

Week 4. Nehemiah 5: Compassionate Restoration

- Timeline for Nehemiah breaks during this chapter to focus on opposition *thematically*
 - o Walls take 52 days to finish (6:15)
 - o Chapter 5 takes in 12 years (5:14)
- Chapters 4&6 see **external** opposition, here we have **internal** barriers forming

Selfishness is Incompatible with God-fearing Care

Structure:

- v1-5: Three Outcries against God-forsaking selfishness

Financial trouble comes from three sources:

1. The work on the wall means people aren't focussed on agriculture (v2)
2. A famine exacerbates financial trouble and demands people take loans (v3)
3. People are so desperate they're selling children into debt slavery (v4-5)

Persian taxes were incredibly high.

- o The Persian king collected about twenty million darics a year in taxes.
- o Most of this was melted down the gold and silver and stashed away as bullion.
- o At Susa alone Alexander the Great found ~ 270 tons of gold & 1200t of silver.
- o Many had to mortgage their lands to the authorities and become labourers.
- o Interest rates were ~20% under Cyrus...40-50% by Artaxerxes!

- v6-13: Nehemiah's call to God-fearing repentance

The Torah commands against God's people taxing and enslaving God's people
See Lev 25:35-42; Deut 23:19-20

This explains Nehemiah's response: he is incensed (v6) but then take a breath (v7)!

He charges the nobles: they are financially oppressing God's people

- o This is precisely the sort of behaviour which the prophets had condemned
- o Once again God's people are showing nothing has really changed since exile

Nehemiah's diagnosis: **they don't fear God** so **God's reputation is at risk**

The people respond in repentance and praise (v12-13)
(That's what repentance should prompt in us!)

- v14-20: Nehemiah's demonstration of God-fearing care

Nehemiah's own example is very different. His motivation? Fear of the Lord (v15)

NB It's easy to jump to conclude that this chapter highlights the evils of wealth

It doesn't!! It highlights the *evils of selfishness and oppression* in financial matters.

It's startling to see that Nehemiah follows that with a detailed account of his wealth!

- o 12 yrs x 1 ox and 6 sheep = 4380 Oxen and 26280 sheep. Plus 'some' poultry!
- o All paid for by Nehemiah himself. He is fantastically wealthy
- o His reverence doesn't mean he flees wealth. It drives extravagant generosity

Key Themes

- **Reverence for God/God-fearing:** is the key motivation for generosity and care
- **God's reputation:** God's people put God on display in their care for one another
- **Selfishness:** Our human selfishness is a barrier to putting God on display
- **Godly use of Wealth:** does not necessarily mean fleeing it!
 - o We must balance scripture. Money can be devious idle.
 - o It is also given for ministry: we are called to care for one another.

Suggested Questions

- How does selfishness among God's people manifest itself in Nehemiah's day?
- How can selfishness among God's people manifest itself today?
- How does that selfishness stop God's people from displaying God's glory?
- If you had the means to provide enough food each day to feed 150 people as extravagantly as Nehemiah does, would you feel guilty about your wealth?
- How can we grow in a God-fearing celebration of all he gives us to be generous with?

Intro Talk Outline

- God's great plan is to put himself on display through his people, to show his glory
- That is opposed at every step and at every stage of history
- External opposition: make God's people turn away from fearing God to fear others.
- Internal opposition: much more deceptive. Stop God's people acting as God's people
- Display God by love for him and for one another. Stop that love: stop displaying him
- **Selfishness is Incompatible with God-fearing Care**
 - 1. Outcries against God-forsaking Selfishness (v1-5)
 - Financial trouble from lots of sources: work on wall neglects fields. Famine. Taxes
 - Persian Taxes were something else! Huge amounts, taking loans at 50% interest!
 - Result: people selling children into debt slavery. Exactly what not to do (like wives)
 - 2. Nehemiah's call to God-fearing repentance (v6-13)
 - Inconsistent. They've been redeeming people only to sell them again!
 - Counter to fear of God. God's reputation at stake. Nations: 'their God is just like ours'
 - Call to repent... and they do. **Praise** is right response to godly repentance,
 - 3. Nehemiah's God-fearing generosity (v14-20)
 - Nehemiah is not against wealth. He's against drive for personal gain.
 - He's incredibly wealthy. 150+ people every day with extravagant feasting. He funds!
 - Why? Reverence for God (v15): Enjoys God's provision and recognises: for others too

Selfishness is incompatible with God-fearing care. Abundant generosity puts him on display