

January Teaching Theme: The Book of Nehemiah

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题目 Topic: 領袖的特質 / Justice & Generosity

经文 Scripture: Nehemiah 5

Monthly Theme: As we enter a new year, we will spend some time walking through the book of Nehemiah over the next nine weeks. Although Nehemiah is its own book in our English Bibles, the whole book is actually Ezra-Nehemiah together. So as we approach Nehemiah, we have to keep in mind that we are coming into the story 3/4th of the way through. If we go back to the beginning of the story in Ezra, we are told that God moved King Cyrus' heart to let the Israelites return to their land to fulfill the prophecy spoken by Jeremiah (Ezra 1). The hope that exile will not be forever should trigger the reader to pick up all the other prophetic hopes of return, including hope for the Messianic King, God's presence in the Temple, and God's Kingdom to be established. We must keep these hopes in mind as we read to the story to properly understand both the ups and downs. Most characters in the Biblical narrative, including Nehemiah, are deeply flawed individuals who have a mix of successes and failures - just like you and me. And this mix of success and failure we will keep confronting as we move through the story of Nehemiah. Let's see what we can learn from Nehemiah's story.

一月 January: 尼希米記 Nehemiah

January 2nd – 尼希米記: 尼希米的祈禱 The Prayer (尼希米記一章 Nehemiah 1)

January 9th - 尼希米記: 城牆工程 The Project (尼希米記二至三章 Nehemiah 2-3)

January 16th - 尼希米記: 敵黨擾阻 The Opposition (尼希米記四章 Nehemiah 4)

January 23rd – 尼希米記: 民生貧苦 The Poor (尼希米記五章 Nehemiah 5)

January 30th - 尼希米記: 敵黨陰謀 The Adversary (尼希米記六章 Nehemiah 6)

Resources:

[Sermon Video](#) (Pastor Fang)

[Sermon Slides](#) (Pastor Fang)

[Sermon Video](#) (Pastor Will)

[Sermon Slides](#) (Pastor Will)

[Overview: Ezra-Nehemiah \(Bible Project\)](#) [English]

[Overview: Ezra-Nehemiah \(Bible Project\)](#) [Mandarin]

* If your group hasn't watched the overview video yet, please do so. *

Discussion Questions (Pastor William R. Horne):

- (1) Read Nehemiah 5 together. What observations do you make, and what stands out to you? How would you summarize the passage? Describe the situation Nehemiah is in.
- (2) How does Nehemiah demonstrate wisdom in his response to this crisis? How can we foster this wisdom in our lives?
- (3) What does Nehemiah demand of the people? What keeps us from making bold public calls for justice and repentance where needed?

- (4) Nehemiah not only leads with a public call for repentance, but he also calls for reparations. Why is it essential that repentance always includes seeking reparations, if possible?
- (5) Nehemiah then goes a step further by not just calling for repentance and reparations, but he leads by example with his personal generosity. What characteristics do we see about Nehemiah's generosity in 5:14-18? What are some ways we can lead by example in our generosity?

Important Notes (Pastor William R. Horne):

Notes on Q1: As you read through this chapter, make sure you recall the context from both the [Monthly Theme](#) section and the [Bible Project video](#). Context is key to understanding the movements of the story.

The Situation: At some point during Nehemiah's wall rebuilding project, the community faced an economic crisis. Now, how this economic crisis began is unclear in the text. Still, the extra labor given to the wall project probably hurt the harvest and the income that families would typically receive when working that harvest, as they focused their work on the wall. Thus, the wall project potentially brought about unintended consequences economically. However this economic crisis began, it is evident in the text how it was taken advantage of by the wealthy. As is so often in an economic crisis, the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. Here, the poor were put in an impossible situation - where they had to mortgage their fields, vineyards, and homes to help pay for food so their families wouldn't starve to death. This economic crisis exposes a deeper-seated problem within the community. Long-standing unjust practices were causing great economic inequality. The wealthy Hebrews were taking advantage of this economic crisis, making a profit off the plight of the poor. They were lending the people money and food while charging interest on these loans. And when the people could not repay the loans, they would take their land, homes, and children as payment, being forced to sell them as debt slaves! The combination of a lack of income, high taxes from the king, and the wealthy charging interest on their loans for food proved to be detrimental to the community. This is not how the people of God should behave. The Torah outright condemns one from charging interest on loans, rightly viewing making a profit off the poor as exploitation. This may seem odd to us in a capitalistic society where everything has interest charged on it, and we never question such practice.

Exodus 22:22-27 (NIV)

"Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.

"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. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it by sunset because that cloak is the only covering your neighbor has. What else can they sleep in? When they cry out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate."

The evil of making a profit off the poor should be evident. And God says that this evil will result in the same evil being turned back on their heads in judgment. They chose profits over people,

building their wealth over their fellow humanity. These people are what I like to call “poverty pimps.” They exist all over the world today, including in our great city of Lexington. People who make their money off of the poor, off people who have their backs against the wall. You see in it Pay-Day Title Loans, Private owned prisons, unaffordable health care, and in unkempt rental houses all over my neighborhood.

When an economic crisis hits, the most marginalized get hit the hardest. We have seen this reality play out over the last two years of the COVID Pandemic - where indeed everyone is affected, but those on the margins take the biggest hit. Small businesses all over the country have suffered greatly, even having to close down for good. At the same time, 45 of the 50 biggest companies in the U.S. turned huge profits over the same span - including companies like Amazon and Walmart. They reportedly raked in billions in additional profit, with almost none of it being shared with their workers. See, the People of God must never put Profits over People. This is the type of situation Nehemiah faces, an economic crisis in the community and injustice amid the crisis.

Notes on Q2: Nehemiah responds to his learning of this problem, Neh 5:6-7 “When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and THEN accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are charging your own people interest!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with them” Nehemiah rightly responds to the situation with anger, and this is where we see his wisdom come into play. The text says, he “pondered” or “thought over” the situation at hand and THEN accused the nobles and officials. Nehemiah’s wisdom in creating space to think over the situation before responding establishes the path for his anger to lead to righteousness instead of his anger leading to sin. It is okay and even right to feel angry in certain situations, but what we do with that anger will determine if we are walking on the path of foolishness or the path of wisdom. We have seen this slow-down pattern multiple times in Nehemiah’s life that is worth emulating.

- **Chapter 1:** Angry Over State of Jerusalem, Slows Down to Pray, Fast, and Repent
- **Chapter 2:** Slows Down to Pray Mid-Conversation with the King, Takes the Time to Assess the Damage, THEN puts a plan into action
- **Chapter 5:** Slows Down to Think Through Situation before Responding.

Nehemiah’s wisdom and ability to slow down and assess the situation allow him to lead the community to resolution.

Strategies for “Slowing Down”:

- Creating patterns of prayer in your life that take everything to God in prayer.
- When you are personally wronged or offended, take the time to understand the person and situation better before reacting.
- Before reacting to a public situation, spend time listening to voices outside of your circle to gain a fuller perspective on the situation. Social media, in particular, pressures us with the need to respond with a “take” on things immediately. Remember, there is wisdom in slowing down. (Note: This does not negate rightly grieving or feeling angry over situations particularly where lives are lost. Sometimes people want to “wait” because they don’t want the burden of needing to respond. Slowing Down is not forever.)

- Do not fall under the pressure to take action without taking time to assess and plan within the community.

Notes on Q3: Nehemiah calls together all of the wealthy of the community and makes a bold public call for an immediate stop to the unjust practices.

Nehemiah 5:7b–9 (NIV)

So I called together a large meeting to deal with them 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. 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?”

Nehemiah starts by exposing their wrong-doing, and he strategically frames it as a matter of identity and devotion to God. They are acting like the pagan nations around them in their unjust practices, and clearly, they do not fear God, for if they did - such evil practice would have never occurred. The People of God NEVER put profits over the well-being of their neighbors! Nehemiah then makes a somewhat surprising turn in verse 10, as he recognizes his own involvement in the practices of improperly lending money and grain with interest and taking land pledges.

The NIV translates it this way...

Nehemiah 5:10 NIV

I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest!

Another translation, the NET, translates Nehemiah 5:10, this way...

Nehemiah 5:10 NET

Even I and my relatives and my associates are lending them money and grain. But let us abandon this practice of seizing collateral!

After reading multiple translations, we get the idea that the text would best read something like “**in addition, I, my brothers, and my servants are lending them money and grain; let us abandon this massa**” (Hebrew Word) - which includes the ideas of charging interest and the practice of taking a pledge or collateral on a loan like land, homes, and slaves. And in the imperative “let us stop,” Nehemiah includes himself. So Nehemiah rightly confesses that he has been complicit in the injustice and calls for a stop of charging interest and taking collateral on these loans.

Notes on Q4: But, Nehemiah, in his wise leadership, does not stop here, but now he takes the next step - calling for reparations.

Nehemiah 5:11 NIV

“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.”

Not only does the unjust practice need to stop, but all that was taken, including the interest, must be returned. Reparations are the act of making amends for a wrong, usually done in the form of payment equivalent to the wrong. Repentance means nothing if it is not matched with reparations - making the wrongs right. To repent without reparation would be like me stealing from you and then saying sorry, I won't steal from you again - but never returning what I stole. Repentance must always seek reparations, where possible. And this is what Nehemiah calls for - first, stop your unjust practices and then give them back everything you have taken, including any interest charged on the loans.

Notes on Q5: First, Nehemiah uses his power as governor to reverse the unjust taxation of previous governors and implement more equitable tax, even at a personal cost, to Himself. Then, not only does he change the heavy taxation of previous governors, but he personally fed hundreds of people with the food allotted to him as a governor. Throughout Scripture, we have seen that a critical characteristic of godly people is compassion matched with generosity. Nehemiah applies this principle to his own life as a person in power and of great wealth. He was not afraid to give up the privileges of his rank as governor for the well-being of others. Instead, **he leveraged his privileges and wealth to provide for those in need**. Notice here also that this generosity was not a one-time event, but was **done over the long haul** - verse 14 “...when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor.” So over his 12 years as governor, he continually leveraged his power, privileged, and wealth for the sake of others. This was no photo-op or one-off event to create goodwill with the people, but this was a way of life for Nehemiah. And not only did this generosity extend to his fellow Jews, but also those from “surrounding nations.” Verse 17 “...a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations.” At some point on the journey, Nehemiah, despite opposition and the rejected outsiders he inherited from Zerubbabel and Ezra, Nehemiah **extended his generosity even to outsiders**. This episode of Nehemiah's life and journey continues to exemplify the marks of a godly leader.