THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH
"The Reproach of the Heathen"
Nehemiah 5:1-19

Introduction
1. It is thrilling to read about the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem (3:1-7:73). The work was begun (3:1-31). It involved incredible organization. There was unquestioned dedication. Moreover, the entire community was involved.

2. The text is clear that the work continued in spite of opposition (4:1-6:14). Ridicule was the first expression of opposition (4:1-6). When that failed, opposition surfaced overtly (4:7-23). The story of valiant work and resistance to the efforts to create confusion so as to prevent progress is exceptional.

3. At this juncture, a dreadful form of opposition arose. This one threatened destruction from within (5:1-19). The N.T. suggests similar difficulties (cf. Acts 6:1-5; Gal. 5:15; James 3:16). Patently, none is immunized from internal or external interference with the will of God.

4. What did Nehemiah do with the expression of opposition from greed and apparent insensitivity? Read the Bible record. Here are the facts:

1. Nehemiah HEARD the problem vv. 1-5
   a. It was internal v. 1
   The noun cry points to an outburst of pain. The evidence of difficulty came from the "people" and their "wives" (women). It was against their brethren in contrast with the heathen. This is a clear case of internal combustion within Israel. Surely the noun "Jews" enforces it.

   b. It was personal vv. 2-4
   While "people" and "wives" have been noted (v. 1), many "sons" and "daughters" are also involved. Three major problems are raised: 1) Insufficient food (v. 2). 2) Mortgaged properties (v. 3). These are noted: a) our lands (fields), b) our vineyards, c) our houses. All these were given in pledge (mortgage) so corn (grain) could not be bought due to the dearth (famine). 3) Overburdened taxation (v. 4). The royal taxes were overwhelming for the fields and vineyards. For this the people borrowed (Hebrew: bound themselves to their creditors till payment was made).

   c. It was critical v. 5.
   Some of the economically poor had sold their children into slavery to make ends meet. Both sons and daughters were caught in this trap. Parents could do nothing (in their hands) to release their children since others already had their fields and vineyards. The poor were at the mercy of the rich. It was a deplorable mess!

2. Nehemiah DECRIED the problem vv. 6-9
   a. Privately vv. 6, 7a
   Nehemiah reacted with righteous indignation. His first response was anger (v. 6). He could not believe the painful words of the poverty stricken Jews who jeopardized their possessions and families by working on the wall. They did not suggest to quit, but leveled charges against wealthy members of the Jewish community. Then Nehemiah took counsel with himself (same verb for "king"). He was enraged, he fumed!

   b. Publicly vv.7-9
   Nehemiah took a public stand. "Rebuke" means he contended the matter as one would before a Judge. He took the stand for a cause. He argued that it was wrong to take their own brethren, who had already been redeemed from foreign controls, into bondage (vv. 7, 8). The economic infrastructure was being threatened so that the building project was seriously being jeopardized. A huge assembly heard Nehemiah's charges (v. 7). The accused had no reply (v. 8).

Note: Nehemiah categorically argued:
1. What the rich were doing was not good.
2. What the rich were doing was not walking in the fear of God.
3. What the rich were doing brought the reproach of their enemies causing them to sneer at the Jews.

3. Nehemiah RESOLVED the problem vv. 10-13
   Nehemiah's instructions are bold and clear:
   a. Cease! v. 10
   The verb means to remit, to leave off the practice of pledges (usury). Note that Nehemiah, the brethren, and servants were involved in this practice. It was all to stop now.

   b. Restore! v. 11
   Immediately what had been taken by pledge -- fields, vineyards, olive yards, and houses plus any interest or income (the hundredth) received in corn, wine, or oil -- all was to be returned.

   c. Promise! vv. 12, 13
   a) What Nehemiah asked, those concerned said they would do. b) To make the promise more binding, Nehemiah called the priests to record the promise. c) Additionally, Nehemiah pronounced a symbolic curse on those who failed to comply. Shaking of the lap indicated those failing to live up to the oath were to be shaken out empty. The congregation responded and the people kept their promise (v. 13).

Conclusion A major crisis had loomed (vv. 1-5), but it was averted. 1. Nehemiah had been appointed governor. His term had lasted 12 years. In his position, he had certain privileges, but he did not take them. He chose not to do what other governors did (vv. 14, 15). 2. Nehemiah worked like the rest of the people (v. 16) and shared what he had even with those who came from other nations (vv. 17, 18). 3. Nehemiah's motivation for what he did was his "fear of God" (v. 15) and his compassion for the people whose "bondage (burdens) was heavy upon" them. 4. Nehemiah sought God's favor for himself and the success of his project. God grant us a desire to do God's will as this Bible passage teaches. It is over to you dear friend. Amen.