

NEHEMIAH

LESSONS IN GODLY CHARACTER



Today's Scripture Reading:

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

NEHEMIAH

¹ Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. ² For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive." ³ There were also those who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine." ⁴ And there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards."

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

⁵ Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards.” ⁶ I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. ⁷ I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, “You are exacting interest, each from his brother.” And I held a great assembly against them

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

⁸ and said to them, "We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!" They were silent and could not find a word to say. ⁹ So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? ¹⁰ Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest.

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

11 Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them." 12 Then they said, "We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say." And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. 13 I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise.

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

So may he be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said “Amen” and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised. ¹⁴ Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. ¹⁵ The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver.

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. ¹⁷ Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us.¹⁸ Now what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance.

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people.¹⁹ Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

We will look at 5 observations in this passage today.

1. Nehemiah listened.

2. Nehemiah exercised righteous anger under control.

3. He confronted those at fault biblically.

4. He set a godly personal example.

5. Fear and it's life implications

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

¹ Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. ² Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain." ³Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine."

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

- Nehemiah received the words of the people and believed them
- Appears opportunity was lacking

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

“Fatigued with hard labor and harassed by relentless enemies, the majority of them poor, and the bright visions which hope gave them on their return to the land of their fathers being unrealized--must have been very trying to their faith and patience. But, in addition to these oppressions, many began to sink under a new and more grievous evil. The poor made loud complaints against the rich for taking advantage of their necessities, and grinding them by high interest loans.

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

Many of them had, in consequence of these oppressions, been driven to such extremities that they had to mortgage their lands and houses to enable them to pay the taxes to the government, and ultimately even to sell their children as slaves as means of simple subsistence." (unknown author)

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

- Equity lost to debtors.
 - *Proverbs 22:7 The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender.*
- Hole too deep to climb out
- Hopeless

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

⁴ And there were those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards.

- Not only the above problems, but they couldn't even have the minimal necessities of life without borrowing i.e., food and taxes.
- Escalating indebtedness due to taxes.

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

What are possible root problems?

- Control
- Greed
- Upper-hand or domination
- The above all appear to stem from Nehemiah's proclamation. "shouldn't you fear God"?

What's at stake?

- True community living, friendship, varying socioeconomic levels living in harmony
- Equitable living

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

⁵ Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children 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."

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

- Once again the reminder from the people.....we are YOU.
- Financially tapped out as we have even had to sell our children.
- Financially tapped as any and all potential assets we had are lost
- Powerless equated to financial resources equated to social standing and a voice of authority

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

⁶ When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. ⁷ I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are charging your own people interest!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them ⁸ and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say. ⁹ 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?"

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

- Initial anger leading to serious thought
- Great passion, empathy, indignation and yet maturity and pondering of the situation.
- Anger probably arose as Nehemiah remembered mosaic law as well as remembering common decency.

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

Leviticus 25:35-43 If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with youTake no interest from him or profit, but **fear your God**, that your brother may live beside you.You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. . . .

If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: he shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner. . . . For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall **fear your God.**

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

The command is repeated in **Exodus 22:25** "If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him."

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

What happens when fear attacks?

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

Romans 1 ²¹For though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or show gratitude. Instead, their thinking became nonsense, and their senseless minds were darkened.

James 2 ¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can his faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you don't give them what the body needs, what good is it? ¹⁷In the same way faith, if it doesn't have works, is dead by itself.

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

¹⁰ I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest.¹¹ Give back to them **immediately** their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.” ¹² “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.

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

¹³ I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!" At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised. ¹⁴Furthermore, from the day King Artaxerxes appointed me to be their governor in the land of Judah—from the twentieth year until his thirty-second year, 12 years—I and my associates never ate from the food allotted to the governor. ¹⁵The governors who preceded me had heavily burdened the people, taking food and wine from them, as well as a pound of silver. Their subordinates also oppressed the people, but I didn't do this, **because of the fear of God.**

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

¹⁶Instead, I devoted myself to the construction of the wall, and all my subordinates were gathered there for the work. **We didn't buy any land.** ¹⁷ Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those not who came to us from the surrounding nations. ¹⁸ Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people. ¹⁹ Remember me with favor, my God, for all I have done for these people.

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

- What do you fear?
- Is it healthy fear?
- Does your fear of God actually alter your choices?

NEHEMIAH 5:1-19

NEHEMIAH

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