

Let Us Arise and Build

Nehemiah 5

Brother against Brother—Overcoming Internal Conflicts

Intro: It is inspiring to study the book of Nehemiah and watch the wonderful leadership of Nehemiah and the cooperative follow-ship of his fellow-Jews. And we have seen that when God's people unite to work together they can do great things. And we have also seen that Satan raises external opponents to hinder the work that must be overcome.

However, God's work can not only be hindered by opposition from without, but also by conflict from within, from God's workers. Here in Nehemiah 5 we see that internal conflict can bring God's work to a standstill. But more importantly we see how such problems can be solved by leaders in order that God's people can get back to work again. Let's consider together Nehemiah's record in chapter 5.

Conflict Among Nehemiah's Jewish Brethren

Chapter five begins with a description of a conflict that developed between Israel's nobles and the common people.

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin.

Note that this was a conflict between Jews, not between Jews and Gentiles as before.

Some of the wealthy Israelites had taken advantage of their poorer fellow-Jews.

²*For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive."*

³*There were also those who said, "We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine."* ⁴*And there were those who said, "We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax."* ⁵*Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others."*

Nehemiah described the hardships that many had faced while trying to do their best to rebuild the wall.

Many of the larger families could not afford food for their families.

Some had been forced to put up their property as a pledge that they would pay for their grain.

The high taxes of the king had forced some of the people to mortgage their property at high interest rates to get money for payment.

Some had even had to resort to selling their children into debt slavery to satisfy debts.

Worst of all it was the Jewish nobles who were taking advantage of their fellow-Jewish brethren. They had allowed their greed to cause them to misuse their own brethren.

Those who were suffering could rightly argue that there was no difference in the value or worth of their children and those of the wealthy; yet they were having to surrender them as slaves to repay debt to their fellow-Jews.

Nehemiah responded decisively and passionately to the situation.

⁶ *I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints.*

⁷ *After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, "You are all taking interest from your own people."*

Nehemiah would not stand idly by and watch this abuse take place. Though angry about their actions, he took the time to think carefully and to proceed with wisdom. He confronted the offenders with wrongdoing. Certainly the Law had forbidden lending to fellow-Jews with interest:

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. (Exodus 22:25, NASB)

The Hebrew word translated "charging interest" might possibly be translated in this case "taking pledges." The effect however would be the same as charging interest. In the event that person could not pay the promised amount, he would have to surrender what he had pledged..

And I called a great assembly to deal with them, ⁸ and said to them, "As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!"

Nehemiah challenged them with compelling logic. Some of the Jews had made effort to redeem those Israelites who had been sold into slavery by their Gentile overlords; but now ironically some of the Jews were selling their fellow-Jews as slaves, creating the need for more Jews to be redeemed by their fellow-Jews.

The abusive nobles could not respond or defend their behavior.

Thus Nehemiah urged them to correct their sin.

So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies?"

Nehemiah appealed to those texts that show when one truly fears the Lord he will also show proper regard to the poor.

Do not take usurious interest from him, but revere your God, that your countryman may live with you. (Leviticus 25:36)

And he reminds them that their actions would cause even the heathen to question their loyalty to the Lord in selling their own brethren into slavery.

Moreover I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest.

Nehemiah appeals to his own practice. He had apparently lent to the needy without taking pledges and seizing their property upon their failure to pay. In other words, he allowed his loans to turn into benevolent gifts. Thus, he urges the nobles to act similarly.

¹¹ *Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.*

In other words, do not take advantage of those who are poor by taking interest and by seizing their property when they cannot pay. Nehemiah evokes the principle of generosity toward the poor rather than treated them a cold business mindset.

If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks.” (Deuteronomy 15:7–8)

What Nehemiah advocated was showing the love of a brother to those who were without resources, returning their possession instead of further impoverishing them.

The oppressive nobles repented and restored the possession they had taken.

¹² *Then they said, “We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say.” And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised.* ¹³ *I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.*

The nobles pledged to make things right. But Nehemiah placed them under oath to fulfill their word or experience a curse of the loss of everything if they did not do as they had said.

It was appropriate here that Nehemiah also point out that his conduct toward the needy was compatible with the generosity he had tried to show all along as governor of the province. He had been willing to make great sacrifices for the sake of his fellow-Jews. He did not have one standard for himself as leader and another for the nobility.

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 King Artaxerxes, 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 food and wine from them, besides forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God.

Though Nehemiah could have justified by precedent taking tax money from the people to meet the needs of his governorship, he did not do so. He could have reserved his labor for his own benefit; but instead he put all his resources to work in rebuilding the wall.

¹⁶ Indeed, I devoted myself to the work on this wall, and acquired no land; and all my servants were gathered there for the work.

¹⁷ Moreover there were at my table one hundred fifty people, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations around us.

¹⁸ Now that which was prepared for one day was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and every ten days skins of wine in abundance; yet with all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because of the heavy burden of labor on the people.

Consequently he prayed that the Lord would remember him for all that he had tried to do for His people. He had not demanded his rights. He had been generous with them. Thus he prayed:

¹⁹ Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

Conclusion:

Nehemiah's actions are a great example to us; and his handling of the matter can also offer some important principles in identifying and solving conflicts. Tonight we'll look at several principles that will guide us in resolving conflicts among brethren.

Nehemiah's story underscores some important truths:

We must vigilant to prevent actions that alienate brethren and undermine the unity that they may possess in working together.

"I, THEREFORE, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love," (Ephesians 4:1–2)

It is still important to remember the need to fear the Lord in how we treat those who are a part of our spiritual family. All too often we may allow them to go without what is needed. Paul reminded the Corinthians that Christians do not need to embrace some kind of spiritual communism; but even though some may prosper more than others, no Christian should be in want for basic needs.

"For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality—at this present time your abundance being a supply for their want, that their abundance also may become a supply for your want, that there may be equality;" (2 Corinthians 8:13–14)

Nehemiah illustrates that generosity that Jesus commanded in the Sermon on the Mount.

““Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.” (Matthew 5:42)