

SESSION 5

OPPRESSION AND GENEROSITY

Nehemiah 5 / Personal Study

Opening Prayer

Gracious Father, incline my heart to Your testimonies. Open my eyes that I might behold wonderful things in Your Word. Unite my heart to fear Your name and satisfy me with Your steadfast love. I ask this by Your Spirit and through Your Son. Amen.

Introduction

Nehemiah has his hands full. The Hebrews are scared from the threat of an outside attack, while internal issues boil between them. The complaints to Nehemiah come from three different groups of people whose men left their day jobs to build the wall. In an agrarian society, this means the wives and children stayed home to do the work in the field, and the men lost the fruit of their labour. This sacrifice cost their families, and they were forced to mortgage their land, put their children into debt slavery and ask for help with basic food. The interest on their debt was high, and either they couldn't pay or they had mortgaged all just to survive. The issue was that those who were charging the interest, the ones foreclosing on debts and taking fields and vineyards away from the Hebrews, were other Hebrews. The upper class of the nation was forcing their own countrymen to sell their children into debt slavery, and they were selling Hebrews to Gentiles for a profit.

*Now our flesh is the flesh of our brothers, our children as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves...but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards. **Nehemiah 5:5***

Nehemiah doesn't mince words about his feelings in response, but he also doesn't respond immediately out of an emotional reaction. He considers the issue and takes time to think it through. There is no hasty email with choppy sentences shot off to the city councilman or the business bureau; he takes counsel with himself and then calls a meeting.

Read Nehemiah 5 and answer the following questions:

1. In your own words, rewrite the outcry of the people in 5:1-5.
2. What do you think motivated the upper class to charge such high interest on the loans to their countrymen?
3. Nehemiah responds to the situation with anger and carefully chosen words. Summarize what he says to the nobles and officials in response to their actions.

What reasons does he give to point out their error (5:6-13)?

4. How quickly do you turn anger into speech? Why is there wisdom in waiting to speak? Look up the following verses and note what they add to your understanding:

- Proverbs 14:29
- Ecclesiastes 7:9
- James 1:19

5. In 5:14-19 we learn that Nehemiah does more than just make convincing arguments – he is also extremely generous. Summarize how his actions back up his words to the nobles and officials.

6. Compare 5:9 and 5:15. What common reason is given for being obedient to God? What do you think it means to obey God for this reason? What does it not mean?

7. We often let what others think of us dictate our decisions, allowing our fear of man to control our thoughts and actions. Do you tend to base your decisions on fear of God or fear of man? How does fear of man negatively affect the way you spend your time?

8. Nehemiah's fear of God prompts him to great generosity. How does our fear of man limit our ability to be generous to others?

9. To whom can you be generous this week with the gifts of time, money or possessions God has given you? Whom has God placed in your path who needs your generosity?

Closing Prayer

Gracious Father, You are slow to anger. Your decrees are upright. Teach me to learn selfcontrol in dealing with my anger and words that I might better reflect Your character. You are a generous God, giving to those who do not deserve Your grace. Teach me to be openhanded with the things You have entrusted to me. Help me to see the needs of others before my own. Thank You that You are a God worthy of our reverent obedience. Amen.

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Nehemiah 5 / Group Study

Answer the following questions:

1. What thoughts do you have based upon this week's personal study?
2. What stood out to you? What challenged you? What prompted questions?
Read Nehemiah 5 and answer the following questions.
3. This chapter opens with disunity among the people of God. Can you think of other examples in Scripture where disunity was a problem?
4. The disunity of chapter 5 is caused by injustice. What lesser reasons can cause disunity among believers today? How can we guard ourselves against falling into disunity over unimportant or secondary matters?
5. Why does Nehemiah tell the Hebrew nobles and officials to walk in the fear of the Lord? How would this fear have changed their actions? How should it change ours?
6. The Hebrews are the people of God, but they fail to protect their national unity because of sin. Is there anything that keeps you from being unified with your Christian brothers and sisters in this room?
7. The nobles and officials let greed guide their decision making, resulting in injustice and selfishness. How does greed damage the modern-day church? How do believers use other believers to gain an advantage for themselves? How does greed damage our key relationships with family and friends? Who are we most likely to use to improve our own comfort or standing?
8. Nehemiah lets the fear of the Lord guide his decision-making, resulting in justice and generosity. How have you seen justice and generosity operating within the body of believers? How could you join in those efforts? What specific steps could you take to demonstrate fairness and generosity in your key relationships with family and friends?

Guide to Prayer

- Pray for the Lord to grant greater unity to His people and specifically for unity within your gospel-centered community and The Village.
- Ask the Lord to deliver us from pride, arrogance and greed that might cause us to oppress others. Ask Him to stir our hearts to pursue justice and generosity.
- Thank the Lord that He is faithful, just, generous and good.

LEADER GUIDE

SESSION 5

Oppression and Generosity / Nehemiah 5

1. Personal response

2. Personal response

3. Constant examples of disunity in the Old Testament could be mentioned. In the New Testament, we could look at the bickering between the disciples, the disunity in Corinth, or various evidences of greed and oppression combated in Galatians and James.

4. Disunity can be caused by church building campaigns, changes in leadership, changes in ministry philosophy, rumours, gossip – the list goes on. We can guard ourselves by remaining humble, remembering the important things that unite us and guarding our thoughts and speech.

5. Israel's relationship with God was one of humility and dependence. God took the people and formed a nation, and they were to live in a way that demonstrated their faith in the God who saved them. "Fear of the Lord" sounds like being afraid of His wrath, but it is the kind of close relationship that would cause a redeemed person to want to please their heavenly Father. Discuss how a right understanding of God's role in saving us helps us to see our complete dependence upon Him. If we recognize our need for the Lord and how He has abundantly provided, the idea of walking in the fear of God becomes clearer (Prov. 8:13, 9:10, 14:26; Heb. 13:6).

6. If there is a failure to see our identity in Christ as being part of the family of God, the Christian life can become one of comparison and competition. Our desire to grow in Christ is intermingled with worldly desires, and mixed motives quickly cause frustration in the human heart. A desire for a house, job, family, etc. causes discontentment and doubt toward the Lord's provision for you, rather than seeing everything as coming through the hand of God. If our identity is rooted in Christ, then trusting the Father is where we are to live, even when it is a struggle.

7. Leaders might use their platform to obtain wealth or power. Members might use their influence to push their own agendas or gain support for the issues they think are important. Greed damages our relationships with family and friends because it breaks the Golden Rule of loving others preferentially.