

## Dr. Tiberius Rata, Ezra-Nehemiah, Session 8, Nehemiah 5-6

© 2024 Tiberius Rata and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Tiberius Rata and his teaching on Ezra and Nehemiah. This is session 8, Nehemiah 5-6.

Let's open to Nehemiah chapter five.

Until now, we have seen opposition from the outside. Now in chapter five, we'll see that there is opposition from the inside and everything has to do with wrong revealed. And we start in chapter five, verse one.

**1** Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. **2** For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive." **3** There were also those who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine." **4** And there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. **5** Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards."

So while Nehemiah was preoccupied with dealing with opposition from the inside, there was an internal problem that developed, which was socioeconomic in nature, which also dealt with the wrong of injustice.

And four different groups of people are present in the situation. First, there were those who did not own land but needed food. The second group had difficulty feeding their families, even though they owned property.

The need was so overwhelming that these had to mortgage their homes and their fields to just buy food. The third group had borrowed money to pay the royal tax and were unable to repay it because of the exorbitant interest charges. The fourth group was made up of wealthy Jews who were exploiting their Jewish brothers and sisters by taking their land and their children for collateral.

Now if you remember Leviticus 25, it talks about levirate servanthood. Not levirate marriage, but servanthood where if a Jewish brother or sister would become so poor, they could sell themselves to a brother who was well-to-do for a time. They were supposed to return the land and the people in the year of Jubilee or in the Sabbath year.

But this doesn't seem like they're following the law here. They were exploiting their brothers and sisters. See, in Leviticus, what God had in mind was not the people who were doing well; it was the poor.

God wanted to take care of the poor. And here there is this injustice of not only not taking care of the poor and the needy but exploiting them. Jewish parents had been forced to choose between starvation or servitude for their children.

The Jews had disobeyed the Spirit of God's law, which always made provision for the poor. And now the sin of injustice had been revealed and brought to Nehemiah's attention. Now which one is harder to fight? Opposition from the outside or opposition from the inside? Sometimes it's probably harder to fight the opposition from the inside.

What will Nehemiah do? Wow, we see Nehemiah has feelings.

**6** I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. **7** I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, "You are exacting interest, each from his brother." And I held a great assembly against them **8** and said to them, "We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!" They were silent and could not find a word to say. **9** So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? **10** Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest.

Twice in the book of Nehemiah we are told that Nehemiah is angry. The first time is here in the face of injustice done against his brothers and sisters.

The second time we will see it's in chapter 13 when Eliashib allows Tobiah to live in one of the temple's chambers. The question is, is it okay to be angry? Can a Christian get angry? Well, we see Jesus getting angry and express that anger when the Pharisees were oppressing the poor and the needy. He got angry when people transformed the temple into a marketplace and a business place.

So yes, there is a place for righteous anger. Well, we have to make sure it's not a selfish anger. But in this case we can tell clearly Nehemiah's anger is not selfish but it is righteous.

In his righteous anger he accuses the nobles of abusing their brothers and sisters. Selling of Jewish slaves was against God's law under any circumstance, Exodus 21 verse 8.

And the silence of the nobles and officials was an admission of guilt. And for Nehemiah it's not enough to say, well, it's wrong. No. He says, fix it. He says, correct it.

The godly leader took necessary steps to eradicate the wrong committed. For example, in our churches if you say, yeah, there's a poor family in our church. Well, it's not enough to identify the family.

We need to take care of them, to help them in whatever way we can. One of the greatest injustices we have done in this country is to say that the poor and the needy are the job of the government. Where Jesus says, the poor you will always have with you.

It is the job of the church to take care of the poor. Let us abandon this exact thing of interest. It's clear.

And Nehemiah acts on this injustice and fixes it. And he continues verses 11 through 13. The wrong has been identified.

The wrong has been addressed. And now the wrong has been made right. The solution was simple. Return what was taken. Even the interest exacted. And surprisingly they agree.

And they listen. And we have to also ask ourselves about this text. Is it descriptive or is it prescriptive? We have to be careful about applying this text to the contemporary situation.

One scholar noted that modern expositors find in Nehemiah 5 teaching on matters such as family planning, the proper exercise of anger, thinking before acting, exemplary living, the church's testimony before watching the world, promise keeping, sacrificing rights, the fear of God, nonconformity to the world and trusting God's reward. However, when one interprets the text in its proper context, one might expect that the main application of Nehemiah 5 would be that we should help the poor. And the more specific applications would include the sufferings of the poor, condemnation of injustice, exhortation to get involved in righting wrongs, advice on how creditors should treat debtors, and I'm talking about Christian ones, and suggestions about the government's responsibility to the poor, which as I said should actually be the church's responsibility, not the government's responsibility.

And Nehemiah leads by example, starting in verse 14. 40 shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded over the people, but I did not do so because of the fear of God.

**16** I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. **17** Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. **18** Now what was prepared at my expense<sup>d</sup> for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people. **19** Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

Nehemiah served as governor for two terms.

The first term was a twelve-year term, and the second term was an undetermined period of time. We know that from Nehemiah 13.6. The first time he served was from 433 BC to 421 BC during the reign of Artaxerxes I. But as a leader with a sensitive heart, and one who identifies with his people, he did not take advantage of the legally allowable food allowance for the governor. He didn't think that was fair for him to live in luxury when his people lived in poverty.

Growing up in Romania, Romania was a poor country, socialist country led by a communist government. And we lived in poverty. The government gave us a ration of food.

They gave us a card, and we had to go take that card to the store, and they would mark when we bought bread and milk and meat. And the government would tell us how much bread and milk and bread we need. And of course, we would have to wait in long lines.

What was interesting was that after the dictator died, they discovered that while his people lived in abject poverty, he had a gold-inlaid swimming pool. We never knew that such things existed. But he lived in riches while his people lived in poverty.

That's what dictators do. That's what bad leaders do. Nehemiah doesn't do that.

Nehemiah understands that he needs to lead by example. I mentioned that Nehemiah was a governor. Here's an Israeli archaeologist, Namad Avigad, who reconstructed this list of the following governors of Judah.

As you can see, after 538, for some of these we have biblical evidence. Again, Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Nehemiah. But from others, we don't have biblical evidence.

They're not mentioned in the Bible. But we do have archaeological evidence, as you can see, from bullas, seals, and papyri, and coins, going all the way to about 330. Again, out of these, Nehemiah stands out.

He says, Remember, for my good, O God. Kidner affirms that Nehemiah exemplifies the two greatest commandments. Loving God and loving people.

As we move to Nehemiah chapter 6, we will see that, at the end of the chapter, the wall is finally finished—and it will be done in record time. But before the wall is finished, Nehemiah has to deal again with opponents.

First of all, we see that Nehemiah is wise. He discerns the plan of the enemy. Starting in verse 1 of chapter 6,

**1** Now when Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall and that there was no breach left in it (although up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates), **2** Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, “Come and let us meet together at Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono.” But they intended to do me harm. **3** And I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?” **4** And they sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner.

God gives Nehemiah discernment to understand that the enemy intended to harm him. Remember, the enemy is multiplied. Since the beginning of the reconstruction project.

And the enemy's tactics have changed. And now they say, okay, let's meet. And interestingly, they say, let's meet in the plain of Ono, which was in a kind of a neutral territory, a little bit to the north.

But Nehemiah recognized the invitation as a trap. Now, Nehemiah doesn't address it. He doesn't say, hey, guys, you are lying.

You are deceiving. He doesn't address that. Rather, he declared that, hey, I have a work to do, and my work is not going to stop to go to committee meetings.

I don't know. I hear business people telling me that billions of dollars a year are wasted in business meetings. I don't know about church meetings.

Probably with church meetings, the number is much higher. I don't know. But Nehemiah doesn't stop.

Maybe he knows that meetings are where good ideas get killed. I don't know. But Nehemiah does not stop to go to a meeting.

He has the discernment to understand that this is not what he needs to do. And we also need to ask God for wisdom to discern truth from falsehood. And not just truth from falsehood, but not just between what is right, but what is right and almost right.

And we need God's wisdom for that. The opposition, though, the opponents are not happy with Nehemiah's response. So they continue, and now they lie.

And now they slander. In the same way, starting in verse 5,

**5** In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. **6** In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and Geshem<sup>a</sup> also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king.

Wow! That is another lie. Think about the accusations. Not only is he guilty of rebellion, but he wants to overthrow the king.

**7** And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, 'There is a king in Judah.' And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together." **8** Then I sent to him, saying, "No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind." **9** For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done." But now, O God,<sup>b</sup> strengthen my hands.

The enemy changes the tactics. Now they go to lies and slander.

In an open letter, they are accusing Nehemiah of preparing not only to bite the hand that feeds him, but to cut off that hand. To cut off the hand that allowed him to return to his homeland. Not only that, they are accusing him of being God who puts in prophets.

He was accused of writing the prophet's sermons in order to enhance his own image. In light of God's plan for the world, this sin would have been much greater than the first ones. Geshem gave birth to the rumor and spread it.

Sanballat's resolution for the problem was another meeting. And again, Nehemiah is praying for strength. Strengthen my hands is the cry of the faithful who know that the victory is only God's.

Nehemiah's cry echoes that of the psalmist who desires God's strength when his soul is weakened by sorrow. Psalm 119:28. Strengthen my hands.

Do you think that the enemy now says, Oh, okay, we give up? No. The opponents continue with threats and even employing false prophets. Starting in verse 10.

This is Nehemiah. We don't know why, but he actually goes to the house of Shemaiah, the son of Deliah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home and said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple. Let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you by night." **11** But I said, "Should such a man as I run away? And what man such as I could go into the temple and live?<sup>e</sup> I will not go in." **12** And I understood and saw that God had not sent him, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. **13** For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me. **14** Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid.

It's interesting, we have this dimension of Shemaiah, the son of Deliah, is a prophet of whom we have no further information. Now, Nehemiah seems to have trusted him enough to go to his house.

Again, we don't know anything more. But once inside the house, Shemaiah says, Nehemiah, we got to go to the temple because these people are coming to kill you. Not only that, but apparently he knew when they were going to come.

They are going to come at night to kill you. Very interesting. But as a godly leader, Nehemiah fears God more than he fears people.

His question is, should such a man as I run away? That shows his character. I fear God more than I fear people, Nehemiah says. But what's worse in this passage is that this is a false prophet.

And the Bible speaks of false prophets, that their punishment was actually the death penalty. Not only was this a false prophet who prophesied falsely, this was a prophet for hire. Sanballat and Tobiah paid for him to lie.

Like Judas of old, many prophets today, Shemaiah sold himself for a price. Instead of speaking the word of God, Shemaiah spoke words of men, lies, in order to mar Nehemiah's reputation. I don't know.

Did he not know the fate of King Uzziah, who went into the temple? Because that was the argument. Shemaiah says, let's go into the temple, and that will be safe. But Nehemiah doesn't want to do that.

Maybe Nehemiah knew the fate of King Uzziah, who dared to enter the temple. And Nehemiah probably realized that his fate would have been the same, if he disobeyed God's law. Kidner correctly points out, that had Nehemiah tried to save himself in such a way, he would have lost, possibly, his life, certainly his honor, and he would have jeopardized the very cause he had at heart.

Was Shemaiah the only false prophet? No, actually the text also mentions Nehemiah. Nehemiah, Nehemiah the prophetess, is the only one other false prophet here, mentioned by name. But it's in the past.

Nehemiah responds to the enemy's plan by praying to God. Praying to the one who reigns over all, and who thwarts the enemy's plan. And even though there is opposition after opposition, even though the opponents change their tactics, we see the miracle happening.

The man of God succeeds. The wall is finished. Not only is he finished, but it's finished in record time.

**15** So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. **16** And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. **17** Moreover, in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. **18** For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah: and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah as his wife. **19** Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid.

Despite of obstacles, despite of a fierce opposition from the enemy, the Jews worked from the third day of Av, until the 25th day of Elul, and they finished the wall in only 52 days. Now you have to understand that the entire wall was not down. The wall was breached, and there were only certain areas that needed to be rebuilt.

Either way, this was a miracle of God. Again, in unity, under great leadership, they accomplished this great thing. The work that started in the hot summer, concluded in the cooler days of the fall.

And even though there is great rejoicing, the enemy continues to threaten. And verse 18 here, points to the sad reality of what's happening in some of our churches. Instead of living lives according to biblical principles, some live their lives being led by family ties.



That's what verse 18 is all about. These people, because of their family ties, are opposing Nehemiah, and they're joining Tobiah. In Nehemiah's days, family ties led some to fight against the faithful.

How many churches today have been damaged and even destroyed, because the leadership of the church fears their family members, instead of fearing God and trusting in His word. There's a word in the English language called nepotism. Apparently, that happens not just in institutions, but it happens unfortunately even in the church.

And even though Nehemiah received some praise about Tobiah, Tobiah was relentless in his opposition. While the bricks and the mortar provided some defense against the elements and the enemy, Nehemiah and the faithful needed the protection of the almighty power and work of God. The last verses of chapter 6 are wonderful, because notice it says, Even the enemies perceived that the work has been accomplished through the work of God.

When we do the work of God, even the enemy understands and sees that it is the work of God. May we also do the same work, not just here, but wherever God has called us to do His work.

This is Dr. Tiberius Rata and his teaching on Ezra and Nehemiah. This is session 8, Nehemiah 5-6.