

Ezra Nehemiah Lesson 6 Lecture

Nehemiah 3 - 5

- Nehemiah chapters 3 – 5 give us great insight into Nehemiah’s leadership and organizational skills.
 - Nehemiah engaged all the people he could in building Jerusalem’s walls and repairing its gates.
 - We note that Bethlehem is not specifically mentioned.
 - The rulers of Tekoa refused to perform manual labor. Tekoa, the hometown of the prophet Amos, was a small town 5 miles south of Bethlehem. Its location was near the Arab territory of Geshem and perhaps its rulers influenced the nobles of Tekoa to disdain participation. Or perhaps the rulers of Tekoa just thought they were above such manual work.
 - We see mentioned in Nehemiah 5:6 the use of the wooden beams Nehemiah brought with him from Susa.
- Nehemiah faced continued opposition from the sub-governors of Samaria, Ammon, the Arabs, and the people of Ashdod.
 - Ashdod was one of the 5 cities of the Philistine pentapolis. It had been devastated by Nebuchadnezzar and had likely been repopulated by other people groups. During Persian times, it served as a seaport and its citizens built ships for the Persian navy. Ashdod was also a Persian territory and its area included most of the old Philistine territory plus portions of the former southern Judah.
 - Nehemiah 4:8 tells us, “They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it.”
 - Fortunately, God protected his people, and this planned attack did not happen.
 - Faced with the threat of attack, Nehemiah again demonstrated leadership.
 - All the workers carried swords as they worked.
 - Trumpeters stood ready to sound the alarm.
 - The men alternated working by day and guarding the wall and gates by night.

- When the threat became more severe, Nehemiah pulled the workers into the city of Jerusalem at night.
- In the middle of rebuilding the wall, Nehemiah faced an economic crisis. There was a famine in Judah and grain was in short supply due to poor grain harvests. In addition, the farmers had difficulty working in their fields and olive groves as they were spending time within the city of Jerusalem as they were building the walls.
 - Men were borrowing money to buy grain and to pay their Persian taxes. Their fellow Jews were lending them money with interest, which violated God’s commands from Exodus 22:25.
 - Other men were having to mortgage their fields, vineyards, and homes to buy grain.
 - Still others, who had no land or vineyards, had resorted to selling their children into debt slavery. While God had put a limit on how long a fellow Jew could serve as a bondservant (6 years, according to Deuteronomy 15:12), the practice of true slavery among Jews was prohibited (Exodus 21:8). With debt slavery, the children worked for the creditor until the debt was paid or 6 years had elapsed, whichever was sooner.
 - Nehemiah 5:5b also mentions that some daughters had been enslaved. Here, the interpretation is that these daughters had been taken into a creditor’s household as a second wife.
 - The economic situation was so severe that Nehemiah 5:1 notes that even the wives were protesting.
 - Overall, these poor Jews viewed the situation as hopeless. They said, “We are powerless (Nehemiah 5b).”
 - Nehemiah was angered by the situation, particularly when he discovered that the Jews were charging their fellow Jews interest.
 - Nehemiah clearly had in mind the following verses from Exodus 22:25-27:
 - “If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest. ²⁶ If you take your neighbor’s cloak as a pledge, return it by sunset, ²⁷ because that cloak is the only covering your neighbor has. What else can they sleep in?”
 - Charging interest violated God’s commands.
 - Taking advantage of the poor was also a violation.

- Nehemiah called a large meeting with all the nobles and officials who were guilty of the offense.
 - He could not take them to court, as they would have been the likely judges.
 - During the meeting, Nehemiah called out their sin.
 - The nobles and officials were silent. They could say nothing in return.
 - Nehemiah urged the nobles and officials to immediately stop charging the 1% interest. This amounted to 12% annually, which was an exorbitant sum in those days.
 - Further, he insisted that they return anything held in pledge. By this he meant the Jews' fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses which had been mortgaged to buy grain. Note that the children sold into debt slavery and the daughters taken as 2nd wives are not mentioned here. Those situations were not so easily unraveled.
 - The nobles and officials agreed with Nehemiah's requests. Not fully trusting they would do so, he made them swear an oath to do as they had promised.
- The last view we have in this lesson concerning Nehemiah's leadership skills deals with his role as sub-governor of Judah for 12 years.
 - He vehemently states that he is not like other governors who placed a heavy burden on the people.
 - As sub-governor, he was authorized a food allowance and was entitled to collect taxes for his personal use and for his assistants (his "brothers").
 - Nehemiah disdained both.
 - Even though as a Persian sub-governor Nehemiah was expected to entertain Jewish nobles, Jewish leaders, other Persian officials, and other sub-governors, he paid for this out of his own pocket. To do otherwise would have put too heavy a burden on the Judean Jews.

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Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. ⁵ For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations. Psalms 100:4-5

1. Read Nehemiah 3.

- a. List all the different groups of people who participated in building the wall (example: the priests).

Priests, Levites, Temple servants, Jewish men, Jewish women, goldsmiths, merchants, gate guards, Jewish leaders, perfume makers

- b. What was the benefit of having these varied groups work on the wall?

They all had a personal stake in seeing the wall completed.

- c. Did you note any group which didn't participate?

Musicians; nobles of Tekoa

- d. Did you notice any unusual participants?

Shallum's daughters

2. Read Nehemiah 4:1-9.

- a. What comments did the non-Jews make about the efforts to rebuild the wall?

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, ² and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?"

³ Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones! Nehemiah 4:1-3

- b. What was the purpose of their comments?

- To slow or stop the construction of the wall.
- To discourage, anger, and frustrate the Jews.

c. How did Nehemiah respond?

Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. ⁵ Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders. Nehemiah 4:4-5

d. When the wall had reached half its height, what was the reaction of the non-Jews?

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. ⁸ They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. Nehemiah 4:7-8

e. How did the people of Judah respond?

But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. Nehemiah 4:9

3. Read Nehemiah 4:10-23.

a. From these verses, do you think the taunts of the non-Jews were having an effect? Yes, the people building the wall were discouraged and afraid of attack by their non-Jewish neighbors.

b. How did Nehemiah deal with this situation?

- Nehemiah posted armed guards at the exposed lowest points of the wall.
- Nehemiah encouraged every person in the community not to be afraid and to fight for their families and their homes.
- Half of the men did the work while the other half guarded the wall.
- Each builder wore a sword at his side as he worked.
- He told the nobles, officials, and people to rally whenever they heard the sound of the trumpet, which announced an attack.
- The people worked from dawn to dusk daily.
- Nehemiah ordered the builders to stay within the city at night, to be workers by day and guards by night.
- No one took off his clothes at night. Each man had his weapon, even when he went for water.

c. From verses 19-20, what did Nehemiah expect to happen?

Nehemiah expected an attack from the non-Jews.

- d. How did Nehemiah deal with this threat?
- Nehemiah posted armed guards at the exposed lowest points of the wall.
 - Half of the men did the work while the other half guarded the wall.
 - Each builder wore a sword at his side as he worked.
 - He told the nobles, officials, and people to rally whenever they heard the sound of the trumpet, which announced an attack.
 - Nehemiah ordered the builders to stay within the city at night, to be workers by day and guards by night.
 - No one took off his clothes at night. Each man had his weapon, even when he went for water.

4. Read Nehemiah 5:1-5.

- a. What was the next crisis Nehemiah faced?
The people were hungry due to famine.
- b. What were the people's complaints and how had they dealt with the issue?
- Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine." Nehemiah 5:3
 - Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. ⁵ Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others." Nehemiah 5:4-5

5. Read Nehemiah 5:6-12.

- a. What is Nehemiah's reaction when he hears the people's complaints?
When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. ⁷ I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are charging your own people interest!" Nehemiah 5:6-7
- b. How do Deuteronomy 15:12 and Exodus 22:25 add context to Nehemiah's reaction?
- If any of your people—Hebrew men or women—sell themselves to you and serve you six years, in the seventh year you must let them go free. Deuteronomy 15:12
 - If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest. Exodus 22:25

c. What actions did Nehemiah take?

So I called together a large meeting to deal with them ⁸ and said: “As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

⁹ So I continued, “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? ¹⁰ I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! ¹¹ Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.” Nehemiah 5:7-11

d. What is the response to Nehemiah’s demands in verse 9?

We will give it back,” they said. “And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say. Nehemiah 5:12

e. What is the response from verse 12?

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. Nehemiah 5:12

6. Read Nehemiah 5:13.

a. What extra step did Nehemiah take to ensure compliance?

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. Nehemiah 5:12

b. What symbolic gesture does Nehemiah make to illustrate his action?

I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, “In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!” Nehemiah 5:13

c. What were the consequences of breaking the oath?

“In this way may **God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!**”
Nehemiah 5:13

d. What do you think is meant by “may such a person be shaken out and emptied?”
God will remove the person’s house and possessions. He will be left with nothing.

7. Read Nehemiah 5:14-19.

a. What do you learn about Nehemiah's role in Judah?

He was the governor of Judah.

b. How long did he serve in this position?

12 years

c. What power do you think this position give Nehemiah?

- His rules had the force of law. His authority came from the Persian king.
- He had parity with the other sub-governors of Trans-Euphrates.

d. What was Nehemiah entitled to because of this position?

He was allotted food.

e. What does the passage say about Nehemiah and this entitlement?

Neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. Nehemiah 5:14

f. What had previous people in Nehemiah's position done?

But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. Nehemiah 5:15

g. Why didn't Nehemiah act this way?

Out of reverence for God

h. From verse 16, how else was Nehemiah different than previous governors?

Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land. Nehemiah 5:16

i. What statement does Nehemiah make about his actions?

Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations.¹⁸ Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.

¹⁹ Remember me with favor, my God, for all I have done for these people. Nehemiah 5:17-19

j. What do you think about this statement?

This statement in Nehemiah 5:19 does not sound very humble. God saw his actions. He did not need to remind God of them.

Nehemiah 3 - 5

Nehemiah's Leadership and Organizational Skills

- He Engaged All the People He Could in Building the Walls and Repairing the Gates
- Bethlehem Is Not Specifically Mentioned
- The Rulers of Tekoa Refused to Perform Manual Labor
 - Tekoa Was Near the Arab Territory of Geshem, Which May Have Influenced Their Decision
- Nehemiah 5:6 Mentions the Wooden Beams Nehemiah Brought From Susa





North Tower and Jerusalem City Wall Built
by Nehemiah; copyright: biblicalarchaeology.org

Opposition

- From the Sub-governors of Samaria, Ammon, the Arabs, and the People of Ashdod
- Ashdod Was One of the 5 Cities of the Philistine Pentapolis; Devastated by Nebuchadnezzar and Likely Repopulated by Other People Groups; During Persian Times, It Was a Seaport and They Built Ships for the Persian Navy; Its Territory Included Most of the Former Philistine Territory and Part of Southern Judah
- Nehemiah 4:8; A Planned Attack
- God Protected His People and the Planned Attack Did Not Happen



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Nehemiah Responds

- Faced With the Threat of Attack from Judah's Neighbors, Nehemiah Ordered Defensive Actions:
 - All Workers Carried Swords as They Worked
 - Trumpeters Stood Ready to Sound the Alarm
 - The Men Alternated Working by Day and Guarding the Wall and Gates by Night
 - When the Threat Became More Severe, Nehemiah Pulled the Workers Into the City of Jerusalem at Night

The Economic Crisis

- Famine in Judah
- Grain Was in Short Supply Due to Poor Grain Harvests
- Farmers Were Building Walls Instead of Farming
- Men Borrowed Money to Buy Grain and Pay Their Persian Taxes; Their Fellow Jews Were Lending Them Money With Interest; a Violation of Exodus 22:25
- Other Men Mortgaged Their Fields, Vineyards, and Homes

The Economic Crisis

- Some Sold Their Children Into Debt Slavery
 - Deuteronomy 15:12 Limited How Long a Bondservant Could Serve (6 Years)
 - The Practice of True Slavery Among Jews Was Prohibited (Exodus 21:8)
 - With Debt Slavery, the Children Worked For the Creditor Until the Debt Was Paid or 6 Years Had Elapsed, Whichever Was Sooner
- Nehemiah 5:5b Mentions Some Daughters Had Been Enslaved; These Daughters Went to a Creditor's Household as a 2nd Wife

The Economic Crisis

- Nehemiah 5:1: Even the Wives Were Protesting
- The Situation Was Hopeless for Poor Jews; Nehemiah 5b: “We Are Powerless”
- Nehemiah Was Angry, Especially About the Interest
- Exodus 22:25-27
- Charging Interest Violated God’s Commands
- Taking Advantage of the Poor Was Also a Violation

Nehemiah Responds

- He Calls a Large Meeting With All the Nobles and Officials Who Were Guilty of the Offenses
- He Could Not Take Them to Court; They Would Have Been the Judges
- Nehemiah Calls Out Their Sins; The Nobles and Officials Were Silent
- Stop Charging the 1% Interest; 12% Annually, Exorbitant in Persian Times
- Return the Vineyards, Olive Groves, and Houses Mortgaged to Buy Grain
- The Children Sold Into Debt Slavery and the Daughters Taken as 2nd Wives Are Not Mentioned; Harder to Unravel
- The Nobles and Officials Agree; Nehemiah Makes Them Swear an Oath to Do as They Promised

Nehemiah the Sub-Governor

- He Served for 12 Years
- He Says He is Not Like Other Sub-Governors Who Placed a Heavy Burden on the People
- He Was Authorized a Food Allowance and Was Entitled to Collect Taxes for His Personal Use and For His Assistants (His “Brothers”)
- Nehemiah Disdained Both
- Nehemiah Paid to Entertain Jewish Nobles, Jewish Leaders, Other Persian Officials, and Other Sub-governors Out of His Own Pocket
- To Do Otherwise Would Have Put Too Heavy a Burden on the Judean Jews