

NEHEMIAH 5

This is the second of three chapters in Nehemiah which deal with the opposition to God's work. It's clear that Nehemiah has deliberately arranged these chapters topically, as this chapter covers a number of years (see verse 14).

While chapter 4 dealt with the opposition that comes from those who hate God and his people, this chapter deals with the opposition that comes from within God's people. We have an alarming habit of attempting to destroy the work ourselves, and the Bible is very realistic about this. However there is encouragement here as well, as Nehemiah shows us an example of godly leadership in the way he deals with the issue, and models obedience.

What is the problem in verses 1-5?

Because building the walls was a full time task, those who were poor were in difficulties as they could not attend to their usual work. They still needed to eat to live, and pay taxes to King Artaxerxes (verse 4). The rich among the people seemed to have been exploiting this situation, rather than being generous, and were taking interest and security from the poor.

- Why is what the rich have done to the poor so wrong? See Leviticus 25:35-38

Notice "Jewish brothers" in verse 1. Lending to a fellow Jew was to be charitable, not for commercial gain.

- Look up Isaiah 5:7, Amos 2:6-8 (words from the prophets before God's people were sent into exile).

This injustice and exploitation was one of the reasons God judged his people and sent them into exile.

Can you think of any ways in which the church can exploit or take advantage of inequalities between members? How would this harm God's work today?

For NT examples see James 2 and 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.

What was Nehemiah's first response (verse 6)? Was that right?

He "was very angry". A settled response to sin. True godly anger is right - it is hating what God hates. However often our anger is simply a response to us not getting our own way.

If we don't feel anger at sin, what is wrong?

We don't see it's ugliness. We don't love God and his glory. We don't care for people.

What is the second thing he did? Why was that wise – what happens if we don't do that (verse 7)?

He "pondered them in his mind". Don't miss this. He paused and thought between his anger and his action. so what he did wasn't simply rash or the fruit of pent up emotion.

What is the third thing he did (verse 7)? Why is this a mark of Nehemiah's godly leadership?

He confronted the sinners. no one likes confrontation (if you do you shouldn't do it), but godly leaders don't ignore situations.

If we are not prepared to confront sin, what is wrong?

We don't see it as serious. We don't love those who are sinning (if we did we'd want them to repent), we don't love God's people and God's world (who are affected by the sin).

How does Nehemiah appeal to the nobles and officials?

He appeals to consistency and theology (verse 8) - as God's people they have been buying back those who were slaves to gentiles.

Why should they all "walk in the fear of the Lord" (verse 9) – what other consequences does sin have?

The gentiles have a reason to reproach them. God's church are laughed at and not taken seriously. it opens a door to opposition from outside. Can we think of examples where this has happened today?

What is the response from the people? (verse 12)

They repent! That is what we pray and long for when we confront.

What is the significance of what Nehemiah says in verse 13? Isn't this just a bit over the top?

To be part of God's people we need to live God's way. It is the OT equivalent of church discipline/excommunication. hard hearted unrepentance has no place in God's people (which is different to saying we are sinless).

Look up Matthew 18:15-18. How does Jesus tell us to deal with sin in the church?

How has Nehemiah lived (verse 14-19)? Why has he lived this way (verse 15, 18)? What does this teach us about godly leadership?

Nehemiah as a leader has modeled what he expected of others, those he may have had the right to demand perks as a leader. he lead in different way to those who lead in the world (verse 15), because he feared God (verse 15), and loved people (verse 18). He looked to God and the future for his reward (verse 19).