

REBUILDING A HOPE-FILLED FUTURE FROM THE RUBBLE OF YOUR PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES - Studies In Nehemiah - Part six

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THE HIGH COST OF FREE, RENEWING GRACE

Nehemiah 5:1-13 - "Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. [2] For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive." [3] There were also those who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine." [4] And there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. [5] Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards." [6] I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. [7] I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, "You are exacting interest, each from his brother." And I held a great assembly against them [8] and said to them, "We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!" They were silent and could not find a word to say. [9] So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? [10] Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. [11] Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them. [12] Then they said, "We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say." And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. [13] I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said "Amen" and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised."

These verses from chapter five are more than just dull detail about Jewish finance and bookkeeping. They tell us something about the **cost** of rebuilding the walls. True, God had opened many doors and worked many miracles. But if the rebuilding work was to progress and thrive, there was a high price to be paid by the people. That's what this fifth chapter is all about.

1) **THE HIGH COST OF REBUILDING WITH THE HELP OF A GRACIOUS GOD**

It's interesting to recall the words of Jesus about the cost of construction: **Luke 14:28-30** - " For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? [29] Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, [30] saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'"

Whether you're building a tower or a life, you can't work just with an emotional excitement at the **beginning** of the project. Successful builders are always focussing on the **end** of the project. They concentrate on what it takes, not just to **start**, but to **finish** the work. They count the **cost** of the entire project.

Those words could well be applied to the rebuilding of the walls in Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah. The people are over half way through the rebuilding job. And they're just now facing the hard question: "**How much are these walls worth? How badly do we really want them rebuilt? Walls are great, but walls at what price?**"

Those are good questions to ask. They should have been faced at the **start** of the work. But now these questions were **forced** to the surface by some of the hard issues that were beginning to become obvious.

It would be easy to argue that too much had been sacrificed to get those walls back up in place. People were going without **food**. And you can't eat walls! People couldn't **run their farms** or **plant their crops**. They were too busy repairing the walls. People were **suffering financial strain** and sacrifice from the unpaid bills on their land because they couldn't harvest their crops for cash. And when push came to shove, these Jewish people - these people of God, who loved to see Nehemiah's prayer and devotion to God - began to abuse and extort one another for financial survival.

Now, certainly there was no excuse for their wicked behaviour. Nehemiah will confront them on that account in just a minute. But these events **do** still press an important issue: **Where do you want the rebuilding presence and force of God's Kingdom in your life?** How much do you long for some of those **old things to become new again?** Make no mistake about it - there is a high price to be paid for that process to be brought to completion in the heart.

People **do** want God to work. Most of the time they **don't** want Him to work badly enough. Marriages fall **apart**. They never fall **together**. It takes more than nice thoughts or wishes to rebuild a home. Good intentions will never build a strong devotional life. There are always a millions good things to keep you home from church. Cut it any way you want, **rebuilding takes long, persistent work in the right direction**.

You can't **wish** the walls up. You must **build** them. Pick any area of growth in holiness and Christlikeness you want. If it's going to become a reality in your life you must be **focussed** on it with determination. This, more than anything else, is what Jesus meant when He described the blessed people - the people who truly **see** God - as being "**pure in heart**." Pure in heart simply means you are focussed on the spiritual aspirations more than anything else. If you are truly pure in heart you **don't fixate on anything else with equal devotion**.

When was the last time you met a Christian like that?

2) **THE LABOUR ON THE WALL BROUGHT ABOUT INTERNAL STRAIN AND OPPOSITION**

Chapter four deals mainly with the opposition coming from the outside - the enemies, the mockers and the critics. Chapter five deals with internal opposition. It describes a community starting to come apart at the seams because of the *internal, festering grievances arising among the community's own members*.

That's what the *first five verses* are all about: **Nehemiah 5:1-5** - "Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. [2] For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive." [3] There were also those who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine." [4] And there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. [5] Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards."

The bottom line in all of these details is that the people were using the difficult times to take advantage of each other. They were charging each other interest on loans and then actually making slaves of each other when the debts couldn't be paid (5:4-5).

This practise was clearly contrary to the law of God - **Deuteronomy 23:19-20** - "You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest. [20] You may charge a foreigner interest, but you may not charge your brother interest, that the LORD your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

Notice, "*...that the LORD your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land which you are about to enter to possess.*" Nothing could reveal more clearly the heart of God in the voice of His commands. Only the lie of the Devil blinds our minds to God's kind heart in His commands and His restraints.

As long as they were generous and loving with their brothers and sisters, God would see to it that everything they did prospered. God would bless them as they loved each other.

There's also another passage that may have been on Nehemiah's mind: **Leviticus 25:35-40** - "If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. [36] Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. [37] You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. [38] I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God. [39] "If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: [40] he shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee."

Notice that both in **Deuteronomy 23** and **Leviticus 25** the reasons given for not charging interest or taking brothers as slaves are *theological reasons*. They're *spiritual reasons*. They were not to charge interest from brothers because **God** wanted to be their God and source of blessing. They were not to make slaves of the Jewish family because **God was to be seen as their God and He wanted to bless them in the land He was going to give them**.

What I'm getting at is this. There were plenty of nations all around Israel who *did* extort their own kind. There were plenty of nations all around them who *did* take slaves wherever and whenever they could. ***There were people all around them who lived solely to expedite their own ends and their own desires***. There was no problem finding all sorts of people like that. The world was full of them. In fact, ***everyone*** lived like that. But there was no ***revelation of God*** in lives lived like that. There was nothing that could ever be seen as God's wonderful ***grace*** and ***power*** in lives lived like that.

Now, finally, God wanted to raise up a people who would not only be different, but would ***be seen by others to be totally different!*** God wanted a group of people who would make these surrounding nations scratch their heads and rub their pointed beards and say, "***How do those people make it in this world. They don't just live by their wits or desires. And yet they always land on their feet. It almost looks like someone else defends their cause. Someone else looks after them. Maybe their God is real after all!***"

This was what God was trying to teach His people. "***You don't have to exploit your brother by charging interest. I will prosper you enough to make up for all of that if you will simply obey me. You don't have to insure your future on the back of your neighbour. I will prosper and bless you enough to make up for anything you can fix yourself if you will just trust, obey and honor me!***"

The ongoing lessons for us are these:

a) ***The primary motive in all my decisions and reactions is the glory of God***

He must be seen to be obeyed and trusted in my life ***when it doesn't appear to be in my best interest to trust or obey Him***. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that this is the only ***true*** test of discipleship. Everyone pursues what is ***immediately*** and ***obviously*** of benefit to himself. There is nothing that ***stands out*** about a life lived like that.

Here's the real issue: ***Do you obey God when others don't?*** That's all that counts. ***Do you follow Him when no one else thinks it's practical or comfortable? Do you use the lowering standards of everyone else in the church as your excuse for sloppy standards and willful continuance in what everyone used to call sin, but now has been refined and renamed.***

This passage from Nehemiah is so important because in it we can ***see*** what God wants from Nehemiah and the people He's brought back to Jerusalem. I see I must learn to obey Him ***radically*** so that people will be drawn to the fact that, at least in some lives, ***God is valued above all self interests.*** In some lives, at least, everyone will see that God isn't just ***praised***, but He's ***prized.*** ***It's only at that point that His Lordship becomes visible to those who observe my life!***

Jesus recognized this principle when He asked the religious people of His day, ***"What do you do more than the others?"*** What's ***distinctive*** about your life? You don't smoke or drink? Lots of people don't. You don't cheat on your spouse? Lots of atheists don't.

So Nehemiah addresses these people. And as he does, he pressed the ***core issue*** of their relationship with God: ***"As you rebuild, don't make the mistake of trying to advance yourself at the expense of your primary devotion to God. Don't try to lighten the cost of the work on your own terms. Hurt yourself rather than your brother. Suffer loss before wounding the glory and reputation of God. Do this, not just for humanitarian reasons, but so God will be visibly manifested and glorified before men!"***

b) ***Self-denial brings more blessing than self-fulfilment***

"Don't pad your future on your brother's back. Not only because it's not nice to do that to your brother. But ***because you rob me of the chance of doing more in your life than you could ever accomplish!"***

Jesus said, ***"When you lose your life for my sake you will find it!"*** There is a sense of ***discovery*** here - like finding something you never thought you'd see again - when you ***consciously, actually lose your rights, lose your sense of getting your due, lose any attempt to shore up your own life on your own terms. You will find something you never thought was possible. Life gets bigger than it was before. And it gets richer. God has more space to operate in your mind and heart. Doors start to open!***

In what area of your life is the Lord saying, "Lose your right to this right now. Lose your pride. Lose all attempts to protect and defend yourself. ***Put yourself in my hand instead. Find Me in a way that goes deeper with your present experience of Me, and find life on a fuller level than ever before!"***

You have to live your Christian life with some kind of sense of ***momentum.*** Inertia is deadly. You simply have to press forward and have your life aimed at the finish line. A life lived for self can never be very large.

Risk something. Lay something on the line freshly before God. ***Prove Him*** in some area. Take your own hands off the wheel and listen to the Spirit of God today. ***Do something more than those shallow religious lives around you.*** Lose what you think is so precious and find fresh life in the sails of your daily life.

Here's a spiritual law that is absolutely universal in application in the walk with the Lord. There are no exceptions. ***If you just keep doing what you are doing, you will only get what you've already got.*** Or, to put it in Biblical terms, you have to sow more to reap more. Count the cost and pay the price. That's the only way to find life eternal.