

One of the phrases of the moment invented by journalists here in the lucky country to keep us reading & listening to them is '*Mortgage stress*'. There will be something else next week, but this is the one that holds our interest now. The old preacher Ecclesiastes says: "There's nothing new under the sun." The remnant of God's people Israel rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in the 5th Century BC cried out to Nehemiah '*We have nothing left to mortgage*'.

God's sun shines on the just and the unjust. His rain falls on all of us; even godless Australia now. Some thank him. Most ignore him, pretending He's not there! The most enduring result of that ignorant ingratitude is inequality among people. Make us equal today and we will be unequal tomorrow. Some will rise up and take advantage of others. What broke Nehemiah's heart was that this was happening among the so-called people of God. Our social situation is a reflection of our spiritual need. Whether you have come for healing of body, mind or spirit; whether you are seeking restoration of relationships, or responsibilities look below the surface. Nehemiah takes us to the heart of the matter. In the midst of his great work for God Nehemiah heard the cry of the powerless who were being exploited by the powerful.

1 THE GREAT CRY OF THE PEOPLE [5:1-13]

The people's cry was not against foreign investors, but local brethren [5:1], and it touched upon three fundamental areas of life.

[i] Our families are hungry

The vision statement on so many kitchen walls had become "let us get grain that we may eat and live." [5:2] They did not reject Nehemiah's call to "arise and build" the walls of the city and oppose the enemy, but they understood that no one can work or fight on an empty stomach.

[ii] Our fields have been mortgaged

Fields, vineyards and houses had been given in trust to others so that the owners could "get grain during the famine". [5:3] It was not like Australia's contemporary crisis where riches have encouraged people to move too far into debt in order to keep up with an expanding lifestyle. Loan sharks seem to have been active taking advantage of ordinary workers during a time of famine. Pressed by the tax agents of the Eastern king [5:4] people borrowed money from wealthier Jews in the city. The crisis came when they found that they had "nothing left to mortgage".

[iii] We are feeling helpless

Though born equal, they had become enslaved to their brethren giving their children as servants to their neighbours. "We can't help it" [5:5] they cried. "Other men have our fields and vineyards". What might seem normal in godless society even now was intolerable for a people honoured by God with the gift of land in perpetuity. Allocated land was never to be sold, as it symbolised God's gracious gift of life to his people Israel. In Old Testament terms, they had lost the deed to heaven!

2 NEHEMIAH'S RESPONSE

Nehemiah's response involved anger, assessment and action as at other times.

[i] Anger

"When I heard their cry, I was angry" [5:6] He like God did when his people cried out in distress [Exodus 3:9]. He was provoked. Anger is an important response to the evidence of injustice. The man could feel anger like God, but he could not correct the problem like God.

[ii] Assessment

God's man moved from provocation to pondering. "I consulted with myself." [5:7] Some of us call this having an intelligent conversation! Nehemiah is no thoughtless hot head. He thinks and prays before taking action; four months initially, prior to seeking permission to come to Jerusalem. [Nehemiah 1]

[iii] Action

Nehemiah confronted the powerful, those who could do something about the problem. [5:7] He charged the leaders with being responsible for "exacting usury [taking unfair advantage] from your own brethren". He "called a great assembly against them" to bring the whole matter into the open, and commended the redemption process. We redeemed ["bought back"] enslaved brethren "as we were able". [5:8]. "Now you are selling your brothers" undermining the whole compassionate process. First there was guilt silence. "They kept quiet because they could find nothing to say." Nehemiah condemned those responsible for this ungodly behaviour urging them to fear God whose anger is very great against those who harm his people. He grieved over the effect on their "gentile enemies." [5:9] What would they think of God, when they saw his followers using one another instead of loving their neighbours.

Nehemiah was quick to confess that he and others lent money to the brethren, which was quite legal [Deuteronomy 24:10-13], but his complaint is against usury [taking unfair advantage]. Despite his grand position as governor representing the great Eastern king, Nehemiah approached his hearers as fellows sharers in the grace of God. He did not command them, but appealed to their conscience. "I beg you let the exacting of usury stop." [5:11] Restore fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses and return the one percent usury [interest] on everything. The man of God was conscious that he was leading a spiritual revival among God's people, not simply rebuilding the walls of the city. He put his finger on the problem. No great work for God individually or in the community can proceed without the rooting out of willful sin. The assembly agreed, [5:12] but Nehemiah was determined to move them beyond emotion to determination. He called for an oath [promise] to guarantee their word [5:12b] and enacted a parable. Shaking the sand and dust from his garment, he called upon God to shake out these people if they failed to carry through their great resolve. The whole assembly said, "amen", praised the Lord and "did as they promised." [5:13b]

The cry of forsakenness --- our families are hungry, our fields have been mortgaged and we are feeling helpless, had become a cry of faith, because one good man stood for what was right in God's sight.

3 NEHEMIAH'S EXAMPLE [5:14-19]

Nehemiah's call for spiritual revival among God's people was supported by genuine concern shown in his own lifestyle. Although he had been governor for 12 years [445 - 432 BC], he took no tax for himself. [5:14] On the contrary he fed 150 Jews, as well as strangers [gentiles], at his own table [5:17-18]. "I never claimed the governor's allowance because the bondage [demand] was heavy upon the people."

His secret motivation was godly fear. Earlier governors had burdened the people and allowed their public servants to lord it over them, "but godly fear kept [Nehemiah] from doing this" [5:15, 9]. Throughout this national upheaval Nehemiah maintained strict priority. He had been sent to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls and that's what he continued to do. [5:16] As a matter of principle he did not exploit his position of privilege by "acquiring any land" [5:16, 18]. This whole work began, continued and ended in prayer. [5:19]

Healing of body, mind or spirit; restoration of worthwhile relationships and maintenance of genuine responsibilities, any spiritual leap forward in fact rests on these principles. Are you doing what God has called you to do? Are you careful not to take advantage of others determining to love, not use your neighbours? Are you making each move in prayerful communion with God our Father always seeking now to follow in the steps of his perfect Son, our Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ?