

Nehemiah 5 Righteous Anger

You are by now getting familiar with the story of Nehemiah and his work reconstructing the walls of Jerusalem following the return of the captives from Babylon.

Despite the opposition of Sanbalat and Tobiah, two local Ammonite governors who were afraid of losing their power and influence, the achievement of Nehemiah in rebuilding the walls through team work and organisation remains a model of leadership, even today.

You may even hear of it on modern management training courses.

But as we have seen in Chapter 5, there were internal problems that Nehemiah had to deal with.

In modern terms there was a cost of living crisis!

The people working on the walls were facing financial hardship: *Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. ² Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."*

They were facing high grain prices because of a famine, their ability to work growing food was limited by the fact that they were committed to working on the wall and so they were mortgaging their land and property at high rates of interest- probably 12% and they were having to let their children go into servitude. On top of that they were also paying tax to the King.

The situation was a scandal, and it made Nehemiah angry:

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. ⁷ I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are charging your own people

In the law of Moses as in Exodus 22:25-7 and Leviticus 25:35-7 it is made quite clear that interest should not be charged to fellow Jews who are in need:

Leviticus 25 ³⁵ *“If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you. ³⁶ Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you. ³⁷ You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit.*

The Hebrew Bible is quite clear then that it is wrong for the poor and those in need to be made a profit from. Charging interest on a loan required for survival is a very different thing to a loan needed to extend a farm or to buy more stock.

And so Nehemiah called a meeting of these loan sharks, and told them

“You are charging your own people interest!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with them ⁸ and said: “As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

⁹So I continued, “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? ¹⁰I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! ¹¹Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.”

Thankfully Nehemiah had the power and authority to change an unjust situation into a righteous one

12 "We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say."

And just to make sure he made the money lenders swear an oath before the priests and said Nehemiah

I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!"

At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

Sadly this story has a very contemporary ring to it.

Now in 2025 we have people who earn so little or fall on hard times that they have to sell up in order to survive

Here in this day we have the poorest of society facing more burdens on their finances:

Prepaid Gas and Utility Meters mean that their users are charged more for their energy bills.

Pay day loans charge interest of upto 79.5% and in the UK there is no limit on the rates of interest being charged.

Companies like Cash Shop which act as Pawnbrokers charge 9.9% per month which is 154% APR

Just looking through the Internet it seems that DENS Foodbank here in Hemel for instance last year distributed 4140 food parcels and helped 10282 people.

There maybe some among us in this church or in our community who are struggling and for whom this is indeed a reality

So how can the example of Nehemiah help us ?

Nehemiah took notice and listened to the complaints. Of course he wanted a happy workforce, but he could, had he wished, have just ignored the complaints and focussed on completing the wall.

It is easy to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the many needs that are around us both here and across the world. But Nehemiah took time to listen and to ponder what to do

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. 7 I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are charging your own people interest!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them

That phrase '*When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry*'. really sticks out to me.

Nehemiah listened, heard and was angry. He had a righteous anger that stems from seeing and knowing that something is wrong.

Righteous anger is something that we all feel at sometime, when we see something that is wrong or is an injustice .

Righteous anger is a grief over sin that arises when we witness an offense against God or His Word and it motivates us into action.

Jesus expressed righteous anger when he overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple.

Nehemiah's Righteous anger stems from seeing fellow Jews going against God's law by charging interest to fellow Jews who had once been in exile

Nehemiah spoke out against the wrongs that he saw

I told them, "You are charging your own people interest!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them ⁸ and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

And so this righteous anger caused Nehemiah to order them to stop doing this and to give back the fields and Vineyards, olive groves and houses and the 100th tax on their grain money wine and oil.

Nehemiah was able to put things right because he had the power and authority to do so.

But if we apply all of this to us, let us be challenged.

Let us be challenged by the question Do we experience Righteous Anger when we look at what is happening around the world ?

What is it that provokes this Righteous anger in us?

Is it the injustice we see, or the inequality that we see. It is the suffering of the innocent in wars and famines or the decisions on political leaders which are causing these situations to persist and grow?

What is it that makes you angry!!!????

Then we are challenged to do something about it. Nehemiah was in a unique position as the new governor of Jerusalem and was able to wield power and change things.

Few of us have that degree of power but we all can in our own way react against the things that are making us angry.

In some cases we can do practical things like support the foodbank to help families in need. At Markyate we help run the Wednesday Café to support Asylum Seekers, many of whom arrive at the Holiday inn with nothing.

We may have resources to share – may be more donations to those charities and organisations that can do the practical things that make a difference in the world.

In some circumstances we may want to protest in some way. Write to our MP. Wave a banner or whatever.

Maybe part of our response is to just make others aware of the things that bother us and rise them up to action through their righteous anger! Actions speak louder than words.

May be we need to change our lifestyles and living priorities to be role models to others.

Towards the end of this chapter Nehemiah points out that he deliberately never took advantage of food or luxuries obtained through taxes by the king.

He said in v 18 I never demanded food allotted to the governor because the demands on the people were heavy.

If we are to fulfil Jesus teaching and to love our neighbour as ourself, we have little choice to be full of righteous anger on their behalf as an act of love.

Jesus came to bring peace and justice into the world, in his first public sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth he read from the prophet Isaiah :

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind , to release the oppressed , to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Luke 4 :18-9)

Jesus mission is in many ways an expression of God's Righteous Anger . He sent Jesus to put things right. As his followers we need to follow him in that mission.