

PRESSURES WITHIN AND WITHOUT SERIES: THE MESSAGE OF NEHEMIAH

by Steve Zeisler

The opening chapters of the book of Nehemiah are about the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. It had lain in ruins for more than two generations of exiles who had returned from captivity. They were a beaten lot, and their city was broken because their hearts were broken. They had stopped believing that God could change anything of significance. If they could survive in quiet desperation, that seemed about all that anyone could hope.

The Lord stirred Nehemiah, a man of leadership and vision and godliness, to go to Jerusalem from the capital of Persia and speak to his people again of what God could do. The project of rebuilding the walls began. In Nehemiah 4:6, the walls were described as halfway built. In 6:15, the project was completed:

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.

One of the reasons to study this ancient city's restoration is that restoration and new construction are what God is doing in every generation. Many of us know what it's like to live with a broken life that has a great deal of rubble from the past. It is good to remember that God can bring restoration from wreckage or build something beautiful and substantial where nothing existed before.

Again, by analogy, we might note that Jerusalem was built on a hill to be sought out by those who had needs. Remember Jesus' words about our responsibility to reach out to those who don't know the truth. He said, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden." (Matthew 5:14.) A city built on a hill, its lights beaming to the countryside around, attracts the lonely and vulnerable. Christian communities are cities set on a hill, places where unbelievers can find their way home.

In the last message we noted a well-organized and intrepid opposition. On all sides were gathered those who opposed the success of the Hebrews in rebuilding their city. They harassed, threatened, and ridiculed. Time and again they tried to intimidate the people who were doing the work. Nehemiah and the others who gave leadership, as we discovered in the last message, had to draw the people together in order to deal with the threat. None of us can deal with threats by ourselves. We need each other. When one is standing guard, the other can sleep, and when one holds a weapon, the other can hold a tool.

In chapters 4 and 5, the problems concerned external enemies. The next set of problems that Nehemiah and others in the project encounter is inflicted from within the community itself-squabbling and difficulty, hurt and accusation.

THE INTERNAL THREAT TO COMMUNITY LIFE

Let's read 5:1-8:

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."

Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine."

Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our

sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others."

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

There are some interpretive uncertainties with this passage, but the general thrust is clear. The building of the wall took most of two months. Many involved had to leave their homes and their farms and other labor to go work on the wall. They had to contribute whatever money was needed to get the necessary materials. All of that had worsened an already difficult economic situation. Apparently there was a local famine. And always there were taxes from the world empire that controlled the region. So now people who were previously near the edge financially felt overwhelmed.

Verse 2 alludes to another problem: "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain." There was no such thing as family planning in the ancient world, or inclination toward it. The larger the family, the better. So whether rich or poor, families would have been roughly the same size. Those whose children were numerous, I think, were those whose families were young. The younger parents who still had many dependents at home, whose children were not grown and on their own, were saying to the older generation, "We're still responsible for many mouths to feed. Those of you who no longer have children at home aren't concerned about how hard it is for us to make it."

That ought to sound familiar in our time and place. Those who have owned property a long time or who have raised their families or who have investments that are maturing and so on, live a very different life from the young families in this area who are trying to raise children and make ends meet. How much should they work to survive in this culture? And if both husband and wife work to gain enough income, then what about the quality of their lives and the kind of parenting they're providing? In Nehemiah's day, those on the edge of economic difficulty were crying out for help.

The wealthy people of Jerusalem, on the other hand, could get through the rebuilding project fairly easily. It would be bad enough if it were just that some had wealth and some didn't. But it was much worse than that. Those who were wealthy were taking advantage of and preying on those who weren't.

Let me quickly review economic responsibility as provided for in the law. First, Hebrews were allowed to make financial arrangements with Gentiles in which there was an expected return. Everybody, both Jew and Gentile, had a tribe to which they belonged. If there was some leftover capital, it could be invested with hope of return. If, however, family members were in extremity, if they got sick and couldn't plant their crops, or if some other tragedy occurred, it was the responsibility of their tribe to rally around and take care of them.

What was not allowed was for an Israelite to charge interest on a loan to fellow Israelites. The law strictly forbade it (Deuteronomy 23:19-20; Exodus 22:25). They couldn't use the knowledge of someone else's hard times as a way of making a profit.

Imagine yourself in a similar situation. Your great-aunt, let's say, is newly widowed. She's too old to work and she's frightened, yet she has some property. So she is vulnerable. It is wrong to take economic advantage of the vulnerable, especially family members who are likely to be trusting.

Second, there was an arrangement whereby the Hebrews could indenture themselves. That is the reference to slavery in Nehemiah 5:5. It wasn't racially based slavery of the type we've been used to in our country. It was indentured servitude. The law (Exodus 21:1-3) provided for seven-year cycles, and at the end of every seventh year, all contracts of indenture had to end. Suppose a family fell into hard times, and they had strong sons and energetic daughters. They might go to someone and say, "My son will come to work for you. It's the third of the

seven years, so my son will be indentured to work for you for four years." However, the arrangement wasn't open-ended. Within the tribe no one was permitted to use other people's struggles to permanently create an underclass.

There is great wisdom in this. Modern economics operate with different premises, of course. But the wisdom does overlap. If we're going to protect each other, if we're going to answer the call when someone is hurt, if we're going to build a wall or do anything else that's worth doing together, it will require vulnerability. I have to tell you what I'm afraid of. I have to alert you when I'm hurt. And I have to be willing to hear what's hard for you. But we won't create those kind of relationships if we think we're going to be taken advantage of. If vulnerability leads to being used, then it will always break down.

That's why Nehemiah was so outraged. They couldn't ever be anything God intended them to be if they were going to abuse one another economically. Money is a subtle and powerful siren song for many, and unless we pay close attention, very often greed can get in the way of what God wants in relationships.

Look at verses 7-8 quickly. "When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry." Then he got the nobles and officials together, the people who were taking advantage (a private talk first). "You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!" he accused. Probably the interest was so high that it would be impossible to ever pay back the loan. It undermined their ability to work together, and it was forbidden by God.

Verse 8 is more difficult to understand. The poorest people had had to indenture themselves and sell their property. Nehemiah said, "When we came back from exile, we went out and bought our brothers back from their slavery to the Gentiles. But look at what you're doing now: You're arranging for them to be sold again to the Gentiles, who can ignore the Jewish cycles of seven years. Then you're buying the contracts back again as a way of avoiding the legal requirement to keep periods of indentured service short."

Jesus similarly challenged the Pharisees who tried to get around the responsibility of caring for their parents. Recall the Pharisees' Corban tradition in the New Testament. Jesus told them, "But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God)...." (Mark 7:11). It was a loophole, a way around God's command to take care of one's family. God was getting in the way of their using their assets the way they wanted to.

CONFRONTING DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR IN THE COMMUNITY

Nehemiah deliberately challenged the nobles and officials and told them exactly what they were doing. He did it in private first, then in public at the end of verse 7: "So I called together a large meeting to deal with them." In public he dressed them down for their disobedience, and they offered no reply. There were no extenuating circumstances, no ignorance. They knew exactly what they were doing. They were guilty as charged.

Let's examine Nehemiah's responses more closely. I've already mentioned the first one: He got angry. That is a very good thing. Anger is a proper response to economic abuse of the poor and vulnerable. It made our Lord angry.

But Nehemiah very helpfully didn't act immediately on his anger. Look at what it says in verse 7: "...But I thought about what was happening, and then I spoke." He took enough time to realize that his anger wasn't completely helpful, that it was capable of getting out of control. Just being angry wasn't good enough. So he gathered himself and took a walk, we can imagine, and thought about it.

Then he went to the nobles with clear accusations. He was specific in his charges. "You're charging usury, and you're abusing the laws of indentured servitude." His charges were unambiguous.

Verses 9-13 show us Nehemiah's heart:

So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them-the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil."

"We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say."

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!"

At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.

When he challenged them about their usury and wrongful use of the labor of others, his specific challenge was, "Shouldn't you fear God more than you love the short-term benefit? Shouldn't you want rewards that come from God, not from money? Aren't you concerned about the reputation of our God and his law and his presence in the eyes of other people? For some greedy, short-term advantage, why are you denying all that?"

And in verse 12, the nobles who had been doing these inappropriate things responded, saying in effect, "It's terrible what we've done. But we're going to quit right now. We're sorry. We agree with you that we shouldn't have done what we did."

But Nehemiah was wise enough to know that the seductiveness of the power that comes with money is so great that it wasn't enough to just feel bad about what they had done and determine on their own to change. So he called the priests in, and the nobles and officials were made to swear, in the presence of the priests, that they would act on their oaths.

Then even that wasn't enough. Nehemiah took off his coat and shook it and said, "This is what God is going to do to you if you fail to keep your oath. God will shake you in this way."

THE INTEGRITY OF FEARING GOD

Let's move on to 5:14-19, and then we'll further consider Nehemiah's example.

Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year--twelve years--neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. 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. Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.

Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations...In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.

Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people.

Nehemiah had a right as the governor to exact his own tax to provide for himself and his retinue. He not only refused to do so, but he didn't acquire land or speculate during all this change that was going on in Jerusalem. Moreover, he fed at least 150 people a day. The implication here is that he paid for these things out of his own

pocket. Verse 18a goes on to tell how many oxen and sheep and poultry and so on had to be prepared to do this.

Remember, when Nehemiah accused these unrighteous men of charging usury for loans, he said, "I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain." Making loans was legitimate; in fact it was expected that those who had something should go to the poor and say, "You're having hard times. You're a hard worker, and a good person, and I know you're going to get back on your feet someday. Here's a loan to tide you over. When you get back on your feet and have the money, pay me back. No interest is required." That was what Nehemiah did.

But in addition, he was generous. He not only did the proper thing, but he paid for the expenses of the governing that he had to do there. He went beyond what was required of him and did more. He essentially gave them a great gift by running the government at his own expense.

Nehemiah concludes with another of the short prayers with which the book is filled: "Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people." He wanted a reward from God, not some short-term benefit that would burn up someday.

"Shouldn't you fear God?" Nehemiah asked. He himself did what he advocated for others, and that's what made him such a powerful leader. That's one of the most important lessons to take from this. That was the reason he could go to the nobles, propelled by righteous anger, and say, "Stop exacting usury. Stop taking advantage of people. Stop making it impossible for us to love each other because of the fear that we'll get hurt if we do. Give back what you've stolen to the hundredth part [the final cent]. Take an oath, and God is going to hold you to the oath that you've taken." The reason he could say all that was that he was willing to do right in God's sight himself. He wasn't calling for them to act in ways that he wouldn't act.

We're living through a terrible experiment in this country concerning whether leaders who have a significant commitment to immorality can call on the people in the country to live sacrificially, to live to high purpose, to live lives that are contributory and honorable. Can leaders who are compromised in their honesty ask the citizenry to live differently? It ultimately doesn't work.

That's an important lesson for parents, for those who have a management position at work, for those who have any other position of responsibility—elders in the church, heads of home groups, Sunday School teachers. They need to be able to say what others should know and think and do because it's an experience they have had themselves, because they have been willing to trust God themselves.

THE SAFETY OF RESISTING COMPROMISE

Let's briefly turn to chapter 6. It tells of three incidents that took place, and every one of them tested Nehemiah on the same issue: Was he vulnerable because he was compromised inwardly?

The first test was when the job was almost done. The walls were built but the gates weren't hung yet, and the enemy said, "Come on out to the plain of Ono, and we'll throw a party!" But they had set an ambush for him and were going to kill him. They appealed to his pride: "Nehemiah, you've done a great job! We want to celebrate with you." If Nehemiah had believed all his press and was self-impressed, he might have gone.

But in verse 3 he responded:

...So I sent messengers to them with this reply: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"

He was saying, "I'm focused on what I've been called to. Your accolades will contribute nothing to me." His unwillingness to be proud, to indulge in self-congratulation, saved his life in this case.

In the second test they said, "We're going to write a letter to the emperor, and we're going to say that you're building this wall because you want to gather an army and make yourself king."

In verses 8-9 he answers them again:

"Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head."

They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed."

But I prayed, "Now strengthen my hands."

If Nehemiah really had been planning to raise an army and become king, the fact that they were accusing him would have caused him to try to cover his tracks. But he wasn't ambitious. He said the whole thing was ridiculous. He was a man of integrity who knew who he was and who was receiving honor from God. He wasn't vulnerable to this attack.

The third way they tested him was to send a false prophet to him who said, "We ought to go hide in the temple. Men are coming to kill you."

Nehemiah's answer is in verses 11-12:

But I said, "Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.

If Nehemiah had not been able to deal with fears of sneak attacks, if he was blustering on the outside and cowering on the inside, he might well have run to save his life. But he said, "I'm not that kind of person. I'm not going to go hide in the temple to save my life when everybody else is threatened. If there are assassins in our city and they're going to start killing people, I'm going to stay with the people. Either God will protect me or he won't."

In each of these cases, his ability to withstand the test was based on what he had already decided was true. He had already solved that problem. "God is going to save my life or he isn't. I don't want to be king; I have no ambition. I'm not so impressed with my press clippings that I'm going to go party when I ought not." In every case, he escaped the possible downfall out of his good character.

The last word I advocate for us by way of application of these chapters is to think again what it means to be a community. It's impossible to draw near to people without being vulnerable. How are we going to fight enemies unless we know where we fail, where we hurt, where our strengths and weaknesses are? Without that, we can't be a community, an army, a family. But it is impossible to be vulnerable in that way if we're also threatened by what the others will do with the information.

Nehemiah realized that this financial grinding of the poor by the rich was not only bad in itself, but it was bad because of what it did for every possible relationship among them. They would always be a broken city, a poor and hopeless people. We can see that the same is true of us. We will always be desperately hanging on alone unless we attempt to live in the kind of community that is reinforcing. That can come only if we determine not to take advantage of one another.

And we can be different. We can be thankful that some like Nehemiah have the kind of influence that makes others better. We shouldn't settle for anything less.

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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