

The Enemy Within

Nehemiah 5:1-13

Nehemiah 5:1-13 – *“And there was a great outcry of the people and their wives against their Jewish brethren. ² For there were those who said, “We, our sons, and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain, that we may eat and live.”*

³ There were also some who said, “We have mortgaged our lands and vineyards and houses, that we might buy grain because of the famine.”

⁴ There were also those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our lands and vineyards. ⁵ Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children; and indeed we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been brought into slavery. It is not in our power to redeem them, for other men have our lands and vineyards.”

⁶ And I became very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. ⁷ After serious thought, I rebuked the nobles and rulers, and said to them, “Each of you is exacting usury from his brother.” So I called a great assembly against them. ⁸ And I said to them, “According to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations. Now indeed, will you even sell your brethren? Or should they be sold to us?”

Then they were silenced and found nothing to say. ⁹ Then I said, “What you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies? ¹⁰ I also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury! ¹¹ Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them.” ¹² So they said, “We will restore it, and will require nothing from them; we will do as you say.”

Then I called the priests, and required an oath from them that they would do according to this promise. ¹³ Then I shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out each man from his house, and from his property, who does not perform this promise. Even thus may he be shaken out and emptied.”

And all the assembly said, “Amen!” and praised the Lord. Then the people did according to this promise.”

Background Notes

The ancient wall around the city of Jerusalem was being repaired. The original wall was destroyed when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in the 6th Century BC. Now it's the 5th Century BC, and Nehemiah had traveled from Persia to Jerusalem to direct the rebuilding of the wall. Judah's enemies made many attempts to prevent the rebuilding of the wall. They tried ridicule and scorn, but that didn't stop the wall building. They tried threat and conspiracy, but the wall continued to go up. They planned a definite surprise attack, but it was called off because Nehemiah and the Jews found out and organized a plan of defense. All the enemies' attempts to stop the rebuilding of the wall had been thwarted.

Could anything else go wrong? Sadly, yes. In chapter 5 we learn of internal problems – strife, dissension, and disunity. These problems increased to the point where they almost prevented the completion of the wall. The enemy outside the wall wasn't the problem - it was strife between fellow Jews inside the wall! Do you know of any church or ministry that has had to cope with that problem?

What was the problem? There was a famine at that time, so food was expensive, and some of the wall builders were so poor that they didn't even have enough to eat. In addition, Judah was a vassal province in the Persian Empire, so the people had to pay taxes to the Persian government. Some of the workers had actually mortgaged their homes, their farms, and their vineyards - just to buy food and pay the king's tax!

Unfortunately, the wealthier Jews were not coming to the rescue and helping their poor relatives and neighbors, as God's Law required. The Law forbade the charging of interest on loans to fellow Jews who were poor. (Check out some of these laws in Exodus 22, Leviticus 25, and Deuteronomy 23.) Instead of obeying God's Law, these wealthy people were like loan sharks, charging high interest on any money they loaned to the poor people. They may even have charged interest as high as 12%, because verse 11 talks about "a hundredth." If that was a monthly payment, the annual rate would come to 12%. They were exploiting the situation.

Some of the poor families had actually sold themselves or their children as "slaves" (v5). In order to buy food and pay their debts and taxes, these desperate people had sold themselves into servitude - similar to "indentured servants" in the early days of America. Again, the well-off Jews were not helping - in fact, just the opposite! They were actually buying the poor people as slaves.

Nehemiah's first reaction was anger. He was very angry (v6). He confronted the wealthy people, exposed this wrongdoing, and rebuked them before a large assembly (v7). He exhorted them regarding the laws against charging their fellow-Jews interest on loans, and he challenged them to restore the property. And they were not to just stop charging interest – they were to give it back what they had charged as well!

The good news is that the wealthy people were ashamed, and they responded positively (v12). They even took an oath, administered by the priests, that they would not take advantage of one another again. Now the wall building could go forward again.

Doctrinal Point

Internal strife and dissension will hinder spiritual wall building.

What is "spiritual wall building"? It means building and maintaining strong Christian lives and testimonies – lives that are pleasing to God. If Satan is unable to use outside influences to stop us from becoming strong Christians, he'll try to halt our spiritual wall building in other ways. If he can't stop us from without, he'll try to bring about failure from within!

Satan can stop individual believers from growing in the faith, and cause failure. He knows our weak areas – where we're most prone to fail, because of our fallen sinful nature. Perhaps our weak area is pride - we're proud of some personal accomplishment or ability. Maybe it's envy - we're jealous of other people's success. Maybe it's a desire to be in control - we're even willing to take advantage of one another to gain personal prestige and power.

Satan wants to prevent churches from building strong spiritual walls. Have you ever driven past a boarded up church? It's sad - especially if it was a growing, Christ-honoring church at one time. Most likely that church did not fold because of external persecution, but because of various internal disagreements - maybe even petty jealousies.

Galatians 3:15 warns, *"if you fight and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another."* That's internal strife. Many churches and ministries have started out well, and were building strong spiritual walls in spite of enemy opposition. But they no longer exist - not because of external attack, but because of the internal strife, pride, jealousy, and dissension.

Things were going well in the early church until internal friction arose. The dispute was about providing for poor widows. *"In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenist [Greek] Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food" (Acts 6:1).*

But the problem was resolved and the day was saved! The leaders in the early Church solved the problem by appointing the first deacons to serve and oversee the proper distribution of benevolent funds.

Galatians 3:13 says *"through love, serve one another."* We need to grow in love for one another. Let's resolve to serve one another in love, because serving together in **love** will help prevent internal strife and dissension.

Like the early Christians, we need to overcome internal strife, if it develops. Churches may weather the storm from external attacks, but we've got to remember that internal problems will hinder spiritual wall building. Be aware, do what we can to smooth troubled waters, and serve one another in love.

Practical Applications

1. Do you look at unfortunate circumstances through the "glasses of a servant," or the "glasses of an opportunist"?

Look at the sad situation in Nehemiah's day: famine, taxes, high interest rates, and other problems. Some of the people saw the situation through "opportunistic glasses" - taking advantage of one another, and trying to make a quick buck. But Nehemiah saw it through "servant glasses" - looking for ways to serve and help the less fortunate people.

Notice verse 8: *“According to our ability we have redeemed our Jewish brethren who were sold to the nations.”* Nehemiah was actually going the extra mile by redeeming some of the people who had become slaves to foreigners. Once that was done, he told the people they needed to stop taking advantage of one another - Jew against Jew. This should not be happening! Nehemiah saw the situation through servant glasses.

We expect to see opportunists in the worldly, self-centered culture around us. For example, when a natural disaster occurs, there are always some people with servant glasses, who do everything they can to help. But on the other hand, there are always people wearing opportunistic glasses, who try to take advantage and make a quick buck. Taking advantage can even happen in the Christian community. For example, when you choose a church, are you thinking of how you can grow in faith and serve others, or are you thinking of what connections you can make for business or social status? A good rule of thumb is: take no privileges that will hurt someone else in some way.

Let's put on the right glasses. What glasses are you wearing? Let's put on the glasses of a servant!

2. Give serious thought before acting when you're angry.

Nehemiah was very angry (v6). Anger is usually sinful, but Ephesians 4:26 clearly teaches that a “righteous anger” is not sinful. *“Be angry and sin not.”* Our sinless Lord, at times, was angered by the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders.

Notice that Nehemiah didn't take action immediately. He didn't do anything rash, or act in the heat of emotion. He didn't deny his anger, but he dealt with it in the right way. He exhibited emotional equilibrium. He gave serious thought to the serious situation, and determined what was the right way to go - the righteous course of action. He planned out how to get to the root of the problem and correct the situation - without things falling apart, and without people getting more hurt or even more angry with everyone else.

We need to follow Nehemiah's example here. We need to give serious thought before acting when we're angry.