

The Perils of Prosperity

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study Series from **Jerry Vines Ministries**
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Let's Begin

Until we get to Nehemiah 5, every attempt to hinder the Jews' work of rebuilding the Jerusalem wall had been unsuccessful. But the devil is very shrewd. If the attacks from the outside are not working, he knows to try to cause problems on the inside. And when he is successful in causing problems among God's children, he usually causes more hurt and harm to the work of the Lord than anything else. That is exactly what we see happening as we begin Nehemiah 5.

In this chapter no mention is made of any work being done on the wall until we get to verse 16. For the most part the work stops and the tools are laid down because of trouble on the inside. There was turmoil among the Jews. What was the problem? It is the same problem that has plagued God's people and

people in general throughout human history. It was the problem of selfishness and greed. Instead of using their wealth and position to help others, some of the more prosperous Jews were taking advantage of their own brothers. The result was resentment among God's people and a delay in rebuilding Jerusalem's wall. Using the outline below, let's see how Nehemiah handles this situation and why we need to guard against the perils of prosperity today.

I. The Great Cry (vv. 1-5)

II. The Grave Confrontation (vv. 6-11)

III. The Good Consent (vv. 12-13)

IV. The Generous Conduct (vv. 14-19)

I. The Great Cry (vv. 1-5)

The first thing we read in chapter 5 is about the great cry of the people and their wives against their brethren the Jews (v. 1). It was the classic struggle between "the haves" and "the have nots" or the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. The wealthier Jews were exploiting the poorer Jews. The cry from the wives means they didn't have enough food to feed their families. Verse 2 confirms the shortage of food. Others also share how they had mortgaged their land and homes in order to get food

during the time of famine (v. 3). To add to their financial woes, many of them had to borrow money to pay their taxes (v. 4). It is true they were back in their own land of Israel, but they still were obligated to pay taxes to the king of Persia. Judah was still part of his empire.

Verse 5 shares these parents' greatest heartache: their children were being placed in bondage. In those days if you couldn't pay your bills your creditor could take your children. The children would then be required to work

until the parents' debt was paid off. The worst part of everything these Jews were going through was that it was their own people, their Jewish brothers, who were oppressing them. They were the ones taking advantage of the situation.

We might wonder what the wealthier Jews were thinking. It might help to understand a concept they had back in Bible days. They believed if people were blessed materially, it meant they had God's favor. They also believed the opposite. If people



fell on hard financial times, then God was showing His disfavor towards them. If we are not careful, we can fall into that faulty thinking today. Just because a person is blessed materially does not necessarily mean he is right with God. And just because somebody is having a tough time

financially does not mean that person is not living for the Lord. These offending Jews possibly thought they were justified in their actions. But, there is no evidence in Scripture that the economic problems the poorer Jews were encountering were a result of sin.

Reflection Connection

Read 1 John 3:17 and discuss how God wants His children to be towards fellow believers who have needs.

II. The Grave Confrontation (vv. 6-11)

When Nehemiah hears about what has been happening, he says, “I was very angry” (v. 6). Some people think Christians shouldn’t get angry, but that is not what God’s Word says. In fact, Ephesians 4:26 tells us, “Be ye angry, and sin not ...” Sin and injustices should make us angry. But we need to know how to get angry and not sin.

After stating he became angry, Nehemiah next says, “Then I consulted with myself ...” (v. 7). Nehemiah was not an impetuous person. This is just one reason he was such a great leader. We have already seen that when Nehemiah had a problem he would go to God in prayer. No doubt, at this time he was giving himself time to think and pray about what he should do. It is also possible he was taking time to examine his own heart. Anytime we are ready to confront a problem, it is important for us to be sure we don’t have anything in our own lives that is displeasing to the Lord. Nehemiah may also have been

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giving himself time to cool down.

After consulting with himself privately, Nehemiah confronts the situation publicly (v. 7). It is here we learn who the guilty ones were. They were the nobles and rulers. These men normally would have been Nehemiah’s advisors, but this time he couldn’t consult with them. They were the ones who needed to be rebuked. He tells them exactly what they were doing—they were exacting usury. This meant they were loaning money to their fellow Jews, but they were also charging interest. God had specifically instructed the Jews not to do

this (cp. Ex. 22:25). We need to understand it is never right to take advantage of our brothers and sisters in the Lord, especially in their time of need.

Next, Nehemiah calls a great assembly or a public meeting and confronts the guilty nobles and rulers openly (v. 7d). It is never pleasant to have to deal with sin. But there are times when it has to be openly confronted. In front of everyone, Nehemiah reminds the guilty ones that many of the Jews had returned to Jerusalem to get their brothers out of bondage (v. 8). These nobles and rulers were putting their Jewish brothers right back into bondage. They needed to stop and consider what they were doing. The guilty Jews had nothing to say in their defense.

Nehemiah had more to say. In verse 9 he tells the nobles and rulers they needed to walk in the fear of the Lord, meaning they needed to heed and obey God’s Word. The way they were living was a poor testimony to others, especially their enemies. Their



enemies saw these wealthier Jews taking advantage of the poorer Jews and had to think they were no different than they were in how they lived and conducted their business. Even today, there is probably nothing that hurts the testimony of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ any more than Christians who are not honest in their business dealings. We need to remember

it's a poor testimony to be unfaithful in our financial dealings. We need to pay our bills, and we should never spend more than we can afford. Remember, a lost world is watching us.

Nehemiah and those with him could have taken advantage of the situation just like the nobles and rulers but didn't (v. 10). So, he tells the nobles and rulers to make things right immediately.

They needed to restore everything they had taken, and they needed to do it that very day (v. 11). The time to deal with sin in our lives and to get right with God is today.

Reflection Connection

Read Proverbs 27:1 and discuss why it is important to never delay in making things right with God and others.

III. The Good Consent (vv. 12-13)

To the credit of the guilty nobles and rulers, they tell Nehemiah "... We will restore them, and will require nothing of them ..." (v. 12a). They consented or agreed to do the right thing. They were willing to return everything they had taken from their brothers. At this point, Nehemiah calls the priests and makes the nobles and rulers confirm their words with an oath (v. 12b). They needed to realize their sin was not just against their brothers, but it was against their God. They were

not just giving Nehemiah and the people their word, but they were making a promise to God to make things right.

In the first part of verse 13, Nehemiah adds a warning clause. In those days, the men wore long flowing garments, and Nehemiah shakes out his garment. He then says if the nobles and rulers didn't keep their promise, God would shake them just like he was shaking his robe. They would lose everything they had. He was

warning them of the importance of keeping their word.

Verse 13 concludes with, "... And all the congregation said, Amen, and praised the Lord. And the people did according to this promise." It's wonderful when God's people do what's right and fellowship is restored.

Reflection Connection

According to Deuteronomy 23:21, why were the Jews' vows to God so serious?

IV. The Generous Conduct (vv. 14-19)

In verse 14, we learn Nehemiah became the governor of Judah and served in that position for 12 years. Sometimes the greatest tests in life are not the tests of adversity but rather the tests of promotion. Often we can learn more about ourselves by the way

we handle blessings than the way we handle difficulties. We have already seen how the nobles and rulers misused their material wealth and position. It is at this point Nehemiah takes the time to share how he handled his powerful position (vv. 14-19). It is quite

a contrast from that of the nobles and rulers.

In the last part of verse 14, Nehemiah mentions "the bread of the governor." We find the same phrase again in verse 18, "... yet for all this required not I the bread of the governor."



That little phrase summarizes the fringe benefits or advantages Nehemiah had because of his position. As the governor, he was entitled to an allowance of food. Yet, he says he didn't take advantage of his position. He didn't take what he was allowed to take. In contrast, the former governors, as well as their servants, had (v. 15).

Nehemiah also didn't let his position as governor go to his head. The last part of verse 15 tells us why, "... but so did not I, because of the fear of God." He understood promotion comes from the Lord, and he was accountable to Him. Psalm 75:6-7 tells us, "For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another." How a leader handles his position of authority and the perks that go along with it tells a great deal about his relationship to the Lord.

Even in his position as governor, Nehemiah continued to work on the wall (v. 16). He understood that's why he was in Judah in the first place. God had called him to lead in the rebuilding of the wall. His priority was not to be the governor, but it was the completion of the wall. Sometimes when people receive a promotion, they then think they are above doing certain types of work. They "can't get their hands dirty." Nehemiah was not that way at all. And he had his servants working on the wall too. It is a tragedy when

leaders get to the point that they want to tell everybody else what to do, but they don't want to do it themselves. Nehemiah was not that way. Instead, he led by example.

Nehemiah also didn't get side-tracked. The middle of verse 16 tells us, "... neither bought we any land." Nehemiah knew one day the wall would be finished and Jerusalem would become a

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thriving city again. At this point, there was probably some very affordable land. In his position, he could have taken advantage of the situation and made some profitable real estate investments. But he wasn't interested in his own personal advantage or personal profit.

Sadly, many servants of the Lord have been detoured in their Christian lives because they became more interested in their own projects and activities than they were in the Lord's work.

The Bible says, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). There is nothing wrong with making wise investments. But when our future planning interferes with our present service for Jesus Christ, then our priorities are skewed.

As we read these verses, we realize Nehemiah was a wealthy man, but he was generous with his possessions. In verse 17 he tells about the 150 Jews and rulers who came every day to eat at his table. In addition to that regular group, there were the unexpected ones that came to eat. In verse 18, he shares the daily menu but adds, "... yet for all this required not I the bread of the governor, because the bondage was heavy upon this people." He was a leader who cared about his people and refused to add anything to their already heavy burdens.

Nehemiah concludes this parenthetical with a prayer, "Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people" (v. 19). Keep in mind that Nehemiah didn't say this to the people. He was not bragging to others about what he had done, but he was talking to the Lord. He was saying that the Lord knew his heart. He knew why Nehemiah did what he did.

Nehemiah had a two-fold purpose as he served as the governor. His number-one purpose was to do what he did for the glory of God. The second purpose was to govern for the



good of the people. That's the secret of a real leader. He does what he does for the Lord and for the benefit of those God has given him to lead.

Reflection Connection

Read I Timothy 6:17-19 and discuss how Nehemiah exemplified this charge.

Wrap Up

As Americans, even the poorest of us are among the richest people in the world. Nehemiah 5 has shown us two directions we can take with our material blessings. We can be like the nobles and rulers who used their prosperity to enslave others. Or we can use our blessings like Nehemiah who used his prosperity to help others. Let's follow his example. Let's live our lives to bring glory to Jesus Christ and good to others.

