

Chapter Five

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What were the reasons for the people's distress?
2. What had they done to relieve their hardships?
3. What would have been the result if no further solution were found?
4. How much expense was Nehemiah willing to go to?
5. How do interest rates compare, then and now?

OUTLINE

- E. Internal difficulties arise and are overcome.
1. The problem stated (vss. 1-5).
 2. The solution (vss. 6-13).
 3. Nehemiah's own example (vss. 14-19).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- E. Internal difficulties arise and are overcome.
1. Selfishness and greed create a problem.

TEXT, 5:1-5

- 1 Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.
- 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 And there were others who said, "We are mortgaging our fields our vineyards, and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine."
- 4 Also there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards."
- 5 "And now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters

are forced into bondage already, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others.”

COMMENT

Chapter five presents a new kind of problem: the work is threatened by internal dissension. Somewhere along the line this almost always has to be faced. It may be pointed out that the problem is not identified exclusively with the rebuilding of the wall. The only mention of the wall in this chapter is in verse 16, and may be merely a statement that Nehemiah had helped on the construction at some time past. The problem of usury was probably larger and more extensive than the brief period of their work on the wall. It would give even more point to their complaint, however, if this was going on while the walls were being built. The presence of the chapter at this point does have its weight and does suggest a connection. It does follow logically from the things that have gone before.

With great numbers of workmen busy from dawn to dusk repairing the wall in the shortest time, and with their being forbidden even to go out of the city to take care of crops, some would begin to suffer hardship. The workers received no income apparently, and this kind of toil produced no consumer goods; hunger was the inevitable result. Opportunists arose and took advantage of the situation to make themselves wealthy at the expense of the hard pressed.

Verse 1 identifies the opportunists as some of the more wealthy Jewish brethren. Some of these may have been of the number who had married the “peoples of the lands” (cf. comments on Ezra 9:1), and had become prosperous as a result. It made the load no lighter that those who were oppressing them were of their own race and religion.

Verse 2 states the people’s appeal to the government for relief, and identifies the first of three of their burdens: some had large families. “Let us get grain” may be their threat to steal to keep from starving, or it may be only a request for food to help them survive this time of desperation.

Verse 3 gives the second source of their grief: many had gone in debt and mortgaged their property, and were in danger of default and the loss of everything. The famine alluded to may not have been a general condition; the word is used in other places occasionally of private hunger, so it may be only a suggestion of the conditions imposed on some persons by the circumstances mentioned above. These in themselves would be enough to produce the situation of hunger.

Their third burden, in *verse 4*, was taxes. Some had borrowed money, jeopardizing their lands and pledging their future crops to pay the Persian tribute; their subjection to Persia was an ever-present reality.

Verse 5 is their plea, on the basis of compassion. If their creditors loved their children, they could be sure that the poor loved their children in the same manner. Some families had already been driven to sell their sons and daughters into slavery, and to part from them. In addition, some of their daughters had been forced into bondage. This may have been an euphemism for rape¹; at the least it would imply marriages which were not of their choosing, since women were often sold into slavery for this purpose (Ex. 21:7-11).

Of course all of this was legal: the Law of Moses made provision for a person to sell his children into slavery to pay his debts (Lev. 25:39-43). He could even sell himself; he could not sell his wife separately, for "the twain shall be one flesh."

And slavery was not as onerous as it became in more recent centuries. A Hebrew slave, male or female, was to be released after a maximum of six years (Dt. 15:12-18), though slaves were not always freed as they should have been (Jer. 34:14-17). If he suffered any injury or abuse, he was to be released (Ex. 21:27). He had the further option of running away, in which case he was to be protected and not returned to his former owner (Dt. 23:15f). In effect, he was a slave only as long as he wanted to be a slave. Neither is today's employee in industry compelled to report to his job any longer than he wishes; but he won't get help in paying his

1. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 708.

expenses and his debts unless he does. Why, then, would they bemoan the enslavement of their children? Even at best there was the reality of separation from them.

2. Nehemiah protests, and offers a solution.

TEXT, 5:6-13

- 6 Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words.
- 7 And I consulted with myself, and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, "You are exacting usury, each from his brother!" Therefore, I held a great assembly against them.
- 8 And I said to them, "We according to our ability have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?" Then they were silent and could not find a word to say.
- 9 Again I said, "The thing which 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 "And likewise I, my brothers and my servants, are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury.
- 11 "Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money and of the grain, the new wine, and the oil that you are exacting from them."
- 12 Then they said, "We will give it back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say." So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise.
- 13 I also shook out the front of my garment and said, "Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said,

“Amen!” And they praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise.

COMMENT

Note the personal tone of *verse 6*.

In *verse 7*, he makes two appeals. The first is addressed to the nobles and rulers, i.e., the persons making the loans at excessive interest, and buying the slaves (perhaps collecting exorbitant taxes, too). The second is to the people themselves (this is labeled a characteristic of Nehemiah²), whose support and good will is always ultimately essential to any rulers. The complaint is against usury (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:35ff; Dt. 23:19). The purpose for making a loan should be to help the needy, not to enrich the lender.

Verse 8, before the assembled people, informs us that Nehemiah and others had bought Jews back from slavery to foreigners, to the limit of their means, either in the lands of their captivity or more recently in Judah. Now their fellow-Jews were selling them back into slavery. There was nothing illegal about this, but it just didn't make sense.

Verse 9, still before the assembly, appeals to their creditors on the basis that their action was bringing aid and comfort to their enemies, who would hear reports of every oppression. There is the implication also that what they were doing was not consistent with reverence to God.

In *verse 10*, Nehemiah appeals to them on the basis of his own example. His brothers would be his relatives or associates whom he had brought with him from Persia; the servants would be the soldiers sent as his bodyguard. Each of these were making loans of food and money to the poor. There is a kindly compulsion in his words as he includes himself in the exhortation, “Please, let us leave off this usury.”

Verse 11 suggests that the property which had been mortgaged

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 709.

and subjected to foreclosure, plus the crops and personal belongings, be returned to their original owners. The hundredth part of the money presents a problem. He may have asked them to drop all interest requirements, in which case the 1% would be the monthly rate. Even so, this would be low interest in a world where 20% was the standard figure (Lev. 5:16; 6:5). One suggestion is that one letter had slipped out of a word, and the text should be emended to read, "also the *claim* on the money and the grain . . ."³ However, the interest rate is not that unbelievable; Latin sources speak of the same monthly rate of 1%, or annual rate of 12%.⁴

Verse 12 indicates their consent to this proposal. To avoid a change of heart later on, they were required to go through the formalities of taking an oath (see "Take Oath," Word Studies for Ezra 10).

In *verse 13* we see Nehemiah employ a "visual aid." The folds of his garment served as pockets for the personal belongings he would carry; with a dramatic gesture he shook these out before his audience as a symbol of the loss of possessions which God would cause the person to suffer who violated his oath. The assembly cheered; they all praised God; and their creditors kept their promise.

3. Nehemiah vindicates his own conduct.

TEXT, 5:14-19

14 Moreover, from the day 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, for twelve years, neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the governor's food allowance.

15 But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty

3. *Anchor Bible*, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 129.

4. *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 212.

shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God.

- 16 And I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we did not buy any land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work.
- 17 Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us.
- 18 Now that which was prepared for each day was one ox and six choice sheep, also birds were prepared for me; and once in ten days all sorts of wine were furnished in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the governor's food allowance, because the servitude was heavy on this people.
- 19 Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.

COMMENT

From *verse 14*, it is obvious that this note was written after Nehemiah's second journey to his brethren in Israel, described in 13:6ff. It would also appear from this verse (and through the end of the chapter) that Nehemiah was a man of considerable means who could afford to live on his income as a Persian official without ever drawing his salary as governor of Judah, for himself or for his assistants. This is also the first disclosure that Nehemiah has made of the rank which had been assigned to him by Artaxerxes; again we see something of his reserve. We can also guess what kept his enemies in the surrounding regions from attacking.

Verse 15 contrasts this with other administrations in which large (daily) demands had been made on the people, both by the rulers and by their appointees. The forty shekels of silver was probably the value of the bread and wine, rather than in addition to it; assuming that a shekel was an average day's wage for a working man, the ruler would be well paid. Add the burden of the appointees' domineering attitude (underlings in government have historically been among the most overbearing), and we can guess

the benefits which Nehemiah's administration had in contrast. The reason he gives for his unassuming character was his fear of the Lord.

Verse 16 lists three more things to his credit. (1) He himself helped with construction on the wall; even if this meant only superintendence of the work, it was beyond the call of duty for a governor. (2) Neither he nor his associates bought up any of the land at cheap prices from the desperate workers. (3) His own soldiers busied themselves with the building.

Meanwhile, in *verse 17*, there were the considerable expenses of official hospitality. It is suggested that the 150 Jews were the officials spoken of; read, "Jews, that is, officials." There were still others from surrounding lands who came and went.

The daily menu, in *verse 18*, has been estimated as sufficient to feed 400 to 500 people; that would be no small food bill. Here also is his concern not to be a burden on the people. It is always a blessing when those who give themselves to the service of others do not need to be compensated by oppressive salaries from those whom they volunteer to serve.

In *verse 19* Nehemiah's only request for recompense for his work was from God. His nobility speaks for itself.

WORD STUDIES

REDEEM. Of the three main words translated "redeem" in the O.T., two appear in Nehemiah. Qanah, 5:8: "set upright, erect." This is a means of "founding, creating," by which then we "get, acquire" something, as Eve "got" Cain; hence to get by purchase, buy, buy off, or redeem.

Padah, 1:10: the basic idea is to cut off, or cut loose; thus, to let go free, or set free. This happens when one is ransomed, or redeemed.

The third word, Gaal (noun, Goel, Redeemer) is implied in the whole process of being sold into slavery as described in 5:5, or in

5. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 714.

mortgaging property (5:3). A near relative always has the right; if he were sufficiently wealthy and equally concerned (see Ruth 4:1-6 for one who wasn't), to buy a person back from slavery (Lev. 25:48f; Ex. 6:6); he could always redeem land which had been sold or foreclosed (Lev. 25:25). All firstborn males were to be given in sacrifice to God in memory of the sparing of the firstborn in Egypt; but a person could not be sacrificed, so a redemption price was paid and his life was spared (Ex. 13:2, 13). If a person had suffered a crime or had been murdered, his next kinsman was to track down the guilty and avenge his brother; this threat would preserve justice in the land (Num. 35:19). Or if a married man died without children, his next younger brother or kinsman was to marry her and continue his brother's name and inheritance (Ruth 3:13).

So our redeemer restores our inheritance, recovers us from sin's bondage, rescues us from death, protects us from injustice, and gives us an everlasting name.

SUMMARY

The next obstacle which Nehemiah and the builders had to surmount was caused by the Jews themselves: their selfishness and greed and oppression of one another. Some had been forced by the economic situation to borrow money, mortgaging and losing their property. Others had sold their children into slavery. Still others had encumbered their property to borrow the money to pay their taxes.

When Nehemiah heard how they were abusing one another when they all equally needed the protection of the wall and its completion was in jeopardy, he went to their creditors and politely insisted that they return the slaves and things taken in security, that they eliminate the usurious interest rate, and thus honor God and quit giving comfort to their enemies. Walls or no walls, the presence of a class of impoverished people never makes a contribution to the wealth of the well-to-do; ultimately the well-being of all is related. Observing Nehemiah's own example they

agreed, and took an oath to continue this policy into the future.

Nehemiah himself assessed no tax on the land to pay his salary or his lavish hospitality bills. He required similar generosity of his associates and soldiers, and he and they actually assisted in the construction of the wall.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who had caused the people's distress?
2. How did Nehemiah propose that this be relieved?
3. What example did Nehemiah himself set?
4. Was the solution successful?