

### NEHEMIAH

#### Lesson 7, Chapter 5

Last week we studied Nehemiah chapter 4, and in it Nehemiah and the Jews of Judah were faced with violent threats from 4 local and regional gentile rulers who did not want the walls of Jerusalem rebuilt or the city itself rehabilitated unless they were given at least partial control of the reconstruction and shared in ruling over the city. These 4 potentates represented territories that literally surrounded Judah like prison walls.

The threats were that they would attack the Jews in order to disrupt the building project. When Nehemiah got wind of the escalated threat level he first prayed to the God of Israel for guidance and then organized the people for battle. Nehemiah was a Godly man; but he also didn't see strong action or even war against a declared enemy as somehow contradictory to his faith and trust in Yehoveh. I second that notion. It is only in later times, long after gentile church bishops gained control of the movement started by Christ and His Jewish disciples that passivity became the preferred mode of behavior for Christians. And this passivity can be traced primarily to an out-of-context misinterpretation and misapplication of Paul's famous instructions on spiritual warfare, using military terms and metaphors, which we find in Ephesians 6. The result was church leaders deciding that the only permitted action of a Believer against threat or attack was prayer.

In time this passivity extended to almost every area of a Christian's life when faced with a challenge. Instead of pray, prepare and stand as encourage by Paul, it evolved into pray, sit and wait for God to solve the problem. Our walk with God was, is, and shall always be a co-operative venture and action in the face of challenges is not an option, it is our duty.

As it turned out, intimidation from the 4 gentile rulers wasn't the only challenge facing Nehemiah. It seems that the Jewish workers were losing their enthusiasm for the rebuilding

project. Through exhaustion from toting the heavy loads of removing thousands of tons of rubble, basket by basket, and from hoisting heavy stones back into place by hand along thousands of feet of destroyed walls; and because the laborers' families regularly pled with them to come back to their farms, orchards and vineyards so that they could grow food to survive, and to tend and protect flocks and herds, the Jews of Judah were starting to feel deflated and defeated. 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.

But 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.

### **READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 5 all**

In times of stress, underlying societal problems that until now had gone unnoticed by the leadership can suddenly erupt. And what we find in this chapter is that a simmering issue of fundamental fairness has emerged that is near to tearing the Jewish community of Judah apart. The issue is a huge gap in personal wealth and income between the aristocratic Jews and the common Jews. Except for momentary lapses, all throughout history, in almost all cultures, the issue of wealth distribution has been problematic, and has also been the nearly universal cause for riots, rebellion, and civil war. The 21<sup>st</sup> century of our day is awash in exactly this conundrum, generally present in every nation on our planet where such a thing as an economy exists (and America is currently ground zero in this regard).

What we just read is about Nehemiah using all his leadership skills, as well as a good dose of humility and wisdom, to deal with this potentially explosive civil unrest.

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. Second was that then as now, trade either with or through their immediate neighbors was a must, and 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.

I'll interject at this point what I mentioned last week: reading Nehemiah is like reading today's edition of The Jerusalem Post. It is chilling to see essentially the same things happening, in the same places, by the same people, 2500 years later. Israel's enemies have used the power of Public Relations and the United Nations to create a growing economic embargo upon the Israeli economy in order to try to force Israel to cede some control of their land over to their enemies, the two Palestinian factions of the West Bank and Gaza, and to share Jerusalem. This is precisely what we see happening here in Nehemiah, is it not? The embargo is, of course, not called by that label by the national and international press; rather it goes by the innocuous name BDS: Boycott, Divest, Sanction. Various groups from Europe to South America, Canada, Australia and the United States are now officially boycotting the purchase of Israeli made goods and services, selling off assets and investments situated in Israel, and pushing for worldwide political sanctions against Israel in order to punish and isolate them. These efforts are led by Universities and colleges, labor unions, teacher's organizations, professional trade guilds, pension funds and in the case of the EU (the European Union) boycotting Israeli made products and services has become official policy.

While this is typically spun as merely a political action against Israel and for the Palestinians, in reality this is but another form of thinly veiled anti-Semitism. And lest we ever forget, boycotts and sanctions are precisely how the reign of terror against the Jews began in Germany leading up to WWII and the Holocaust. Boycotting Jewish shops, firing Jewish laborers, and the government putting up special sanctions against Jewish held banks and companies was billed as but a justifiable and peaceful means of social protest and a political statement against too much Jewish influence in Germany. But as history shows, within months of the boycotts beginning assaulting Jews on the streets, burning down their businesses and synagogues, and confiscating their wealth came next. With these supposed social and political statements, the stage was set for a concerted effort to murder every Jew not just in Germany but in Europe. Hitler and his allies nearly succeeded and the gentile populations of the world (including the church) were mostly silent and in Germany highly complicit.

Where are the outcries today from national leaders, Christian leaders, and Jewish groups outside of Israel for this blatant anti-Semitic war on Israel's economy? The reality is that just as in the lead-up to the Holocaust, nobody seems to notice, and few care. If in the late 1930's this situation was mentioned outside of Germany, it was only whispered and the usual response was that concern over this was overblown; just irrational paranoia. I ask each and every one who is listening to this message to hear me: this is our time to stand up and be counted. The Lord is giving us an opportunity to both comfort His people and to take sides. These Jewish victims of the boycotts and slanders are our elder brothers and sisters in the faith; this is God's chosen people who gave us our Messiah who are being attacked. Pass the word that this is happening. Fight! Don't be silent! Let your political leadership know that YOU know about it and about their indifference and that this is unacceptable; and then do the one thing that just might help the most: intentionally purchase Israeli products to help Israeli Jews support their families and perhaps break the back of this economic siege against Israel. Perhaps there are other ways to help the Jewish people directly that your family or group can think of. As an example: Seed of Abraham Ministries/ Torah Class is now devoting a substantial part of our budget in order to rapidly expand our inventory of exclusively Israeli made products at our [www.holylandmarketplace.com](http://www.holylandmarketplace.com) online store. This non-profit ministry was created just for this purpose. However, I think I can say confidently that none of us who began this ministry over a decade ago imagined that such a day would come so soon, that the attack on Israel's economy would be so blatant, and the need would become so great so fast.

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.

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. Just like in our pre-industrial economy of a century ago in America, a major portion of the population indeed lived on farms and raised crops and herds, but those who lived in the ever growing cities had other types of skills and so they had to trade money for food produced by the farmers. However for those who lived in the suburbs, it was more common to have a garden and grow some food but still have to purchase other food items to supplement. 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 3<sup>rd</sup> group of verse 4 is somewhat like the 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

So in verse 5 a reference to who the 3 groups were complaining against is posted: **“they are the same flesh as our brothers, their children like our children.....”** Obviously “they” are speaking of fellow Jews; aristocratic Jews from their local communities. And the concerns of the people weren’t hypothetical: some of their children were already taken as slaves. In fact, we see an unusual use of a Hebrew term that gives us pause. Where in our CJB it says, “Some of our daughters have gone into slavery already”, it probably ought to read more like, “Some of our daughters have already been submitted”. The Hebrew word is ***kabash*** and while it has the sense of being forced to do something, it doesn’t really indicate slavery. So some scholars think this means that daughters were given as wives, or as 2<sup>nd</sup> wives, to some of the wealthy Jews. In the Book of Esther we see one of the few uses of this Hebrew word in the Bible and it has sexual overtones to it.

<sup>CJB</sup> ***Esther 7:8 Haman had just fallen on the couch where Ester was, when the king returned from the palace garden to the wine banquet. He shouted, "Is he even going to rape the queen here in the palace, before my very eyes?" The moment these words left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face.***

Here in Esther the word ***kabash*** is translated to “rape”. And while that English word wouldn’t fit the context of our passage in Nehemiah, the idea is that a girl would submit sexually to a man. In Hebrew culture the only acceptable sexual submission is as a wife or concubine (a 2<sup>nd</sup> wife). So I agree with scholars that say that this is referring to marrying daughters off, but not as regular wives rather as 2<sup>nd</sup> wives. And this prospect was unsavory; but it also meant that unlike regular bond servitude whereby a person was enslaved until the debt was paid off, or until ***shmittah*** (release at Jubilee) arrived, this daughter was lost forever as she was permanently joined to another family by marriage (even though in reality it was purely debt related).

Let’s be clear: it was legal according to Torah for Jews to be bond servants. And it was legal to use land or other assets as collateral on a loan. However the real purpose of these Torah laws was to give a poor person a way to survive and hopefully to recover from their bad financial situation. The laws weren’t meant to give the rich a shot at acquiring more land or slaves. So whenever these laws were applied, they were to be applied with fundamental fairness as opposed to leverage to the advantage of the wealthy. While there are passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy that covers such matters, the most extensive is found in Leviticus 25. We’ll not read it, but I do want to quote some of the verses to remind you of the principles

that God is establishing regarding debt, slavery, release, and the sale of land especially as it concerns Hebrews because it directly applies to the situation in Nehemiah chapter 5.

**(Lev 25:14 CJB)<sup>14</sup> "If you sell anything to your neighbor or buy anything from him, neither of you is to exploit the other.**

**(Lev 25:17 CJB)<sup>17</sup> Thus you are not to take advantage of each other, but you are to fear your God; for I am ADONAI your God.**

**(Lev 25:23-24 CJB)<sup>3</sup> "The land is not to be sold in perpetuity, because the land belongs to me- you are only foreigners and temporary residents with me.**

**<sup>24</sup> Therefore, when you sell your property, you must include the right of redemption.**

**(Lev 25:35-37 CJB)<sup>35</sup> "If a member of your people has become poor, so that he can't support himself among you, you are to assist him as you would a foreigner or a temporary resident, so that he can continue living with you.**

**<sup>36</sup> Do not charge him interest or otherwise profit from him, but fear your God, so that your brother can continue living with you.**

**<sup>37</sup> Do not take interest when you loan him money or take a profit when you sell him food.**

**(Lev 25:44-46 CJB)<sup>44</sup> "Concerning the men and women you may have as slaves: you are to buy men- and women-slaves from the nations surrounding you.**

<sup>45</sup> ***You may also buy the children of foreigners living with you and members of their families born in your land; you may own these.***

<sup>46</sup> ***You may also bequeath them to your children to own; from these groups you may take your slaves forever. But as far as your brothers the people of Isra'el are concerned, you are not to treat each other harshly.***

So we see the underlying principles behind how a Jew is to deal with another Jew (or more technically, a Hebrew with another Hebrew) as regards loans, debt repayment, interest rates, etc. And according to the complaints of the people of Judah these principles were not being observed by the wealthy; rather they were exploiting the situation to their benefit but also to the extreme detriment of the common Jews.

Nehemiah realized the seriousness of the situation; it was not only that the overall economic condition of Jerusalem and Judah were deteriorating, but that the community was in danger of rupturing. His initial reaction was anger; but to what? To the fundamental unfairness, or to the possibility that his entire mission could be undone? I think it is more the latter than the former. Nehemiah was a man of purpose who was not easily detoured in getting from A to B. But in his usual manner, he didn't act on impulse. Verse 7 says that he thought the matter over and only afterwards he made the decision to confront the nobles and rulers (Jewish nobles and rulers). And to do this he called for an assembly of the people to come and there before them the case against the wealthy Jews would be tried. This indeed was handled as a more or less legal matter, and so the people were the witnesses. The reality is that unless this situation was reversed, or at least greatly mitigated, the entire project would become the failure that all previous attempts to rebuild the city and its walls were.

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.

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. To borrow a term from H.G.M. Williamson in his commentary on Nehemiah, this was a moral absurdity. 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:

***(Lev 25:17 CJB)<sup>17</sup> Thus you are not to take advantage of each other, but you are to fear your God; for I am ADONAI your God.***

Thus what would under normal circumstances have been a good and correct legal defense by the wealthy to Nehemiah's accusation that it was entirely different for them to sell a Jew to a Jew than to sell a Jew to a pagan was short-circuited by Nehemiah when he says that either way it still puts the poor Jews in the same untenable situation and thus endangers the well being of the entire Jewish Community of Jerusalem. We are told that the wealthy Jews stood silent at such sound reasoning. And we have to remember that what is happening here in the Jerusalem project is not a commercial enterprise; it is a cause for the advancement of the Kingdom of God. It is God's will for Jerusalem to be redeveloped. And if the common Jews are willing to stop farming, to leave home and family for a time, to work with one hand on a tool and the other on a sword for self-defense, and to give of their back-breaking labor to make it happen, then the rich Jews not only shouldn't profit from it, they should help to make up for what the laborers were sacrificing.

So in verse 9 Nehemiah declares the rich Jews guilty as charged. And then adds a spiritual reason for their guilt: "You should be living in the fear of God!", no doubt referring to the Torah and Lev. 25:17. But then comes a humbling admission: Nehemiah too was guilty. He had been loaning money and food to the poor Jews (apparently at usurious interest rates or he'd have no guilt). So, he says, it is time to stop adding to the burden of these selfless workers by putting them further into debt. The debts should be forgiven. There's probably two scenarios intended here: 1) that any who had lost their lands, crops, vineyards or orchards due to inability to pay a debt should immediately have it returned to them. And 2) whatever interest that had been paid for a loan (in silver or in food) was to be given back. Now this second scenario is somewhat disputed by scholars primarily due to the word *me'ah* that translates most literally as "hundred". The CJB makes the interest 100 pieces of silver plus some of the produce. Other versions say that it means not hundred, but hundredth (or better, 1/100<sup>th</sup>). I'm not dogmatic about it since we may never know; however there is much to be said for the 1/100<sup>th</sup> interpretation that means an interest rate of 1% to be paid in silver, PLUS some amount of produce. 100 pieces of silver was a substantial sum that seems unattainable for a typical Jewish farmer. Of course we're also not told if this 1/100<sup>th</sup> (1%) is monthly or yearly, although monthly is probably meant giving us an imputed interest of 12% per year since 20% per year interest was the standard in the Middle East in that era. In any case, any interest at all was determined to be wrong. And in a display of obedience and generosity the wealthy Jews agreed to return everything and to no longer charge interest for loans. I can hear the cheers of the people accompanied with tears of joy. I can also easily imagine that the community grew much closer together as a result, and the wealthy were rewarded with sincere honor and respect.

But Nehemiah needed more than a mere declaration to rely on and so he called the Priests to come and administer a vow to the aristocrats, which they apparently accepted. Nehemiah used a symbolic act (much like the Prophets of days past did) as a curse upon the wealthy if they failed to adhere to their vow before God. Before the invention of pockets, a fold in a garment would be used to provide a safe place to put things. So Nehemiah opened the fold in his garment, shook it, and asked God to do the same for anyone who failed to live up to their vow. The idea being that God would rid Himself of those people or that the offenders would lose everything valuable to them. The entire assembly, meaning the rich and the common Jews, together shouted Amen, thus each personally voicing agreement to adhere to the terms of the vow.

The spirit of what Nehemiah suggested and what the wealthy agreed to (after being so callous and wrong for so long) is well expressed in a NT verse that we find in 1<sup>st</sup> John.

**1John 3:17-18 CJB <sup>17</sup> *If someone has worldly possessions and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how can he be loving God?***

**<sup>18</sup> *Children, let us love not with words and talk, but with actions and in reality!***

What we see thus far in Nehemiah is Godliness expressed by actions. Hear God calling you? Respond. See a need? Fill it. See a wrong? Fix it. Recognize sin in your life? Repent.

We will pick up chapter 5 next week.