

## NEHEMIAH'S NEGATIVITY (Neh. 5:7-6:4)

Has anyone ever described you as being too 'negative'? Was it meant as a compliment or an insult?! In our study we are going to consider *Nehemiah's Negativity*, and see how it is a justifiable position for the Christian to take.

In the opening six verses we looked at the problem of greed Nehemiah had to contend with among his own people. The rich and wealthy Jews were shamelessly 'fleecing' their brethren who were struggling to pay their day-to-day bills. The matter came to the attention of Nehemiah and he confronted the rich who promised to immediately cease their heartless and callous activities (v.7ff.). He spoke to them in courteous tones, **11** Restore, I pray you, to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their oliveyards, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money, and of the corn, the wine, and the oil, that ye exact of them. ... And, without dispute, they replied, **12** We will restore them, and will require nothing of them; so will we do as thou sayest. ... It was very amicable (cf. **Prov. 15:1** A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger). To further enhance their compliance, Nehemiah required them to take an oath, that they should do according to this promise (v.12) ... He also shook the dust from off his garment indicating to them, **13** So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labour, that performeth not this promise, even thus be he shaken out, and emptied. And all the congregation said, Amen, and praised the LORD. And the people did according to this promise. ... He was 'covering all angles'! (... as we say 😊)

He then moves into a personal section where he explains his own behaviour/record ... It is easy to tell everyone else what to do, but it is important you are seen to be doing it yourself. He wanted to show them it was not a matter of 'do as I say', but his example before them was to 'do as I do'. ... In fact, when we read this passage closely it might be more correct to emphasise *don't* do as I *don't* do. ... It sounds negative, but it was essential as he and his people were facing an enemy determined on their destruction. ... He specifically records his negativity, ... I and my brethren have not eaten (v.14) ... so did not I (v.15) ... neither bought we (v.16) ... for all this required not I (v.18) ... I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down (6:3) ... Nehemiah shows us there is absolutely nothing wrong in saying 'no', and continuing to repeat it!

That, of course, 'goes against the grain' of how we normally like to conduct ourselves. We normally like to say 'yes', and to be known as 'agreeable' and 'pleasant' people. However, Nehemiah shows us there are times when we *must* say 'no', and we *must* say it emphatically. When someone asks you a question whether something is right or wrong and you don't give them a clear answer in

case you might offend them, you are contradicting what Jesus said in His sermon on the mountain, let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil (Mt. 5:37) ... We can rely impeccably on the fundamental issues of our faith in God and the truth of His Word, ... and we must know when to say 'no' to sin in all its various forms in our own lives and also in the world around us. ... There is nothing *wrong* with saying 'no' at the *right* times! ... And for Nehemiah to achieve what God set before him, he often had to be prepared to say 'no'.

This is first illustrated in relation to the privileges he had. He had come from Susa and Babylon, from the King's court, from among the highest, the wealthiest, and the most influential men in the empire ... and he himself would have been handsomely rewarded as a winetaster (i.e. his wage, tips, favours, etc). Also, as Jerusalem governor his wealth increased in that lucrative job. ... He was not a pauper, searching for the next scrap of food. He was not in danger of losing his home or his properties. He was not in debt for he was one of the wealthiest men in Jerusalem. Previous governors and their administrators were known for extracting exorbitant revenues from the poor (v.15), however, not Nehemiah, because of the fear of God (v.15). ... Nehemiah's respect for God demonstrated itself by his respect for his people ... and consequently, he knew God's daily blessing upon his service.

He pointed out he kept working on the wall, - he was not 'sitting in some back office', but he was 'on the wall with his trowel' (v.16). Neither did he take the opportunity to buy any land (v.16). He knew what it was like for the ordinary person in Jerusalem to get his hands dirty, and to work long hours, and who was required to stay alert. He was not being an added burden to his people, but he was serving alongside them in the work.

And even more than that ... every day he had one hundred and fifty people around his table, - a vast table something like what is used when Queen Elizabeth entertains her guests. They were all there, - who paid for it? The taxes? Did he go out and take from the poor people who hardly 'had a bite' for themselves? No, Nehemiah paid for it *all*, not out of taxes or from official expenses, but out of his own pocket because he cared for his people. ... Even though he had plenty, what he had ... did not have him!

Absolutely ... he had privilege, but he did not use it for he was humble and he was an example to his people of kindness and generosity and of a giving spirit in the Lord's work during those hard and heavy times ... I and my brethren have not eaten the bread of the governor (v.14) ... and he fed all those people

every day ‘out of his own pocket, <sup>18</sup> Now that which was prepared for me daily was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and once in ten days store of all sorts of wine: yet *for all this required not I the bread of the governor, because the bondage was heavy upon this people.* ... The Lord was good to him, and he shared that goodness with his people ... and God blessed him abundantly.

Another example Nehemiah demonstrates is how he said ‘no’ to pride. He motivated the people to work on the wall and it was completed in fifty-two days (6:15). For over one hundred and forty years the wall lay in rubbles, offering no defence to the city. The enemy could have sauntered into Jerusalem whenever they liked! ... But fifty-two days after Nehemiah began the work, the wall was built and completed ... Nehemiah could have flaunted himself, - not Zerubbabel did not do it, Ezra did not do it either, but *I* did it! ... How proud he could have strutted about on Jerusalem’s stage! ... He could have boasted but he did not because he was determined he would take none of the glory to himself. ... He recognised it was God Who opened the door to bring him back to Jerusalem ... it was God Who put him in the position for it to happen ... it was God who directed the people to work alongside him. Nehemiah did not boast because he knew the work was all of the Lord, from start to finish, as the psalmist wrote, for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name (Ps. 138:2). ... To God be the glory, great things *He* hath done! ... God did it, - yes, Nehemiah and the people were working ‘on the ground’, but it was God Who ultimately made the work happen! He and his people knew it was because of God the wall was completed ... and it wasn’t done ‘Nehemiah’s way’, but the work was done God’s way and for God’s glory!

Nehemiah said ‘no’ to undue privilege and ‘no’ to pride. He also said ‘no’ to carelessness. He could have adopted the attitude God would achieve the work with the minimal amount of effort from him, - “if God is going to do it, God is going to do it!”. ... “If it’s God’s will for this wall to be built, it will be built ... and if it is not His will it will not be built” ... “If it’s God’s will for this church to survive, it will survive ... and if it is not His will, it will close” ... “I’ll just sit back and see” ... But surely that’s why God had brought Nehemiah almost one thousand miles back to Jerusalem for ... to lead up the work which was needing in the city! ... Yes, God would see it done, but He would see it done through Nehemiah and his co-builders! ... If you and I were to adapt a silly cavalier attitude, - ‘leave it all up to God, and we’ll sit back and do next-to-nothing’, - we might as well close the church doors now ... but, Nehemiah shows us something else you have to say ‘no’ to ... say ‘no’ to carelessness.

The fourth ‘no’ Nehemiah spoke was when he answered the enemies’ request to meet them, Come, let us meet together in some one of the villages in the plain of Ono (6:2). ... He knew they were up to no good for the enemy never is, no matter how nicely they speak to you, - Nehemiah was fully aware, But they thought to do me mischief. If Satan was brazen enough to tempt Jesus, he has *no* hesitation at tempting and testing you and me! And so, the enemy invited Nehemiah, under the guise of holding a special ‘get-together’ meeting. ... They had heard about the wall, <sup>1</sup> Now it came to pass, when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and Geshem the Arabian, and the rest of our enemies, heard that I had builded the wall, and that there was no breach left therein (6:1) ... They had heard, and they were not pleased!! We have to stop him, they said. We mocked him at the start (2:19) ... and we said that even if a fox ‘picked its way’ over the stones of the wall, it would come crumpling down (4:3) ... They laughed and they mocked but God put their scorn to flight when they saw what Nehemiah and his people had achieved! ... Paul’s words are so appropriate, Not that we are sufficient of ourselves ... but *our sufficiency is of God* (II Cor. 3:5) ... or the words of the psalmist, Through God we shall do valiantly: for he it is that shall tread down our enemies (Ps. 108:13).

In our day, it is not fashionable to say ‘no’ ... but there are increasing occasions when we *must* for if we don’t, we shall be carried off with every wind of doctrine and then, through cunning craftiness, we shall fall foul of those enemies of God and His Word who are lying in wait to deceive us (Eph. 4:14). ... How ready we must be to say ‘no’ ... and Nehemiah made it absolutely clear, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you? (6:3) ... This is where God has for me to be, in Jerusalem ... and this is what He has for me to be doing, - this is where I am staying! ... And Nehemiah would not abandon what God had given him to do. ... How we need to be like him! Fanny Crosby wrote, “To the work! To the work! We are servants of God ... To the work! To the work! In the strength of the Lord”.

Was it easy? Of course, it was not easy! Nehemiah not only had the enemy outside the walls, but he also had the opposition among some of his own people. ... An old children’s chorus begins, “Learn to say ‘no’. Learn to say ‘no’, to everything evil wherever you go”. ... And that is how Nehemiah teaches us ... to keep to the path God is clearly leading us. Other paths can be right for other believers, but if the Lord is not leading us on them, we must keep to where He *is* leading for it is the *right* path He has for us, as the old hymn says ... “Where He may lead me I will go, for I have learned to trust Him so”. Amen.