

Shaken Out of God's House - Part 1

By Phyllis Corbin

INTRODUCTION: Interestingly, it was not the tension of a possible battle that took the greatest toll on the people who built the wall. It was something internal which held the greatest threat. The enemy of our souls is crafty. He has destroyed more churches and gave more people a helping hand to hell by creating conflict within the Church than by launching direct attacks against her. If Satan can get people to fight, if he can breed strife and jealousy, he soon has the upper hand and bars are put on the windows and real estate agents begin eyeing the property.

Listen to what was happening in Jerusalem as we open chapter 5 of Nehemiah.

Neh. 5:1-5. 1. Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. 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". 3. Others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards". 5. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others."

AN INTERNAL CRISIS:

A problem had been simmering as steadily as the wall was built. Four classes of people were affected by the economic crisis which had gripped the nation as they struggled to rebuild:

1. People who had no land and no food
2. Landowners forced to mortgage their property
3. People forced to borrow money at exorbitant rates of interest because of heavy taxation and
4. People forced to sell their children into slavery.

The situation is shown to be serious in the very first line as women join the men in a great outcry against those who are their brothers. It is bad enough to be oppressed by people we don't know. We all have felt oppression by some faceless corporation or government, but to be exploited by a brother is a sad scene indeed.

The conditions were so bad that some wealthy people began to use the occasion to make money from people and make them poorer because they had no choice but to buy from them.

If you want a picture of how this oppressive system worked we only have to consider that there is no food shortage in our world today. The view that the starving masses of Somalia are suffering because of a food shortage is a myth. There is plenty of food, but it is in the hands of too few people. And the sad aspect of the matter is that they inflate prices to make it even harder

for the ordinary person to buy food. Then government agencies step in and also buy food at inflated prices. Somebody always gets rich during a famine. UN soldiers had to make a stand in Somalia because rival gangs were stealing and hoarding food to keep it from the defenseless and poor people.

How unfair and how ironic. While the Jewish families were in Babylon their families were together. Now that they were back in the Promised Land, their children were being sold into slavery.

NEHEMIAH'S RESPONSE:

When Nehemiah heard what was going on watch his response:

Neh. 5:6-11 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 exacting usury from your own countrymen!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them. 8. And said, "As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us! They kept quiet, because they could not find nothing to say. 9. So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? 10 I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! 11 Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves, and houses, and also the usury you are charging them ---- the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil".

Nehemiah heard their outcry and the charges that were laid against the Jews and he was very angry. He considered the matter for a little while. The New English Bibles says, "I mastered my feelings." Then Nehemiah levied an accusation against the Jews for acting contrary to Mosaic Law regarding charging interest. This is what the Law said in Leviticus 25:35-43.

35. "If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you. 36. Do not take interest of any kind from him, but fear your God, so that your countrymen may continue to live among you. 37. You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit. 38. I am the Lord our God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God. 39. If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave. 40. He is to be treated as a hired worker or a temporary resident among you; he is to work for you until the Year of Jubilee. 41. Then he and his children are to be released, and he will go back to his own clan and to the property of his forefathers. 42. Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves. 43. Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God. (NIV).

Nehemiah reminded them that they had tried to redeem as many of their brothers as they would since they had been sold to Gentiles. His words convicted them. Their guilt was so obvious that they said nothing. The scene was something like that when the woman was brought before Jesus in John 8:7-10.

7. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is

without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." 8, Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9. At this time, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" (NIV).

The interest levied on people in these days is referred to as "the hundredth part." It means they took one percent of the money, grain, new wine and oil. And they took this interest payment every month. The poor people had no choice except to accept the terms and conditions of the mortgage or starve to death. The usury however, was leading to people losing their lands, homes, olive groves and also their freedom and that of their children.

As far back as I can remember I was always cautioned about watching "my testimony" What I said and did had a direct impact on the credibility of the Gospel and reflected on the character of Christ. There is always someone ready to say, "I wouldn't go to church there Mr. So-and so can go there and be saved then I don't think too much about what it stands for. Obviously the actions of the membership define the credibility of the organization.

In the Old Testament the children of Israel were always cautioned about Christ being mocked and belittled. In some cases the activity of Israel caused God's name to become a "byword" among the heathen. Read Joel 2:17. 'Let the priests, who minister before the Lord, weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, 'spare your people, O LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, "Where is their God" (NIV)

The term "byword" is really the same as "reproach". The destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile brought Judah to the state of "reproach" O Lord, according to all thy righteousness, I beseech thee, let thine anger and thy fury be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain; because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and thy people are become a reproach to all that are about us" Dan. 9:16. On the other hand, the disgrace found in a person or a nation became the occasion for taunting the oppressed. The disgraced received abuse by the words spoken against them and by the rumors that were spread about them. Whatever the occasion of the disgrace was, whether defeat in battle, exile, or enmity, the psalmist prayed for deliverance from the "reproach"; 'Remove from me reproach and contempt; for I have kept thy testimonies "(Ps.119:22). The verbal abuse that could be heaped upon the unfortunate is best evidenced by the synonyms found in (Jer. 24:9); 'And I will deliver them to be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth for their hurt, to be a reproach and a proverb, a taunt and a curse, in all places whither I shall drive them." Several prophets predicted that Israel's judgment was partly to be experienced by the humiliating 'reproach" of the nations: 'And I will persecute them with the sword, with the famine, and with the pestilence, and will deliver them to be removed to all the kingdoms of the earth to be a curse, and an astonishment and a hissing, and a reproach, among all the nations whither I have driven them" (Jer. 29:18). However, the Lord graciously promised to remove the 'reproach" at the accomplishment of His purpose: "He will swallow up death in victory and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth..." (Isa. 25:8).

I mention this word because our failure to treat others, especially fellow believers with compassion is an insult to God and a blot on our testimony. Here is what Peter cautioned in 1 Peter 2:12-15: '

12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. 13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority institutes among men; whether to the king, as the supreme authority. 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right 15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men (NIV)

The People's Reaction

Nehemiah's tough stand brought them to their senses. He was able to get the offenders together and a great number of witnesses and administered a solemn oath to be faithful to their promise. Then to cement the bargain Nehemiah performed a curious gesture. It is almost like a curse. He shook out the folds of his robe and called on God to shake out of Israel every man who did not live up to his word. (Neh. 6:12-13). Also, the curse asked God to shake this man out of his possessions, so that if his word was broken he would be as impoverished as the people he had fleeced in violation of God's word to the nation. To this the people responded 'AMEN'. It is sometimes hard to get people to say Amen to what is positive. Imagine how difficult it must have been to say it to such a loaded agreement.

What is even more surprising is that the people praised the Lord after the agreement was made and they did as they had promised.

Application for today

What can we find in this incident? There are times when we can lose our perspective. We can do things that oppress without realizing it or we can do it in the name of profit. But there always has to be something bigger than the drive for profit. There has to be compassion for those who we call our brothers and sisters. We have to be careful of the bumper-sticker philosophy which proclaims, 'He who has the most toys when he dies - wins'.

Fortunately, the wall that was being built in Jerusalem loomed larger than the personal goals of any of the people. We may all have a personal agenda for our lives, but we should ensure that that agenda is based on the master agenda - that of showing Jesus Christ to a needy world.

If when we lose our perspective, let us be like the people of Jerusalem. Let us be mature enough to take wise counsel, correct our behavior, conform to God's agenda and fulfill our promises to God. The work is too important to let anything hinder its successful completion. Let us stand firm in what we believe and let us always make sure there is no discord among us then the Holy Ghost will not be quenched or grieved.

"1.And when the day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.
2. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

3. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of the.
4. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."

Acts 2:1-4

What is significant about this passage is that they were ALL IN ONE ACCORD. There was unity among them and the Holy Ghost came upon them as a result. Let there be no discord among us but let there be unity and peace and then we will see great things done for the kingdom of God. Let us each one be the servant that Nehemiah was.

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Thank you and God bless you

sister Phyllis