

Building for God: Alleviations

Goldstone Church – 25-Oct-15 10:30am

Nehemiah 5:1-13

Introduction

Continuing our series in book of Nehemiah. As Christians, how does God want me to be involved in building His kingdom here at Goldstone church?

Old slogan, “*An apple a day keeps the doctor away*”?

This phrase was first mentioned 150 years ago, in 1866, but with different wording,

“*Eat an apple on going to bed, and you'll keep the doctor from earning his bread.*”

My Dad used to say, ‘An apple a day keeps the doctor away – unless it’s rotten inside!’ Isn’t it frustrating when you cut open what looks like a succulent, rosy-red apple, only to find that the inside is damaged and bruised and unpalatable.

Nehemiah 5 describes further opposition that Nehemiah faced while rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem. But this time, the conflict is among the people he is working with; the problems are within the walls and gates.

The story so far:

In Chapter 1 we saw how Nehemiah’s foundation, was to prayerfully respond to the news that the walls and gates of Jerusalem were in ruins. Nehemiah’s prayer was a helpful guide to how we should pray.

In Chapter 2, we saw Nehemiah’s patient and planned response to the opportunity of rebuilding. Our challenge is to: (i) Wait on God, (ii) Work with People and (iii) Wrestle with Problems.

Chapter 3 showed how Nehemiah carefully organised and shared out the huge building project. The names of the 10 gates into Jerusalem; helped us to identify areas in our spiritual lives that may need to be rebuilt.

In Chapter 4, we identified the different types of Opposition that Nehemiah faced and how he responded. A guide on how we are to respond to the trials and oppositions that we face in our daily lives.

But just when we think that it couldn’t get any worse for Nehemiah, in Chapter 5 he is faced with further tensions and struggles. But there is a difference.

In Nehemiah Chapter 4 the Opposition was on the outside of the city walls. But now the Unseen Enemy tries another approach; the problems are from within Nehemiah’s own ranks - within the city walls.

1. CARRIED COMPLAINTS by the People

Our English translation of v.1 is too polite. The undercurrent meaning of the word in the original Hebrew text, means to ‘bellow like a thunderstorm’. In our UK society, this would be a banners-waving, noisy and outspoken protest march.

But what are they protesting about? There are 3 main complaints.

a) HUNGER Trouble (v.2b)

“in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get gain”.

Our most basic needs are for “food, shelter and clothing”. The people were rebuilding the shelter part, and Neh 4:23 suggests that their clothes were not wearing out. Which leaves the 1 need for food.

Because the people were working on the walls days and night, they had no time to plant crops – but they still had to eat. As a result, the people were hungry.

b) MONEY Trouble (v.3)

“we are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes”.

The people were having to mortgage their property just to make ends meet.

Our modern day equivalent would be to go to the pawnbroker, or take out a pay-day loan – just to put food on the table. Financially, the people had a big problem.

c) DEBTS Trouble (v.4a)

“we have had to borrow money”

The people had to take out additional loans on top of their mortgage - which they also could not pay. It was a vicious, downward spiral.

Ever-mounting debts is a contemporary, modern-day problem.

But however real and genuine these Complaints were, the people were only displaying the Symptoms. What were the root causes to these problems?

2. CONNECTED CAUSES to the Problem

a) FAMINE (v.3b)

“to get grain during the famine”

One Bible commentator suggests that this was the scarcity of food that followed on after the famine (see Haggai 1:9-10). What is certain is that food supplies throughout the whole region were a problem. The hunger the people were complaining about was a symptom of a bigger, economic problem in the country.

b) TAXES (v.4b)

“to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards”

Even in Nehemiah’s time, the Tax Man had his say! This is a significant issue. Remember that Israel was a conquered nation, belonging to the Babylonian empire.

The king didn't wipe everyone off the map, because it was economically more efficient to collect taxes than to kill everyone off.

The difference between us and the people with Nehemiah, is that, for the Israelites, there was no tax free threshold. In other words, everyone had to pay tax. It was the law, even if you went into debt -and failure to pay taxes was dealt with rather severely!

c) INTEREST (v.5)

In Deuteronomy 23:19-20, God clearly defines what the appropriate lending practices were for His people. Lending was allowed, but ...

“Do not charge a fellow Israelite interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a fellow Israelite, so that the Lord your God may bless you in everything you put your hand to in the land you are entering to possess.”

In Nehemiah 5:5, the debts the people were incurring were being compounded by the root cause that interest was being incorrectly charged on fellow Israelites.

These are the Symptoms and Root Causes of the problems that the people were experiencing, Nehemiah's response is to ponder on the situation (v.7).

3. CRIMES COMMITTED by the Nobles

The Nobles and Officials needed to be confronted that what they were doing was wrong.

So what were they doing?

a) OUTRAGEOUS INTEREST (v.7b)

Nehemiah clearly outlines the problem, *“You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!”*

It was against God's law to charge interest on any loan given to a fellow Israelite. v.11 tells just what the interest was: *“the one hundredth part”* per month, i.e. 12% per year.

Nehemiah is not backward about coming forward (v9) *“What you are doing is not right.”*

b) ONGOING SLAVERY (v.8b)

“Now you are selling your brothers”

Our 21st century perspective, the word 'slavery' rings alarm bells. But the Law of Moses says:

“If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to you, do not make them work as slaves. They are to be treated as hired workers or temporary residents among you; they are to work for you until the Year of Jubilee.” (Leviticus 25:39-40)

This gives us 2 important guidelines,

(1) it was acceptable to give your services to a lender in payment for a debt, but slavery was prohibited between Jews.

(2), these people must be released in Jubilee year.

What the Nobles and Officials were doing was wrong.

Nehemiah doesn't hold back (v9) *"What you are doing is not right."*

c) OUTWARD WITNESS (v.9b)

"walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies".

The word 'reproach' can also be translated "taunt" or "scorn".

The way that Jews were treating other Jews was being seen and commented on by the surrounding Gentiles. This bad treatment was sending out a negative message.

In modern-day language: non-Christians watch carefully how Christians treat each other.

No wonder Nehemiah declares to the Nobles and Officials (v9) *"What you are doing is not right."*

Nehemiah's problems are substantially more complex and deep rooted than just "helping the poor".

How does Nehemiah respond?

4. CRUCIAL CORRECTIONS to Resolve the Problem

It wasn't enough just to speak and confront the Nobles, a change in behaviour was required. Because Nehemiah has carefully and clearly identified the issues, he sets out what needs to change.

a) RELENT (v.10)

"Let the exacting usury stop!"

The first way to fix the problem, is to stop doing what is wrong.

The first step in overcoming sin, is to stop committing the sin in the first place.

The phrase in the Hebrew is straight-talking, meaning to "walk away".

In other words, yes, 'stop!', but also separate yourself from the action.

To repent, and change direction.

b) RESTORE (v.11)

"Give back to them"

Nehemiah instructs the Nobles to return both the property and the interest to the people they have defrauded.

This phrase “give back” has a double-meaning. It means to physically return the property, but also to ‘turn back to God’.

c) RECOMMIT before God (v.12b)

The verbal agreement of the Nobles to change their ways was not enough. Nehemiah also asked that they make their promises before God. This is a profound step. The Nobles are saying:

‘I am recommitting myself wholeheartedly to God. From now on, I will conduct myself in a way that honours and glorifies God.’

CONCLUSION

Ways that we can respond and apply this passage to our lives today.

Firstly, **Individually.**

As a disciple and follower of Jesus Christ, if you are struggling with sin, then hear what Nehemiah says: Relent, Restore & Recommit.

- Stop the sin you are doing and separate yourself from further temptation.
- Turn back to God and restore your relationship with Him.
- Decide once-and-for-all that you are going to live wholeheartedly for God.

Secondly, there is a Corporate message.

If you have a struggle or a conflict with a Christian, someone who is a fellow disciple and follower of Jesus Christ, then let us follow Nehemiah - which is what Jesus taught in Matthew 18:15.

- Clearly identify the symptoms of the problem.
- Follow that up by finding out the root causes of the problem.
- Meet your brother or sister alone and respectfully and clearly outline the problem.
- If he or she refuses-to-listen, then, as Jesus taught us, respectfully and clearly bring the matter to the church leaders.

As Christians and followers of Jesus Christ we need to be extra careful and proactive in our relationships with one another. The world is watching us closely.

Let us seek to be worthy and honourable ambassadors and representatives for Him.

AMEN