

Nehemiah: Rebuild and Renew

Lesson 4: Fairness and Leadership

Key Verse: *"But the earlier governors – those preceding me – placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that" (Nehemiah 5:15).*

Nehemiah's Response to Internal Complaints (5:1-13)

- Nehemiah not only faced the challenge of external opponents, he also faced internal challenges caused by conflict within his own ranks.
- Four main complaints were waged by the people in response to a famine in the land.
 - One: Work on the wall was limiting work on the land leading to a grain shortage (famine) for those families (v 2).
 - Two: The grain shortage led some families to mortgage their fields, vineyards, and homes to get grain (v 3).
 - Three: Some families had become indebted/enslaved to other Jews to pay property taxes to King Artaxerxes (v 4).
 - Times of need often lead to those with capital using that capital as a way of consolidating their ownership of the land – hence anti-monopoly laws.
 - See Genesis 47:14-31 for an example.
 - The Bible is not against people making money, but it is against people intentionally bankrupting other people – the prohibitions against usury and the practice of Jubilee point us in other, more generous directions.
 - Four: Some families were so desperate they had sold their children into slavery to other Jews leading to a power imbalance in the community between the haves and the have-nots (v 5).
- Nehemiah's first response to hearing these charges was anger (v 6).
 - He had enough problems with the Jew's enemies. The last thing he needed was for some Jews to be taking advantage of the vulnerable state of other Jews.
 - Nehemiah did not immediately act but instead took time to ponder the problem and his next step (v 7).
- Nehemiah boldly accuses the nobles and officials of usury.
 - The Bible forbid Jews from charging their own people interest on loans (see Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-38; and Deuteronomy 23:19-20).
 - He followed up the accusation with a meeting to make his case against usury.
 - Jews had a history ("As far back as possible") of redeeming their own people who had been sold into slavery to foreigners. Now they were the one's enslaving their people.
 - For Nehemiah, God's reputation is at stake in the way they treat one another (v 9).

- Nehemiah generously models an alternative behavior by lending freely (that is, without interest) to those in need (v 10).
 - o Charging interest was to stop.
 - o Any property seized for failure of payment was to be returned along, it seems, with the interest already charged (v 11).
- The nobles and officials respond by declaring that they will do as Nehemiah commands and give the property/interest back. They will stop practicing usury (v 12)
 - o Nehemiah made them take an oath to do what they promised (v 12). This made their promise a public promise.
 - o Nehemiah essentially cursed anyone who failed to keep the promise by shaking out the folds of his robe (like turning out one's pockets). He was asking God to empty out from his people anyone who failed to keep this promise (v 12).

Nehemiah as Governor (5:14-19)

- Sometime during the construction of the wall, Nehemiah is appointed to be the governor of Judah by King Artaxerxes (v 14).
 - o This was the highest position of leadership in the nation at that time.
 - o He was governor for twelve years – well beyond the building of the wall.
- Unlike his predecessors, Nehemiah refused to take advantage of his government position.
 - o He refused to eat the food allotted to him when his countrymen were struggling to buy grain (v 14, 17-18).
 - o Whereas previous governors taxed the people in order to supply their own needs, Nehemiah found ways to fulfill his government duties out of his own pocket (v 15).
- Nehemiah did not allow the trappings of leadership to distract him from the purpose of leadership, to lead the people in the building of the wall (v 16).
- Nehemiah turned to God for his ultimate reward (v 19).
 - o Prayer kept Nehemiah connected to life's true purposes.
 - o He often asked God to remember him (5:19, 6:14 [twice]; 13:14, 22, 29, 31).

Sources

- Derek Kinder, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Academic, 1979).
- Gary V. Smith, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022).
- Mark A. Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, Interpretation (Louisville KY: John Knox, 1992).