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The Complaints of the Poor Israelites

Nehemiah 5: 1-13

The complaints of the poor Israelites DIG: What is the “great outcry” all about? What needs are going unmet? What do you suppose brought on the economic crisis? What three groups are most affected? How does this affect their common desire to finish the project? How does Nehemiah respond to his brothers’ cries for economic justice? What does that tell you about him? Why does he get so angry at the nobles and officials (5:7ff; also see Leviticus 25:39-42; Ezekiel 22:12-13)? How does Nehemiah seek to make sure the nobles and officials make their ways right (5:9-10, 12b)? In what ways does Nehemiah act wisely? Generously?

REFLECT: How do you react when you hear about an injustice done to an innocent person? If you could act, do you respond? Why? Why not? In your place of worship this past year, what financial crisis, party politics, or other morale problems may have hindered your service to God and others? In what ways do you react like, or unlike, Nehemiah? In money matters, do you deal with a believer differently than with a non-believer? If so, why is that?

445 BC During the ministry of Nehemiah (to see link click [Bt](#) - The Third Return).
Compiled by: The Chronicler from the Ezra and Nehemiah Memoirs
(see [Ac](#) - Ezra-Nehemiah From a Jewish Perspective: **The Nehemiah Memoirs**).



Building **the wall** and external opposition put economic strain on the whole community. The culmination of these problems may have occurred shortly before the wall was finished in the

month of Elul (August-September). This would have been near the end of the harvest, and the creditors would have required payment of capital and interest on loans. According to **Nehemiah 4:22**, **Nehemiah** had asked **the workers** to stay in **Yerushalayim** and not return to **their** villages. In short, the economic situation was more critical because **the people** dedicated so much labor to **the wall**. And in the midst of the building, **the nobles and officials** began to oppress **the common people** in a variety of ways.²⁴⁶

Then there was a great outcry from the poor people (Exodus 3:9) and their wives to their fellow Jews (Nehemiah 5:1). Husbands and **wives** worked together and both had the right to be heard. The extra manpower needed on the wall may have meant that more women had to help in the harvest.

There were three groups facing financial crisis. The first group had spent all their time and energy rebuilding the wall and had no time left to work for their own food. These **people** may have been among the poorest – those who owned no property and normally would have earned a living by harvesting the fields of others. No work, no money. **There were those who said: We and our sons and our daughters are numerous. We must take grain, so we may eat and live (Nehemiah 5:2). It was as if they were saying, “Since we have not been able to till our fields, we are compelled to buy corn in the market and prices have soared to a high level.”**

The second group consisted of property owners who had been forced to take out loans in order to pay their bills. There were others who said: **We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our houses in order to obtain grain during the famine (Nehemiah 5:3).** To make matters worse, there had been a famine, and these **people** were having trouble feeding **their** families. **In sheer desperation, people would resort to this method for the purpose of raising money, since their attachment to family property was very strong.**

The third group had been hit hard with Persian taxes both on property and produce. This group was the hardest hit, for they had not only mortgaged their lands, but had also sold their children into slavery. **Still others were saying: We have borrowed money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. And now, though we share the same flesh as our brothers, and our children are just like their children, still we subject our sons and our daughters to slavery (Exodus 21:7ff). Some of our daughters have already been enslaved but our hands are tied since our fields and vineyards belong to creditors on default of payment (Nehemiah 5:4-5).**

People who could not pay **their** debts might sell **themselves** or **their children** into

slavery. God's Word contains specific stipulations concerning this practice – stipulations those wealthy **Jews** were ignoring. First, **ADONAI** forbid **His people** to charge interest to one another on loans (**Exodus 22:25**). Second, the debtor was to be treated with dignity and respect as a fellow member of **God's chosen people** (**Leviticus 25:39-40**). Third, such debts might include indentured service, but it did *not* include one's personal property. **YHVH** had given **the Promised Land** to all **His people**, and **they** were not permitted to buy or sell that **land**, even to one another (**Numbers 36:7-9**).²⁴⁷

I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words (Nehemiah 5:6). **Nehemiah** demonstrated the difference between sinful anger and righteous indignation. **Yeshua** was full of righteous indignation when **He** turned over the tables of the money changers (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click Bs - Jesus' First Cleansing of the Temple at the Passover**). And **Nehemiah's** zealous **anger** was ignited by the fact that **the Jews** were not obeying **God's Word**. **He** didn't turn over any tables, but **he** did address the underlying sinful behavior that was causing the problem.

I pondered them in my heart and sought **the LORD's** wisdom in how to handle the situation. **Then I opposed the nobles and the officials strongly, saying to them, "Usury** (lending money at an exceedingly high rate)! **Each of you is putting his brother in debt" (Nehemiah 5:7)! Their** commitment to building **the wall** had been virtually nonexistent, and **their** loyalty to **the Jew's** enemies had added to **their** opportunistic attitudes, which placed **them** close to the status of **Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem** (see **Cc - Samaritan Opposition to the Building of the Walls of Jerusalem**). **They** had become the enemy within.

Nehemiah solved this conflict between social class on the basis of principles taught in the Torah, especially the sense of community equality and the importance of the Covenant, which envisages a people . . . not an individual. Individuals, while important, were expected to act for the benefit of the group. **Deuteronomy** refers to all **Israelites** as **brothers**, regardless of social status or tribal divisions. This includes **kings** and **priests** (**Deuteronomy 1:16, 3:12-20, 10:9, 15:3-11, 17:15, 18:2**). This, together with the tendency to speak of **Isra'el** as a single whole, had a leveling effect on the whole community. Therefore, relations between **Jews** should never be treated purely as business transactions, but rather as spiritual service that is pleasing to **God** and blessed by **Him**.²⁴⁸

In the ninth example of leadership in the life of Nehemiah, good leaders do not stop with rebuke, but take steps to correct the problem (see **Bt - The Third Return**). So, I convened a great assembly to deal with them. I said to them, "As much as

possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who had been sold to the nations. Once again, **Nehemiah** set an example by **his** own behavior. **He** first denounced the evil conduct of selling a **brother or sister** by means of **usury**. **Nehemiah** then contrasted this with **his** own action of **redeeming** (with **his** own money) some of **the Jewish exiles** who through debt had lost **their** freedom in Babylon. **Now you also are selling your brothers and sisters so that they will be sold back to us?" Then they became silent and could not find anything to say (Nehemiah 5:8).** **Nehemiah's** rebuke could not be denied because it was based on **God's** Word and **his** own personal example. The fact that **he** had obeyed **ADONAI** at cost to **himself** in a similar matter left no room for **his** opponents to argue about **his** accusations.

Nehemiah's statement: **The thing that you are doing is not good!** It is an example of how a leader can assume the role of a moral teacher. **Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God, in order to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies (Nehemiah 5:9)?** **Nehemiah** confronted **them** with the truth, not what **they** wanted to hear. The problem was that **they** were damaging **their** ultimate mission to **the Gentiles: And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:3b).** To walk in the fear of God is a concept taken from the wisdom literature of the TaNaKh and means **to live in awe of and devotion to God and with kindness and integrity toward mankind (Deuteronomy 10:12, Second Chronicles 6:31; Leviticus 25:36; Nehemiah 7:2).** Such a lifestyle would be a witness to **the Gentiles** and fulfill the election of **Isra'el (Isaiah 42:6-9).**

Even I, my brothers, and my servants are lending those in need money and grain without the expectation of making a profit. **Let this usury stop, now!** If a person was destitute, those who had the means were to give what they had bought as a free gift. If the debtor was able to repay the money, no interest was to be charged. Such generosity was a mark of true godliness (**Psalms 15:1-5**). **Now, return to them this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves and their houses, as well as the hundredth that you have extracted from them on the money, the grain, the new wine, and the fresh oil (Nehemiah 5:10-11).** Once they had restored what they had taken, **Nehemiah** considered the matter to be closed. **He** called the people to obey **God's** commandments, but **he** didn't go beyond that to punish **those** who had disobeyed.²⁴⁹

The nobles and the officials accepted **Nehemiah's** challenge and promised to pay back the interest and deposit **they** had taken. **They** said: **We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do just as you say (Nehemiah 5:12a).** Here **Nehemiah's** humility and sense of social responsibility was crucial in solving long-term social-economic problems that had surfaced under the additional stress of **building the wall.** **They** were

willing to work together, even at great personal cost.

Nehemiah knew that promises made under emotional pressure were not always kept. **He** was not prepared to trust **the moneylenders** further than **he** could throw **them**. **Nehemiah** called **the priests** and had **the nobles and officials** take an oath. **Then I summoned the cohanim**, the administrators of oaths (**Numbers 5:19**), and **I made them swear to do according to this promise (Nehemiah 5:12b)**. Also **I shook out my garment**. Observing a practice that would have been well known to **the people** - hiding valuable objects in the folds of **their** long, flowing **garments** kept secure by a belt - **Nehemiah shook his garment**, but nothing came out, showing that **he himself** had given away all that **he** had. **This was a symbolic announcement that those who went back on their word would be cursed. That Ha'Shem would take away their houses and possessions.** In this way may God shake out from His house and from His property every one that does not keep this promise. In this way may he be shaken out and emptied!

The unselfish leadership and courageous action of **Nehemiah** bore fruit: **And all the assembly** replied, **Amen!** in agreement, and **they praised ADONAI**. **So the people did according to this promise (Nehemiah 5:13)**. Not only did **the offenders** do as **they** had promised, but **they** also restored unity and **praised the LORD**. God was in this!

Many people assume that the TaNaKh describes **ADONAI** as being wrathful and vengeful. However, the most common word used in the TaNaKh to describe **YHVH** is **compassionate**. God cares about people, and **He** especially cares about **the poor and the needy** who belong to **Him**. **You must open your hand to your poor and needy brother in your land (Deuteronomy 15:11b)**. That phrase is used twenty-seven times in the TaNaKh. In this case, **the poor and the needy** who were being exploited were the ones who had wholeheartedly thrown **themselves** into the work of **rebuilding the walls** and had stood firm in spite of opposition.

Those people had demonstrated a strong commitment to **God's** work, and one would have expected their fellow **Jews** to be grateful. Unfortunately, **they** were not rewarded with gratitude but were exploited. **The nobles and officials** who were taking advantage of **the poor and the needy** assumed that **YHVH** would look the other way. **They** were powerful and influential men with money and property, who had the means to take advantage of the situation and did not hesitate to do so. But **they** had forgotten that because **ADONAI** is compassionate, **He** hears **the cry** of the oppressed (**Exodus 22:24-26**).

The LORD calls upon **His** people to be generous with **the poor and the needy** and give

freely with no expectation of repayment. Solomon wrote: **He who is kind to the poor is lending to ADONAI; and he will repay him for his good deed (Proverbs 19:17).**

Yeshua gave us practical instruction on how to do this: **Give to everyone who asks you; and whoever takes something of yours, make no demands upon him. Do to others as you would have them do to you . . . but love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Then your reward will be great and you will be the children of Elyon, for He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked ones (Luke 6:30-31 and 35-36). ADONAI is kind**, and **His** character is revealed by the fact that before salvation, the believer, while **ungrateful and wicked**, has been the recipient of **His** mercy.²⁵⁰