

## Nehemiah 5

Up to this point, Nehemiah's challenges as a spiritual leader focused primarily on those outside of Judah. But before the walls were finally rebuilt, he encountered the most difficult and intense kind of problem almost every spiritual leader has to face sometime—problems from within.<sup>1</sup>

**What kind of internal crisis was going on (vv. 1-5)?** There were four problems.

1. (v. 2) The people faced a food shortage and did not have enough food to feed their families. To add insult to injury, there was also a famine going on at the same time (v. 3)!
2. (v. 3) They did not have enough money to buy food and they had to mortgage their fields, vineyards and homes.
3. (v. 4) They were deeply in debt and had to borrow money from their Jewish brothers to pay property taxes to King Artaxerxes (v. 4).
4. (v. 5) To repay their creditors they had to sell their children into slavery which left them in a hopeless, helpless state.

All these difficulties created an internal crisis in Judah. And they meant “double trouble” for Nehemiah. Not only were their enemies a constant threat to their security and state of well-being, but now, many Jews were actually taking advantage of other Jews. Morale, which was already low (4:10–12) because of external pressures, physical exhaustion, and fear, now took another plunge because of these internal problems.<sup>2</sup>

**How did Nehemiah respond to these allegations (vv. 6-11)?** Nehemiah's initial response to all this was deep anger which was directed at the nobles' and officials' selfishness, greed, and insensitivity. Some people were hurting and suffering, and the leaders should have been the most compassionate, but were guilty of exploiting their fellow Jews.

1. **(vv. 7-8)** After pondering these allegations and regaining control of his emotions, Nehemiah confronted the situation head on. First, he rebuked those who were violating God's command not to charge their own people interest (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35–38; Deuteronomy 23:19–20). Money could be loaned (Deuteronomy 15:7–8) but not to gain interest from another person's distresses.<sup>3</sup>
2. Second, calling a large meeting, Nehemiah pointed out the inconsistencies of their behavior compared with what he and others in exile had done personally to help their brothers. Evidently Nehemiah and some of his fellow Jews had paid money to certain Gentiles in Babylonia who owned Jewish slaves in order to free those Israelites so they could return to Judah (v. 8). How inconsistent it was, then, for the Jews in Jerusalem to enslave them again. Some were actually selling their fellow Jews as slaves to foreigners which was forbidden (Exodus 21:8).
3. **(v. 9)** Nehemiah reminded them that God's reputation was at stake. Their immoral and unethical behavior was bringing reproach on the One who had delivered their country from both Egyptian bondage and Babylonian Captivity. So he exhorted them to live in the fear of God (i.e., to trust, obey, and serve Him) and thus avoid the reproach of their Gentile enemies.<sup>4</sup> Their witness to the surrounding Gentile nations was an essential part of God's plan to draw the surrounding nations to Himself.

**How did Nehemiah personalize this crisis (v. 10)?** He referred to his own example and that of others who were already helping those in need by lending them money and grain without interest. He was already doing something about the problem. So he was not asking the people to do something that he was not exemplifying in his own life.<sup>5</sup>

**What did Nehemiah direct the nobles and officials to do (v. 11)?** Nehemiah then asked those guilty of exploitation to return what they had taken from others. Mortgaged fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses were to be returned; charging interest (usury) was to stop, and the interest received from the loans was to be returned.

**How did the accused nobles and officials respond (v. 12a)?** After Nehemiah urged the rich to return the property gained by usury and to restore a measure of the interest exacted on loans of money, grain, new wine, and oil, they promised to do so.

**What action did Nehemiah take next (v. 12b)?** Knowing that words are cheap and easy to say on the spur of the moment under public pressure, he made the guilty leaders (nobles and officials) take another step—to take an oath affirming that they would do what they had said. The priests witnessed the oath-taking.

**What other action did Nehemiah take to convey the seriousness of their oath (v. 13a)?** Nehemiah visualized for them the grave consequences that would come if they lied to God. Shaking out the folds of his robe (Acts 18:6), which served as pockets, he asked that God similarly shake out of His house ... every person who failed to keep his oath. This gesture indicated rejection, something like shaking the dust off one's feet (Matthew 10:14; Acts 13:51).<sup>6</sup>

**How did the people respond (v. 13b)?** They praised the Lord and did what they promised under oath to do.

**What sacrifice did Nehemiah make (v. 14)?** The people that the governor ruled over were required to provide his food allowance. Rather than taking advantage of them, he sacrificed that which would normally and rightfully be his in order to serve as an example to the people.

**How did that action contrast with his predecessors (v. 15)?** This practice contrasted with the former governors, who charged the Jewish people 40 shekels of silver besides the allowance of food and wine. Even the governor's assistants took advantage of their position and oppressed the people, demanding their own payments.

**What was Nehemiah's motivation?** Out of reverence for God, he did not act like his predecessors. He feared God.

**What did Nehemiah do instead (v. 16)?** He did not take advantage of his position to acquire land or feather his nest for the future. His time was devoted to making Jerusalem safe for his brothers by building the wall not building his own personal fortune.

**How did Nehemiah demonstrate his generosity and compassion toward his fellow Jews (vv. 17-18)?** In providing food for many Jews and in entertaining dignitaries from other nations, he served food and wine out of his personal resources instead of demanding a food allowance from the people.<sup>7</sup>

**What was Nehemiah's prayer (v. 19)?** Nehemiah asked God to reward him for what he had done. This is not an improper request, since God has promised to bless those who put Him first (Matthew 6:33; Mark 10:29-30). The invocation of God's favor is not so much a plea for a reward as an emphatic way of claiming that he [Nehemiah] has acted in good faith and from right motives. It is a statement of confidence that God is judge, and judges favorably those who sincerely seek to do his will.<sup>8</sup> If God just kept track of his sacrifices that was sufficient for Nehemiah.<sup>9</sup>

As a man of prayer, Nehemiah was in touch with God. He prayed that God would remember him (i.e., not fail to act on his behalf) because of his concern for the people. Seven times in his prayers recorded in this book Nehemiah asked God to remember (v. 19; 6:14 [twice]; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). Remember me with favor is the same prayer he voiced at the end of the book (13:31).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Nehemiah, 2023 Edition (published by <http://planobiblechapel.org/soniclight/>), 32.

<sup>2</sup> Gene A. Getz, "Nehemiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 683.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 684.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 685.

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Nehemiah, 2023 Edition (published by <http://planobiblechapel.org/soniclight/>), 36.

<sup>9</sup> William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 486.

<sup>10</sup> Gene A. Getz, "Nehemiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 685.