

NEHEMIAH – FACT SHEET 4



Chapter 5:

Sandwiched in between the ‘opposition’ verses of chapter 4 and chapter 6:1-14; is chapter 5. Such has been the enthusiasm, momentum and intensity of the work and ‘battle’; that as is often the case – it can be easy to neglect the detail; and more specifically, the people.

Here in Nehemiah 5, we initially see:

Nehemiah’s Problem:

The opening verses reveal to us a problem that had been developing for some time – that of social neglect and poverty. Thus the people, ‘raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers’ (5:1). With many of the ‘breadwinners’ working on the wall for a number of weeks, thus unable to earn within this period, the source of their complaint was manifold:

- They were struggling to feed their large families – vs2
- They were having to sell things and re-mortgage to get by – vs3
- Impacting this was a famine – vs3
- Borrowing was on the increase to pay Persia’s exorbitant taxes – vs4
- Others were so desperate, that they were having to sell their children into slavery – vs5
- Ultimately they felt powerless to change anything – vs5

Secondly – the chapter reveals **Nehemiah’s Passion:**

In addition to the 5 general themes seen throughout Nehemiah (his awesome God, his humble view of himself, passion for scripture, passion for prayer, exemplified leadership); a sixth theme constantly emerges about this great leader – that of his heartfelt **passion for the people.**

Just as in the first chapter, on hearing the initial report about Jerusalem, when Nehemiah ‘sat down and wept’ (1:4) – here again, the great leader is not afraid to show emotion. However this time, it is anger (5:6). Yet like the controlled leader he was, he would not allow his anger to dominate his actions, so on receiving the report, he wisely, ‘pondered them in (his) mind’ (5:7). Just as his four months of thought and prayer had prepared him well for his conversation with the Persian King; his ponderings here would ensure that his approach on such a tricky and sensitive issue, would also be God honouring. Nehemiah, having thus pondered, then addresses the issue directly with those involved; following which, in order to obtain a consensus for a solution, convenes a larger meeting (5:7).

Within our 21st century western culture, it is often difficult to understand the depth and seriousness of such events. It is only when one 'steps into' the culture of that time that one can truly appreciate such. Remember that Israel, God's people, was founded upon the Law of Moses. This was God's 'blueprint for living' that in addition to the Decalogue (10 Commandments), also gave provision for the detail of life, health, trade, family et al.

Amongst such laws were ones that dealt with the very issues raised by the people here in Nehemiah 5 – for example:

- Slaves were to be allowed their freedom after 6 years service – Exodus 21:2
- Any debts owed should be cancelled every 7th year – Deut 15:1
- It was forbidden to charge interest on a loan to a Jewish brother – Deut 23:19

Such activity had been heavily condemned by the prophets and was declared to be a significant factor in the original exile (read Ezekiel chapter 22).

By the tone of the concerns here in chapter 5, it would appear that, along with many things, these key areas of inter-dealing amongst God's people, had been conveniently forgotten. Nehemiah's initial anger and subsequent public condemnation can be much more readily understood as one understands the greater offence against the law giving God who had redeemed them.

Nehemiah's Practical Approach:

Rather than 'jumping in' and providing an insufficient, temporary solution; Nehemiah involves the wider fellowship of God's people – this is everyone's problem. Nehemiah's appeal to the people is on several fronts; not as a threatening, tyrannical leader; but as one who:

- Appeals to their conscience – slaves that had been generously bought back from gentile masters – were now having to be sold to fellow Jews – vs8
- Appeals to 'family' – 'our Jewish brothers' – vs8
- Appeals to morality – 'what you are doing is not right' – vs9
- Appeals to Theology – 'Shouldn't you walk in the fear of the Lord?' – they were God's covenant people – how could they use and abuse others members of God's household? – vs9
- Appeals to their testimony – how would their 'gentile enemies' view this? – vs9
- Appeals to his own example – Nehemiah was also lending money, however one assumes that he honoured God's boundaries on this – vs10
- Appeals for action – 'give back to them immediately' – vs11

Faced with such a heartfelt, Godly appeal; the people respond (5:12). Their commitment however is not to Nehemiah and the people alone, it is to God. Thus the priests are summoned to witness the oath; with the whole ceremony depicted with Nehemiah's prophetic act of 'shaking his cloak' (5:13).

In addition to his exhortation to the people to reform their ways and get back to God's standards. Nehemiah also reveals his **personal sacrifice**:

In verse 14, for the first time, Nehemiah reveals his new role, as Governor. Such a position would be entitled to receive the financial support of the people. However, the compassionate leader, seeing the people's struggles, does not want to impact this with unnecessary personal demands. His attitude is driven ultimately by his reverence for God (5:15). The proverb states, 'He who is kind to the poor, lends to the Lord' (Prov 19:17).

Additionally, instead of being absorbed by his own importance and issues, Nehemiah again identifies with his people, preferring to labour side by side with them, on the wall (5:16). Nehemiah is also an approachable leader, offering hospitality to many (5:17). Verse 18 underlines the great leader's way of always putting the people first – they were his prime concern. In the final verse, not as a proud boast to God; but as a humble plea, he asks the Lord to 'remember' him and to accept his service, which is ultimately for the King of Kings.

For further study:

The bible has much to say about wealth and poverty – what do the following Old Testament verses say about each? Can you find some New Testament equivalents?

Wealth:

Wealth's source – Job 42:10, 1 Chron 29:12, 2 Chron 10:12, Eccles 5:19, Psalm 112:3

Warnings against wealth being our focus: Prov 30:8-9, Eccles 5:10, Jeremiah 9:23, Hosea 13:6

Poverty/The poor:

The Lord's Concern (what we should reflect!): Psalm 140:12, Prov 19:17

Poverty's causes: Amos 1:6, Amos 2:6, Prov 14:31, Prov 19:15, Prov 23:21, Prov 10:15

There are many more references and inferred circumstances including oppression & fraudulent activity, laziness, unfortunate circumstances, being trapped in a 'cycle' of poverty.

With regards other people – what or who should our attitude ultimately be like? See Philippians 2:5.

Further Reading/Bibliography – My thanks go to!

- *The Holy Bible – (first of course!)*
- *The Message of Nehemiah, R Brown – IVP*
- *Overcoming challenges, B Hybels – Zondervan*
- *A Passion for Faithfulness, J Packer – Crossway*
- *Ezra & Nehemiah, D Kidner – IVP*
- *The Holy Bible – New International Version – Hodder & Stoughton, 1998*
- *London School of Theology Study Notes – Encountering God & Neighbour*
- *Hoek M & Thacker J (eds), Micah's Challenge, Milton Keynes, Paternoster, 2009*
- *Chan, F, Crazy Love, Colorado Springs, Pub. D Cook, 2008,*
- *Blomberg, C L, Neither Poverty nor Riches, A Biblical Theology of Possessions, Leicester, IVP, 1999*

“Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your Word”
Psalm 119:18