

Session 4

August 12, 2018

PROTECT

Nehemiah 5:1-13

As if Nehemiah didn't have enough worries, the opposition he faced from without was complicated by conflict from within. Just as division threatened the congregation at Corinth in Paul's day, conflict was threatening the unity of the Jewish countrymen, right when they needed it most. Apparently, the issue had been going on for some time, and Nehemiah's strong leadership and rapport with the people provided the outlet they needed to voice their concerns and get some relief. Nehemiah's challenge was to restore justice, unify the people, and move forward in the task at hand.

The sin is exposed (vv. 1-5). The problem consisted of wealthy Jews controlling the people's wealth at the expense of the poor and needy. The charge was both "widespread" in its source and extensive in its influence. The construction of verse 2 can actually be taken as a threat. "Let us get grain" can mean "Let us *take* grain," indicating the state of desperation the "numerous" of the needy felt in relation to the few who controlled the flow of food, especially in a season of famine (v. 3). The heart of the problem is uncovered in verse 4. The steep taxes and cost of living under oppression had sent the needy to Jewish countrymen who had a measure of wealth. Unable to pay the usury fees or interest, the families were forfeiting their land, and their children were being indentured as servants. Not only was such a practice immoral and unethical, it was against the Old Testament law! (see Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:35-37; Deut. 23:19-20).

The solution is offered (vv. 6-11). Nehemiah's response is logical and measured. Several key words characterize what happened. **Anger:** Nehemiah's most immediate response was fierce anger. After all they had been through, to hear of the atrocities forced against the Jews by their own countrymen was more than he could bear. **Consideration:** verse 7 indicates that Nehemiah calmed down and thought logically how to best confront the guilty. **Confrontation:** his calm demeanor did not thwart the sharpness of his attack. They were guilty and needed to be confronted. **Explanation:** Nehemiah next used an irony to illustrate his position. "We worked to free our people from foreign oppression so that they can return home and suffer further oppression from their own countrymen?" is the meaning (v. 8). **Appeal:** the appeal to the guilty lenders had three distinct parts; it was an appeal to their religious heritage and testimony as God's people (v. 9); an appeal based on Nehemiah's example of the right thing to do (v. 10); and an appeal to pay restitution to those wronged (v. 11).

The crisis is averted (vv. 12-13). People who are confronted in wrongdoing can react in a number of ways. They can ignore it and continue in sin; they can lash out and blame everyone else; or they can admit their fault and make things right. Fortunately for Nehemiah and the needy he represented, the guilty moneylenders saw their sinfulness, and responded appropriately. Their silence in the midst of the charges (v. 8) signaled the conviction they felt, while their acceptance of Nehemiah's instruction points to repentance and ultimate move toward restoration.

Unity is restored (v. 13). In a surprising yet necessary move, Nehemiah seals the deal by having the repentant lenders vow an oath before the priests and the people. He then asks for God to

judge those who might be tempted to renege on their commitment. With the crisis settled, the people display their unity in the best possible way: with a hearty “Amen” and a time of jubilant worship. In the end, they all came out winners.