, There was the complaint about the borrowing of money for paying the king's tax on fields and vineyards and of sons and daughters being enslaved.

5:2, The first of the three complaints was very straightforward and expressed the fundamental need for mercy to be extended toward those in imminent need. The families

¹ Prepared by David Crowe for Pray's Mill Baptist Church Adult Sunday School
ALL Scripture Quotations are from the ESV Bible unless the Scripture reference is in a quote from another author – their original translation was kept.

needed what they did not have available to them at this time, sufficient food to survive or collateral to offer in exchange for loans.

5:3, The second of the three complaints was from those who were exhausting their resources for survival amidst a shortage of sufficient food available to them – expressed here as a famine. They did have fields, vineyards, and houses, but were having to pledge them or leverage them as collateral for necessary food for survival.

This group begins to bring the context of protest into sharper focus as two important questions can now be asked:

- 1) To whom are they mortgaging their properties?
- 2) What was the nature of this famine?

Regarding the first question consider the following: There were persons who were in positions to render a measure of aid during this obvious time of great struggle/distress. Being in this position they had a range of choices to make that would include:

- 1) Expressing charitable mercy with consideration of a return on their giving.
- 2) Offer requested aid in the form of a reasonable business transaction in which one's personal abundance can help in the immediate and bring a reasonable return at a later time when debts are settled.
- 3) Take complete advantage of another's great misfortune and maximize what can be secured through the process, even to the long-term detriment of the one receiving aid. As the text develops, it becomes plain that while there were some, such as Nehemiah and his associates, who provided aid in a reasonable and gracious manner, there were others who were found to be shamefully abusing the situation.

Regarding the second question consider the following: There was no other reference to a famine throughout the book of Nehemiah or in Ezra's overlapping account. This was not a traditional famine brought on by natural circumstances of drought, failed crops, or infestation. This was a shortage that appears to have been produced from a lack of opportunity and resources to properly tend to necessary agricultural needs. This was likely the result of laborers being redirected away from their fields and to the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem – an act of obedience which should have afforded a context of the exercise of merciful care and not shameful financial abuse. God consistently used famines throughout the Scriptures to direct the affairs of men, to judge, to show provision, and this too should have been an opportunity for demonstrations of the fear of God in the exercising of merciful charity while the people as a whole strove toward a common goal in obedience.

5:4-5, The third of the three complaints was a reflection of the discrepancy of those who were in positions to be generous and those who were in great need of help. Here the people's financial circumstances were further exasperated by having to borrow money to pay the king's taxes on their fields and vineyards – standard elements of being under the larger rule of Persia.

This group brings the context of protest into plain view as to why there was a particular offense toward their Jewish brothers. Their complaint was not with the requirements of the king's taxes, but with the fact that the only thing that distinguished those who were severely struggling and being financially abused and those doing the abusing was a class distinction

and not a matter of pedigree or heritage. This was what they were communicating by expressing that their flesh was the same as their wealthy brothers and that their children were as the children of their wealthy brothers with the exception that it was their children who were being forced into servitude because of the ensuing abuse of their wealthier brothers.

The enslavement was likely a debtor's enslavement – persons made to be servants until the debt was paid off. However, with the emphasis on the plight of the daughters there was the additional possibility that they were being taken as a second wife to the ones who purchased them, thereby further humiliating their condition and their lack of ability to do anything about it.²

At this time two summaries will prove helpful.

The Net Bible provides the following explanation of the context and offense:

“The poor among the returned exiles were being exploited by their rich countrymen. Moneylenders were loaning large amounts of money, and not only collecting interest on loans which was illegal (Lev 25:36-37; Deut 23:19-20), but also seizing pledges as collateral (Neh 5:3) which was allowed (Deut 24:10). When the debtors missed a payment, the moneylenders would seize their collateral: their fields, vineyards and homes. With no other means of income, the debtors were forced to sell their children into slavery, a common practice at this time (Neh 5:5). Nehemiah himself was one of the moneylenders (Neh 5:10), but he insisted that seizure of collateral from fellow Jewish countrymen was ethically wrong (Neh 5:9).”³

F. Charles Fensham also provided a helpful overview of the nature of the context in which this outcry was made. He states that there were likely two primary elements that need to be considered. The first is on account of the overt hostility of the surrounding peoples. As expressed in chapter four, there was likely not the implementation of standard trade among the regions.⁴ This would be like a contemporary embargo on hostile nations – an act that accomplishes significant adverse consequences to their economies and access to necessary/desired goods.

The second element was that on account of the necessary work demands and implementation of defensive measures, which included twenty-four-hour preparedness and remaining within the city proper, there was little to no opportunity for the people to service their own crops, and thereby the creation of a shortage of supply and the like effects of a regional famine.

However, an important element to these matters was that the people, while clearly understanding these elements, were not directing their outcry against Nehemiah. They understood and owned the high calling and nature of this work with its accompanying sacrifices. The offense was with their wealthy Jewish brothers who were selfishly and wickedly capitalizing on their compromised condition at their expense.⁵

² The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah; F. Charles Fensham; WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982 (Hereafter: Fensham), Pg. 192

³ NET Bible, Nehemiah 5:5, Note 8

⁴ Fensham, Pg. 190

⁵ Fensham, Pgs. 190-191

So, it is plain that this was a cry of distress provoked by the weight of life being in the immediate balance and, as will continue to be made plain, this was further exasperated by those who were capitalizing on this great need.

Reflection and Application

When and how should one express a great public outcry regarding an injustice or need? Is there biblical merit for like action today, and if so, what might that look like while remaining submissive to the governing authorities and various leadership structures that the Lord has placed you under?

Walking in obedience and a reasonable application of the expressed will of God in the context of long promised restoration still found the people in a challenging context and one in which they were subject to struggle from without and taken advantage of from within. This did not negate their own obedience or the merit of their efforts – it is a reflection of walking in a fallen world, populated by fallen people, and under the influence of a fallen prince whose judgment is sure. Looking for a utopian context in which one is perfectly executing their pure hearted obedience will always lead to disappointment here. Today we struggle from within and without, but we also rightfully anticipate and long for the day in which we will set these things aside and enjoy that utopian context for pure hearted obedience in the new heavens and new earth. Until such time comes we are called upon to struggle well and for the glory of God.

Considering this, how should you evaluate struggles and hardships amidst genuinely striving after faithful obedience?

5:6-13, A response and resolution from the outcry from offense.

Nehemiah's response to the three statements that constituted the people's great outcry against their brothers was significant anger. An anger directed not toward circumstance, frustrations, or differences, but over the sinning of the people against each other.

Being extremely angry did not result in impulsive action, but calculated reflection from within before taking wise and decisive action, which included taking charges against the nobles and the officials.

Nehemiah first expresses the core charge: “You are exacting interest, each from his brother.”⁶

It was plain at this time that the “Jewish brothers” referenced in the outcry were the nobles and officials – those who held various degrees of leadership and were with greater means than others. The charge expressed does not appear to be an overt violation of Persian law, but likely the Laws of Moses and certainly beyond the scope of honorable conduct among the covenant people.

Nehemiah also held a great assembly – bringing the offenses of these persons to bear before the people, demonstrating the severity of the matter and the need for clear and complete resolution.

Nehemiah was clearly taking an offensive posture toward these persons: he brought *charges against them* and he held a *great assembly against them*.

Nehemiah addressed what appears to be the culminating element of their offense of exacting interest - enslaving their brothers and even selling off their brothers.

He first frames this offense by addressing the right or best action that he and others had taken for their people in this regard: buying back of their brothers from the nations (inasmuch as they have been able to do this). Then by contrast to this right or best action was an articulation of the main offense: the selling of their brothers.

It appears that these nobles and officials were selling off their brothers to the nations/Gentiles... and perhaps with the presumption/understanding that other Jews would redeem them or buy them back. If this was indeed their conduct then they were effectively running some sort of immoral racket - laundering their own people for personal gain.

Taking advantage of them in their compromised situations.

Maximizing their leverage in an abusive way.

Taking action against them - while anticipating someone else would likely rectify their offense.

However, it was not wholly clear if their offense was the selling of the impoverished Jews to the nations, as the language lends itself to the possibility of their selling these enslaved Jews to other Jews. Either way the practice was wrong and immediately recognized as such when the accusation was directed against the offending parties. This was the case even with provisions in the Law of Moses in Deuteronomy 15 allowing for selling of persons to satisfy debts because they were either abusing the provisions of the Law (if they were even selling to fellow Jews properly so as to work off debts), they were not honoring the year of release, or it was an unnecessarily odious action before the enemy nations.⁷

The offending parties appear to have been speechless... and they were the only ones not talking in this context:

The people were crying out from 5:1-5.

Nehemiah was speaking from 5:7-8 and would again talk from 5:9-11.

Finally, the offending parties speak with repentance in 5:12.

⁶ Nehemiah 5:7 ESV

⁷ Fensham, Pg.194

Their silence was because they could find nothing to say as it was plain that they found their position to be indefensible - they do not even attempt to explain that it was legal if not moral/ethical - they had nothing to that end that could be stated.

Sidebar: A perversion of judgment and justice.

Mervin Breneman argues that the initial buying back that is referenced by Nehemiah was likely a slave debt after persons were returning to the land and it was effectively this exact practice that was now being duplicated by the Jews to the Jews.⁸

Deuteronomy 28:32 expresses the weight of righteous judgment when the Israelites would be sold to other nations for their enduring unfaithfulness. "Your sons and your daughters shall be given to another people, while your eyes look on and fail with longing for them all day long, but you shall be helpless." This was painful, terrible, but just.

Now on some level you have various elements of Jewish leadership selling their own people for perverse personal gain while the nation was in the midst of being returned and restored from having been dispersed among the nations. This was painful, terrible, and *wrong*.

This was a striking contrast to the charge to fight for your brothers and family in 4:14 to some now being charged for the selling their brothers as slaves.

The accused having nothing to say, Nehemiah again spoke out and states that the actions of these persons was not good. He does not overtly accuse them of violating any laws (either of God or man), but makes it clear that it is not good.

Sidebar: Lending and Taking Interest in Israel

While it was not overtly stated here, it does appear that the offenders have violated the Law of Moses:

"If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him." Exodus 22:25

"If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God." Leviticus 25:35-38

"You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest." Deuteronomy 23:19

After rebuking the deficiency of the offenders' actions, Nehemiah exposes the reason that it was not good and redirects them to what would be proper/good. He was framing their conduct as inconsistent with walking in the fear of God.

⁸ The New American Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther; Mervin Breneman; Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993 (Hereafter: Breneman), Pg.204

Unlike other situations where it was a direct contrast of fearing God or fearing man, here it was just a negligence to properly fear God and let his glory, holiness, and expressed character direct one's conduct.

Nehemiah directs them to what proper conduct in the fear of God would accomplish: it would prevent the taunts of the nations, their enemies. By contrast it appears that these offenders' actions were providing a means for others to taunt the Jews.

A significant element of Nehemiah's rebuke was that the actions of the offenders provides an open door of opportunity for the shaming and taunting of the Jews by the nations - a major element that was working toward remedy.

Nehemiah 1:3, "...the exile is in great trouble and *shame*." An element that provoke Nehemiah to great distress and prayer.

Nehemiah 2:17, "...that we may no longer suffer *derision*." An element of the charge to build the wall was to rectify this odious problem.

Nehemiah 4:4, "Turn back their *taunt* on their own heads...." Nehemiah prays that the Jews be vindicated by God and that their taunting enemies be stopped.

Nehemiah 5:9, "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?" Here Nehemiah is rebuking the offenders for failing to walk in the fear of God and thereby fueling the offense that they have sought to rectify.

Nehemiah then appears to transition from rebuke to persuasive exhortation based off of his and others' respectable conduct and a call for these offenders to abandon their poor practices.

Nehemiah and those who were in his immediate service and sphere of influence had been working to render merciful aid rather than capitalizing on the vulnerable condition of others. They were lending both money and grain as these were the two areas of the most immediate need: money for the king's taxes and possibly food and then grain for the immediate needs of survival.

It does appear that even Nehemiah's lending presumed some measure of restitution, but clearly without interest which was a noted offense here and the context for creating greater burdens.

Nehemiah then calls on the offenders to abandon what appears to have been a legal but "not good" practice of exacting interest, not just their predatory lending, but all interest. This would bring them both into compliance with the Law of Moses for fellow Jews *and* relieve an unsurmountable burden for the people's trying context.

Note that Nehemiah does not urge them to stop lending, but the manner of their lending practices needed to stop.

Nehemiah's identification in the resolution, "let us," has a measure of challenge to it as it is not wholly clear if he was overtly identifying himself with the general practice of loaning money/resources that in turn bled over to abuse by others, or if he was identifying himself with the people in a leadership capacity. It appears that he was affirming his own loaning

practice, which while gracious/fair, he nevertheless in this present context chose to wholly absolve any returns for himself and calls upon others to do the same.⁹

Next Nehemiah provided an exhortation toward repentant/restorative action in view of the wrongs committed. Restore that which they have been exacting from the people:

Their fields.

Their vineyards.

Their olive orchards.

Their houses.

The percentage of money.

The percentage of grain.

The percentage of wine.

The percentage of oil.

There does not appear to be any qualification to this requested/statement of action - it was to be acted upon that very day. Further, it does not appear that restoring these items will do undue harm to those who have secured them from others.

Having exacted this property and percentage of goods appears to be the heart of the issue - presumably what ultimately led to some being sold off. *This was a repentance like action* - he was not telling them simply to stop, but to *stop and restore*.

Sidebar: What Was Returned?

While it is not wholly resolved as to what was being returned here: the interest, the profit from the loaning process, items given in pledge or everything. What is clear is that abuse would be stopped immediately and charitable generosity for the good of others would be made to prevail. There was substantial need from the merging of providence and sacrificial service and to avail oneself of this benefit to the harm of another was wrong and was made to immediately stop.

The offending parties replied in full compliance/repentance.

They verbally affirmed their response.

The response was two-fold: they would restore and they would desist.

Nehemiah shrewdly capitalized on the offender's compliance and then binds them to what they stated. So, while it appears that while their actions were previously not restricted by the laws of men they would now be restricted by their willful compliance and submission under promise. This action also preserved the matter from possible digression back to the prior offense, and swearing to their promise appears to have bound them to something beyond their personal integrity

Nehemiah again demonstrated leadership in that he reasonably compelled the people to do as they should.

The element of promise was extremely strong here, and Nehemiah wholly intended to keep them bound to their promise. So, having bound the offenders to their promise through their swearing before the priest, Nehemiah then laid out a curse for anyone who would still yet disregard their promise - further pressing the weight of this matter.

⁹ Fensham, Pgs.194-195

Nehemiah established this curse for one who would violate the promise by providing the image of being shaken out and emptied. He provided the personal and physical image of being shaken out - himself shaking out the fold of his garment – effectively presenting the equivalence to an empty or barren pocket which would be the image of the one who dishonored this binding promise. Effectively what was being done by one brother to another would in this case be done to the offender by God.

The corporate body wholly affirmed Nehemiah's leadership in this matter - including its strong and severe expectations. Further, they did not just affirm it, but there was also an element of praising The LORD too. This was a worshipful response to a just standard.

Reflection and Application

Nehemiah was angry and he responded with a time of internal examination and wise restorative action. What will you learn from Nehemiah in this moment?

Nehemiah addresses grave social/economic injustices. What is a proper response to this in your own context?

It was clear that the offenders were operating within some degree of legal allowance, but beyond the scope of where the fear of God would have permitted. Does your life reflect one of permissive allowance or righteous restriction under the fear of God?

Nehemiah compelled the offenders toward a disposition of repentance. Do you mortify your sin in a like manner – put it to death and then pursue a disposition of repentance?

5:14-18, Nehemiah's exemplary leadership of generous mercy.

It is plain here that Nehemiah was appointed the governor - he did not impose this role of his leadership on the people.

Here Nehemiah also provided a definitive time marker for his time in service as the governor of Judah - from the twentieth to the thirty second year of Artaxerxes' reign. His role as governor appears to have begun when he was dispatched to Jerusalem or soon thereafter as it was the twentieth year of Artaxerxes when he was made aware of Jerusalem's plight (1:1) and when he entreated the king (2:1).

At this time Nehemiah expressed an overt contrast to the subject of abuse that was spoken to for the entirety of the chapter up to this point. In his entire twelve-year tenure, neither he nor his brothers availed themselves of the food allowance for the governor. This was an overt and gracious decision on his part and it was a practice that he maintained for twelve years – which likely compounded his feelings regarding this woeful and elective abuse by other leaders.

There was a significant allowance afforded the governor, but it would likely come by means of taxing the people, and Nehemiah saw that this was not within their reasonable means without being a great burden to them.

While this choice was obviously not a direct parallel to the highlighted offenses of this chapter, in that it was not exacting interest or unreasonable collateral for goods or finances, it was nevertheless a parallel by way of contrast in that Nehemiah was legally and morally authorized to enjoy reasonable benefits at the expense of other's provision for him, but he chose to waive this privilege and not request this of anyone for him or those around him.

Nehemiah further developed the contrast between the offense of those abusing the people and the more direct parallel between his actions and those of prior governors. He identified the assuming of the provided stipend/ration of forty shekels of silver for the governor as having laid heavy burdens on the people. Nehemiah further stated that even the former governor's servants lorded their authority over the people. In this, he demonstrated that in prior administrations the primary authority and those under him were exercising their rule in ways that were a hardship on the people.

Nehemiah both affirms that he did not take advantage of his position to the hurt of his people and expresses the reason why: the fear of God. His conviction, which led to his daily conduct, was rooted in the fear of God. This was also what Nehemiah was driving the offending parties to also (5:9), because he understood that the fear of God was a means of governing one's actions (particularly toward others) that superseded what the laws required, but were in alignment with what was *truly pleasing* to God. Further, the fear of God was a means of restricting one's conduct that would prove unloving to others and beyond the scope of what was good practice.

It was the fear of God that kept Nehemiah walking in faithful obedience, which included honorably leading and caring for the people.

Nehemiah went on to further articulate that his conduct was more than just not doing wrong or maximizing his position to the harm of others, but that he himself was a sacrificial servant

leader. He stated that he too persevered in the work on the wall as did the people under his care and leadership.

Nehemiah also stated that they acquired no land. Not purchasing land was a reference to taking advantage of those having to sell their land from being impoverished – he was not availing himself of their hardship.¹⁰

In addition to the daily responsibilities of governing the people and the choice to labor alongside the people on the wall, Nehemiah also was actively serving as a chief diplomat.

Among these responsibilities was to be hospitable to numerous people on a consistent basis as he would average 150 men at his table. These were men ranging from Jewish leaders, to diplomats traveling through and/or visiting the region, to Jews who had not yet fully settled within the province.¹¹

This role and its demands of hospitality were quite substantial and costly.

Each day one ox, six choice sheep, and birds.

Every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance.

This would have been an extraordinary amount of demand by way of provision and it appears that he primarily purchased them as he did not require access or use of his food allowance. These robust accommodations came wholly at Nehemiah's expense as he did not access the available resources at all for these matters, which proved to be a charitable sacrifice on his part.

Regarding these choices Nehemiah explained that this was out of an awareness of the burden that it would have placed on the people - it was a decision *based on their care*. He had no desire to demand what would be too heavy on the people.

Sidebar: A Contrast of the Offenders and Nehemiah

Offenders:

Placed their lives in jeopardy.

Mortgaged the peoples' fields, vineyards, and houses.

Lent money at significant expense - exacting interest.

"If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him." Exodus 22:25

Selling of their brothers into slavery.

Not walking in the fear of God.

Nehemiah:

Lending the people money and grain without exacting interest.

"[The righteous] is ever lending generously, and his children become a blessing." Psalm 37:26

"It is well with the man who deals generously and lends; who conducts his affairs with justice." Psalm 112:5

"Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed." Proverbs 19:17

Did not personally take advantage of the Governor's food allowance.

¹⁰ The MacArthur Study Bible, NKJV. Word Bibles, 1997. (Hereafter: MacArthur), Pg.666

¹¹ Breneman, Pg.208

Walked in the fear of God.

Labored on the wall rebuilding project.

Acquired no land.

Hosted substantial meals at his own expense (daily and ten day cycles of great expense).

Was sensitive to the struggles of the people and insulated them from further burden.

Reflection and Application

What can you learn and apply from Nehemiah's extraordinarily sacrificial generosity for the people?

Nehemiah made it plain that he was ultimately governed by a fear of God and heart for the people under his care. What does being governed by the fear of God look like in your life?

5:19, Nehemiah lived before God.

Nehemiah clearly saw this leading of the people as an act that pleased God, and in this he pursued God's good pleasure.

While Nehemiah will ask at various times for The LORD to remember certain offenders and offenses, in chapter thirteen there was again the correction of substantial abuses and dramatic internal corrective reforms and there again Nehemiah expresses the short, but clear petition for The LORD to remember him and his efforts of leading with righteous integrity. The final petition being how he closes the book.

Nehemiah 13:14, "Remember me, O my God, concerning this...."

Nehemiah 13:22, "Remember this also in my favor, O my God...."

Nehemiah 13:31, "Remember me, O my God, for good."

Nehemiah did not strive to live before men, but before God and *he petitioned The LORD accordingly.*

“He reveals his twofold motivation: first, filial reverence for God, which restrained him from ‘lording it over the people’ (15b), and made heaven’s verdict all-important to him (19); and second, brotherly compassion, ‘because the servitude was heavy upon this people’ (18). In his own brusque style he exemplified the two great commandments, and anticipated the cheerful disregard of one’s entitlements which Paul would expound in 1 Corinthians 9.”¹²

Reflection and Application

Nehemiah lived before God, how might you?

¹² Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Ezra and Nehemiah, Derek Kidner, Intersity Press, 2009 (Hereafter: Kidner), Pg.107