



# Oppression from the Inside

Nehemiah 5

## The Peoples' Complaints

- ❑ Read Nehemiah 5:1-13. “Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews” (5:1, *NIV*).<sup>1</sup> Three categories of people voiced their complaints.<sup>2</sup>
  1. What conditions were they facing?<sup>3</sup> What were their complaints? (5:2-5)
  
- ❑ The people were facing great difficulties due to a shortage of food (5:3) and the oppressive actions of “their fellow Jews.” The wall construction was also a factor. Since many of the men were working on the wall, there were fewer workers for the harvest. Also, for security reasons, Nehemiah had forbidden the men to return to their homes and fields (4:22).<sup>4</sup>

## Nehemiah's Response

- ❑ Nehemiah heard the peoples' outcry and charges against their fellow Jews (5:6).
  2. How did Nehemiah respond? Consider his emotions, thinking, approach and actions.<sup>5</sup> (5:6-11)



3. What reasons did Nehemiah give for following his demands? (5:9)

<sup>1</sup> ‘their fellow Jews’ – particularly the richer and more powerful Jews; likely those who had returned from Babylon.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Some were saying... Others were saying... Still others were saying...’ (5:2-4).

<sup>3</sup> The first category of people included workers who depended on their wages to eat and live (5:2). Conditions were especially difficult for large families. The second category of people included landowners who had to ‘mortgage’ their properties to get food to eat (5:3). To mortgage property means to pledge property (as ‘collateral’) in order to get a loan. If the borrower fails to make his debt repayments, the creditor (lender) can take the property. The third category included landowners who had to borrow money to pay the taxes on the produce of their land (5:4). Some were compelled to sell their children into debt-slavery to pay off their debts (5:5). This practice, which was common in the ancient near East, was regulated but not prohibited by Jewish law (*Exodus 21:1-11; Deuteronomy 15:12-18*).

<sup>4</sup> The incident recorded in Nehemiah 5 likely arose toward the end of the wall building period (August/September) when the harvest of an important crop came to an end; though oppression of the poor had been a long term problem.

<sup>5</sup> While Nehemiah was ‘very angry’ (5:6), he did not react in haste. He ‘pondered’ (seriously considered) the matter before taking action (5:7). He rebuked the nobles and officials for ‘charging interest’ (*nāšā’ maššā’*) to their fellow Jews (5:7). This may refer only to charging interest, which was prohibited by the Law (*Deut.23:19*), but likely also includes lending against a pledge, which was allowed but regulated by the Law. While the nobles and officials were important to Nehemiah’s mission to rebuild the wall, he was willing to rebuke them. In verse 8, Nehemiah points out the moral absurdity of subjecting their own people to slavery after they had made special efforts to release them from slavery to Gentile (non-Jewish) masters. In verse 10, Nehemiah identifies with the rich Jews as a person who has also lent money and grain (though not in an oppressive manner) and he says, ‘But let *us* stop [lending against a pledge].’ Finally, in verse 11, Nehemiah ‘demands the cancellation of all debts and interest due and therefore the return of property that had been used in repayment. In the longer term, he demands the abandonment of this form of loan on pledge (v. 10), which could easily lead to loss of property and debt-slavery’ (H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* [Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985], 241).

## The Oppressors' Response

- ❑ Nehemiah's actions were effective and persuasive. The nobles and officials responded to his demands, "We will do as you say" (5:12a). To hold them accountable, Nehemiah called the priests and made the nobles and officials "take an oath to do what they had promised," and then he symbolically pronounced a curse on anyone who violated the oath (5:12b-13a).
  - 📖 "At this the whole assembly said, 'Amen,' and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised" (5:13b, NIV).

## Nehemiah's Example

- ❑ Read Nehemiah 5:14-19.<sup>6</sup> As governor of Judah, Nehemiah had the authority and right to receive income through the taxation of the people. Earlier governors had "placed a heavy burden on the people," and their assistants had also oppressed the people (5:15).
  4. How was Nehemiah different? What did he do, and not do? (5:14-16)

*"...leadership means going further than those one is leading"*<sup>7</sup>

5. Why was Nehemiah's manner of governing different? (5:15b, 18b)<sup>8</sup>

## Our Response

- ❑ The Jews were supposed to be working together in unity, but "oppression from the inside" was revealing and worsening division among the rich & powerful and the poor & powerless.
  6. In what ways may *we* be similar to those who were oppressing their fellow Jews?
  7. How can we apply the moral lessons of Nehemiah 5 to our lives?



- 📖 "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?" (1 John 3:17, NIV)

## Reflection/Application

- In this world of deficiency and oppression, we *all* need spiritual deliverance and provision. Jesus is the Deliverer and Provider we really need (Luke 4:16-21). Have you received him?
- Believers, reflect on your attitude and concern toward your brothers and sisters, especially those who are disadvantaged. Review this lesson, with special attention to "Our Response." And remember that we need the Holy Spirit's power to love others as God commands.

<sup>6</sup> Verses 1-13 concern a crisis during the wall rebuilding project. Verses 14-19 concern Nehemiah's whole term as governor, thus Nehemiah probably wrote these verses at a later time.

<sup>7</sup> Williamson, 246.

<sup>8</sup> Nehemiah acted 'out of reverence for God' (5:15b) and 'because the demands were heavy on these people' (5:18b) thus showing love for God and love for his neighbor – obeying the most important commandments (Matt. 22:36-40).