

NOON BIBLE STUDY: NEHEMIAH 5

SUMMARY

IN THE LAST CHAPTERS WE SAW THE RESOLVE OF THE PEOPLE, UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF NEHEMIAH TO CONTINUE BUILDING THE WALL, DESPITE OUTSIDE THREATS AND OPPOSITION. THEY TRUST IN THE LORD TO PROTECT THEM AND CONTINUE THE WORK - A SHOVEL IN ONE HAND AND A SWORD IN THE OTHER. WHAT WE WILL DISCOVER NEXT IS THE NEXT CHALLENGE THEY WILL FACE WON'T BE EXTERNAL, BUT GUARDING AGAINST THE INTERNAL CHALLENGES THAT ARISE.

NEHEMIAH 5:1-5 - PROBLEMS AMONGST THE PEOPLE

WE TURN FROM THE UNITED RESOLVE OF THE JEWS TO WORK TOGETHER TO BUILD THE WALL (CHAPTER 3 & 4) TO A "GREAT OUTCRY OF THE PEOPLE AND THEIR WIVES" (5:1). WE WILL LEARN OF SOME SERIOUS CONCERNS OF THE PEOPLE, PRIMARILY OF THE ECONOMIC SORT:

V. 2 - SOME HAD VERY LARGE FAMILIES AND THERE WAS NOT ENOUGH FOOD TO GO AROUND, PERHAPS BECAUSE THE MEN WERE FOCUSED DURING THIS SEASON ON BUILDING THE WALL AND NOT TILLING THEIR FIELDS.

V. 3 - OTHERS WERE "MORTGAGING" THEIR FIELDS, VINEYARDS AND HOMES TO GET MONEY FOR FOOD DURING A PREVIOUSLY UNMENTIONED "FAMINE". THEY APPEAR CONCERNED ABOUT WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THEIR PROPERTY IF THINGS CONTINUE THIS WAY.

V. 4 - OTHERS ARE APPARENTLY TAKING WHAT MAY BE EQUIVALENT TO A SECOND MORTGAGE OR HOME EQUITY LOAN OUT TO PAY TAXES TO PERSIA.

AND VERSE 5 SUMMARIZES THE HEART OF THEIR COMPLAINT:

NEHEMIAH 5:5 (NLT) - WE BELONG TO THE SAME FAMILY AS THOSE WHO ARE WEALTHY, AND OUR CHILDREN ARE JUST LIKE THEIRS. YET WE MUST SELL OUR CHILDREN INTO SLAVERY JUST TO GET ENOUGH MONEY TO LIVE. WE HAVE ALREADY SOLD SOME OF OUR DAUGHTERS, AND WE ARE HELPLESS TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT, FOR OUR FIELDS AND VINEYARDS ARE ALREADY MORTGAGED TO OTHERS."

THIS GROUP OF FAMILIES WAS UPSET BECAUSE THEY WERE BEING FINANCIALLY CHALLENGED AND AT RISK WHILE OTHER MEMBERS OF THEIR LARGER NATIONAL "FAMILY" WERE NOT HURTING. IN OUR GENERATION, THIS MAY SEEM LIKE A POINTLESS PROTEST, WE MIGHT THINK THAT THEY SHOULD HAVE WORKED HARDER, MADE BETTER PLANS TO SAVE OR INVEST - BUT FOR THIS TIME FOR GOD'S PEOPLE, THEY HAVE A VERY LEGITIMATE COMPLAINT.

WHAT IS NOT MENTIONED IN THESE VERSES IS THAT IF THE POORER FAMILIES OF THE LAND ARE MORTGAGING THEIR FIELDS, TAKING LOANS TO PAY TAXES, AND SENDING THEIR CHILDREN TO BE SLAVES TO HELP PAY FOR GRAIN, WHO IS IT THAT THEY ARE TAKING LOANS FROM, PAYING INTEREST TO AND SENDING THEIR KIDS TO? NOT FROM PERSIA - BUT FROM OTHERS JEWS IN THE LAND - THEIR NEIGHBORS AND BROTHERS. AND THIS FACT IS WHAT WILL GET NEHEMIAH STIRRED UP.

NEHEMIAH 5:6-8 - NEHEMIAH CONFRONTS THE NATION

THE TEXT TELLS US THAT NEHEMIAH WAS "VERY ANGRY" (V. 6). HE TAKES THE TIME TO THINK THINGS THROUGH PERSONALLY AND THEN INVOLVES THE OTHER LEADERS OF THE NATION (V. 7). "WE ARE DOING ALL WE CAN TO REDEEM OUR JEWISH RELATIVES WHO HAVE HAD TO SELL THEMSELVES TO PAGAN FOREIGNERS, (NEHEMIAH SAID) BUT YOU ARE SELLING THEM BACK INTO SLAVERY AGAIN." (V. 8, NLT)

GOD'S HEART FOR THE NATION WAS NOT COMPARABLE TO MODERN COMMUNISM WHERE THE GOVERNMENT FORCES PEOPLE TO ALL HAVE THE SAME. HOWEVER, THERE WAS A CLEAR EMPHASIS IN THE MOSAIC LAW ON THE NATION TAKING CARE OF EACH OTHER BY BEING MERCIFUL AND GENEROUS. FOR EXAMPLE:

EXODUS 22:25-27 - "IF YOU LEND MONEY TO MY PEOPLE, TO THE POOR AMONG YOU, YOU ARE NOT TO ACT AS A CREDITOR TO HIM; YOU SHALL NOT CHARGE HIM INTEREST. 26 "IF YOU EVER TAKE YOUR NEIGHBOR'S CLOAK AS A PLEDGE, YOU ARE TO RETURN IT TO HIM BEFORE THE SUN SETS, 27 FOR THAT IS HIS ONLY COVERING; IT IS HIS CLOAK FOR HIS BODY. WHAT ELSE SHALL HE SLEEP IN? AND IT SHALL COME ABOUT THAT WHEN HE CRIES OUT TO ME, I WILL HEAR HIM, FOR I AM GRACIOUS.

LEVITICUS 25:35-37 (NLT) - "IF ONE OF YOUR FELLOW ISRAELITES FALLS INTO POVERTY AND CANNOT SUPPORT HIMSELF, SUPPORT HIM AS YOU WOULD A FOREIGNER OR A TEMPORARY RESIDENT AND ALLOW HIM TO LIVE WITH YOU. 36 DO NOT CHARGE INTEREST OR MAKE A PROFIT AT HIS EXPENSE. INSTEAD, SHOW YOUR FEAR OF GOD BY LETTING HIM LIVE WITH YOU AS YOUR RELATIVE. 37 REMEMBER, DO NOT CHARGE INTEREST ON MONEY YOU LEND HIM OR MAKE A PROFIT ON FOOD YOU SELL HIM.

DEUTERONOMY 15:7-11 (NLT) - "BUT IF THERE ARE ANY POOR ISRAELITES IN YOUR TOWNS WHEN YOU ARRIVE IN THE LAND THE LORD YOUR GOD IS GIVING YOU, DO NOT BE HARD-HEARTED OR TIGHTFISTED TOWARD THEM. 8 INSTEAD, BE GENEROUS AND LEND THEM WHATEVER THEY NEED. 9 DO NOT BE MEAN-SPIRITED AND REFUSE SOMEONE A LOAN BECAUSE THE YEAR FOR CANCELING DEBTS IS CLOSE AT HAND. IF YOU REFUSE TO MAKE THE LOAN AND THE NEEDY PERSON CRIES OUT TO THE LORD, YOU WILL BE CONSIDERED GUILTY OF SIN. 10 GIVE GENEROUSLY TO THE POOR, NOT GRUDGINGLY, FOR THE LORD YOUR GOD WILL BLESS YOU IN EVERYTHING YOU DO. 11 THERE WILL ALWAYS BE SOME IN THE LAND WHO ARE POOR. THAT IS WHY I AM COMMANDING YOU TO SHARE FREELY WITH THE POOR AND WITH OTHER ISRAELITES IN NEED.

DEUTERONOMY 23:19-20 - "YOU SHALL NOT CHARGE INTEREST TO YOUR COUNTRYMEN: INTEREST ON MONEY, FOOD, OR ANYTHING THAT MAY BE LOANED AT INTEREST. 20 "YOU MAY CHARGE INTEREST TO A FOREIGNER, BUT TO YOUR COUNTRYMEN YOU SHALL NOT CHARGE INTEREST, SO THAT THE LORD YOUR GOD MAY BLESS YOU IN ALL THAT YOU UNDERTAKE IN THE LAND WHICH YOU ARE ABOUT TO ENTER TO POSSESS.

NEHEMIAH'S ANGER IS STIRRED DUE TO THE FACT THAT THE NATION IS NOT FOLLOWING THE WORD OF GOD NOR MODELING THE HEART OF GOD. NEHEMIAH'S CHARGE IS THAT "THE LENDERS WERE BEHAVING LIKE PAWNBROKERS - AND HARSH ONES AT THAT - INSTEAD OF LIKE BROTHERS" (DEREK KINDER, "TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES: EZRA & NEHEMIAH", PG 96)

NEHEMIAH 5:9-13 - NEHEMIAH CALLS FOR REPENTANCE

NEHEMIAH DOESN'T JUST REBUKE OR COMPLAIN - HE CALLS FOR THE PEOPLE TO REPENT OF THEIR SIN AND MAKE THINGS RIGHT. BEING IRRITATED ABOUT PROBLEMS DOESN'T BRING ABOUT GOOD. LOVINGLY CALLING FOR BROTHERS AND SISTERS TO RETURN TO THE LORD'S WAY DOES.

THERE WERE TIMES IN THE CALENDAR WHEN THE NATION WAS CALLED TO RETURN SLAVES, FORGIVE DEBT, AND RESTORE LAND. HOWEVER, NEHEMIAH'S CALL FOR THESE ACTIONS IS NOT BASED ON IT BEING THAT TIME IN THE CALENDAR, IT IS A CALL FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION BASED ON IT BEING THE RIGHT THING TO DO!

V. 13 - SHAKING OUT THE FRONT OF THE GARMENT - "THIS WAS A SYMBOLIC ACTION MATCHING THE WORDS OF THE CURSE THAT FOLLOW. THIS TYPE OF CURSE-FORMULA WAS A SOLEMN, CONVENTIONAL WAY OF COMPELLING COMMITMENT TO A COURSE OF ACTION. BY SAYING AMEN, THE WHOLE ASSEMBLY TOOK UPON ITSELF THE TERMS OF NEHEMIAH'S CURSE." (ESV STUDY BIBLE, NEHEMIAH 5:13)

NEHEMIAH 5:14-19 - SERVANT LEADERSHIP

NEHEMIAH REPORTS THAT UNLIKE HIS GOVERNOR PREDECESSORS, HE IS NOT TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE PEOPLE HE IS OVERSEEING. HE'S NOT BURDENING THE PEOPLE TO SUPPORT SOME LAVISH LIFESTYLE FOR HIMSELF, BUT IS GENUINELY A "MAN OF THE PEOPLE." HE'S WORKING RIGHT NEXT TO "COMMON" JEWS ON THE WALL WITH HIS FELLOW GOVERNOR SERVANTS. HE WAS ENTITLED TO MORE, BUT INSTEAD CHOOSE TO BE A LEADER THAT SERVED. AND HE DID IT ALL BECAUSE "FEARED GOD" (V. 15) AND DESIRED ABOVE ALL TO BE PLEASING TO GOD (V. 19).

SOME LESSONS FOR US:

CAN'T YOU JUST SEE THE IMPORTANT WORK OF THE WALL BEING HIJACKED BECAUSE THE WORKERS BECOMING UNWILLING OR UNABLE TO WORK WITH EACH OTHER BECAUSE OF THE PERSONAL/ECONOMIC STUFF THAT WAS HAPPENING? HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU SEEN THE WORK THAT GOD WANTS YOU TO DO BE HALTED OR DIMINISHED, NOT BECAUSE THE DEVIL BRINGS PERSECUTION FROM THE OUTSIDE, BUT BECAUSE OF PERSONAL/RELATIONSHIP STUFF IN YOUR OWN LIFE?

THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL IS RARELY STOPPED BECAUSE OF PERSECUTION OR THREATS UPON THE LIFE OF CHRISTIANS AROUND THE WORLD. PERSECUTION TENDS TO STRENGTHEN THE RESOLVE OF GOD'S PEOPLE (CP. NEHEMIAH 3-4). WHAT STOPS THE MOVEMENT OF GOD'S WORD AROUND THE WORLD MORE THAN ANYTHING IS THE PEOPLE OF GOD GETTING CAUGHT UP IN SECONDARY CAUSES/BATTLES AND FIGHTING WITH THEMSELVES.

HERE'S A GREAT SPIRITUAL LESSON FROM NEHEMIAH 5: **IF THE ENEMY CAN'T GET YOU FROM THE OUTSIDE, HE'LL TRY AND GET YOU ON THE INSIDE.**

THIS IS WHAT POTENTIALLY COULD HAVE RESULTED FROM THE GREAT OUTCRY FROM THE POOR OF THE NATION. THE FIGHTING WOULD HAVE TAKEN TO MUCH OF THEIR TIME AND ENERGY THAT THE WORK OF GOD (REBUILDING THE WALL IN THIS CASE) WOULD HAVE BEEN LEFT UNDONE. THANKFULLY THIS DIDN'T HAPPEN, DUE TO THE LEADERSHIP OF NEHEMIAH.

WE ARE SEEING THAT ONE OF THE MAIN THEMES OF NEHEMIAH IS ABOUT LEADERSHIP. NEHEMIAH HAS ALREADY BEEN LEADING THE CHARGE AGAINST THE ENEMIES OF GOD'S PEOPLE (SANBALLAT, TOBIAH ETC) AND NOW IN CHAPTER 5 WE SEE HIM INITIATING ACTION TO STOP THE NATIONAL DISOBEDIENCE TO THE MOSAIC LAW AND THE POTENTIAL RIFT THAT IS STARTING BETWEEN JEWISH BROTHERS. HE USES THE WORD OF GOD AS HIS STANDARD FOR RIGHT AND WRONG AND CALLS OTHERS TO REPENT.

THIS IS A GREAT EXAMPLE TO ALL OF US AND NOT JUST FOR THOSE WHO ARE FORMALLY "LEADERS". ANYONE CAN (AND SHOULD) DO THIS. OFTEN TIMES WE HEAR OF PROBLEMS THAT MIGHT BE BREWING AMONGST THE COMMUNITY OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD AND WE ASSUME IT IS SOMEONE ELSE'S JOB TO INTERVENE. WHILE SOME PEOPLE IN THE CHURCH CAN TEND TO BE "NOSY" OR "BUSYBODIES" OTHER TEND TO BE OBLIVIOUS TO POTENTIAL THREATS TO RELATIONSHIPS OR CONCERNS IN THE LIFE OF OTHERS. NEITHER IS THE RIGHT PLACE TO BE.

WHAT ARE AREAS IN YOUR LIFE, FAMILY OR CHURCH THAT MIGHT BE POTENTIAL AREAS WHERE THE DEVIL CAN EXPLOIT TO CAUSE DIVISION DOWN THE ROAD? WHAT RELATIONSHIPS NEED TO BE FOUGHT FOR THAT ARE ON THE BACK BURNER? WHAT DOCTRINAL THREATS EXIST? WHAT IS HAPPENING IN OUR SOCIETY THAT THE EVIL ONE MIGHT TRY AND USE TO SPLINTER HIS PEOPLE? WHAT SECRET CONVERSATIONS ARE HAPPENING OR EVIL OPINIONS ARE BEING FORMED THAT NEED TO BE BROUGHT INTO THE LIGHT? DON'T JUST WAIT TILL THE PROVERBIAL "DUNG" HITS THE FAN.

SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP IS SEEING WHAT MIGHT BE ON THE HORIZON AND ACTING TODAY TO KEEP GOD'S PEOPLE SAFE, TO THE GLORY OF HIS NAME. THAT'S WHAT WE SEE HERE IN NEHEMIAH 5 AND WHAT WE NEED TO SEE FROM YOU AND I TODAY.