



A Redeemer Comes to Zion

Read: Nehemiah 5

The church needs more than a wall to protect it from its enemies on the outside. We also need deliverance on the inside. We need redemption from bondage and the sin that enslaves. Nehemiah discovered something of this as he was leading the work on the wall. There was not only a problem on the outside; there was a problem on the inside.

A Great Cry

The chapter opens with a tumultuous wail of one group of Jews against another group of Jews (v. 1). In the opening of the book of Exodus, the people of Israel had groaned because of the oppression of the Egyptians. Now, one group of Jews was groaning under the oppression of another group of Jews. Both groups shared the same beliefs, the same worship. Both groups were also engaged in the building of the wall.

Some commentators think that this chapter took place at a different time than its surrounding chapters (chapters 4 and 6). They find it hard to believe that this oppression could have been going on at the same time that people were building the wall together. However, the text certainly gives the opposite impression. If it were from a different time, Nehemiah surely would have indicated so; he does this elsewhere (Neh. 13:4-7). The fact that this chapter is couched between two chapters about the project of building the wall tells us something (see also Neh. 5:16). If people want to be brothers in the faith, they can't be adversaries at home or in everyday life. In contemporary terms, they can't sit next to each other in worship and across from each other in a secular court of law (cf. 1 Cor. 6:1).

In their cry, the oppressed Jews emphasized their common brotherhood (v. 5). How this shows the effects of sin! Cain's treatment of Abel showed this as well. Brother rose up against brother. Sadly, this happens also in the church (compare 1 Cor. 11:19-21). However, when the Spirit works among us and sets us building the wall, we will not go long before we realize how brothers of the same house must dwell in union with each other. If we are not united, we are divided, and the building of the wall cannot continue. How can we build the walls of Zion if we are busy building walls between brothers?

Moreover, sin brings bondage. And bondage there was. In fact, the bondage was so great that there was no way out. They cry out: "*Neither is it in our power to redeem them*" (Neh. 5:5). What a miserable condition! No wonder the passage starts with a great cry! The people were in great need of redemption. They needed a Redeemer.

A Great Assembly

When Nehemiah heard what was being done, he couldn't but be angry. It was a holy and righteous anger at the enslaving effects of sin. He called a great assembly against the powerful Jews, the nobles and rulers (v. 6). He specified the sin and the heinousness of it: "*Ye exact usury, every one of his brother.*" This was against the Mosaic law (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:36; Deut. 23:19-20).

Isaiah prophesied that a Redeemer would one day come to Zion (Isa. 59:20). One of this Redeemer's accomplishments would be to turn away ungodliness from Jacob (see Rom. 11:26). Nehemiah was not the great Redeemer whom Isaiah prophesied, but he did foreshadow Him. By

confronting the people with their disobedience to the law in this great assembly, he showed something of what the great Redeemer does. In his hand, the law of Moses convicted and convinced and sent the sinner running to the Redeemer. Christ can do this in the great assembly of the congregation, where He wields the rod of His scepter, but He can also do it in the silence of a closet. Not only does He change actions on the outside, He changes the heart, from which flows the fruit of right actions. How we need this Redeemer to come to the Zion of our days!

One of the things this great Redeemer does is to make people generous with respect to the household of faith (Gal. 6:10). They have concern for poor Christians among their ranks and beyond (2 Cor. 9:12). They are brothers after all!

Nehemiah also foreshadowed the great Redeemer by actually buying back enslaved Jews (v. 8). Nehemiah did this to the best of his ability. However, Christ did it to the full extent of His commission. Nehemiah redeemed from physical slavery; Christ, from spiritual bondage and death. Nehemiah redeemed with silver and gold; Christ, with His precious blood. Nehemiah purchased their temporal freedom; Christ, an eternal inheritance with the saints in light.

“Restore,” said Nehemiah (v. 11). It was as if he issued a Jubilee edict. He cancelled the debts, released fields and lands to their original owners, and set the captives free. Through his wisdom and courage, Nehemiah accomplished much under the blessing of the Lord. The great assembly was effective. The people all consented to the call of Nehemiah. Nehemiah also led them in swearing a solemn oath to fulfill their duty. There was a solemnity in everyone and none could resist the claim of the redeemer’s words.

A God-fearing Ruler

After the great assembly, Nehemiah continued to model for the people a life of sacrificial devotedness to the cause of the Lord. He did not demand normal taxes and provisions for his extensive administration. He paid it all from out of his own provisions. He did not hoard wealth, but dispensed it generously.

What motivated Nehemiah? He tells us in verse 15: *“because of the fear of God.”* God had implanted in Nehemiah the fear of His great name. Nehemiah had more regard for the Lord, His honor, His cause, and His people than for himself.

Down through the history of the church, there have been so many like Nehemiah, who acted out of the fear of God. They would rather suffer damage themselves than hinder the gospel cause. Nehemiah tells us that, all the while, he continued in the work on the wall (v. 16).

Like Nehemiah, Paul, too, did not exact anything for himself (2 Cor. 11:9). For the advancement of the gospel cause, Paul would spend and be spent. He even was willing to take Onesimus’s debt upon himself (Phil. 8). Like Nehemiah once said, *“Restore,”* Paul wrote to Philemon: *“Receive ... not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord”* (Phil. 15-16). The gospel makes enemies brothers through Christ, the great Redeemer. And it makes us true God-fearers.

Questions:

1. Why does the narrative of the book of Nehemiah break away from the wall-building and turn to this problem? Are the two related in any way?
2. What is the world’s mentality concerning this world’s goods? What should a Christian’s be? How do you think the nobles explained away their sin against God’s commands?
3. Do we have assemblies that point out the nature of our sins? How does what Nehemiah did happen today?
4. How was Nehemiah’s action in verse 11 like the Jubilee? See Lev. 25:13-14, 25-28, 35-36.
5. Read Psalm 72:12-14. Trace how this applies to Nehemiah and to Christ.

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