

NEHEMIAH'S ANGUISH (Neh. 5:1-6)

Life was 'on the up' in Jerusalem! Away back in 538 BC Cyrus, - who had been the king of Persia, - allowed one of the descendants of King David, - Zerubbabel, - to return with 42,360 fellow-Jews to build a new temple in Jerusalem. The construction work was not without its opponents, but nevertheless, it was eventually completed in 516 BC. As Ezra recorded, the Lord had kept His promise, **Ezra 6:3** In the first year of Cyrus the king the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded, the place where they offered sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid ... **5** And also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought unto Babylon, be restored, and brought again unto the temple which is at Jerusalem, every one to his place, and place them in the house of God. ... Restored and renewed! ... God was doing a new thing among His people. The priests were back in action and the worship of Jehovah was again being heralded from Mount Zion.

However, as is often the case, time erodes enthusiasm ... and that, coupled with increasing opposition, had a detrimental effect upon God's people. They had lost their enthusiasm and outside influences were proving spiritually harmful.

Then, in 458 BC, Ezra the priest arrived from Babylon with five thousand more Jews. While priests had already been serving in the new temple, and had reinstated some of its services, the spiritual condition of the people had been waning. Consequently, God had introduced Ezra 'for such a time as this', For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments (Ezra 7:10). ... He brought a fresh impetus and vigour, **27** Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, which hath put such a thing as this in the king's heart [*i.e. Artaxerxes, v.12*], to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem: **28** And hath extended mercy unto me before the king, and his counsellors, and before all the king's mighty princes. And I was strengthened as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me, and I gathered together out of Israel chief men to go up with me. ... The Lord was restoring His people.

And then, just over fourteen years later, the Lord burdened another man for what was continuing to be needed in Jerusalem. He raised up Nehemiah the winetaster to reconstruct the city's walls and secure its gates.

Each of these three men, - Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, - were used to fulfil God's plan. Also, in the background was the influence of the wife of King Artaxerxes, Queen Esther. ... Sometimes we wonder where God is, and how He is working, but here we are being reminded how He directs everything for His purposes ... and that is what He has been doing all along ... In Babylon, the enemy had tried to exterminate the Jews by using Hagar. In Jerusalem, they had tried to stop the rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel and the reintroduction of the temple worship under Ezra. They had tried to halt the restoration of the walls under Nehemiah ... but on every occasion they failed because God was determined His work would succeed. ... Half of the walls had been repaired, the gates were in place again, and Sanballat and his friends were temporarily silenced. The future looked brighter. The 'mist was lifting'.

... *And then* fresh opposition came from a different quarter. When Satan does not achieve his evil plans by opposing God's people from the outside, he changes tactic and wheedles his way to work from within ... and he manipulated many of the wealthy Jews in Jerusalem. At a time when they all should have been standing together, the devil began to cause division.

Inside the city, the people started to murmur. ... The previous chapter describes how they had all been working in the restoration of the walls. Apart from the nobles of Tekoa (Neh. 3:5), it seems everyone else *did* get involved. However, these rumblings rose to the surface at the beginning of chapter five when there was a great outcry from the people and their wives against the Jewish wealthier class. Harmony was replaced with *disharmony*.

What was happening was this ... In the previous chapter, it had all been about building the wall to protect the city, the temple, and the people. At the beginning of chapter five though, the emphasis was concerning the *people* and what *they* wanted! ... **Neh. 5:1** And there was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brethren the Jews. ... It developed into an absolute furore for they were arguing and dividing among themselves. They were undoing the unity they had achieved in chapter three ... and without being aware of it, they were doing the enemy's work! ... Sanballat and his friends would have been in raptures when they heard about the discord and dissension in Jerusalem ... and Satan *especially* could not have hoped for better!!

It was so distressing. God had brought all these people the whole way back from Babylon to Jerusalem and they were endangering the work carried out under

Godly men such as Zerubbabel and Ezra, and now Nehemiah. ... Satan, it seemed, was having his way! ... And notice, too, the use of that word ‘great’ ... In chapter one Nehemiah invoked the help of ‘the *great* God’ (1:5). In chapter four he spoke about how the work of building the wall was ‘*great* and large’ (v.19). ... The *great* God, the *great* work ... and now a *great* cry of injustice, discrimination, and maltreatment (Neh. 5:1). ... The people of Israel had fallen into the trap of doing their enemy’s job! ... They were crying against their own!

There were four different groups of people in this controversy. There were the poorer people who owned no land but who desperately needed food, We, our sons, and our daughters, are many: therefore we take up corn for them, that we may eat, and live (v.2). ... “We are starving. Allow us to go into the fields and gather grain so we can eat and stay alive (the way Ruth was allowed in the field of Boaz)”. The people were hungry, and they appealed to Nehemiah.

The second group were the landowners who owned and farmed small pieces of land. To ‘make ends meet’, they had to mortgage their property to buy food, We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn, because of the dearth [*famine*] (v.3). ... The famine was driving prices ‘sky high’, and these simple people who owned only a small stretch of land were in great debt ... and what they had was in danger of being taken from them.

And the third group complained of the ‘state’ taxes being so ridiculously high they were forced to borrow exorbitant amounts of money to pay them. These taxes were the taxes every region throughout the Persian King’s empire had to pay (v.4). ... The Jews were in debt from every direction.

The fourth group consisted of the wealthy Jewish businessmen who abused the opportunity to exploit their own countrymen and women by lending them money at outrageous rates of interest. They forced their fellow-Jews to put up their lands and children for collateral (v.5). Basically, they were making slaves out of their own people for it was obvious those in debt could not afford the repayments. ... The people had been slaves of a foreign master in Babylon, and now they were slaves of their own brethren!

This was in complete contravention of the Law of Moses, **Lev. 25:39** And if thy brother that dwelleth by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee; thou shalt not compel him to serve as a bondservant: **40** But as an hired servant, and as a sojourner, he shall be with thee, and shall serve thee unto the year of jubilee. ... In the ‘Year of Jubilee’ (Lev. 25), all debts had to be forgiven and

forgotten, and all land restored to its original owner, and all servants set free. ... But that is not what was happening at the beginning of chapter five because these selfish opportunistic businessmen were profiting from the poor. ... It wasn't wrong for them to lend money to their fellow-Jews, but the Law of Moses clearly stipulated they must not charge interest, **Dt. 23:19** Thou shalt not lend upon usury [*charge interest*] to thy brother; usury of money, usury of victuals, usury of any thing that is lent upon usury: **20** Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury; but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury. ... These wealthy Jews were worse than the Babylonians for the Babylonians did not know the Law of Moses ... but the wealthy Jews in Jerusalem *did!* ... And they were 'sucking their own people dry' ... they were strangling them financially!

And that is what lay at the foundation of the discord among God's people in Jerusalem. ... It is sad when God's people are divided, for whatever reason for it only serves the interest of the devil. ... God's people will uphold the truth of God's Word. They will defend the doctrines of saving and keeping grace. They will make all the right noises expected of believers and tell of how well they are confronting and opposing Satan ... but at the same time it is sad when many within the family of God cause hurt and division among their brothers and sisters who they ought to be encouraging. Nehemiah told them, **5** our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children ... We are all the same for we are the children of God, and yet, there were those wealthy merchants, - who had more than enough already, - and they were bringing into bondage their own people.

Satan disrupts, Satan divides, Satan destroys – that is how he works, even among God's people. He could not get at them through Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem, so he slithered his evil way into the assembly of believers at a time when they were 'starting to get back on their feet', following the building of the wall. He is at his most dangerous when you do not expect him.

One of David's psalms the people used to sing on their way up to Mount Zion was ... **Ps. 133:1** Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! **2** It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; **3** As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore. These wealthy Jews in Nehemiah's time would have sung it to the 'Hypocrite's Tune'.

There is nothing wrong with having wealth, in fact, Nehemiah would have been one of the wealthiest in Jerusalem, but he shared his wealth, in obedience to the Law of Moses. ... And when you look down through chapter three, you will see all types of people and backgrounds involved in the building of the walls, - the priests, the nobles, the shepherds, the goldsmiths, the fish-men, the perfume-workers, the rich, the ordinary, the employer and the employed . They had worked as equals alongside each other, yet now, we find them a divided people among whom the enemy was wreaking havoc.

Nehemiah was right to be furious when he saw what was going on (v.6) for God's people were dishonouring God's name. It is easy to find fault with your brother or sister. It is easy to judge them when they don't live according to your expectations ... but I'm often reminded of those who brought the woman caught in adultery to Jesus ... Presumably, since she was committing adultery, there was a man in the bed beside her, but they didn't bring him! ... But she was brought to Jesus for the leaders to test Him as to how He would respond. He sat down in the sand, and drew something as if He was ignoring them, and then said, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her (Jn. 8:7). ... One by one, they disappeared.

God makes us all equal. There is none has priority over the other. God's love for each of His children is perfectly the same. None of us would be saved apart from His grace, so we have nothing of ourselves to boast in. We are in the work together because He has redeemed us with His own blood, There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28) ... and therefore,

Jesus, Lord, we look to Thee; Let us in Thy name agree ...
 Make us of one heart and mind, Courteous, pitiful, and kind ...
 Let us for each other care, Each his brother's burdens bear ...
 Free from anger, and from pride, Let us thus in God abide.