

# CAPITOL STUDIES

FEBRUARY 9, 2022 • WEEK 7



## NEHEMIAH: THE CIVIL SERVANT FROM SUSA

### *Contents*

Exploitation	2
Exhortation	3
Example	5
Entreaty	6
About Capitol Studies	8

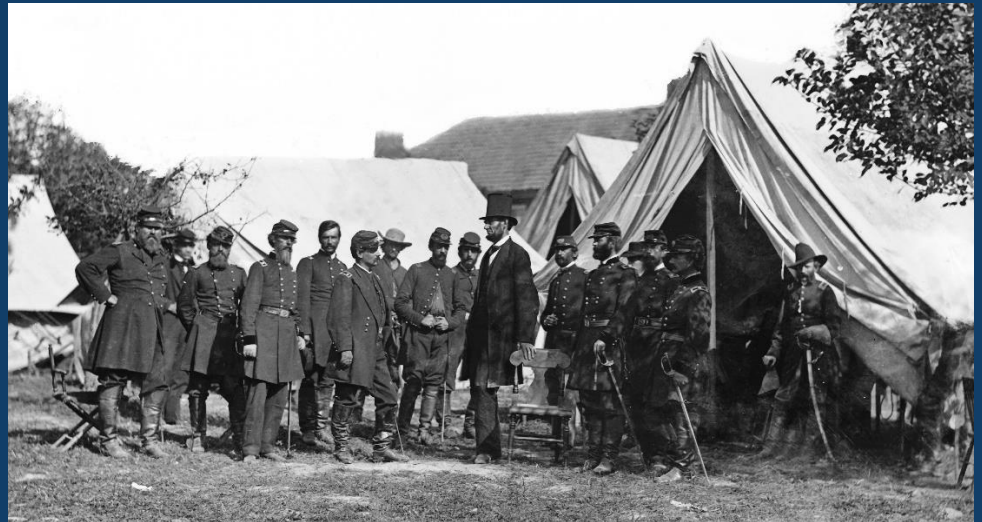


### *Verse of the Week*

Nehemiah 5:19

*Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.*

## Nehemiah: Builder with Integrity



WHEN HE WAS 24 YEARS OLD, Abraham Lincoln served as the postmaster of New Salem, Illinois, for which he was paid an annual salary of \$55.70. Even then, 24 years before he entered the White House, the rail-splitter was showing the character that earned him the title of “Honest Abe.” The New Salem post office was closed in 1836, but it was several years before an agent arrived from Washington to settle accounts with ex-postmaster Lincoln, who was a struggling lawyer not doing too well. The agent informed him that there was \$17 due the government. Lincoln crossed the room, opened an old trunk and took out a yellowed cotton rag bound with string. Untying it, he spread out the cloth and there was the \$17. He had been holding it untouched for all those years. “I never use any man’s money but my own,” he said.<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

Nehemiah was a man of integrity. While building the walls, he had to deal with dissention, exploitation, and selfishness among his fellow countrymen. He made a conscious choice not to be pulled into negative thought patterns or desires for personal gain. Nehemiah would not be corrupted by those around him. He refused to compromise in his moral values or on matters of principle.

“When the enemy fails in his attacks from the *outside*, he then begins to attack from *within*; and one of his favorite weapons is *selfishness*. If he can get us thinking only about ourselves and what we want, then he will win the victory before we realize that he is even at work.”<sup>2</sup>

### I. EXPLOITATION: A LEADER OF INTEGRITY MUST RECOGNIZE UNFAIRNESS

*Nehemiah 5:1-5*

*Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. <sup>2</sup>For there were those who said, “We, our sons and our daughters are many; therefore, let us get grain that we may eat and live.” <sup>3</sup>There were others who said, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine.” <sup>4</sup>Also there were those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our fields and our vineyards. <sup>5</sup>Now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage already, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others.”<sup>3</sup>*

Look at the cries of these Jewish laborers—you can see them throwing down their work tools in frustration and complaining that they just cannot go on in this rebuilding project. Life did not seem fair. They were trying to do God’s work, but they were hurting because of all the unfair practices. Desperate and depressed economic conditions caused by the famine forced the poor to take extreme measures to survive. They had already been forced to mortgage their lands just to have food. Now they had no money to pay the king’s tax.

The wealthy Jews exploited their own brothers and sisters by loaning them money, then charging excessive interest or taking their lands and children for collateral. Both the people and the land belonged to the Lord, and He would not have anybody using either one for personal gain. “If a countryman of yours becomes so poor with regard to you that he sells himself to you, you shall not subject him to a slave’s service. He shall be with you as a hired man, as if he were a sojourner; he shall serve with you until the year of jubilee” (Leviticus 25:39-40).

“Often parents would sell their children before selling their property because the sale of property precluded the possibility of earning the money to buy the children back. The situation was even more critical for daughters sold into servitude because their master or his son could



pressure them into marriage. Moreover, they were also more susceptible to sexual exploitation. Their daughters are described as enslaved, which is from a Hebrew term (*kavash*) that generally means “subdue,” sometimes used in the Old Testament with sexual connotations (“violate” in Esther 7:8 or rape).”<sup>4</sup>

One reason for the “Year of Jubilee” (Leviticus 25) was to balance the economic system in Israel so that the rich could not get richer as the poor became poorer. All debts had to be forgiven in the fiftieth year, all land restored to its original owners, and all servants set free. God has a special concern for the poor and will not hold those guiltless who take advantage of them.<sup>5</sup>

## II. EXHORTATION: A LEADER OF INTEGRITY MUST CONFRONT SIN

*Nehemiah 5:6-13*

*Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words. <sup>7</sup>I consulted with myself and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, “You are exacting usury, each from his brother!” Therefore, I held a great assembly against them. <sup>8</sup>I said to them, “We according to our ability have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?” Then they were silent and could not find a word to say. <sup>9</sup>Again I said, “The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies? <sup>10</sup>And likewise I, my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury. <sup>11</sup>Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money and of the grain, the new wine and the oil that you are exacting from them.” <sup>12</sup>Then they said, “We will give it back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say.” So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise. <sup>13</sup>I also shook out the front of my garment and said, “Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said, “Amen!” And they praised the Lord. Then the people did according to this promise.*

### A. Nehemiah’s Premeditated Response: His Examination of His Own Heart

Nehemiah was angry (v. 6). This was not the flaring up of a sinful temper, but the expression of righteous indignation at the way the businessmen were oppressing their brothers and sisters. “Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26). Nehemiah’s intense anger was directed at certain people’s selfishness, greed, and insensitivity. The most vulnerable were hurting and suffering, and those who should have been the most compassionate (the nobles and officials) were most guilty of exploitation.





Because Nehemiah was a man of integrity, he knew he needed to have a right spirit to confront sin and exploitation. First, he consulted with himself to gain proper perspective (v. 7). “I consulted with myself” literally means “My heart consulted within me.” If a leader cannot control himself, he will never be successful in controlling others. Nehemiah was not a politician who asked, “What is popular?” or a diplomat who asked, “What is safe?” but a true leader who asked, “What is right?”

## B. Nehemiah’s Pointed Rebuke: His Appeals to His Countrymen

**You are robbing your own fellow Jews, not the Gentiles (v. 7):**<sup>6</sup> These were brethren, people who should be loved. They were part of the family of God. His appeal was based solidly on the Word of God, for the Law of Moses forbade Jews to exact interest from one another.

**God did not give us the ability to redeem our brethren who were sold to other nations just so they could be sold again to their own countrymen (v. 8).**

**It is a sad witness to our Gentile neighbors (v. 9):**<sup>7</sup> If we truly fear the Lord, then we will want to honor Him in the presence of those who don’t believe in Him. Far better to lose money than lose the privilege of your witness to the lost. You can always earn more money, but how do you restore a damaged testimony? “The remarkable thing about fearing God,” one wrote, “is that when you fear God, you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God, you fear everything else.”<sup>8</sup> That means claiming Matthew 6:33 (“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”) and having the right priorities in life.

**You can help the needy, just like I am, without charging interest or taking collateral (vv. 10-11):** Nehemiah appealed to his own personal practice. Unlike some leaders, Nehemiah was not saying, “Do what I say, not what I do!” He was not a hypocrite; he practiced what he preached.

**God will judge you if you do not keep your promise and do what is right (vv. 12-13).**

Then the entire congregation praised the Lord. Why? Because God had enabled Nehemiah to begin solving their problems, and Nehemiah had directed the money lenders to acknowledge their sins and make restitution. “This great assembly was not an ‘economic summit’; it was a worship service where Nehemiah had lifted a financial problem to the highest possible level. God’s people need to follow his example and deal with every problem in the light of the will of God as declared in the Word of God.”<sup>9</sup>

It is important to note that the building of the wall did not *create* these problems; it simply *revealed* them. Often when a church enters into a building program, all sorts of problems start to surface that people didn’t even know were there. A building program is a demanding thing that tests our faith, our patience, and our priorities; while it brings out the best in some people, it can often bring out the worst in others.



### III. EXAMPLE: A LEADER OF INTEGRITY MUST BE GENEROUS IN MEETING NEEDS

*Nehemiah 5:14-18*

*Moreover, from the day that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, for twelve years, neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the governor's food allowance. <sup>15</sup>But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God. <sup>16</sup>I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we did not buy any land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. <sup>17</sup>Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. <sup>18</sup>Now that which was prepared for each day was one ox and six choice sheep, also birds were prepared for me; and once in ten days all sorts of wine were furnished in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the governor's food allowance, because the servitude was heavy on this people.*

This is the first mention of Nehemiah's appointment as governor (*pechah*) of the province. His duration as governor is also given: twelve years. This was probably from 445 to 432 BC. Nehemiah distinguished his governance from his predecessors in that he declined to eat "the bread of the governor," or the food allotted to the governor. Such a refusal was at great personal cost to him.<sup>10</sup> "Those who truly fear God will not dare to do anything cruel or unjust. Let all who are in public places remember that they are so placed to do good, not to enrich themselves."<sup>11</sup> D. L. Moody said, "A holy life will produce the deepest impression. Lighthouses blow no horns; they only shine."<sup>12</sup>

Nehemiah was innocent of any conflict of interest (vv. 16, 19). He was careful not to abuse his position as governor in any way, thereby jeopardizing the people's respect for him. In fact, he continued working right along with the people in the construction project. He did not hesitate to "get his hands dirty" in this important building program, and he did not get sidetracked. His motives were pure, and he never lost sight of God's calling in his life. He was in Jerusalem to help the people, not to exploit them. He was there to exemplify God's Law, not to violate it. He was there to rebuild the wall, not a personal empire.

We must be willing to sacrifice personal gain for the spiritual good of others (see Acts 20:33-35 and 1 Samuel 12:3). It has been said that leaders are people who accept more of the blame and less of the credit, but they are also people who quietly sacrifice so that others might have more.<sup>13</sup> Nehemiah, not only paid for his own food, but he shared what he had with others.





## IV. ENTREATY: A LEADER OF INTEGRITY MUST BE A PERSON OF PRAYER

*Nehemiah 5:19*

*Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.*

This is the fourth of Nehemiah's prayers (the first three are found at 1:5ff; 2:5; 4:4), a wonderful expression of worship and humility. He did not want praise or reward from the people; he wanted only the reward God would give him for his sacrificial service (see 13:14). Some of the people may not have appreciated him as they should, but that did not upset Nehemiah. He knew that the final assessment would come from the Lord, and he was willing to wait (1 Corinthians 4:1-5).<sup>14</sup> As a man of prayer, Nehemiah was in touch with God. He prayed that God would remember him (i.e., not fail to act on his behalf) because of his concern for the people.

**He Appealed to God's Faithfulness:** "Remember me..." Seven times in his recorded prayers, Nehemiah asked God to remember (5:19; 6:14 [twice]; 13:14, 22, 29, 31).<sup>15</sup> There are many promises of future rewards; God will not forget His loyal servants.

**He Appealed to God's Sovereignty:** "...O my God..." God has the power, wisdom, and authority to do whatever He chooses.

**He Appealed to God's Goodness:** "...for good..." God loves to give good gifts to His children.

**He Appealed to God's Justice:** "...according to all that I have done for this people." Harvest Law still applies here: what you sow, you will reap.

## CONCLUSION

**To be a leader of integrity:**

Focus on the Work, not the Perks (5:15-16)

Focus on People's Needs, not Personal Rights (5:17-18)

Focus on God's Favor, not Man's (5:19)

**If you are in a position of spiritual leadership:**

Expect problems to arise among the people.

Confront the problems courageously but compassionately.

Be sure that your own integrity is real.

See in every problem an opportunity for the Lord to work.

"All that we say and do must be motivated by love, controlled by truth, and done to the glory of God."<sup>16</sup>

**How to Handle a Promotion like Nehemiah:**

*Promotions bring privileges*

Increased responsibility always affords the recipient new or added rights, benefits, and special favors. The wise leader will use them without abusing them. Temptations arise everywhere. **Be careful.**



### *Promotions threaten policies*

Nehemiah's administration replaced a corrupt government. The people were used to dirty politics, including taxation, extortion, and favoritism. "My accountability to my Lord is the focus of my life. I fear Him too much to indulge myself." A godly leader's integrity is at stake. **Remain pure.**

### *Promotions involve projects*

Nehemiah did not accept the position of governor so he could engage in his own pet enterprises. He stayed at the task of building the wall. He did not abuse the promotion. He did not turn it into a lucrative opportunity for himself. A leader of integrity does not lose sight of the goal: **Serve God and others.**

### *Promotions affect people*

Nehemiah led with compassion.<sup>17</sup> **Show you care.**

Pastor Arin Hess

## FOOTNOTES

1. Paul L. Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times*, Bible Communications, Inc., 1996, pg. 1529.
2. Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, Victor Books, 1996, pg. 58.
3. All Scripture quotations, unless noted, are taken from the *New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update*.
4. C. R. Anderson, *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, Holman Bible Publishers, 2017, pg. 727.
5. Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, pgs. 60-61.
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 62.
7. *Ibid.*, pgs. 63-64.
8. Oswald Chambers, *Ibid.*, pg. 64.
9. *Ibid.*, pgs. 64-66.
10. Anderson, *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, pg. 727.
11. Matthew Henry and Thomas Scott, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary*, Logos Research Systems, 1997.
12. Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, pg. 66.
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 68.
14. *Ibid.*
15. G. A. Getz in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, Vol. 1, edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, Victor Books, 1985, pg. 685.
16. Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, pg. 69.
17. Charles R. Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, Thomas Nelson, 1978, pgs. 116-124.



*Verse of  
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Nehemiah 5:19

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*Personal Study Notes*

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