

NEHEMIAH 5

REFORMATION OF INJUSTICE

The opening scene of this chapter shows us the tears of the oppressed and poor people among the Jews. Hard times and hard hearts had made these people miserable. There was a famine of food, probably due to a lack of rain. The general scarcity of bread was even more grievous because many of the people had large families to feed. And not only was food expensive, but the king's taxes were also high. But these poor people had no more of their own money to buy food and pay taxes, so they were obliged to borrow from their wealthier brethren. And to make matters worse, as if the hard economic times were not bad enough, the persons from whom these people were borrowing were hard-hearted. They were making an unjust profit from the necessity of their unfortunate brothers and sisters by charging them incredible interest rates, and then forcing them to mortgage their lands and houses as collateral for the money. Yet this was not even the worst! These oppressors were also taking these poor people's own children as servants, as repayment for the debts that were owed.

Concerning these problems, the oppressed people made a humble remonstrance to Nehemiah – not only because they saw that he was a great man who *could* relieve them, but also because he was a kind man who *would*. It seems that these complaints were made to Nehemiah at the time when he had his head and hands as full as possible of the public business surrounding the building of the wall. Yet he did not chide them for coming to him at a desperately inconvenient time; he knew that no matter how high, thick, or strong Jerusalem's walls were, the city could not be safe while such abuses as these were tolerated.

Nehemiah was righteously angry when he heard these things. But although his spirit was provoked, he did not say or do anything unadvisedly. He consulted with himself what to say and how to say it, and then he rebuked the oppressors – even though they were persons in high positions. It was bad enough to oppress foreigners, but it was much worse to oppress their poor brethren – especially since they had so recently been redeemed out of the hand of the heathen. It is a great sin to thus oppress the poor; and it is a great scandal and reproach for such behavior to be found in those who profess faith in Christ, Who has redeemed us from the curse of the law and slavery to sin.

Not only did Nehemiah earnestly urge these noblemen to stop making any more of these hard bargains with their poor neighbors, but he also entreated them to restore that which they had already unjustly gotten from them. He laid them under a solemn promise to do as he had requested; and he bound them by a solemn curse, hoping that it would strike some awe upon them. Their cheerful-

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ The poor Jews complain of the hardship they were under – verses 1-5
- ❖ The effectual course that Nehemiah took to relive this situation – verses 6-13
- ❖ The good example which he himself set for the people – verses 14-19



ness in promising was well, but that which followed was even better: “They did according to this promise!”

Nehemiah had mentioned his own example, in verse 10, as an inducement to the noblemen to not burden the poor – not even with lawful demands. But toward the end of this chapter, he related more particularly what his example was – not in pride or vain-glory, nor to pass a compliment upon himself; but as an inducement, both to his successors and to the lesser magistrates, to be as tender as possible for the people’s ease. The Persian government allowed these governors a certain amount of silver; but besides that, they obliged the people to provide them with bread and wine, which they claimed as privileges of their office. Moreover, they also allowed their servants to squeeze the people and get all they could out of them. But Nehemiah did not do so. The fear of Jehovah restrained him from oppressing the people. He did not even exact from them what he might have required as honest compensation for filling the office of governor. He supported himself exclusively upon what he received from the Persian king’s court, and from his own personal estate in Judea. While his countrymen were groaning under so much hardship, he could not find it in his heart to add to their burdens.

Not only did Nehemiah practice much self-denial for the good of his people, but he also gave much to them freely which he might have withheld! He donated the time and labor of his personal servants to the building of the city wall, and he constantly kept a very good table with plentiful provisions for his many honorable guests – at least 150 of his own countrymen, who were persons of the highest rank; besides foreign dignitaries who came to him on business. He depended upon the Lord alone to make up to him what he had lost and laid out for His honor, and he counted the favor of Jehovah to be reward enough.

Redemption always costs someone something! Nehemiah put himself to great expense to serve his countrymen who had been set free from Babylonian exile; he gave up his title, his finances, and his time. But Nehemiah was a foreshadowing of Someone far greater! The Son of God gave up His position at the right hand of His Father. He came to earth and gave up more than just His time, honor, and finances. It cost Him much, much more than that to redeem His people! He didn’t pay our ransom-price with silver or gold or anything perishable; it cost Him nothing less than His own precious blood to purchase our freedom from the slavery of sin. And with Him as our new Master, we find freedom, hope, and joy in His redemption!

O Lord, we beseech You to bless our nation with faithful leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah – men who fear and love You, and who are not afraid to set wrong matters right! Amen.