

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

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THE ONLY SURE WAY TO GET YOUR LIFE OUT OF A MESS

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."

We started working through this rather pointed text in our last study. The part I want to zero in on this week is the last two verses. Nehemiah gives some strong words of warning to the people. He exposes not only their cruelty to *one another* (which we would expect from any people even reasonably committed to common courtesy and decency), but their lack of respect for *God*.

After all God had done for them, after He had brought them out of captivity, provided the blessing of the king, provided them with material for construction, and enabled them to get the wall completed up to half its original height, they couldn't even live selflessly and peaceably and generously with each other, demonstrating their trust in God to bless and secure their lives once they were back in their land, living within the walls He was enabling them to build.

And we saw the *reason* for their lack of faith and obedience. They were encountering difficulty. They were pinched financially. They were unable to see any way out of the present pressure of their circumstances. When circumstances corner us, we turn and fight. But because our circumstances are frequently *invisible*, or *out of our control*, we do the next best thing. We strike out at people who are visible and tiring and work our own frustration and selfishness out on them.

So there are *different kinds of struggle*. And one frequently contributes to the other. There was the trial of *external circumstance* that these people were beginning to face. There was exhaustion, frustration, and opposition. And this *led* to the *internal spiritual struggle to trust God and refrain from anger and unbelief*.

It's always easier to trust God when the sun is shining. It's easy to sing "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" when you can clearly trace the visible hand of God's blessing on all your circumstances. But that's not where these people were at this point. God seemed far away. Their lot was hard. The work was trying. They were starting to feel the *cost* of their labour.

As is always the case, when things got difficult in their *own* lives they took it out on *each other*. They found things to fault and blame in each other. They looked at others and felt they weren't pulling their weight. They felt they were hard done by. Those working the hardest felt unappreciated. I mean, how fair is it that 20% of the people do 80% of the work? Relationships among God's people fray when circumstances start to pinch.

The tough times led the people into sin. They started to take advantage of each other. They preyed on the desperation of others to lure them into high interest loans. They made slaves of their own people.

It's important to notice the shift in emphasis between chapters 4 and 5 of Nehemiah. The people could find the strength to rally against their common enemies and critics in chapters four. In fact, as long as they kept their focus on their *common* enemy they were actually stronger in their relationship with *each other*. *It's when they forgot their common enemy that they began to take swipes at each other*.

There is such a great lesson here. The Devil delights to take our attention off of *himself* by pointing out the faults and irritations of *others*. He loves to get us fighting the wrong enemy altogether. He loves to see the church of Jesus Christ majoring on minors and minoring on majors.

There's one thing the Devil knows for certain. He knows we won't spend much time or energy fighting an enemy we *can't* see if he can set us up with dozens we *can* see.

Now, Nehemiah knows what's going on here. He's spent too much time in prayer, fasting, preparing, and seeking God to miss what the rest of the people are missing. He sees the *spiritual* problem the people were missing. So he's going to call them to task quite sternly. He's going to warn them about the coming judgement of God if they don't wake up and take hold of what's really going on in their work project.

He's going to tell them (and us) how to get themselves out of this mess. These steps have never changed. They still work because they are God's idea. Any person can put them into effect to find freedom and joy in even the most difficult circumstances:

1) NEHEMIAH CONFRONTS THE PEOPLE WITH THEIR SIN

Nehemiah 5:9-10 - "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.'"

Nothing else will work until this is done. If other people are guilty as well, if other people have contributed to your hurt, leave that with the Lord. You simply **must**, for your soul's sake, come to the point where you accept the blame for your **response** to the situation you find yourself in.

You may **not** be responsible for the **circumstances**. Probably there are others who have made much of the mess you find yourself in. But you **are** responsible for how you're going to **respond** to your situation, even if the situation itself isn't your fault. **Life** is not what either destroys or enlivens your soul. Your **response** to life does.

Let me try to point this truth out from a very familiar passage of Scripture that you may need to see with fresh eyes today:

Luke 15:13-19 - "Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. [14] And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. [15] So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. [16] And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. [17] "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! [18] I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. [19] I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"

Probably, more sermons have been preached on this text than any other. But there's one verse I want you to look at very carefully today: **Verse 17** - "But when he came to **himself**, he said, 'How many of my father's servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!'"

He came to himself. Forget for the moment all the other wonderful details and truths of this simple story from Jesus. Just hold on to one key idea. It's the most important detail in the whole account: **Getting out of a mess has, first of all, to do with yourself - not anyone else. Even before you come to God you have to come to yourself.** In fact, you'll never come to Jesus as you need to come **until** you have first honestly come to **yourself**. The prodigal came to **himself**.

As we will see, other steps will come later, but right now we're talking about the **first** step out of a mess. And the very **first** step doesn't involve anyone else - not ever. If you want to change - if you want to be free - if you want to move on - you have to deal with **yourself** first.

The Devil will point out a million different things to deal with. In fact, here's one sure way to **know** the Devil's at work behind your life: He'll bring everything else and everyone else **but** yourself to the center of your thoughts. He'll draw your mind to everyone but you. You will only see yourself as a **victim**. Never the **cause** of your trouble.

But always remember, whether you get yourself out of a mess or not depends, not on the repentance of anyone else. It only depends on you **"coming to yourself."** You, and you alone start the process. God will quickly come with fresh grace to the aid of anyone who says: **"Here's what's wrong right now. It's me. Others may be involved in different ways, but I'm taking responsibility for myself. I'm wrong. And I'm not going to put up with it for one more minute."** Don't wait for **others** to repent before **you** repent. Stop the bleeding and start the healing.

You can see this whole process unfold with Nehemiah and the people:

Nehemiah 5:8-9a - "...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?"**

The people were **silent**. There was no argument favouring their sin. No excusing their actions. This was a total change of direction from 5:1, where the people were crying out in outrage against the unfair conditions and tough economic times. Now they are absolutely silent.

That's always a good sign. We used to sing the little chorus, "Be Still And Know That I Am God." That stillness isn't just a **mystical** stillness. It's a humble, repentant, honest stillness before God when He speaks. You will never know God until you've experienced this.

2) NEHEMIAH CALLS THE PEOPLE TO MAKE FULL RESTITUTION FOR THEIR ACTIONS

Nehemiah 5:11 - "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.”

Don't make long term plans about some *future time* of repentance. That is the surest way to take the edge off of the Spirit's work in your soul. Study this Biblical pattern of repentance: **Luke 19:8** - “**And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, ‘Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.’”**

Never allow yourself to repent with only your *emotions* or your *thoughts*. **Make things right!** Start forming the new character. Build new habits. Don't just *apologize* to God for your sins. Kick them out of your heart with positive actions. Build the foundations for a new start.

3) NEHEMIAH CALLS THE PEOPLE TO REMEMBER THE JUDGEMENT OF GOD ON HALF-HEARTED REPENTANCE

Nehemiah 5:12-13 - “**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.”**

What a powerful prophetic statement! This is a series on rebuilding a hope-filled future from the rubble of your present circumstances. Sooner or later, as we see in our study of Nehemiah, we can become our own worst enemies in the rebuilding process. God has provisions to enable these people to overcome all the opposition they will face.

Look at these people. God provided them with building materials, official letters of permission from the king, and a mighty deliverer in the person of Cyrus to release them from the oppression of Babylon. God accomplished all of this on their behalf, totally by His grace. They had neither earned nor deserved any of this. So God proved He was more than able to overcome any *external opposition* they might face as they moved ahead to rebuild the walls.

There was only one obstacle God had left for them to deal with. They had to deal with *themselves*. They had to confront, repent, and forsake their own sin and self-destruction.

This is the reason for Nehemiah's hard-hitting words in these verses. Robes had a large fold where many things could be carried - much like pockets on today's garments. Nehemiah threw everything out of the fold of his robe before the people. As he violently shook out his robe he said, “**This is what God will do to all of you if you fail to keep your promise to Him this day!**”

What strong words! **Just as he emptied out everything from the fold of his robe, till there was nothing left, this would be God's judgement on those who made light of doing what they knew was right in the eyes of God!**

This is the fastest road to emptiness - to spiritual nothingness before God. It is the most dangerous thing in all the world to play fast and loose with what you know you should do when God speaks to your soul.

I know it's not all that popular to say it anymore. But just as surely as God wants to *bless* those who will trust Him with all their hearts, He works aggressively *against* all who stand in the way of His will.

Listen to these words in Shattered Dreams by *Larry Crabb*: “**Our modern Christian culture has weakened our understanding of the holiness of God....We now talk about grace in such a way that changes our view of God from holy to mildly paternal, from justifiably enraged to somewhat strict but understanding.”**

“Very few Christians today see God as the irate judge who violently hates our sin. He is now a bit more flexible, more tolerant, still insistent that we measure up to at least some of His standards, but always gracious when we don't.”

“I remember talking to a young married man who said, ‘I know I'm wrong to continue this affair, but you're wrong to insist I end it. God doesn't want me to continue it, but I know He'll forgive me. I sense only judgment from you. God is a God of grace.”

“God means for us to obey His rules, we say, but if we don't (and of course, no one does - not completely), He's really quite understanding. That's become our modern view of God's grace. It's what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace. It develops when we talk about grace before we first tremble at God's holiness....We reduce the holy God of passionate purity and wrath to merely a fatherly God with a few standards. And we do it all in the name of grace....We dismiss God's standards by attacking them as mere holdovers from legalism. God is the God of liberty. We're told to stand fast in the freedom Christ provides.”

Crabb goes on to say - rightfully, I believe - that there has come the completion of this two-fold reduction of the Biblical God in our generation: The Bible calls us repeatedly to see God as primarily *holy*. That is, the first thing any being close to God will encounter is His blazing passion for holiness.

Then, in the first stage of reduction, He has been reduced to a God who is *merely* fatherly. Crabb isn't denying that Jesus taught us to pray to our Father God in heaven. He is merely pointing out that this concept has been used to *cancel out* what used to be called the “*fear of the Lord*.”

Finally, in the present and concluding phase of the reduction of God, most contemporary churches have reduced God even further to become a God of *helpful principles*. In Crabb's own words, ***"We now spend our religious energy seeking to know the principles a helpful God provides for handling our lives, principles that will make our lives better. The result is we actually never even encounter the God of the Bible in thousands of modern churches today."***

We need to hear this warning from Nehemiah. God *is* a ***gracious*** God. But He is ***not*** a ***tame*** God. He will never be re-made in our image or likeness. He doesn't randomly shower redeeming grace like candy from heaven. It's given to those who, in honest, humble, soul-searching repentance, ***tremble at His holiness and at His Word.***