

DISCUSSION GUIDE :: SESSION 7

A NATION RESTORED
ENDURING WITH OUR CITY
NEHEMIAH 5-7
03/12/2017



MAIN POINT

Working for the good of our community takes patience, the courage to confront sin, and a willingness to make personal sacrifices.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Have you ever seen anyone get treated unfairly? How did you react?

How would you have responded differently if you found out this injustice was something that happened repeatedly?

God gave Nehemiah an important mission, but it didn't come without hurdles. When it comes to tasks God gives us to complete, we often face spiritual setbacks and obstacles as well. Nehemiah's example challenges us to be patient, confront sin courageously, and make personal sacrifices as we work for the good of our community.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ NEHEMIAH 5:1-13.

Are there any social injustices in your community that the gospel could help to reconcile? In our country? How can the gospel help these situations?

Why is debt so dangerous? What was wrong with the lending practices of the nobles and officials?

What risks did Nehemiah take in confronting the nobles and officials regarding this inequity?

In Deuteronomy 23:19, the Lord commanded Israel, "Do not charge your brother interest on money, food, or anything that can earn interest." The nobles and officials were violating this command of the Lord. Further, they were taking advantage of the people at a time when they were seriously impoverished. They were a defeated people who had recently lost everything that they had. Some had just been bought out of slavery. To charge them interest while they were working to restore Jerusalem was particularly outrageous. Nehemiah was very bold to confront the officials and nobles in this. They represented the power base of Jerusalem, and if he lost their support, it could make his job more difficult or even impossible.

Nehemiah knew that this was an issue that would bring about the anger of the Lord, and so as a leader of the people, he had to confront this sin.

What does Nehemiah's example teach us that relates to our work for the gospel in our community?

Often, being a Christian means confronting injustice. We do not do this simply for the sake of the oppressed (which is a good reason to do it), but also because injustice and oppression is contrary to the gospel and angers the Lord. If we are going to make a difference in our city, we will have to be wise enough to notice these wrongs, and we must have the humility and courage to confront them for the sake of the gospel.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ NEHEMIAH 6:1-14.

Why might it have been tempting for Nehemiah to meet with Sanballat and Geshem? What advantage could such a meeting have brought, theoretically?

Sanballat wanted to harm Nehemiah, but he pretended to want to meet and make a deal. This could have been tempting for Nehemiah because a treaty with Sanballat and Geshem could have meant more safety for Jerusalem. Plus, it never hurts to be on good terms with your neighbors. But Sanballat was not interested in peace, and Nehemiah had enough discernment to know that. Sanballat was a distraction, and Nehemiah knew Jerusalem didn't need a treaty to be safe. The Lord would watch over Jerusalem.

Why would it have severely hurt Nehemiah's reputation to lock himself in the temple? Why do you suppose some of the Jews joined in with trying to intimidate Nehemiah?

If Nehemiah had run and locked himself in the temple, he would have sinned because only the priests were allowed into the temple where he would have hidden. It would have been a sin, and he would have looked like a coward. Nehemiah's integrity kept his leadership from being undermined.

How difficult is it to persevere when people who are supposed to be "on your team" betray you?

What distractions or interruptions have you faced as you attempt to serve the Lord? What practical strategies can you use to withstand those distractions or interruptions?

Sometimes, when we attempt to do kingdom work, we will find that those who should be our allies do not support us. It could be that they do not understand what we are trying to do, or it could be that our efforts make them uncomfortable. Undoubtedly, Nehemiah was betrayed for money in this case, but it was probably more than that. His policies bothered some of the nobles and officials of Israel, and they had ties to Tobiah by marriage (5:19).

HAVE A VOLUNTEER NEHEMIAH 7:1-4.

Why do you think Nehemiah put Hanani and Hananiah in charge of Jerusalem?

Why were the citizens of Jerusalem stationed as guards? Why not Jews from the countryside?

How important is it to train capable leaders to help with ministry work?

No ministry can continue without building leadership. Nehemiah knew that he was on a time-table to return to the king. So he appointed God-fearing men to lead the city in his absence. They probably replaced the earlier leaders spoken of in Nehemiah who charged the people interest. Instead of charging interest, Hanani had taken nothing from the people and had devoted himself to their well-being. Nehemiah knew that Jerusalem would be in good hands with Hanani. Also, Nehemiah made those who lived in the city responsible for guarding it. They had the most at stake in keeping it safe, so it made sense

for them to take care of it. For ministry, we too must make certain that we train up leaders to help us carry out the mission. No one can do it alone. We also need to make certain that we give more responsibility to those who are invested in making it work, just like the citizens of Jerusalem.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How could you help make certain that those who are facing injustice begin to be treated fairly?

The people of Jerusalem were in such great debt that they could not afford to buy food. Could you be generous to donate your time and money to being sure that people in your city get the food and clothing they need? Does your church have a ministry like this you could volunteer in?

Have you allowed someone to discourage you from a work that needs to be done? Has fear kept you from devoting yourself to meeting any needs? Perhaps you could support those who, like Nehemiah, are trying to make a difference?

PRAY

Offer a time for group members to pray aloud, thanking God for salvation through Jesus Christ. Ask the Lord to help us share the gospel in the city, and to give us opportunity to help those who are suffering. Pray for our leaders that they will be bold enough to pursue justice and righteousness for those who may be on the fringes of the community.

COMMENTARY

NEHEMIAH 5:1-13

5:1-5. The first group of people and their wives complaining were the landless poor, who depended on their husband's work as day laborers for their daily food. Their absence from the home to work in Jerusalem was causing real distress. The second group consisted of those who were forced to mortgage their property in order to survive. These loans would normally be paid back at harvest time in the fall, but with the men working in Jerusalem during August and early September, many were facing foreclosure. The third group that brought their complaints had borrowed money to pay the king's tax. During this period the interest rate for borrowing money to pay taxes was often between 40 and 50 percent. For all three groups (vv. 2-4) the result was the same: parents were selling their children into slavery. This was allowed under the OT law (Ex 21:2-11) but with some important qualifications (Lv 25:39-46). Often parents would sell their children before selling their property, because the sale of property precluded the possibility of earning the money to buy the children back.

5:7-8. The translation of Nehemiah's accusation here assumes the issue was usury: Each of you is charging his countrymen interest. But the terms used in this context may suggest instead that the issue was acting as a creditor and seizing the properties of those in default—"pressing claims" or "seizing collateral." If this was the case, the actions of the "nobles and officials" were not illegal, but nevertheless unconscionable in light of the dire state of the people. Most likely Nehemiah was not referring to buying back slaves while living in Babylonia, but recently having to buy back Israelites sold to neighboring nations. The nobles and officials were perpetuating the problem.

5:10. It is unlikely that Nehemiah was confessing sin about these issues. It was considered an act of kindness to lend to the poor (Ps 37:26; 112:5; Pr 19:17). What was wrong was taking advantage of the poor (Dt 15:7-11; 24:10-13) and demanding payment in light of the severe economic situation. As in Neh 5:7, there is a translation issue in this verse. Nehemiah's exhortation could be translated, "Let's stop pressing our claims on these loans."

5:12-13. The officials' agreement to Nehemiah's demands was followed by a solemn oath, the seriousness of which was reinforced by Nehemiah's ritual act of shaking the folds of his robe while reciting a curse on those who failed to keep it. The folds of the robe were used as pockets. Nehemiah was comparing his pockets to the rooms of a house and bidding God to evict the disobedient from their houses. The people had ample reason to say Amen (which means "so be it" or "surely"). This issue of social injustice could have splintered the community and brought about the same consequences their enemies had

failed to achieve, but by God's grace Nehemiah produced a fair conclusion that allowed construction to continue.

NEHEMIAH 6:1-14

6:1. Nehemiah was not taking credit here for rebuilding the wall singlehandedly. He was only speaking from the viewpoint of the enemies who understood that stopping the work would mean stopping Leadership always involves stress. Here Nehemiah's personal danger added to his stress, but he was able to confront it, trusting the Lord and continuing to work toward the God-given goal.

6:2. Nehemiah's enemies first attempted to lure him outside the city with a pretense of peacemaking. "Ono" was about seven miles southeast of Joppa. It may have been in neutral territory between Judah and Samaria, although the references to Jews living in Ono (see Ezra 2:33; Neh. 11:35) make it more likely that it was in the extreme northwestern part of Judah. It was evidently not difficult for Nehemiah to determine from past experience that "they were scheming to harm" him.

6:3-4. A more foolish leader bloated with his own importance might have convinced himself that this was an important opportunity to take time out from construction for diplomacy. Nehemiah's answer was polite but firm and somewhat ironic, since leaving the work was the very object of their overtures. These men repeated their invitation "four times," which shows their desperation to halt the work. Repeated temptation can also weaken one's resistance. Nehemiah stood firm and was careful not to let the opposition divert him from his main purpose.

6:5. On their next attempt, they tried a different motivation to get Nehemiah to respond. An open letter can be a vicious way to attack a leader. If Sanballat had been interested in reconciliation, he could have gone to Jerusalem. But now he and Geshem dropped their pretense of friendliness and tried to spread rumors that would damage the work. This strategy was very subtle; on the one hand, it could have diverted Nehemiah from his purpose. On the other hand, the rumors, if left unchecked, could affect public support and bring down the wrath of the Persian king on the Jewish community. After the events of Ezra 4, when similar reports resulted in a Persian decree to stop the work, this seemed to be an excellent plan.

6:6-8. The reported rumors were serious accusations. Jerusalem had a history of rebelling against controlling empires. A strong wall around Jerusalem would have made rebellion more viable. No doubt some of the Jews were remembering the prophecies of restoration of the Davidic kingship; some commentators think Nehemiah was a descendant of David, although there is no biblical evidence that he was. Knowing the accusations to be lies, Nehemiah was able simply to deny them and continue the work.

6:9. Nehemiah recognized the psychological warfare of the enemies. The same verb translated "frighten" in v. 9 is repeated again in vv. 13,14,19, where it is translated "intimidate" (lit., "to make afraid"). The different forms of opposition in this chapter were all intended to instill fear in Nehemiah and his helpers so they would not continue the work. The words "but I prayed" are not in the Hebrew text but are added to identify the clause "now strengthen my hands" as a prayer to God.

6:10. Nehemiah's enemies would not give up but kept trying different strategies. Some people within the Jewish community were not in favor of the building project; so Sanballat and Tobiah tried to use them against Nehemiah's leadership (see v. 14). Nehemiah accepted Shemaiah's invitation to see him, thinking he was a true prophet. But Shemaiah had sold out to the opposition. He used his influence to undermine Nehemiah. If Shemaiah's father, Delaiah, is the same one mentioned in 1 Chronicles 24:18, then Shemaiah was a priest and had special access into the temple. Nehemiah could not enter legitimately.

6:11-12. Nehemiah "realized that God had not sent" Shemaiah. He was able to discern that Shemaiah was a fraud. Shemaiah's proposal constituted a subtle temptation. Nehemiah was sensitive to do God's will. He did not want to be closed to what could have been God's message through a prophet. How then could he discern whether or not the message was from God (and how can we)? His two questions in v. 11 indicate the answer: (1) "Should a man like me run away?" This show of fear, and even cowardice, would be a lack of trust in God and would undermine the confidence of the people in his leadership. (2) "Should one like me go into the temple to save his life?" It was not lawful for him to enter the temple. According to Deuteronomy 18:20 and Isa. 8:19-20, if a word that claims to be a prophecy from God is in contradiction with what God has already revealed, we should be suspicious of it.

6:13-14. The strategy to "discredit" the leader is a subtle one and is common today. Against such attacks we can again learn from Nehemiah's decision to do what was right and leave the outcome to God. Thus he again prayed that God "remember Tobiah and Sanballat ... the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets" who were opposed to his leadership and opposed God's work. Vengeance was left to God (see Deut. 32:35; Ps. 94:1; Rom. 12:19).

NEHEMIAH 7:1-4

Though the wall had been rebuilt, the danger was not over. Nehemiah's transfer of the gatekeepers from their positions in the temple to protection of the city is understandable. The walled city is, in effect, an extension of the temple courtyard. The mention of the singers and Levites suggests that Nehemiah needed these well-organized groups to take part in the city's defense. And with Tobiah's associates well entrenched in the city, he needed people he could trust such as Hanani and Hananiah. Most of the inhabitants of Jerusalem before the exile had been killed, deported, or scattered because of the

catastrophe of 586 b.c. During the previous 80 years, thousands had returned from Babylonia, but the city's population still was small. Nehemiah was aware of the difficulty of trying to defend a sparsely populated city. The solution came when God put it into Nehemiah's mind (literally, his "heart") to gather the people to deal with the problem. Before Nehemiah could put his plan into action (11:1-2) he needed accurate census records of those who had returned from exile.

READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

Nehemiah 8:1-18